



The Fostering Network's response to the Scottish Government consultation on the future of foster care

February 2025

Our vision

What are your views on our vision for foster care?

We are broadly supportive of the Scottish Government's overall vision for foster care, although we believe many aspects of it are also relevant to kinship care, and we would welcome explicit recognition of this.

While all children share a number of fundamental needs¹, every child also has their own unique needs, shaped by their experiences, identity, and interests. It is therefore crucial that services and carers are adaptive to these individual needs. We agree that this requires children's experiences to be prioritised and their voices listened to. Foster and kinship carers are in a unique position to hear and amplify the voices of the children they look after and should be empowered to do so.

We also support the intention to support families in various forms, including by helping those on the edge of care to stay safely together, and involving foster carers in facilitating family time. We believe foster and kinship families should also be recognised and valued in their own right, and children and young people encouraged to maintain lifelong relationships with those who are important to them, including former carers.

The Scottish Government's commitment to improve the fostering system and provide ongoing support to caregivers is welcome. Children and young people with care experience have often been through significant trauma and adversity, through both the circumstances leading up to them coming into care, and the experience of being removed from their birth parents.² The care system exists not only to provide for children's basic needs and rights, but to help them to recover from adversity so they can go on to develop and thrive. Support for foster carers to develop their skills and knowledge is essential, but must be accompanied by a wide range of emotional, practical and financial support.

¹ Pringle, M. K. (1986) *The Needs of Children* (3rd ed.), Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315003337>

² Allik, M., Brown, D., Gedeon, E., Leyland, A. H., and Henderson, M. (2022) Children's Health in Care in Scotland (CHiCS) *Main findings from population-wide research* https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_989673_smx.pdf

Flexible fostering approach

What are your views on the proposed flexible fostering approach?

Our views on the proposed flexible fostering approach are covered in our response to the following question.

What are your views on the seven different elements in the flexible fostering approach?

1) High quality alternative family-based care

We agree that high quality alternative family-based care should remain the basis of the care system in Scotland. Where children cannot safely stay with their birth parents, kinship care must first be fully explored and assessed before considering foster care.

While residential care is right for some children, evidence consistently shows better outcomes, including educational³ and health outcomes^{4 5}, among children in kinship and foster care than in residential care in Scotland. Therefore, we urgently need more support for kinship and foster families and to recruit a diverse range of foster carers to provide and sustain high quality care for children who cannot remain with their birth families.

2) Building potential and capacity for foster carers to support family time

We welcome proposals to build foster carers' capacity to support and facilitate family time where appropriate. Many foster carers are already involved in facilitating family time; of those in Scotland who responded to our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey,⁶ 31% told us they manage family time independently and 27% said they manage it alongside a social worker(s). In comparison, 27% said they only provide transportation to family time, and 19% said they are not involved in managing family time.

Notably, foster carers responding to our survey in Scotland were twice as likely (24%) as those elsewhere in the UK (12%) to say the children they foster do not have time with their birth family. Further research is required to understand this and identify whether it is a cause for concern.

Among those fostering children in Scotland who do have time with their birth family, we found that those who are involved in managing this, either independently or alongside a social worker(s), were significantly more likely to say they feel arrangements for family time are in the best interests of the children they foster (71%) than those who are not involved or only provide transportation (50%). This may be because they feel they can provide support to children during family time, or input into when and where family time should take place. We also heard examples in survey responses of where this did not happen and family time was not in children's best interests, for example, one respondent in Scotland commented, "*The SW department decided it would be a good idea to have*

³ Scottish Government (2024) 'Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23'
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-for-looked-after-children-2022-23/>

⁴ Allik, M., Brown, D., Gedeon, E., Leyland, A. H., & Henderson, M. (2022) Children's Health in Care in Scotland (CHiCS): *Main findings from population-wide research*. University of Glasgow
https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_989673_smxx.pdf

⁵ Miall, N., Fergie, G. & Pearce, A. (2022) Health Inequalities in Scotland: Trends in deaths, health and wellbeing, health behaviours, and health services since 2000. University of Glasgow <https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/282637/1/282637.pdf>

⁶ The Fostering Network (forthcoming 2025) *2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care*

family time during school holidays which means the young person is upset during their time to relax and the whole family suffers.” Involving foster carers in the organisation of family time can avoid such situations from occurring, as they often know the children they look after better than anyone else in the team around the child, and have the best understanding of what else is going on in their lives.

Further to this, we heard from foster carers who want to be more involved not only in organising and supporting family time, but also in informing wider decisions about whether and how often family time should take place. One survey respondent wrote that they want *“To have a say in family time[;] if the child is upset and behaviours start up then we should be allowed to say let’s have a break of say 2 weeks and then let the child/ren relax and fit into routines etc without being traumatised with family time when it’s not good.”*

Another respondent requested *“local authority SW being more supportive to carers input about child and listening when family time is becoming difficult and distressing for children”*. Of course, when family time is required by a children’s hearing, foster carers will not be able to override this decision, however, this is where their ability to participate in children’s hearings is particularly important. In our response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on children’s hearings redesign, we called for foster carers to be automatically included as relevant persons in the hearing system. Current mechanisms for involving foster carers in the hearing system are inadequate, yet foster carers see most clearly how family time affects the children they care for, potentially during visits but also before and afterwards.

We would also note that family time can be emotional for everyone involved and foster carers themselves need support to be able to support children and young people before, during and after meetings with birth family. In the 2024 State of the Nations’ Foster Care survey, less than two thirds (64%) of respondents in Scotland said they always or usually feel supported by their fostering service in relation to family time for the children they foster. Additionally, only 11% said they have received training in the past two years on time with birth families. These are therefore important areas for development as the Scottish Government seeks to build foster carers’ capacity to support family time.

3) Foster carers supporting birth families to facilitate reunification, improving transitions into Continuing Care or other care settings, and into adulthood

We are pleased to see recognition of the role of foster carers in supporting the reunification of children with their birth families, including providing ongoing post-reunification support, where appropriate. We have heard examples of this working well in responses to our 2024 State of the Nations survey; for example, one respondent in Scotland said: *“2 returned home to mum and she chose and insisted we keep in touch. She and the children are now a part of the extended family. It is beneficial for the children to know we are still around”*. Another said, *“The child we fostered from birth to two years when he returned to family is still very much part of our family and we see him regularly for sleepovers and holidays. He is now nearly 7.”*

This language of children remaining ‘part of the family’ after they move on demonstrates the important bonds that can be created in foster care and the benefits of maintaining connections with children and their birth families after they return home. Equally, we would caution that foster carers

must be adequately supported to carry out this role, as another survey respondent wrote, *“I still support birth family with care after the child leaving us two years ago with no social worker involvement and the child not on any order”*.

Additionally, while children’s needs must be centred in all decision-making, any efforts to involve foster carers in post-reunification support will also need to be sensitive to parents’ wishes. In our 2024 State of the Nations survey, 18% of foster carers we surveyed in Scotland told us they have not kept in touch with a child or children they previously fostered because the child’s birth parents didn’t want them to; this was the third most common reason they gave for not keeping in touch. However, where birth parents are open to it, post-reunification support can be extremely beneficial for children and their wider families.

We also believe that young people should be able to keep in touch with former carers when they move to another care setting, rather than back to their birth family. The consultation alludes to this in its reference to foster carers’ role in helping to “improve transitions [...including] to other carers or care settings” but it is not explicitly stated. Despite carers frequently indicating in comments in our 2024 State of the Nations survey that they wish to keep in touch with children they have previously fostered and believe this to be in the children’s best interests, only two in five (42%) foster carers in Scotland who completed the survey said they always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered. Of those who keep in touch to some extent, just over half (52%) said these relationships typically last long-term, for example, into the children’s adulthood.

The Fostering Network’s Keep Connected principles⁷ include that “The relationship between the foster carer and the new family, in whatever form that takes, should be promoted as an ongoing working relationship”. Yet, concerningly, only a quarter (25%) of foster carers responding to our 2024 State of the Nations survey in Scotland said they felt very or quite supported to keep in touch with children they have formerly fostered.

The most common reason foster carers said they have not kept in touch with children they previously fostered was that local practice didn’t allow it (20%). Furthermore, when we asked services how they support children’s relationships with their former foster families when they move on, only three of seventeen services (18%) that responded to the question selected that they have signed up to the Keep Connected principles. The Scottish Government must therefore place a clearer expectation on all local authorities and independent fostering agencies that children and young people should be able to stay in touch with former foster carers after they move on from their care, not only if the carers are formally involved in post-reunification support.

In terms of providing support and staying in touch with young people beyond the age of 16, we would argue that most young people are not ready to leave home at age 16, and unless their family circumstances have changed, a young person who requires foster care at 16 should be assumed to require it until the age of 18. This aligns with the UNCRC definition of a child as anyone who has not yet reached the age of 18⁸. Beyond this point, Continuing Care should be considered the default option for all young people leaving foster care. As stated in our response to the Scottish

⁷ The Fostering Network (2019) ‘Keep Connected Principles’

https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/keepconnectedprinciples_0.pdf

⁸ United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. Part I, Article 1. https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf

Government's consultation on moving on from care into adulthood, to ensure Continuing Care is accessible to all young people who could benefit from it, the Scottish Government must urgently introduce a right to return to Continuing Care, a national recommended allowance for Continuing Care and a national foster carer fee framework which explicitly includes Continuing Care, and must increase the maximum age threshold for Continuing Care to age 25 for young people who wish to stay.

Following Continuing Care, young people should be supported through Aftercare for as long as they need. This is in line with the longer-term support that is often provided by birth families outside the care system, and also reflects that care experienced young people may need support for longer given the effects of trauma on development. As a survey respondent in Scotland commented, *"I feel that we should be offered support to help young people who have left us. They still need help and guidance, just like any other young adult leaving home."*

4) Supporting families on the edge of care to enable more children to remain home

We deliver the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland in partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and are piloting the model in two local authorities in Wales. Having seen the immense benefits it can bring to children, young people and families on the edge of care, we strongly support proposals to adopt this model in Scotland. We believe the model aligns closely with the preventative approach taken by The Promise. Ultimately, it could reduce the need for alternative family-based care for children, and offer a pathway for progression for mainstream foster carers who might otherwise leave the role. However, we agree that this approach will not be appropriate for every family on the edge of care and the role is distinct from that of a traditional foster carer.

Importantly, the Step Up Step Down model can also be used to facilitate reunification and provide post-reunification support to families whose children are returning to them from care. As outlined in our response to the Scottish Government's 'moving on' consultation, we suggest cross-government support and collaboration on the development and rollout of Step Up Step Down in Scotland to ensure its benefits are shared with care experienced people returning to live with their birth family, as well as children and young people at risk of entering care.

5) Short breaks for existing foster carers or families experiencing difficulties

We believe short break provision is a crucial part of the flexible fostering approach, although we prefer terms like 'sleepover', 'weekend away' and 'day out' as these are more aligned with language used by families outside the care system, so can be experienced as less stigmatising.

Many parents will use a babysitter or ask family members to look after their children to give them some time away from their caring responsibilities, but for foster carers without this support system in place, fostering is a 24/7 role. In our 2024 State of the Nations survey, only 44% of foster carers surveyed in Scotland said they have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care to the children they foster. Those with access to this support were less likely to say they have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing because of their fostering (46%) than those without access to it (53%), and were significantly more likely to say they feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing when they need it, without fear of negative consequences for them or the children they foster (69%, compared to 42%). Additionally, they were less than half as likely to

say they are currently considering resigning from fostering (8%, compared to 19%), and significantly more likely to recommend fostering to others (60%, compared to 41%).

By reducing burnout and increasing role satisfaction among carers, access to overnight care may also help to retain carers and prevent unplanned moves for children in foster care, improving stability. In the 2024 State of the Nations survey, of foster carers in Scotland who had experienced a child or children moving on from their care in the previous 24 months, those with access to overnight care were less likely to say this included an unplanned move (62%) than those without access to overnight care (68%), and less likely to have personally requested an unplanned move (24%, compared to 32%). Describing the reasons for an unplanned move, one respondent commented, “*The plan was that we would adopt but local authority was too slow to provide an adequate level of support and short breaks which led to the sad decision to move the child to specialist residential care*”. This shows that, while ‘short breaks’ are not the only intervention required to support stability for children – nor will they always be appropriate – they can be a protective factor, and must be accessible to foster carers who want them, where this is right for children.

In addition to the benefits for carers, and associated improvements to stability for children, as the consultation notes, access to overnight and daytime care can provide children with the opportunity to experience an extended family network. To achieve this, and to provide security and minimise disruption for children, overnight and daytime care must be provided by people who are well known to children. Children must never be sent for ‘short breaks’ with people they do not know. It is also important that children are not made to feel that sleepovers or other temporary arrangements for their care away from their foster carers are a punishment or a response to their behaviour, or that foster carers are ‘taking a holiday from looking after them’. Sleepovers, days out and weekends away should be recognised as a mutually beneficial and natural part of family life. Indeed, it is for the same reason that we believe foster carers should generally be authorised to give children and young people permission to attend sleepovers with their friends, as discussed in the later section on day-to-day decision-making.

The Mockingbird programme, run by The Fostering Network in the UK, offers a good example of sleepovers working well for young people and wider wrap around support for foster carers. Mockingbird is run in ‘constellations’ which each contain six to ten satellite families. The satellite families are supported by a ‘hub home’, operated by an experienced foster carer who offers planned and emergency sleepovers, as well as advice, training, and peer support. Through this, Mockingbird “aims to replicate the support available through an extended family network”.⁹ Sleepovers at the hub home provide some breathing space for foster carers but also give children the opportunity to spend time with friends or foster ‘cousins’ in the constellation.

Equally, for families experiencing difficulties, the Step Up Step Down model also includes days out and sleepovers for children as a way to relieve some of the pressure on families. This should not be used as a replacement for the holistic and intensive support provided by Step Up Step Down

⁹ Ott, E., McGrath-Lone, L., Pinto, V., Sanders-Ellis, D., and Trivedi, H. (2020) *Mockingbird programme: Evaluation report*, Department for Education
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fa412dfd3bf7f03a40fe598/Fostering_Network_Mockingbird.pdf

where this is deemed necessary, however, it could be beneficial as an alternative for families requiring less support than the full Step Up Step Down model.

Of course, the use of overnight and daytime care for children in and on the edges of care should not be limited to the Mockingbird and Step Up Step Down programmes. We believe the Scottish Government's foster carer recruitment campaign must include a drive to recruit more 'short break' carers, who are adequately remunerated, allowing them to support the wider retention of foster carers. This could also allow prospective carers who have less availability for full-time fostering to become involved. We also propose that new foster carers should be recruited alongside their own approved support networks of people who are already part of their lives, for example relatives or close friends.

6) Using more experienced foster carers to mentor new foster carers, deliver training and share practice and knowledge

We support this proposal but believe mentoring should be offered to prospective as well as newly approved foster carers. The Centre for Evidence and Implementation's 2023 research report on foster carer retention and recruitment in England, which we commissioned, recommended that the government trial and evaluate the effectiveness of buddying/ mentoring schemes for prospective foster carers during the approval process.¹⁰ In our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, when asked about the reasons preventing suitable applicants from continuing the foster carer application process following initial enquiry, the second most common theme in comments from fostering services related to aspects of the assessment process, particularly its length and intrusiveness. Involving mentors from the outset could enable them to provide applicants with encouragement and reassurance about these aspects of the process, for example, explaining the need for such intrusive checks and motivating them to continue. This could mean fewer suitable applicants drop out of the process.

Mentoring for approved foster carers would also be highly beneficial. In the 2024 State of the Nations survey, 63% of foster carers surveyed in Scotland rated support they receive from other foster carers as excellent or good, while 50% rated support groups as excellent or good, showing that there is a lack of structured support for foster carers. Importantly, foster carers who rated support from other foster carers as excellent or good were less likely to be considering resigning from fostering (14%) than those who rated this support as poor or very poor (33%). The same was true for support groups: 9% who rated them as excellent or good were considering resigning, compared to 19% who rated them as poor or very poor.

7) The facility for a foster carer to stay in a family home to provide immediate support and care at times of crisis; or for a child and birth parent to live with a foster carer

We are not aware of any examples of a foster carer staying in a family home to provide immediate support and care, except where the birth parent is absent from the home (for example, in hospital or a residential treatment centre) or to provide support to new mothers. We understand that

¹⁰ Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., and Gupta, S. (2023) *Foster carer recruitment and retention in England*, Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network
https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/CEI_Report_Foster_Carer_Retention_and_Recruitment_May23.pdf

adapting this approach as suggested could help reduce disruption to children by allowing them to stay in their family home, but suggest that in most cases it would not be feasible for the foster carer to carry out their role in another family's home. It would also raise risk and safety issues for foster carers. However, we are open to the possibility that this might be a beneficial approach in very exceptional cases, as suggested. It could also potentially serve as another opportunity for progression for carers who do not have family commitments in their own home and are willing to move into another family's home to carry out this role.

We support the provision of parent and child foster care in the foster carer's home where needed as this can be extremely beneficial and can provide a positive, supportive and supervised environment where parents can develop the skills necessary to be positive role models in their child's life. It also ensures parents and children remain together.

What implications does a flexible fostering approach have for how fostering is funded and how foster carers are remunerated?

The new approach is likely to require additional investment upfront. Foster carers must be adequately remunerated, as stated below, and those undertaking more specialist roles, including as Step Up Step Down Family Support Foster Carers and Mockingbird hub home carers, will require higher fees. However, the approach will produce significant savings in the medium to longer term. Preventative and holistic models are cost-effective: Step Up Step Down saves £1.50 for every £1 spent¹¹ and Mockingbird is almost self-financing, saving 99p for every £1 spent.¹²

How can the Scottish Government, working with you, support the delivery of the flexible fostering approach?

The Scottish Government should:

- Commission research on the proportion of children in care in Scotland who do not have time with their birth families, in comparison with other nations of the UK, to better understand the potential disparities identified in our survey.
- Introduce automatic 'relevant person' status for foster carers in the children's hearings system and work with us to ensure foster carers are supported to contribute to hearings.
- Commission the development of a national learning and development framework for foster carers, which includes mandatory training on family time.
- Introduce a requirement on all local authorities and fostering services to sign up to our Keep Connected principles.
- Introduce a right to return to Continuing Care, a national recommended allowance for Continuing Care, a national foster carer fee framework which includes Continuing Care, and increase the maximum age threshold for Continuing Care to 25.
- Fund and support a pilot of the Step Up Step Down programme in Scotland.

¹¹ The Fostering Network (2022) 'Briefing for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland' <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Final%20Briefing%20for%20NI%20review%20team%20.pdf>

¹² Ott, E., McGrath-Lone, L., Pinto, V., Sanders-Ellis, D., and Trivedi, H. (2020) *Mockingbird programme: Evaluation report*, Department for Education https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fa412dfd3bf7f03a40fe598/Fostering_Network_Mockingbird.pdf

- Include a drive to recruit more 'short break' carers in the upcoming foster carer recruitment campaign.
- Trial a mentoring/ buddying system for applicants and new foster carers.
- Roll out the Mockingbird programme in each local authority in Scotland.

Independent Fostering Agencies

What is the role of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) in the future of fostering?

We agree with the view set out in The Promise¹³ that there should be no profit in children's social care in Scotland. Independent providers who do not make a profit can play a vital role in providing homes for children in foster care. A lack of suitable homes with local authority foster carers means some have to place children with IFA carers, which as the consultation states, often requires moving outside of their local authority area. We believe it is in children's best interests to remain in their communities and close to their siblings or social networks where possible.

While we appreciate the desire to use local authority foster carers, first and foremost, to keep children local and with their siblings, the reality is that we do not have enough foster carers. If sufficient numbers of new foster carers can be recruited to local authorities, the need for foster carers in IFAs may decrease, but uprooting children from homes they are settled in for the purpose of moving away from IFAs will never be in their best interests. We are therefore opposed to any attempt to move away from IFAs where there is currently no viable alternative. Reduced use of IFAs may be an eventual outcome of changes to the fostering system but it should not be an aim of the work in its own right. If the Scottish Government does seek to move away from IFA provision, this should be done through a careful, planned, managed transition to ensure the least impact on children and foster carers.

Should we require all IFAs to have charitable status? Please explain.

Yes.

As stated above, we agree with the view set out in The Promise that there should be no profit in children's social care in Scotland. It is beyond our area of expertise to say whether a requirement for IFAs to have charitable status would reduce the possibility for loopholes through which they may still extract profit, in comparison to the current expectation for them to be not-for-profit. If this is anticipated to be the case, we would support such a requirement in principle.

Should we limit how much local authorities can pay to IFAs? If so, why and how would we do it?

No.

There would be no way of limiting how much local authorities can pay to IFAs, nor any benefit of doing so, without first determining what is an acceptable range for foster carer fees, allowances

¹³ Independent Care Review (2020) The Promise, p.111 <https://thepromise.scot/resources/2020/the-promise.pdf>

and IFA management costs. We have been campaigning for years¹⁴ for a national fee framework for foster carers in each nation of the UK to ensure fostering is financially viable and foster carers are properly remunerated for their role. Our latest fees report¹⁵ found that only 19% of local authorities in Scotland provide a fee that is above the National Living Wage (£11.44 per hour) for a notional 40-hour week – and we would note that foster carers spend far more than 40 hours a week carrying out their role. Any limit to how much local authorities can pay to IFAs that is based on typical local authority fee levels would therefore be far too low. Work is required to define the minimum adequate foster carer fee and create a framework around this which accounts for the diversity of fostering experiences.

As for fostering allowances, we set recommended allowance rates every year based on our research with Loughborough University and Pro Bono Economics on the cost of looking after a child in foster care,¹⁶ yet the Scottish Recommended Allowance falls well short of these. Any limit based on the SRA would therefore also be too low.

Only once the SRA meets the full costs of looking after a child in foster care, and a national fee framework has been established requiring all services to provide adequate fees to foster carers, could the work of limiting how much local authorities can pay to IFAs begin. We would urge the Scottish Government to prioritise increasing the SRA to our recommended rates and introducing a national fee framework for foster carers in the first instance which includes the projected spend for caring for a young person in Continuing Care.

Should IFAs be required to pay their foster carers the Scottish Recommended Allowance (SRA)?

Yes.

We agree that all services, including IFAs and LAs, should be required to pay the Scottish Recommended Allowance as they are all caring for the same children.

What more could be done nationally to support local authorities when paying for placements from IFAs (including forecasting, market shaping and procurement)?

A national register of foster carers, as discussed below, could enable more timely data to be provided to local authorities about the location and specialism of foster carers, enabling more targeted recruitment to meet children's needs.

Recruitment of foster carers

¹⁴ The Fostering Network (n.d.) The 'Cost of Fostering' - cost-of-living campaign
<https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/thecostoffostering>

¹⁵ The Fostering Network (2024) Out of Pocket: Fairer Fees for Foster Carers
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Out%20of%20Pocket%20-%20Fairer%20Fees%20for%20Foster%20Carers%20report.pdf>

¹⁶ The Fostering Network (n.d.) The 'Cost of Fostering' - cost-of-living campaign
<https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/thecostoffostering>

What are your views on the recruitment ‘offer’ described in this section of the consultation document?

The Fostering Network has calculated that at least 400 new fostering households are required in Scotland to ensure that every child gets the care they need and is well supported within their community.¹⁷ We therefore welcome the national foster carer recruitment campaign funded by the Scottish Government, and believe that both this and the proposal to develop a national toolkit for local use will help reduce the strain on services’ resources. However, services must be supported to respond to increasing numbers of inquiries and we have already discussed with the Scottish Government the role that Fosterline Scotland, our dedicated national helpline for foster carers in Scotland, could play in managing increased inquiries centrally.

We agree that targeted approaches to recruit more diverse carers are essential. Of foster carers responding to our 2024 State of the Nations survey in Scotland, most were white (92%); female (77%); aged 55-64 (48%) or 45-54 (26%); and Christian (47%) or not religious (46%). There is also an urgent need for foster carers who can look after sibling groups, older children, and children with disabilities or additional needs. We know this is an issue at a national level and in our 2024 State of the Nations survey, all 18 services that responded in Scotland said that they are experiencing a shortage of foster carers for children with particular needs (i.e. their age, health or siblings).

The creation of a Foster Scotland brand could increase collaboration and reduce competition, maximising resources. This brand and accompanying website must not be limited to the duration of the recruitment campaign, as has been suggested previously, but must be part of a long-term approach to providing information and support to prospective and existing foster carers.

What more can the Scottish Government and local authorities do to recruit foster carers?

Fostering services in Scotland that responded to the 2024 State of the Nations survey told us that the main factors preventing suitable applicants from enquiring to foster are finances and a lack of space in the home. One service respondent wrote: *“Lack of suitable accommodation, cost of living and financial risks associated with fostering.”* Another commented: *“Accommodation – no spare room or not enough space for large sibling groups. Gaps in income as no retainer payments, impact on cost of living.”* To allow suitable applicants to come forward, the Scottish Government must ensure fostering is financially viable, including for those who do not have an additional source of income. We also recommend creating a national fund to support prospective and current foster carers to access suitably sized accommodation, including through extensions and renovations.

Equally, by improving the status, conditions and support for foster carers, as outlined in the rest of our response, the Scottish Government can reduce the need for future recruitment campaigns. Only half (50%) of foster carers we surveyed in Scotland said they would recommend fostering to others who may be considering it. Alongside the national recruitment campaign, the Scottish Government should therefore prioritise increasing role satisfaction among the current foster care population to retain more carers and increase word of mouth recruitment.

¹⁷ The Fostering Network (n.d.) Recruitment targets foster carers <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets>

Retention of foster carers – learning, development and practical support

What is your experience of the SSSC ‘Standard for Foster Care’ and do you find it helpful?

In our engagement with foster carers in Scotland, we have heard that very few are aware of the SSSC ‘Standard for Foster Care’. Our view is that the Standard has not been adequately publicised, nor presented in a way that makes it engaging and accessible to foster carers or services.

While the descriptors in the Standard contain a helpful level of detail about the areas of training foster carers should receive, the learning area titles themselves are rather vague and do not necessarily capture the key issues in fostering. For example, the descriptors for numerous standards mention caring for children and young people with additional support needs, managing foster carers’ own wellbeing, and allegations, but these do not appear in any of the titles, and readers must identify them within the 35 pages of descriptors. Other areas appear to be largely overlooked even in the descriptors; therapeutic parenting is only briefly mentioned in the standard 6 descriptors, there are only allusions to trauma-informed care, and there is no mention of Continuing Care except a brief reference in the appendices.

Likely due to a combination of not being widely implemented, and becoming outdated as language, policy and practice change, the Standard does not appear to be particularly reflective of the training that foster carers actually receive in Scotland. In our 2024 State of the Nations’ Foster Care survey, 62% of foster carer respondents in Scotland said they have received training on challenging behaviour – part of standard 15 – in the past two years. However, only 11% have received training on family time – outdatedly referred to as ‘contact’ in standard 10 – in the past two years. Furthermore, despite the minimal emphasis in the Standard on trauma-informed and therapeutic care, this was the second most common area of training our survey respondents said they have received in the past two years (62%).

There is therefore a case for replacing the Standard with a more detailed, up-to-date and accessible framework for foster carers’ training, which clearly lists the specific topics that all foster carers should receive training on, as well as additional areas required by foster carers depending on the age, needs, backgrounds, and care arrangements of children.

Should there be a new national learning framework for foster carers which could also be a pathway for continuous development?

We strongly support proposals to create a new national learning framework for foster carers. As discussed above, the SSSC Standard for Foster Care is not sufficiently clear or user-friendly and does not appear to have been widely embedded across Scotland. Consequently, the quality of foster carers’ training in Scotland remains in need of improvement. In responses to our 2024 State of the Nations’ Foster Care survey, less than two thirds (64%) of foster carers in Scotland approved within the last five years said they would rate their pre-approval training as excellent or good. Furthermore, less than three in five (59%) of all foster carers surveyed in Scotland said they would rate their post-approval training as excellent or good.

A national learning framework was widely supported by survey respondents. 69% of foster carers in Scotland agreed that there should be a standardised accredited framework for pre- and post-approval training of foster carers, while a further 8% thought this should be the case for pre-approval training only, and 5% for post-approval training only. 15% did not know, and less than 3% disagreed with the proposal for a national learning framework altogether.

Additionally, 72% (13 of 18) fostering services in Scotland agreed that there should be a standardised accredited framework for pre- and post-approval training of foster carers, while a further one service said this should be the case for pre-approval training only, and one for post-approval training only. Two did not know, and only one service disagreed altogether.

The Fostering Network and AFKA (then AFA) Cymru have already developed a framework for post-approval training for foster carers in Wales.¹⁸ This framework has been designed to be engaging and user-friendly, and includes core, additional and specific training areas for foster carers. However, similarly to the SSSC Standard, it has not been widely adopted by services and there is no requirement on them to use it. Any new national learning framework for foster carers in Scotland must therefore exist on a statutory footing. We believe it should encompass both pre- and post-approval training, in line with the views of most foster carers and fostering services surveyed.

Retention of foster carers – financial support

How effective is the current financial model for foster carers?

Not effective.

The current financial model is extremely ineffective. The Fostering Network's recommended allowance rates¹⁹ are based on Loughborough University's minimum income standard research²⁰ which estimates the cost of looking after a child, plus 50% in line with Nina Oldfield's research²¹ on the added costs for children in foster care. Although we were pleased that after years of campaigning for this, a Scottish Recommended Allowance was introduced, we were very disappointed it did not meet our recommended rates, and it is even further behind now after there was no uplift for 2024-2025. Evidence from our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey supports this: only 29% of foster carers in Scotland said they feel their allowance and any expenses they can claim meet the full costs of looking after the children they foster.

Far from ensuring every child grows up safe, loved and respected, Scotland's care system is failing to meet even their most basic needs for food and clothing. Instead, the responsibility for meeting these needs is falling to foster carers. When asked how they cover the extra cost that is unmet by their allowances and expenses, 79% of foster carers surveyed said they use other personal

¹⁸ The Fostering Network and AFA Cymru (2019) National Fostering Framework. Post Approval Learning and Development Framework for Foster Carers. https://afkacymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LD-Framework_E-1.pdf

¹⁹ The Fostering Network (n.d.) The 'Cost of Fostering' - cost-of-living campaign. <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/thecostoffostering>

²⁰ Loughborough University (n.d.) The Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom. <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/crsp/minimum-income-standard/>

²¹ Oldfield, N. (1997) The Adequacy of Foster Care Allowances. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429439865>

income, 29% said they have to work alongside fostering, and 15% said they have to claim benefits. This demonstrates that, unacceptably, most foster carers are having to dip into their own pockets to pay for children's care. It also means children are missing out on opportunities that are key to their development. As one carer in Scotland commented, *"We are able to do less. When I look at my first placement we went on more days out more holidays. This is much less now due to the financial costs. These trips support with bonding and support with educations some of our kids have barely experienced anything and we should be bridging that gap."*

The situation with fees is equally concerning. In responses to the 2024 State of the Nations survey, 58% of foster carers in Scotland said they receive a fee, but only a fifth (21%) said this fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs, for example bills, rent or mortgage, and food (not for the children they foster). One foster carer said, *"The fee has not gone up in 10 years, it should go up with the cost of living each year."* Additionally, our latest fees report²² found that foster carers' fees vary by over £30,000 per year in different local authorities in Scotland, and only 19% of local authorities in Scotland provide a fee that is above the National Living Wage (£11.44 per hour) for a notional 40-hour week.

These issues are not only affecting children in foster care directly, by reducing the opportunities available to them and putting strain on their foster families, but also indirectly, by making it increasingly unaffordable to foster and therefore contributing to decreasing numbers of foster carers available to look after children. The number of fostering households in Scotland has been falling for years, dropping by 8% between 2022 and 2023 alone.²³ The role of finances in this is not insignificant. In our 2024 State of the Nations survey, of foster carers in Scotland who have considered resigning from the role, 28% said financial difficulties had contributed to this. As one survey respondent in Scotland told us, *"We will be stopping fostering as we can no longer financially support the additional costs."*

The Scottish Government must equally consider how many potentially suitable applicants are not coming forward to foster due to concerns about affordability. Indeed, when we asked fostering services in the 2024 State of the Nations survey what they consider to be the primary reasons preventing suitable applicants from enquiring about fostering, the top response was finances.

Do you think there should be a national approach to fees for foster carers?

Yes.

We have been campaigning for a national fee framework for foster carers as part of our 'Cost of Fostering' campaign²⁴ for years. As discussed above, fees are inadequate and vary widely across Scotland. Almost three quarters (73%) of foster carers in Scotland that responded to our 2024 State of the Nations survey, and 72% (13 of 18) services that responded, said they think government should set a national fee framework to apply to all fostering services.

²² The Fostering Network (2024) *Out of Pocket: Fairer Fees for Foster Carers*
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Out%20of%20Pocket%20-%20Fairer%20Fees%20for%20Foster%20Carers%20report.pdf>

²³ Care Inspectorate (2024) 'Fostering and adoption statistical bulletin 2023/24'
<https://www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/news/7741-fostering-and-adoption-statistical-bulletin-2023-24>

²⁴ The Fostering Network (n.d.) The 'Cost of Fostering' - cost-of-living campaign.
<https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/thecostoffostering>

Do you think there should be a national approach to additional payments?

Yes.

Loughborough University's minimum income standard covers the full cost of raising a child so should include additional costs such as Christmases and birthdays. If all foster carers received our recommended rates, they would not need additional payments for these things. However, we would support standardisation of an additional 'start-up' payment when children come into a foster carer's home as this represents an added cost on top of the typical cost of raising a child.

Should the financial model for foster carers include a retainer fee?

Yes.

Ultimately, all foster carers should receive a fee payment for 52 weeks a year, including when they do not have a child or young person in foster care with them. (See recommendation 5 in our 2024 fees report.²⁵) Foster carers must not be put in the position where they have to accept a potentially unsuitable match with a child, or forego a short break or time to reflect after a child moves on, out of financial necessity.

Until this 52-week guaranteed fee structure is implemented, however, our view is that retainers should be paid indefinitely as long as the foster carer remains approved and available to foster. This includes during allegation investigations, as is the case for other care professionals under investigation.

In our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, most foster carers (57%) in Scotland said they do not receive a retainer and a further 19% did not know if they do. Less than 2% said they receive a retainer indefinitely. This demonstrates the need for national action to provide all foster carers with the financial stability they need.

Do you think there should be a national approach for Continuing Care allowances and fees?

Yes.

In responses to our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, over half of foster carers in Scotland said they were slightly (25%) or significantly (32%) worse off as a result of offering Continuing Care. We would therefore strongly support a national approach to both allowances and fees for Continuing Care.

Would an enhanced framework of transparency with a legal requirement on LAs and IFAs to publish foster care allowances assist foster carers and wider recruitment and retention?

We support this proposal. As stated in our response to the Scottish Government's 'moving on' consultation, requiring LAs and IFAs to publish their allowance and fee rates would also allow governments to monitor and ensure they pay these.

²⁵ The Fostering Network (2024) *Out of Pocket: Fairer Fees for Foster Carers*
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Out%20of%20Pocket%20-%20Fairer%20Fees%20for%20Foster%20Carers%20report.pdf>

Retention of foster carers – status, recognition and value

What are your views on the proposal for a national charter of support for foster carers?

While we support this proposal in principle and believe it could improve foster carers' status and increase collaboration for services and local authorities, we do not consider it a priority for the Scottish Government. We also believe it would only be effective if it was legally enforced and monitored. There are several more concrete changes which could help to improve foster carers' status and morale more effectively, including introducing automatic 'relevant person' status for foster carers in children's hearings, a national fee framework, and a national register of foster carers.

Day to day decisions

Is the existing framework under which foster carers can make decisions clear?

No.

The existing framework is outdated and does not always give foster carers the authority they need to make decisions on behalf of the children and young people they foster.

Children in foster care should have the same opportunities as their peers and should not be treated differently because of their care experience. This requires foster carers to be able to make day-to-day decisions with a level of autonomy, without waiting for permission from social services.

Positively, in our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, around two thirds (68%) of foster carers surveyed in Scotland said children's social workers are always or usually clear about which decisions they have the authority to make in relation to the children they foster. However, 17% said they are rarely or never clear. In these instances, foster carers will have to ask social workers for guidance, which can often involve long waits. Of foster carers responding to our survey in Scotland, 55% said that where they have not been given the authority to make decisions on certain matters, they feel social workers always or usually respond to requests for decisions in a timely manner. Concerningly, 20% said they rarely or never do.

Delays in response times are reflective of wider issues with social workers' workload and capacity and cannot be easily resolved. There will always be some situations in which foster carers must seek guidance or permission from social workers to make a decision, but in many cases, the need to seek permission could be avoided by anticipating common scenarios, consulting birth family where relevant, and agreeing upfront which decisions foster carers have the authority to make. For example, children's care plans should specify which decisions foster carers can make around sleepovers, haircuts, and so on. This would avoid the need for repeated requests for decisions, ensuring permission can be given in time so children do not miss out.

Would further guidance, for example good practice, be helpful to support decision making for foster carers (sometimes called delegated decision making) be helpful?

Yes.

Current guidance on decision-making for foster carers is now ten years out of date, yet remains in draft form. This guidance must be renewed and strengthened with an explicit expectation that children's care plans include far more detail on the decisions that can be made by their carers. As stated in our response to the Independent Care Review in 2018, the guidance should also address the need for professionals across health, education, justice and other universal services to understand and respect foster carers' role and responsibility.

Retention of foster carers – a national register

What are your views on a national register for foster carers in Scotland?

The Fostering Network has been campaigning for a national register of foster carers for several years as we believe it would bring the following benefits:

- Safeguarding children and improving care - a register would protect children by keeping a central record of foster carers who have had their approval terminated for safeguarding reasons, ensuring they are not re-approved by another service. In line with other parts of the care sector, the introduction of a register would go hand in hand with an accredited pre- and post-approval training framework and robust national standards of practice, improving the quality of care for children.
- Increasing portability for foster carers - by enabling them to take their registration with them rather than having to repeat the approval process if they decide to move local authority area or foster for a different service. This would drive up standards of support for foster carers and give those who might be considering resigning an easier route to transferring service instead, improving retention.
- Improving foster carers' status and conditions - bringing them in line with the rest of the care sector with formal recognition for their role. Decisions on continued suitability to foster following an allegation would be made by a central registration body, ensuring greater impartiality and fairness.
- Supporting high quality matching of children and foster carers - a register could allow local authorities to quickly check whether any nearby IFA carers have vacancies, reducing out of area moves for children, and could also hold data on the experience and specialisms of foster carers to help services identify potential matches for children more efficiently.

We supported the early engagement on a register that the consultation mentions, finding that 73% of foster carers and 52% of other professionals agreed with proposals to create a register, while 18% and 36%, respectively, said 'maybe'. In responses to our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, excluding those who said they need more information, two thirds (65%) of foster carers in Scotland said they support proposals to create a national register of foster carers, while 12% said they oppose them, and 23% neither support nor oppose them. Of the thirteen fostering services that responded to the survey, six (46%) said they support the proposals, two (15%) oppose them, and five (39%) neither support nor oppose them.

Therefore, we strongly recommend that the Scottish Government use The Promise Bill as an opportunity to introduce a national register for foster carers.

If a register is introduced where should the register be held?

We recommend that the Scottish Social Services Council hold the register, as the body that regulates other parts of the social care workforce in Scotland. An alternative could be the Care Inspectorate, as they already inspect fostering services.

What are your views on the potential to linking continuous professional development to a register?

We support this proposal and suggest that the Scottish Government should make standardised and accredited pre- and post-approval training available for all foster carers as part of the register.

What are your views on a national approach to foster care placement matching?

As noted above, a register could support high quality matching of children and foster carers by allowing local authorities to quickly check whether any nearby IFA carers have vacancies, reducing out of area moves for children. It could also hold data on the experience and specialisms of foster carers to help services identify potential matches for children more efficiently.

How can the Scottish Government support local authorities with resource planning of foster carers, including building an evidence base and data on placements, including those outside local areas?

As above, we believe the register could help with this by holding data on the experience and specialisms of foster carers, allowing services to identify potential matches for children more efficiently, and to inform their recruitment activity and training offer to address shortages.

Retention of foster carers – allegations

Should the Scottish Government update its guidance on managing allegations against foster carers?

Yes.

We agree that the Scottish Government should update its guidance on managing allegations against foster carers. While The Fostering Network was involved in the development of the 2013 guidance²⁶ and we remain supportive of its key principles, new guidance is needed to reflect the latest language, best practice, and research on the impact of allegations on foster families. Additionally, the 2013 guidance has not been fully implemented across Scotland, so we believe new guidance should be on a statutory footing.

Many foster carers will experience an allegation at some point during their fostering journey. In our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, 7% of foster carer respondents in Scotland reported experiencing an allegation in the past 24 months and most were unfounded (42%), deliberately invented (16%) or unsubstantiated (5%); a minority were substantiated (11%). Concerningly, despite the existing guidance stating that foster carers should be kept informed verbally and in

²⁶ The Scottish Government and The Fostering Network (2013) *Managing allegations against foster carers and approved kinship carers: How agencies should respond* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/managing-allegations-against-foster-carers-approved-kinship-carers-agencies-respond>

writing throughout the process, 16% of respondents said they did not know the outcome of their most recent allegation investigation.

Existing guidance also states that independent support should be considered for foster carers subject to an allegation. Our position now is that all foster carers subject to an allegation should receive independent support, as well as the offer of counselling and support for their family, given the significant emotional impact that allegations can have on foster carers and their wider families. However, access to this support is still not widespread: in our 2024 State of the Nations survey, only 61% of foster carers in Scotland who had experienced an allegation in the previous 24 months said they received independent support, a fifth (21%) received specialist counselling support, and a fifth (21%) were offered support for their wider family.

Financial support is another key issue for foster families affected by allegations. In the 2024 State of the Nations survey, we asked fostering services if they continue making fee payments to foster carers if they are unable to foster as a result of an ongoing allegation investigation. Of the 17 fostering services that responded to this question in Scotland, less than a quarter (24%, four services) said they pay foster carers fees for the full duration of the investigation and 29% (five services) said they do so for part of the investigation. This can be particularly difficult for carers when investigations are lengthy, as they often are: in the 2024 survey, 44% of carers said their latest allegation investigation took up to one month, 39% said it took one to three months and 17% said it took three to six months. It is therefore crucial that full fees are paid throughout the entirety of investigations to reduce the pressure on foster carers.

This is important both for foster carers' wellbeing, and to support retention. Of foster carers in Scotland who responded to the 2024 State of the Nations survey, those who had experienced an allegation/s in the previous 24 months were twice as likely to say they were considering resigning from fostering (26%) than those who had not (13%). Furthermore, of foster carers in Scotland who had considered resigning from fostering at any point, almost a quarter (23%) said their experience of an allegation/s contributed to this. Allegations will inevitably be difficult for carers and it is essential that they are investigated thoroughly, but we would suggest that a process that is driving carers to consider resigning from the role is not working as it should. Quotes from our 2024 State of the Nations survey emphasise this. One carer in Scotland said, *"It was the most horrendous experience and caused a lot of problems"*. Another commented, *"I did not feel supported by my fostering service. I was not given access to an independent social worker"*, while a third said, *"It's a very isolated place to be."*

To address these issues, we believe statutory guidance should be updated by the Scottish Government which includes a requirement on fostering services to provide foster carers with independent support, counselling, support for the wider family, full fees, and regular communication on the progress of their allegation investigation. Our forthcoming allegations toolkit will support services to respond appropriately to allegations in fostering families and could help to inform the Scottish Government's work on the new guidance. The creation of a national register of foster carers, with responsibility for final decisions on foster carers' continued approval, could also improve experiences for foster carers by ensuring such decisions are made independently from fostering services.

Retention of foster carers – raising concerns

Is there is a need for the Scottish Government to take action in this area? If so, please explain why and what would be helpful, for example best practice guidance?

Yes, best practice guidance would be helpful.

About you

Further information about your organisation's response

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing 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 have been leading the fostering agenda for 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. In Scotland all 32 local authorities and 22 of 25 independent fostering providers are in membership with us, covering 99% of foster carers.

The survey data shared in this response is from our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey. Conducted every three years, this is the largest independent survey of the fostering sector in the UK. The 2024 survey was completed by 286 foster carers and 18 fostering services in Scotland, representing around 10% of fostering households and a third of services in Scotland.