



The
Fostering
Network



State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021

Thematic report 1:
The status of foster carers

About the survey

Children may enter the care system for a number of reasons, for example, because of family disruption caused by illness or a bereavement, abuse, neglect, they are seeking asylum, or they have highly complex health and care needs.

Roughly three-quarters of the 97,000 children and young people looked after in the UK away from home are being cared for by around 56,000 foster families. Foster families provide children in care with the opportunity to thrive in a family setting and offer them a loving and stable environment, often into adulthood. This means that improving outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care.

Every three years we conduct the State of the Nation's Foster Care survey to produce a reliable insight into fostering in the UK; to identify areas of good practice and understand where improvements are needed. This is the fourth time we have conducted this survey, and, for the first time, we also surveyed our fostering service members.

As the largest independent survey of foster carers, we were pleased to receive responses from 3,352 foster carers, representing six per cent of fostering households in England, four per cent in Northern Ireland, eight per cent in Scotland and seven per cent in Wales. At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around nine per cent of all children living in foster care in the UK. We also received 99 fostering service responses, which represents around 19 per cent of the total fostering service providers in the UK. By surveying our fostering service members, we have enriched our evidence base, offering a perspective from those who provide services, enabling us to gain a deeper insight into the challenges within the system and how they impact on the overall service.

Our 2021 surveys included questions on how well foster carers and fostering services believe children's needs are currently being met by the system, as well as key practice and workforce issues such as support, recruitment and capacity in the sector. The Fostering Network will use the findings of these surveys to influence the foster care agenda and create change by bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers.

Introduction

The Fostering Network firmly believes that, for those children and young people who cannot live with their birth families, foster care is the most effective way to ensure children have safe, stable and loving homes. We know that, despite the trauma of coming into care and the difficult starts to life often experienced by children in care, good foster care is a protective factor for children including for their education and wellbeing. Foster carers provide children with stability, security, attachment and a positive experience of family life. However, the findings of our State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 survey once again highlight the fact that foster carers are propping up the care system without the resources, support and recognition that their vital role warrants.

This report examines some of the causes of this regarding the status of foster carers, but at its heart are the needs, experiences and outcomes of the 70,000 children foster carers are looking after. While the lack of status and support for foster carers is clearly problematic for them and their families, the continued failure to position foster carers firmly as key members of the social care workforce risks undermining their ability to fully meet the needs of the children and young people they are caring for.

We are now in a situation where the fostering system is under immense pressure. The number of children in need of foster families is increasing at a rate that cannot be met by the existing capacity within the foster care sector. While there are broader contributing factors at play such as the impact of austerity and high social worker caseloads and turnover, we believe that improving the status of the foster carer is at the heart of solving the crisis in foster care as it would have a significant positive impact on the retention and recruitment of foster carers.

The key to successful foster care lies in recruiting, training, supporting and retaining good foster carers. Supporting foster carers, respecting their role and working in partnership with all those involved in the team around the child will ensure children have a strong support network in place to enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes. Children and young people are in need of foster carers in the right location so that they do not have to move away from school, birth family and other important relationships. Children and young people also need carers who are best placed to support them emotionally, spiritually, culturally, in their health, education and so on. The more high-quality foster carers there are, the more likely it is that a child or young person in need of a foster family will be placed with the best possible foster carers for them, in the right location, at the first time of asking.

The findings of the State of the Nation 2021 survey show that foster carers still do not feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child. Despite the foster carer being key to the child's wellbeing – and despite the fact that foster carers often know the children in their care best – the knowledge, skills and expertise of foster carers are at times not given full consideration. This means that the team around the child is not working cohesively, nor is it providing the best possible assessment of needs and care for children.

This report sets out key recommendations to ensure that foster carers are treated as equals in the social care workforce with appropriate support, training and payment for their time and skills. These changes are urgently needed to improve the experience and outcomes of tens of thousands of our society's most vulnerable children.



Focus on foster carers

This report is the second of a series of publications using the State of the Nation 2021 survey data. The main report is available on [our website](#).

Background: The unique role of the foster carer

All children need love, security and nurturing family environments to thrive. They also need to have their health, education, social, emotional and physical needs met. The foster carer role is unique because they are asked to meet the needs of children on behalf of a corporate parent (the local authority/trust) within a regulated framework.

Children require foster carers who can provide day to day parenting while supporting them to:

- overcome trauma
- build relationships with everyone else in the team (psychologists, teachers, social workers, birth parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers etc.)
- advocate for them
- be proud of them
- make and keep records to help them make sense of their childhood when they are older, or to support the making and shaping of their care and support plans
- stand by their side and speak up for them.

In order to perform all of these roles foster carers need to be supported, trained, reviewed and supervised.

Fostering is not a single entity and it is important that it can be adaptable to children's different circumstances. There are many different types of foster care, including but not limited to:

- short-term foster care, where the plan may be for children to return to their birth family
- parent and child foster care, which offers the young person and their child tailored support
- long-term foster care, which enables children to remain living with a specific foster family until reaching adulthood or leaving care
- short break foster care which offers children short breaks (sometimes known as respite or sleepovers) from the foster home to support their wellbeing and stability of their placement
- family and friends foster care (also known as connected persons foster care or kinship foster care), where the carers have a known relationship with a specific child or group of children prior to them entering foster care and will only provide care to that known child or group of children.¹

Foster carers offer a versatile skill set that can also be used to support families on the edge of care to provide non-social worker intervention to support families to stay together (also known as support care). They can also work with families of disabled children, providing regular short periods of care.

The fostering task is also increasingly challenging. Most children coming into care do so as a result of abuse or neglect, and often have significant complex needs. The trauma experienced by many children before they came into foster care is likely to impact upon their mental health, wellbeing or behaviour. As a comparison, the rate of mental health disorders in the general population aged five to 15 is 10 per cent, however, for those who are looked after, it is 45 per cent.² The complexity of the fostering task, the importance of recognising the vital role played by foster carers and the urgent requirement to provide them with appropriate support and training, is reflected throughout the State of the Nation survey findings. For example:

- The top five new and emerging training needs for foster carers, as identified by fostering services, are:
 - online safety
 - exploitation
 - complex mental health
 - helping young people transition to independence
 - complex adolescent behaviour.

Foster carers offer a unique set of skills and knowledge tailored to the children in their care and they are a vital part of the children's social care workforce. We therefore strongly believe that foster care is a profession and as such foster carers should be considered equal members in the team around the child and provided with practical, financial and emotional support.

Utilising foster carers' unique skill set to prevent children entering care

Support care sits at the interface of fostering services and family support services, providing care and support to families on the edge of care. Support care programmes provide holistic and needs led support, with foster carers meeting regularly with parents in a mentoring role, alongside providing short breaks.

[Step Up, Step Down](#) is one example of a support care programme. It offers mentoring, training and community support with the aim of keeping families together. The programme utilises the unique skills and experience of foster carers in working with children and their birth families in their community.

¹ In Scotland, family and friends carers sit outside of the foster care system.

² Looked-after children and young people. NICE Guideline. 2021. Available from: www.nice.org.uk/guidance/hg205

1. Status

Foster carers are an equal member of the team around the child

Considering the vital role foster carers are playing in caring for looked after children, it is worrying to hear that they often feel undervalued as they are too often excluded from the team around the child (the group of professional adults working to ensure that children in care achieve the best possible outcomes). When we think about the fact that they are the person who usually spends the most time with the child and who may best understand the needs of the child, it does not seem to be in the child's best interest to exclude them in any way. Foster carers report feeling as if they are having to 'shout' or 'fight' to be heard and that, rather than being part of the care process, they are too often having to proactively advocate for the good of the children in their care.

Over many years, evidence from our State of the Nation survey³ has shown that foster carers feel disconnected from the children's teams and generally report poorer working relationships with children's social workers in comparison to their supervising social workers. The working relationship between foster carers and children's social workers is crucial to successful outcomes for looked after children, however, it is often difficult for long, trusted relationships to form due to the high levels of social worker turnover each year.

Children's social workers safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable children. It is vital that children's social workers have a good understanding of fostering and the expertise and knowledge that foster carers bring, in order to ensure that looked after children have the best possible experience of care, to improve their outcomes and to support the whole foster family.

Case study: Priority vaccinations for foster carers during the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, foster carers across the UK continued to fulfil their critical role looking after the children and young people in their care. Many foster carers and their families were exposed to multiple households in their fostering role, increasing their risk of catching the virus.

One foster carer told us her story in February 2021:

'I am looking after three children who caught Covid at different times, I am also looking after an unaccompanied asylum seeking child who has just entered the country. I don't want to stop fostering but I am terrified because I have a heart condition and I am worried how devastating it would be for myself and the children if I had to stop.'

'Any social worker, Border Force or other professional entering my home, comes with full PPE and is regarded as front line staff and will get the vaccine as a matter of priority. Yet we, as foster carers, are not given the same protection and we are being asked to bring children into our homes and run the risk of catching this dreadful virus and we are not seen as a priority.'

The Fostering Network campaigned for foster carers to be included in the second phase of vaccinations given to those at high risk of exposure and/or those delivering key public services. Only one country of the UK, Northern Ireland, gave all foster carers priority access to the vaccine alongside other social care workers.

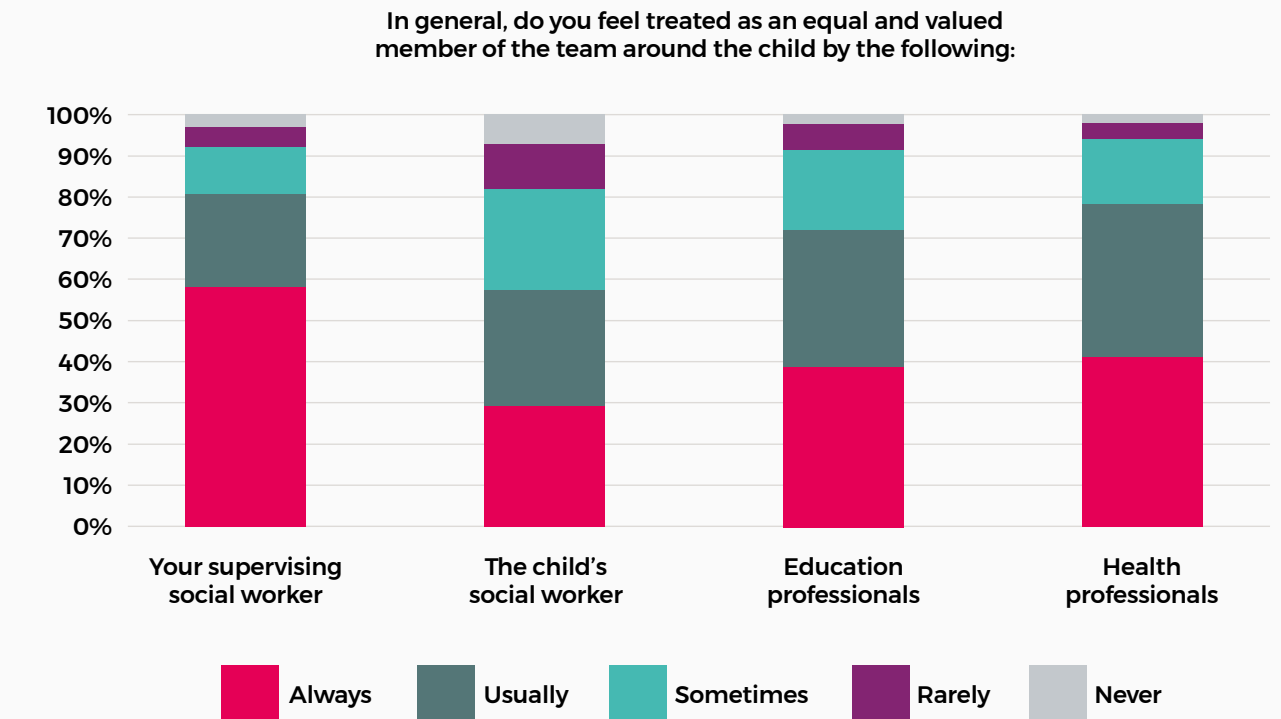


Foster carers should be given more respect within the system. Last month there was a professionals meeting... we were not included as we were not deemed professionals, I asked what qualities we lacked but no one would comment.

Foster carer respondent



Key findings:



- **79 per cent** of foster carers reported that they usually or always feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by their supervising social worker, but only **57 per cent** usually or always do by the child's social worker.

³ Read our previous State of the Nation reports here: www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn

Foster carers must be treated as equal members of the team around the child for children in care to have the best possible experience of care.

Recommendation for governments:

1. Governments of the UK should introduce a national register of foster carers in each country of the UK, allowing the foster carer role to be more recognised and valued within the sector and by the general public.

Recommendations for local authorities/trusts:

2. All children's social workers working with looked after children should spend their first year consolidating their knowledge including an induction with the fostering team to support their understanding about the foster carer role, foster carers' contributions to the team around the child and how best to work with fostering services.
3. Children's social workers should be required to maintain their understanding of foster care post-approval through more joint co-ordinated training with the team around the child, including foster carers.

Recommendation for those who commission foster care placements:

4. Fostering services and commissioning teams should ensure all members of the team around the child understand the role of the foster carer and the agency that supports them.

Recommendation for The Fostering Network:

5. The Fostering Network will champion Mockingbird and other innovative models of delivering foster care that improve the status of the foster carer and improve the support offered and the outcomes of the whole foster family.

A national register of foster carers: Status

The Fostering Network believes that a national register of foster carers in each country of the UK is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions.

Having to be registered in order to foster and prove that you meet a professional standard could help towards foster carer inclusion, improve their feelings of value in the team around the child and ultimately, improve standards of care for children. A national register would bring foster carers in line with other parts of the children's workforce who are registered and regulated (such as residential child-care workers, domiciliary care workers and childminders) and would also help create an overall strengthened and consistent national image of foster care.

Read more about The Fostering Network's position [here](#).

Mockingbird: A model for improving foster carer support

Mockingbird is an innovative model of delivering sustainable foster care led by The Fostering Network in the UK. The model is structured around the support and relationships of an extended family and nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

There are around 90 Mockingbird constellations across the UK at time of writing with more constellations launching throughout the year. These constellations support nearly 1,400 children and young people and 1,500 adults. 207 Mockingbird carers completed the State of the Nation survey. The majority were from English local authorities (**94 per cent**).

87 per cent of Mockingbird foster carers reported that they usually or always feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by their supervising social worker and **63 per cent** usually or always do by the child's social worker. This ranks higher than the remainder of the foster carer respondents suggesting that Mockingbird could be improving the status of the foster carer in the team around the child.

Foster carers should be invited to meetings about the children in their care

It is essential that foster carers are invited to attend meetings about the children in their care because they are responsible for providing nurturing family-based care to children, and know children's likes, dislikes and routines (read more on [our website](#) about what meetings foster carers should be invited to). If the primary care giver is not given all the information they require, or their knowledge is not taken into account because they are not considered a key part of the team around the child, they cannot provide the best care to children. There needs to be open dialogue between all concerned about the stability of placements and solutions should be found jointly. The latest stability index for England found that just over one in ten children in care experienced multiple placement moves in 2018/19.⁴ Ensuring stability for children in care is at the heart of good social work practice, and inviting foster carers to meetings where this is discussed can help prevent instability.

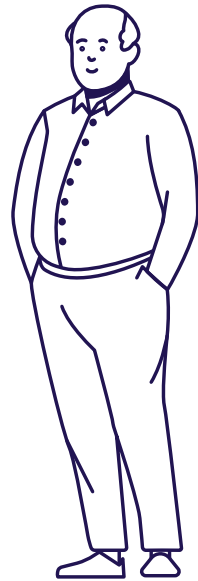
Reviews at placement endings are just one example where foster carers' views are not always sought or considered and where change is needed. It is important that when children move on from their care, foster carers are involved as an active part of the review processes as appropriate. They should provide information (also known as referral information) about the child who is leaving their care to support them in their next care arrangement. Our survey findings show that too many foster carers are still not being given the opportunity to feed into this process, resulting in essential information about the child not being passed on to their next carer or not being taken into account when matching a child with their next carers. Best practice would ensure that information about the child is shared on a day-to-day basis, not just at specific times, to best support the placement.

⁴ Children's Commissioner's Office. Stability Index 2020. Available from: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/cco-stability-index-2020.pdf

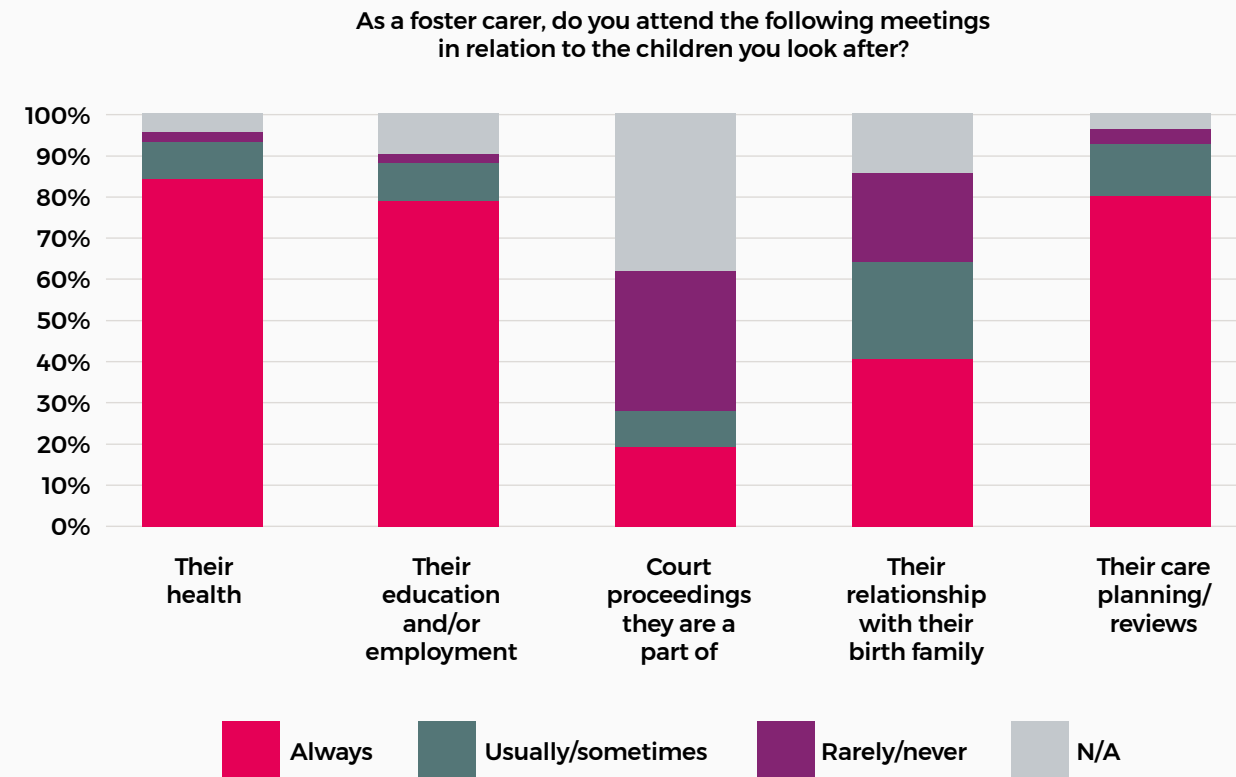
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We should be treated as professionals and allowed to attend professional meetings where key decisions are being made.

Foster carer respondent

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Key findings:



- Despite knowing the children in their care so well, only half of foster carers (**51 per cent**) were given the opportunity to feed into the referral information for the child's next care arrangement.

Recommendations for fostering services:

- Foster carers should be invited to attend all relevant meetings where planning, review and decision making affect them, the placement plan or the children they care for.
- Foster carers should be actively supported to engage in regular, open dialogue about any risk of placement disruption. In England and Wales, independent reviewing officers should be informed immediately if there is any risk to placement stability, to enable them to fulfil their role in respect of monitoring, that all necessary measures are taken to ensure stability and good outcomes for children.
- Foster carers should feel empowered by their fostering service and confident to have an ongoing dialogue with social workers about ensuring stability for the children in their care. Services should have placement stability policies and processes in place to ensure that foster carers are confident that action will be taken to avoid placement breakdown following any concerns raised.
- When a child moves on from a placement, the foster carers involved should have the opportunity and the support from their service to share information and to be an active part of supporting a smooth transition for the child.

Recommendation for governments:

- Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered and shared to ensure lessons can be learnt and fed into individual and wider practice learning. Governments should report on this information in their annual statistical reports on children in care arrangements.

Foster carers views should be sought and listened to

Foster carers are the core element of every fostering service. It is therefore essential that foster carers' views are sought and listened to, not just regarding the care of children, but also in relation to improving the fostering service in general. Fostering services that actively engage with, consult and listen to foster carers will ensure continuous service improvements and the retention of high quality and experienced foster carers, who feel valued.

A good [Foster Carers' Charter](#) sets out clear expectations for how foster carers should be treated, trained and supported. The agreement can help to build an understanding between fostering services and foster carers as it clearly defines the expectations of their roles and where certain responsibilities lie. As a result, a well-implemented charter should lead to increased status of foster carers within a fostering service.

If children in foster care are to flourish, foster carers need to be empowered to confidently perform their roles as key advocates for children's needs and not be labelled as 'difficult' or 'uncooperative' for doing so.

Case study: Positive engagement between a fostering service and their foster carer association

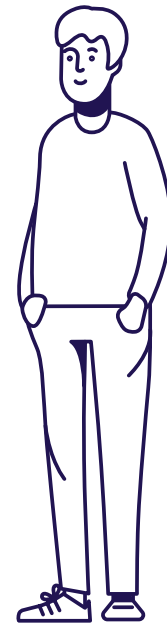
Stockport Foster Carers Association (SFCA) was approached by Stockport Council Fostering Service to feedback on the foster carers' charter which was being updated.

The fostering service accepted all of SFCA's suggestions. One suggestion was to incorporate a commitment from the local authority to routinely consider maintaining contact between a child and their former foster carer and to support foster carers to maintain relationships if in the best interest of the child.



As a family and friends foster carer I was once told by a children's social worker that ...my views were irrelevant because "foster carers always try to make things easy for themselves". This attitude, which I've noticed a lot since this comment, means that genuine concerns for the children raised by the people who know them best are ignored by the people making important decisions in their lives.

Foster carer respondent



Key findings:

- **All but two** services consult in at least one or more ways with their foster carers. Ways of consulting included:
 - running surveys
 - leading groups with foster carers
 - asking identified foster carer representatives
 - attending groups led by foster carers including foster care associations.
- **46 per cent** of foster carers reported that their service has a foster carers' charter. However, only **13 per cent** of foster carers said that having a charter had increased their status suggesting that more work needs to be done to support services in their implementation of a successful charter.
- **Over half** of the fostering service respondents reported having a foster carers' charter in place. **One in ten** did not know whether their fostering service had a charter.

- Of those fostering services who did have a charter:
 - **Two in ten** reported it being updated within the last 12 months, **four in ten** reported it being updated in the past one to two years, with the others not having updated it for at least two years or not knowing when it was last updated.
 - Heads of fostering services and foster carer representatives were most likely to be signed up to the charter, directors of children's services less likely and councillors the least likely.
 - **Roughly one-quarter** of fostering service respondents stated that the charter increased the status of the foster carer in the team around the child while **three-quarters** reported no real change.

Recommendations for fostering services:

11. All fostering services should introduce, embed and regularly review a foster carers' charter. The Fostering Network's Foster Carers' Charter is a robust example and should be used as a template to develop local charters.
12. Fostering services should work with foster carers and others (including young people) to co-design the planning and improvement of fostering services.
13. All fostering services should actively engage with, consult and listen to their foster carers to ensure continuous service improvements and the retention of high quality and experienced foster carers.

Recommendation for The Fostering Network:

14. The Fostering Network will work with their members to ensure they get the right support and information to effectively embed a Foster Carers' Charter.

Both foster carers and fostering services

agree that improving the status of foster carers in the team around the child is the number one thing that will change fostering for the better.

2. Authority

For most children growing up in the UK, their parents will guide them by helping them to make decisions about their life or empowering them to make their own decisions. We should be striving to enable children who are raised by foster carers to have the same opportunities whenever possible; however this can be difficult at times. Too many foster carers report that they are not always given the appropriate authority to make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care. Sometimes they feel like they have the least authority out of all the team supporting the child. This can hinder the ability of children and young people in care to participate in family, school or social activities.

Despite regulations across the UK stating that foster carers should be able to make certain decisions in relation to a child in their care, our data indicates that this is still not consistently the case. The ultimate impact of this is on the child who may be treated differently to the rest of the family and their peers. We believe that foster carers should be empowered and trusted to make more day-to-day decisions on behalf of children (depending on the nature of their relationship with the child), with any decisions that cannot be reasonably made by the foster carer being responded to in a timely manner.

While decisions foster carers have the authority to make are tailored to each child and are based on their relationship with them, in general, foster carers should have the authority to make the following decisions such that the children in their care have the same opportunities as their peers:

- routine medical visits and treatments
- overnight stays
- holidays within the country
- visiting friends
- organised activities/clubs
- haircuts
- school day trips
- meeting with school staff
- school photographs
- sex education
- mobile phones

Decisions foster carers alone do not have the authority to make and are made in conjunction with the child's social worker or those with parental responsibility, e.g. the corporate parent, include:

- applications for a child's passport and national insurance number
- formal contact arrangements which must be upheld and reviewed

The gap between responsibility and authority

The source of the tension about where responsibility and authority lie in foster care often leads back to the fact that the local authority/trust has the legal responsibility to act as the corporate parent for children in care. Corporate parents discharge day-to-day responsibility to care for children to foster carers but often without the full authority to make decisions about the child in their care.

Key findings:

- **21 per cent** of foster carers reported that 'it varies' when asked if their child's social worker had been clear about which decisions they have the authority to make in relation to a child in foster care.
- We asked foster carers if, in general, they felt able to make decisions delegated to them on behalf of the child: **37 per cent** said always, **34 per cent** said usually, **14 per cent** said sometimes and the remaining **15 per cent** said rarely, never, or not applicable. There was no significant difference between the responses from foster carers looking after children on a short- or long-term basis.
- **One third** of foster carers stated that children's social workers rarely or never respond in a timely manner to decisions they do not have the authority to make.

One third of foster carers said they were not always clear about what decisions they have the authority to make about the children in their care.

In order for children in care to have the best possible experience, foster carers should be empowered to take appropriate and timely decisions about the children in their care.

Recommendation for governments:

15. Regulations around delegating authority to foster carers should follow child-focused policy and practice, similar to that introduced in Wales, whereby decisions foster carers have the authority to make are formally agreed and communicated clearly at the outset of the placement and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care.

Recommendation for fostering services and children's social work teams:

16. All members of the teams around the child should have a shared understanding of the decisions that foster carers can make to ensure that children in foster care are not treated differently from their peers and feel part of their family.

Recommendation for children's social workers:

17. It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, explaining why and how this aligns with care planning. Social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority and take the appropriate action to achieve the best outcome for the child at all times.

3. Support, learning and development

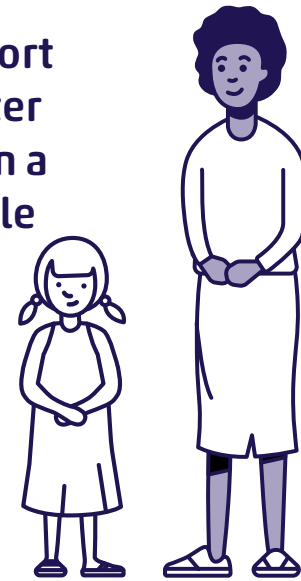
In order for children and young people in care to have the best possible outcomes, foster carers need to be supported – emotionally, financially and practically – to help them continue to do their role well. We need a highly skilled foster carer workforce to meet the increasingly complex needs of the children who come into foster care; this means that excellent learning and development offers and commitment to learning and development plans for foster carers are key. The learning and development of the foster carer workforce could be further supported by standard and accredited pre- and post-approval training frameworks for foster carers across the UK.

The terms and conditions that foster carers agree to must reflect the value that foster carers provide as essential members of the team around the child. The tasks that foster carers undertake require expert knowledge and are unique, and the training and support offered to foster carers must reflect this. Foster carers need to be supported in a good working environment where everyone is respected and treated fairly, everyone is listened to and everyone has clear expectations of each other's roles and responsibilities.

Not offering the right package of practical, financial and emotional support to foster carers can result in instability for children as foster carers cannot continue looking after a particular child and some even leave the workforce completely. Ensuring stability for children in care should be paramount for all fostering services as it is so closely linked to outcomes.

“ There’s no consistency in support when things go wrong for foster carers. I didn’t go into it to earn a living, but to help young people – but for what we have to do and give up on in our lives we’re worth more.

Foster carer respondent



The views of carers

12 per cent of foster carers said that they are considering giving up fostering, and only **54 per cent** said that they would recommend fostering to those considering it. The prominent reasons for this were:

- lack of support and respect
- poor pay and employment rights
- poor communication
- too much ‘red tape’ and paperwork
- levels of stress.

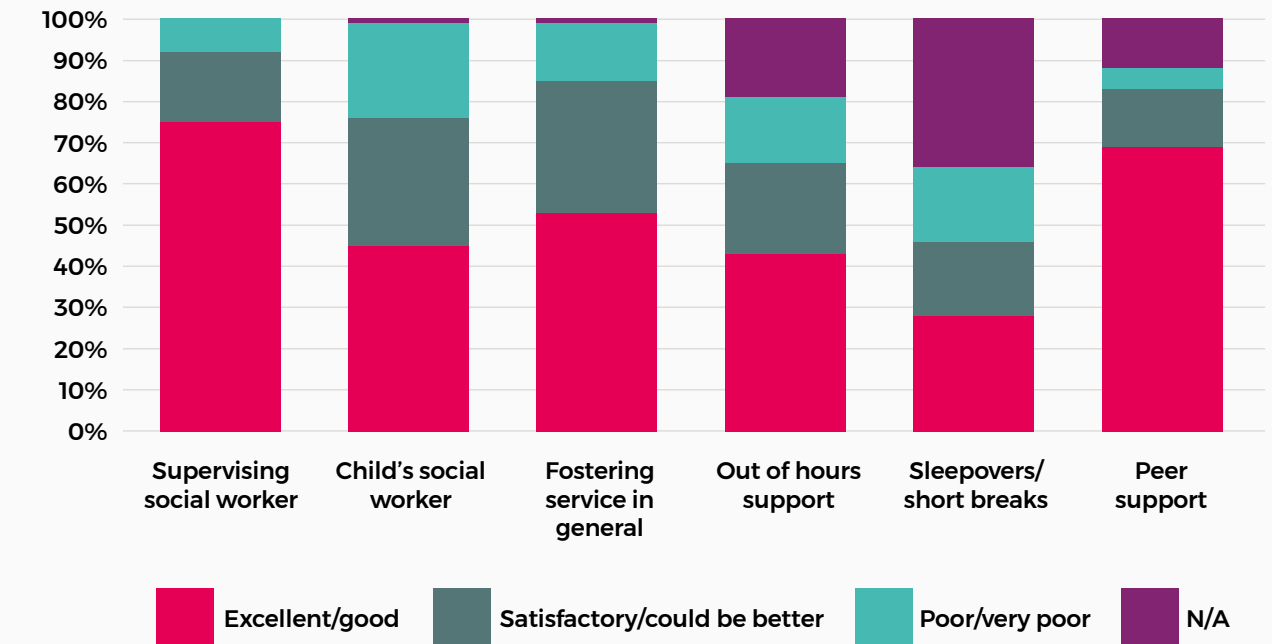
Key findings about support:

- **Three quarters** of foster carers rated the support they receive from their supervising social worker as excellent or good compared with only **45 per cent** who rated the support received from children’s supervising social workers (to support the placement) as excellent or good.
- We asked fostering services to **rate the support they provide to their foster carers**. The three areas they identified that needed the most improvement were:
 - mental health and wellbeing support
 - peer support opportunities
 - short break/respice support.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic

Nearly half (**46 per cent**) of foster carer respondents stated their own mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated slightly or significantly as a result of the pandemic.

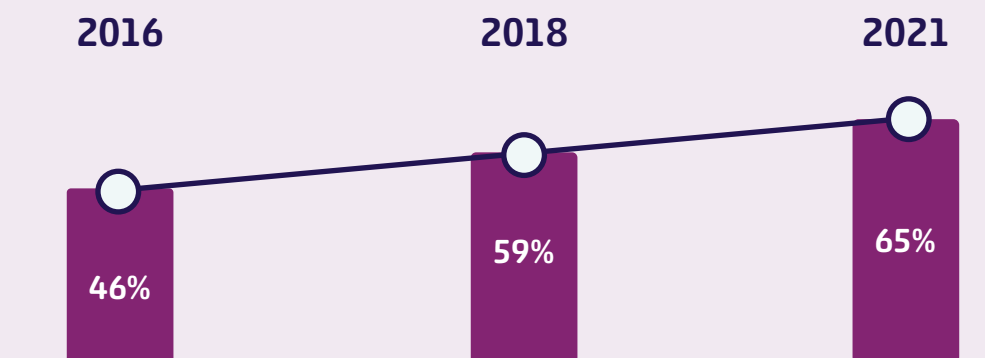
How do foster carers rate the support they receive from the following:



Key findings about learning and development:

- **65 per cent** of foster carers have an agreed learning and development plan for the next 12 months. This figure has been steadily rising since our 2016 survey when only 46 per cent of foster carers reported having an agreed learning and development plan.
- **70 of the 99 service respondents** agreed or strongly agreed that there should be standard accredited training for assessing and approving foster carers.
- **66 services** agreed or strongly agreed that there should be a standard accredited post-approval training framework.

Foster carers who have an agreed learning and development plan for the next 12 months



Fostering is a complex and challenging role, therefore foster carers should be appropriately supported and trained as part of their career development in order to continue to provide the best possible care for children.

Recommendation for governments:

18. A learning and development framework for foster carers, such as that in Wales, should be implemented in all four countries of the UK covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development.

Recommendations for fostering services:

19. All foster carers should have an agreed annual learning and development plan, confirmed in their annual review, that addresses both the standard and specialised learning and development (including in mental health, wellbeing and resilience) required to meet the needs of the children they care for or may care for in the future.

20. Foster carers should be empowered to request further and specialist learning and development they feel they require to encourage children in their care to thrive; and be able to access funds to fulfil their learning and development needs.

21. Foster carers should be encouraged to acknowledge their own mental health, wellbeing and resilience needs. Fostering services should have a range of support available for foster carers to meet these needs, including opportunities to feed back about the working environment and peer support.

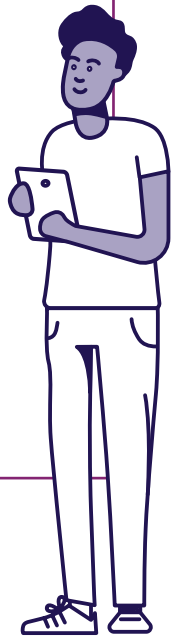
22. All foster carers should have a support network of known trusted adults who can offer natural short breaks for children and support to foster carers. Services should set out this expectation at the recruitment stage and include any assessment of these identified support networks as an integral part of the fostering process. Where foster carers do not have a pre-existing support network available, the fostering service should ensure they can access one.

A national register of foster carers: Learning and development

The Fostering Network believes that a national register of foster carers in each country of the UK is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions.

A register of all those who have foster carer approval would go hand-in-hand with a standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development framework for foster carers. It would standardise approval, set learning and development requirements, increase opportunity for professional development and lead to better and more consistent outcomes for children.

Read more about The Fostering Network's position [here](#).



4. Finances

There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering – an allowance and a fee. The allowance is designed to cover the costs of caring for a child. The fee recognises the time, expertise and skills of the foster carer.

While allowances vary between fostering services, all foster carers looking after a child on behalf of the state in the UK receive an allowance. National minimum allowances are established in England, Northern Ireland and Wales respectively, but there is currently no national minimum allowance in Scotland. National minimum allowances in all countries of the UK should be truly reflective of the costs of caring for a child or young person and no foster carer should be out of pocket as a result of caring for a child on behalf of the state. It is important that governments properly understand the needs of the children in foster care today, and provide appropriate funding to meet these needs.

Just 9%
of foster carers reported receiving more than the national living wage per calendar month.

Foster carers provide specialist round-the-clock care, ensuring that children are nurtured and loved, yet not all foster carers receive an income from this role to support themselves (otherwise known as a fee payment). At time of writing, there is currently no minimum recommended fee for foster carers in any country of the UK, nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services.

The survey findings show that even when foster carers do receive a fee, the majority receive far below the national living wage per calendar month for a 40-hour week, despite many foster carers not combining fostering with other work. Additionally, most foster carers only receive a fee payment when they have a child in foster care living with them and therefore do not have a stable income from fostering.

If all foster carers received regular fee payments, regardless of whether a child was placed with them or not, they would be provided with a stable income. This in turn would play an important role in the recruitment of new foster carers, the retention of good foster carers and be a recognition of how their skills and expertise are of value to their fostering service.

As many foster carers do not currently receive regular fee payments or only receive fee payments when they have a child placed with them, retainer payments are important in order to keep good and experienced foster families. Retainer payments are designed to ensure that fostering households are not financially worse off in between having children stay with them. Retainers also ensure each match between a child and a foster family is right for all involved and not swayed by a family's financial circumstances (and their need to say yes to a child coming to live with them even if it isn't a good 'match') and can in some cases enable a foster family to play an important part in helping a child settle into their next care arrangement.

Key findings:

- **Over a third** of foster carers said that their allowances do not meet the full cost of looking after a child.
- Of those who do not feel the allowances meet the costs of looking after a child, **49 per cent** stated that more one-off payments for exceptional expenses, such as for driving lessons, laptops and furniture, would help.
- **63 per cent** of foster carers stated that they receive a fee payment. This has risen by six per cent since our 2016 survey.
- **Almost all services** agreed that foster carers should receive a fee payment.
- The national living wage (NLW) for 2021/22 in the UK is £8.91 per hour. If working a typical 40-hour week, this equates to £1544.40 per calendar month. Just **nine per cent** of foster carers reported receiving more than the NLW per calendar month. This remains the same from when we last surveyed in 2018.
- Only **15 per cent** of foster carers said that they receive a retainer between placements, and of these **31 per cent** were not sure how long they receive them for, and **half** receive them for eight weeks or less.

61%

of foster carers who responded do not combine fostering with other work.

”

I would like respect and value via remuneration – a more respectful financial acknowledgement of what is being done to support children in care by the carer. We are viewed as “non-professional” in my experience (compared to teachers/SENCO/social workers) and yet are the ones available 24/7 for the child directly. We're not in it for the money, but it is ridiculous how little is paid.

Foster carer respondent

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Foster carers should be appropriately paid for their time, skills and expertise. Doing so will help maintain and grow the workforce required to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in care.

Recommendations for governments:

- 23.** Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers, at the very least, receive regular fee payments in line with the national living wage for a 40-hour week, which recognises their time, skills and expertise regardless of whether they are currently caring for a child. The amount foster carers receive should be reviewed at regular intervals in conversation with foster carers.
- 24.** Governments across the UK should undertake a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances set in their respective countries using up to date evidence to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
- 25.** The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a national minimum allowance for foster carers.

Recommendations for fostering services:

- 26.** Foster carers should receive regular fee payments which recognise their time, skills and expertise and the role they agree to undertake as a foster carer.
- 27.** Fostering services should have annual transparent administration of fee and allowance payment statements so that all foster carers are clear about the allowances and fees they are receiving.
- 28.** Until the introduction of regular fee payments for foster carers, all foster carers should receive retainer payments in between caring for children, to support good matching, maintain a skilled foster care workforce and ensure that foster carers feel valued for the work they do.
- 29.** Fostering services should have a clear policy around what retainer payments are available and for how long the support will be provided.



The components that need to be in place at a national level to improve the status of foster carers:

- **A national register** of foster carers in each country of the UK
- **Regulations around delegating authority** to foster carers that follow child focused policy and practice
- **Investment in innovative models of delivering foster care**, including Mockingbird, available to all foster families across the UK
- **A learning and development framework** for foster carers covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development for foster carers
- **Fully costed and funded foster care**, such that national minimum allowances in each country of the UK cover the full cost of raising a child to a good standard of living and foster carers receive regular fee payments reflective of their time, skills and expertise paid 52 weeks of the year.

The components that need to be in place at a local level to improve the status of foster carers:

- **Every fostering service has an embedded and regularly reviewed foster carers' charter.**
- **Foster carers are invited to all meetings that affect the child**, themselves or the child's care plan and the sharing of information and listening to foster carers' views happens on a day-to-day basis.
- **All newly qualified social workers complete an induction with the fostering team** to support their understanding about how best to work with fostering services and foster carers to support children.
- **Children's social workers are required to maintain their understanding of foster care post-approval** through more joint coordinated training with the team around the child, including foster carers.
- **Decisions foster carers have the authority to make are agreed and communicated clearly at the outset** of the placement and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate flexibility to take decisions relating to children in their care.
- **Foster carers are offered holistic support** including peer support opportunities and support for their mental health and wellbeing.
- **Foster carers have an identified support network** of known trusted adults who can support them in their role.
- **All foster carers have an agreed learning and development plan**, agreed in their annual review, that covers standard and specialist training required to meet the needs of children in their care.
- **All foster carers are empowered to request further and specialist learning and development** they feel they require to encourage children in their care to thrive.
- **All fostering services provide foster carers with an allowance that meets the full costs of looking after a child, regular fee payments 52 weeks of the year** that recognise a foster carer's time, skills and expertise, and annual transparent administration of fee and allowance payment statements.

5. Conclusion

If governments, services and the whole sector want to make a significant positive change to the experiences and outcomes of the tens of thousands of children who come into care each year, there must be a focus on foster care in the children's social care agenda in each country of the UK – after all, three-quarters of looked after children are living with over 56,000 foster families. There are a multitude of factors that require immediate improvements in policy and practice within the fostering system, many of which will benefit children and young people, but we believe that the most impactful change would be to increase the status of foster carers in the team around the child.

Improving the status of foster carers is not a new idea. Indeed, it is something that The Fostering Network has called for since our inception almost half a century ago. Many improvements have been made over those years, but the changes have been too small and too slow. There is a clear consensus that the children's care system across the UK is not fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Much evidence published over the past 12 months suggests that the children's social care system is failing our children and young people. The number of children in need of a foster family is increasing at a rate that cannot be met by the current capacity and at the heart of this crisis is the need to improve the status of the foster carer. Now is the time to ensure foster carers have the right terms and conditions to enable them to do their job properly, are valued for doing so and remain fostering for as long as they are able. This includes being fully trained and supported, having the authority and status to make day-

to-day decisions about the children in their care, their knowledge and skills being valued in the team around the child and being adequately paid for their time, skills and expertise.

Foster carers – whether they are long-term, short-term, emergency, short break or family and friends foster carers – should be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child who bring knowledge, skills and experience to the vitally important role of caring for children in foster care. Yet, the findings of our State of the Nation survey clearly indicate that there is a continued failure to position foster carers firmly as part of the social care workforce and a key member of the team around the child. This risks undermining their ability to provide the stability, safety and love that children and young people need to flourish. Some have argued that increased professionalisation of foster care could result in a lack of nurture and love. But being part of a profession and providing a loving and stable family home to a child are entirely complementary and are exactly the combination required in order to provide the best outcomes for looked after children.

Being a foster carer is not simply parenting or 'parenting plus'. It's never less than that, but it is so much more. The needs of children in foster care, and the system within which foster carers work, require foster carers to be equal and valued members of the team around the child. The findings of our State of the Nation survey clearly show, we need them to be consistently treated as such, to make sure our children have the best possible outcomes.

The state of foster carer recruitment and retention across the UK

- Our State of the Nation 2021 survey found that **all but six services** reported having a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their local population.
- The highest areas of need were for teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disabilities and parent and child placements.
- The **latest figures from England** show that **12 per cent** of foster carers left fostering over the course of one year, and while not all resignations are due to a negative event, **30 per cent** of those who left did so within two years of their approval.
- The Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) **interim report** on the children's social care market found the recruitment and retention of foster carers to be the main barrier to being able to expand the provision of foster care which is needed to ensure that children consistently receive placements that fully meet their needs, when and where they require them.
- The CMA report also found that the most common factor cited for foster carers leaving the workforce was receiving too little training and/or support. Other key reasons mentioned were not receiving enough short break/respice provision; not being able to afford to foster; not being matched with children regularly enough; and being unable to meet children's needs.
- The Fostering Network estimates that **around 9,000 more foster families** need to be recruited this year across the UK to keep up with demand for foster placements.

“
Fostering is the most rewarding job ever despite the difficulties and frustrations sometimes. I feel I'm doing something worthwhile and important.”

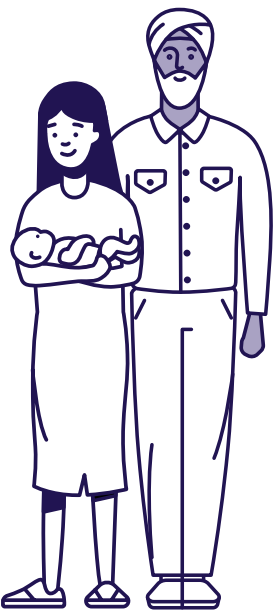
Foster carer respondent

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“
I foster because I love it. Making a difference to children's lives is important to me and my family.”

Foster carer respondent

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About the data

Both the foster carers' and fostering services' surveys were open for nearly 10 weeks from 5 May until 11 July 2021 and hosted online via Smart Survey.

Foster carers' survey

The foster carers' survey was promoted via our website, magazine and through social media and emails.

A total of 3,352 foster carers from across the UK responded to our 2021 State of the Nation survey, maintaining it as the largest UK-wide survey of foster carers. The survey was distributed during the pandemic, representing a good response rate.

While most respondents were from England, there was a strong response from other nations, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all returning more respondents than would be expected for the proportion of the UK population living in those nations and the distribution of fostering households across those countries.

Both surveys were analysed with the help of voluntary analysts taking part in the Ministry of Justice's Analytical Volunteer Programme. We are very grateful for all their support throughout the research process.

About the foster carer respondents:

- **72 per cent** of respondents foster for a local authority/health and social care trust. The remainder fostered for independent providers. This is higher than the actual proportion of local authority carers in the UK which is approximately two-thirds of all carers.
- **42 per cent** currently had one child in foster care living with them, **28 per cent** had two.
- At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around **nine per cent** of all children living in foster care in the UK.
- **Seven per cent** were approved family and friends/kinship foster carers. This is significantly lower than the actual proportion of family and friends foster carers across the UK.
- **75 per cent** foster with their partner or other adult.
- **Seven per cent** had been fostering for less than a year, **31 per cent** for one-five years, **26 per cent** six-ten years, **26 per cent** 11-20 years and **10 per cent** more than 21 years.
- **Around a third** had other children not in foster care living in their household.
- Since 2019 there has been an increase, from **42 to 50 per cent**, of foster carers aged between 55 and 74, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of carers aged below 54. This continues a trend from our 2014 survey indicating that the foster carer workforce is getting older.

Fostering services' survey

The fostering services' survey was open to fostering service members of The Fostering Network only. The link to participate was sent via email directly to the registered managers or someone of an equivalent position with the knowledge to answer the questions. Participation was encouraged by using our practice support team's and country offices' contacts to promote the survey.

A total of 99 services completed the survey. This represents one-fifth of the total fostering service providers across the UK.

About the fostering services respondents:

- **75 services** were based in England, **two** in Northern Ireland, **12** in Scotland and **10** in Wales.
- The total number of fostering households approved by the fostering service respondents was 13,540 which represents around **25 per cent** of the total fostering households in the UK.
- 42 of the people who responded on behalf of the fostering service were registered managers, 26 were fostering service managers, 13 team managers and the remainder had various other job roles.

Demographic information about the foster carer respondents:

- **83 per cent** of respondents were female.
- **57 per cent** of respondents were Christian and **37 per cent** had no religion.
- **87 per cent** of respondents were white British.
- **88 per cent** of respondents were heterosexual, **four per cent** of respondents were gay or lesbian and **two per cent** bisexual.
- **Five per cent** of respondents stated they had a disability.

57 services
were independent
providers

42
were local
authorities/trusts






About The Fostering Network

As the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation, we are the essential network for fostering and we bring together everyone who is involved in the lives of children in foster care. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

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