



State of the Nations' Foster Care Summary Report 2024





Foster care is meant to provide safety and security for children and young people. But too often, children are being caught in a system that doesn't meet their needs.

There has been a growing crisis in foster care for a long time. Every year, hundreds more foster carers leave the role than join, while the number of children in care rises. Our latest State of the Nations survey tells a familiar story. As the sector continues to lose carers, many who remain are burnt out and struggling.

Foster carers take on a vital role. They show remarkable resilience in the face of mounting pressures from all directions. Yet as this report shows, many are at breaking point.

As a sector, we must act collaboratively and courageously to address the issues set out in this research. We must recognise foster carers as far more than small cogs in a system, and rather as

the beating heart of the families they nurture. We must care for them, so they can care for our children.

This report comes as new policies take shape across the UK to reform children's social care. We will be lobbying hard to ensure all four governments deliver the change we need.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who completed the survey and to the fostering community as a whole. You are the lifeblood of this system and without you, it would not exist.

I hope this research inspires you, as it has me, to reflect and act to ensure that every child in foster care has the opportunity to thrive. The challenges ahead are significant but this report sets out some of the steps we must take together.

Sarah Thomas
CEO, The Fostering Network



For almost 25 years, my wife, Sharon, and I have had the privilege of fostering many children, and we still have three young people living with us long-term, who are very much part of our family.

Fostering is at the centre of our lives, it is who we are as a family, and we are passionate about the difference it makes to children. Relationships define our role – with children, their families, our colleagues across the care sector, and the wider fostering community.

The 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care report captures the lived experiences of foster carers like us across the UK. It shines a light on the power of fostering to change lives and doesn't shy away from the challenges that too often stand in the way.

Like many carers, we have experienced the worry of accepting a match when we know it isn't quite right – but the child has nowhere else to go. We've felt the frustration of having a child with

us for years, but hearing nothing about them after they move on. And we've felt the guilt of going on holiday when someone has to be left behind because we couldn't get permission or a passport in time.

Fostering is one of the most rewarding things we do, but there is no doubt that the pressures in our system are making it more challenging. This report is not just a reflection of foster care in the UK today, but a call to action for governments and services.

To my fellow foster carers, I offer my deepest thanks. Thank you for being there for children who need you. Thank you for your resilience, your compassion, and your unshakeable belief in the potential of each and every child you have looked after, loved and supported.

Mervyn Erskine
Foster carer and chair of the board of trustees,
The Fostering Network



Introduction

Over 100,000 children in the UK are looked after away from home, and around three quarters of these are in foster care. Foster families provide children with safe and loving homes when they need them, whether for one night or for many years.

The Fostering Network conducts the State of the Nations' Foster Care survey every three years to provide a reliable picture of the state of foster care across the UK, gathering evidence on what is working and what needs to change. It is the largest independent survey of the UK's fostering sector; the 2024 survey was completed by over 3,000 current and former foster carers and 114 fostering services.

As in previous years, the survey covers a wide range of issues in fostering and we are very grateful to everyone who took the time to share their views. This summary report presents the key findings from the 2024 survey and sets out some of our priority recommendations for governments, placing authorities and fostering services. The full findings, broken down by each nation of the UK, are available in the full report¹

along with a complete list of recommendations. While a foster carer's journey is not linear, both reports are structured to broadly reflect the path from initial recruitment up to the point of considering resigning or retiring.

Unfortunately, since our last report in 2021, we have seen existing pressures in the system grow, compounded by a cost of living crisis, demographic changes in the foster carer population, and the increasing challenges faced by children and young people today. Many of these findings make for difficult and dispiriting reading. However, we are also entering a period of opportunity with new legislation and policy developments forthcoming across the UK to improve children's social care.

We will use our findings to influence this work and continue pushing for wider change at both a national and a local level, to improve support for foster carers and deliver better outcomes for children and young people in foster care. We remain committed to working with services to improve their offer to foster carers, aiding both recruitment and retention.

¹ Available at thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn24





Part One

Starting out

Recruitment, application and approval

The number of children in care has been increasing overall across the UK for the past two decades, while the number of foster carers is decreasing. This means it is crucial that services are able to consistently recruit new foster carers, as well as retain the ones they already have. We have estimated that around 6,500 more foster families are needed across the UK to make sure every child receives the care they need and is well supported in their community.²

Motivations to foster

We asked foster carers to select their motivations for fostering from a list of options. As in 2021, the most frequently chosen motivation was to make a difference to the lives of children in care.



// It's the most worthwhile thing I've ever done. We are a fostering family and it's part of our world. //

Barriers to fostering

We asked fostering services what they consider to be the primary reasons preventing suitable applicants from enquiring to foster. The top reasons they gave were:

- **Finances (49%)** – a combination of the cost of living and the inadequacy of financial support for foster carers.
- **Perceptions** people have **(39%)** – about fostering, children in foster care (often due to media stereotypes), or their own suitability to foster.
- **A lack of space (31%)** – sometimes attributed to people's own children leaving home later.

Improving the recruitment, assessment and approval process

We also asked fostering services what could improve the recruitment, assessment and approval process for foster carers. The top responses were **quicker and more efficient assessments; better conditions** for foster carers; and **more visibility** for fostering in society.

Demographics of foster carers

The population of foster carers in the UK is ageing. Of those who responded to our survey in 2024, only 15% were aged 25-44, a slight decrease from 17% in 2021, and 27% were aged 45-54, down from 32%. In contrast, **the largest proportion of respondents (44%) were aged 55-64**, up from 41%, and a further 12% were aged 65-74, up from 10%. This creates sustainability issues as older foster carers retire and are not replaced by new recruits.

There is also a lack of ethnic and religious diversity in the foster carer population as only 1.9% of those surveyed in 2024 were Asian, compared to around 9% of the UK population, and only 1.5% were Muslim, compared to around 6% of the UK population.³

² The Fostering Network (2024) Recruitment targets. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets

³ UK percentages calculated from the England and Wales Census 2021 (ons.gov.uk/census), Scotland Census 2022 (scotlandscensus.gov.uk), and Northern Ireland Census 2021 (nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census).



Part Two

Caring for children

Matching

Good matching is key to ensuring children are looked after by foster carers who can meet their needs, close to home and with their siblings where appropriate. This helps avoid unplanned moves and increases stability for children. However, services often lack the information they need to make good matches.

Just over half (56%) of fostering services said they always or usually receive all the information required from children's social workers to inform the matching process.

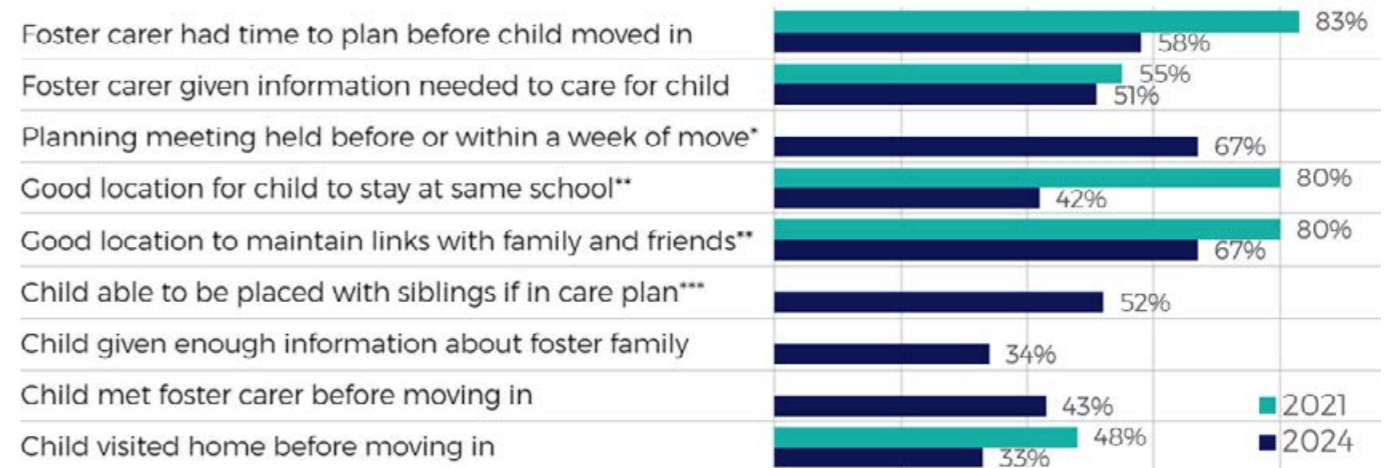
Only two in five (40%) said the service always or usually seeks the child's previous foster carers' views to feed into the matching process, or requests these if the carer is with another service.



Only three in five foster carers (58%) felt they had time to plan before the child they were most recently matched with moved in, down from 83% in 2021.

This lack of information-sharing carries over to foster carers, with only half of those we surveyed in 2024 saying they were given all the information they needed to care for the child they were most recently matched with. This is a deteriorating picture compared to data gathered in 2021, along with most other aspects of foster carers' experiences of matching, as shown.

Foster carers' experiences of their most recent match



Notes: *Worded in 2021 as 'the placement planning meeting was held within an appropriate time' so figures are not comparable. Other items with no 2021 data were newly added in 2024. **Asked as a combined question in 2021 so the response (80%) is shown twice. ***Figure excludes 'N/A' responses.



Staying local

Our foster carer respondents told us that **71% of children they foster are living in the same local authority or trust area** they lived in immediately before they came into care, while a quarter (23%) are living in a different local authority or trust area, but in the same nation of the UK. 1.1% are living in a different nation of the UK.

Vacancies

Almost half of foster carers surveyed said they had spent time with an unfilled space for a child in foster care – a ‘vacancy’ – in the past 24 months. The most common reason given for this was that they were **waiting for a suitable match**. This points to the need for improved matching processes and for foster carers to have the right training and support to allow them to be matched with children with a wider range of needs.

Following this, the next most common reasons for vacancies were: **needing a break**; their **health**; their **housing** situation (moving house, redecorating or renovations); or the **needs of children** already in the home.

“Young person moved to independence and I wasn’t ready for a new child. I wanted a breather and the right match.”

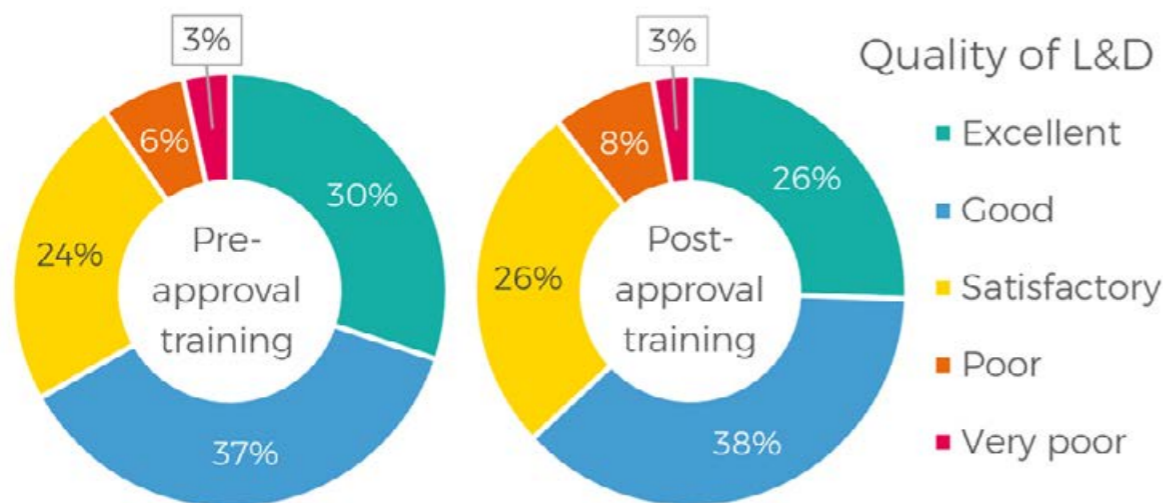
Learning and development

Foster carers are entrusted with the care of children who have often experienced significant trauma and adversity, so it is crucial that they are appropriately trained and able to provide trauma-informed and child-centred care to help children develop and thrive. This includes pre-approval training and regular ongoing post-approval training, tailored to their learning needs. This should be set out in an agreed learning and development (L&D) plan.

However, in 2024, **just over half of foster carers responding to the survey said they had an agreed annual L&D plan**, down from two thirds in 2021.

Additionally, two thirds (67%) rated their pre-approval training as excellent or good. In comparison, 63% rated their post-approval training as excellent or good. This has decreased considerably from 2021, when 71% of foster carers we surveyed rated their L&D (overall) as excellent or good.

In response to questions to foster carers about the types of training they would like to receive but can’t access, the most common theme related to the timing, format or level of training, rather than its content. Respondents reported wanting training to be more **accessible**, **flexible**, and available in a mixture of **face to face and online** formats. They often requested **more advanced** training or to be able to gain a **qualification**.



Family time

Most children in foster care have birth family who they can’t live with but may be able to spend time with or visit. This can include parents, siblings and extended family.

A key part of the foster carer’s role is often to support children to see their family members. **However, less than two thirds of foster carers said they feel supported by their service in relation to children’s time with their birth family.**

Additionally, only around three in five foster carers said they feel that current arrangements for family time are in the best interests of the children they foster.

“The baby is very dysregulated after every family time, I do not feel the child’s needs have ever been met in relation to this. It has only been adult led.”

Day-to-day decisions

Children and young people in foster care should have the same opportunities as their peers – but foster carers don’t always have the authority to make the decisions required for them to access these opportunities, or to give them permission to do so.

Less than a third (31%) of foster carers surveyed said children’s social workers are always clear about which decisions they have the authority to make in relation to the children they foster.

Foster carers said they generally feel more able to make these decisions in relation to children they foster long-term (36% said they always feel able to) than those they foster short-term (28% always feel able to), but both have decreased since 2021. Only half of foster carers said social workers respond to requests for decisions in a timely manner.

In terms of specific areas of training foster carers said they want, these most often related to **children’s needs (43%)**, as in our 2021 survey, and included the following:

- Therapeutic care**, including attachment, trauma informed care and life story work.
- Safeguarding**, particularly around drugs and alcohol and internet safety.
- Mental health**, particularly trauma.
- Neurodiversity**, including foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, autism and ADHD.
- Health and disability**, including alcohol and drug withdrawal in babies.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion**, including caring for LGBTQ+ children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Communication needs**, including sign language.

“I did my own private training on therapeutic parenting. It would be good to have funding provided for extra external training as needed about needs specific to the individual (e.g. eating disorders).”

We also asked foster carers and fostering services whether they think there should be a standardised accredited framework for the training of foster carers, which sets out a minimum level of training all foster carers should receive.

Almost three quarters of foster carers (72%) and fostering services (73%) think there should be a standardised accredited framework for pre- and post-approval training for foster carers.



When asked about the main barriers they face in making decisions for children in their care, the three most common themes were:

- **Difficulties with social workers' involvement (31%)** – including a lack of communication, clarity and information; long waits for decisions; and not feeling listened to.
- **Lack of consent from birth family (15%).**
- **Bureaucracy (7%)** – unnecessary paperwork, box-ticking and complicated processes.

The word cloud shows the areas of decisions foster carers said they find the most difficult to make for children in their care.



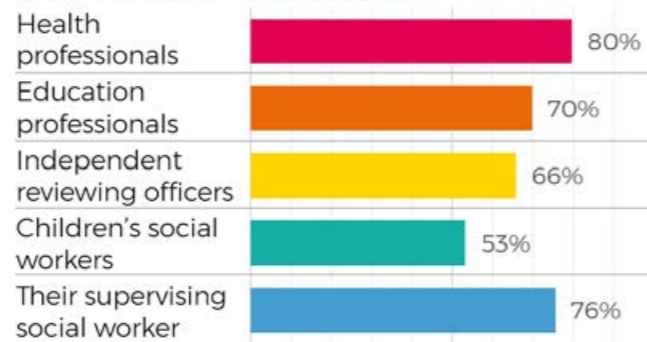
“Everything has to be run by my social worker first, who then has to discuss with child's social worker, then has to be discussed with managers and then time for them to implement the action depending on their diary availability.”

Status of foster carers

Foster carers play a vital role in the lives of the children and young people they look after, but they aren't always recognised or valued for this.

As shown, foster carers were most likely to feel they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by **health professionals** and by their **supervising social worker (SSW)**. They were less likely to feel this way about **teachers/ education professionals** and **independent reviewing officers (IROs)**, and least likely about **children's social workers**.

Foster carers who 'always' or 'usually' feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by...



80% said they are always or usually invited to meetings with teachers/ education professionals, 82% to meetings with health professionals, and 86% to children's care planning and review meetings.

“We should be treated with respect and as equals because we know the children and spend more time with the children than all the professionals.”



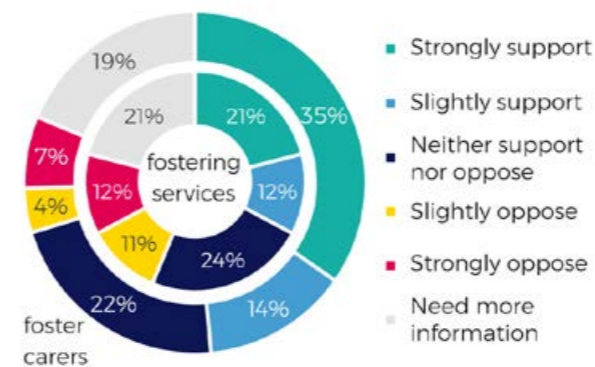
National register of foster carers

The Fostering Network has been campaigning for a national register of foster carers, similar to the registers that already exist for other parts of the children's social care sector, for several years. We believe this would benefit foster carers' status, as well as improving safeguarding for children, matching, and sufficiency planning.

Almost half (49%) of foster carers said they strongly or slightly support proposals to create a national register, while 22% were neutral and 19% said they need more information. One in ten (11%) said they oppose the idea.

Respondents in fostering services were less supportive of proposals for a national register than foster carers, but were still more likely to support the idea (33%) than oppose it (23%).

Views on proposals to create a national register of foster carers



Protections and rights for foster carers

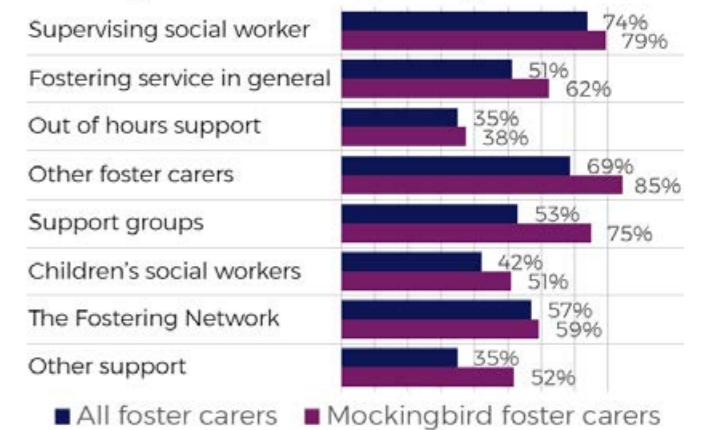
Over a third (34%) of foster carers reported feeling they have no rights or protections, and a quarter (28%) said they don't have many. We asked what rights and protections foster carers feel they should have. The top themes were:

- **Conditions/ treatment (32%),** including being treated as professionals, having a voice, being protected from harm, being respected and valued, and being kept informed.
- Rights and protections around **allegations (20%).**
- **Financial remuneration (19%),** including pensions and fair pay.

Support for foster carers

Fostering is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be challenging. All foster carers need a range of support to enable them to provide the best possible care for the children they look after, while maintaining their own wellbeing. We asked foster carers to rate the support they receive for their fostering from various sources.

Foster carers who rate support for their fostering as 'excellent' or 'good', by source



Support from supervising social workers (SSWs) was rated the most highly, with three quarters considering it excellent or good, the same as in 2021. However, only 44% said they have had one consistent SSW in the past 24 months.

Support from other foster carers was rated the second most highly, with 69% finding it excellent or good, up slightly from 65% in 2021.

Out of hours support was rated the least highly: only 35% said it was excellent or good, down from 43% in 2021. Only a fifth of services that responded to the survey said they provide out of hours support through the foster carer's own supervising social worker.

Less than half of foster carers (48%) said they have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster. Importantly, foster carers with access to this were over three times more likely to recommend fostering than those without it.



Foster carers' wellbeing

More than half (58%) of foster carers surveyed have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing because of their fostering role. Less than half (48%) said 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.

Unsurprisingly, foster carers who have experienced burnout were significantly less likely to recommend fostering, while those who said they feel able to ask for support were significantly more likely to recommend it.

The Mockingbird programme

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

Of foster carers who responded to our survey, we found that those who are part of Mockingbird were more likely to rate support from their supervising social worker, their fostering service in general, other foster carers, peer support groups, and children's social workers, as excellent or good.

Mockingbird foster carers were also significantly more likely to have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for children (85%) than other foster carers (45%). They were less likely to have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing (54%) than other foster carers (58%), and significantly more likely to feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing (64%) than other foster carers (47%).

// The waiting lists can be 2/3 years, it's essential the process should be fastracked. //

Support for children in foster care

Children and young people in care have often experienced trauma and adversity which can affect their development, educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing. Every child in care has the potential to thrive with the right support, but too often this support isn't available when they need it, or isn't adequate.

Support for learning

Half (53%) of foster carers surveyed said at least one of the children they foster receives additional support with their learning. This has fallen considerably from 64% in 2021.

Of those who foster a child receiving additional support with their learning, 53% said they think this additional support is sufficient, down from 59% in 2021.

Mental health and wellbeing support

45% of foster carers said at least one child they foster is either receiving mental health or wellbeing support or is on a waiting list for support.

The proportion fostering a child who is receiving mental health support fell very slightly from 29% in 2021 to 28% in 2024. However, the proportion fostering a child who is being referred or waiting for support increased from 12% to 18% in the same time period.

Two in five foster carers (39%) are fostering a child who needs mental health support but isn't getting it, up from a third (33%) in 2021.



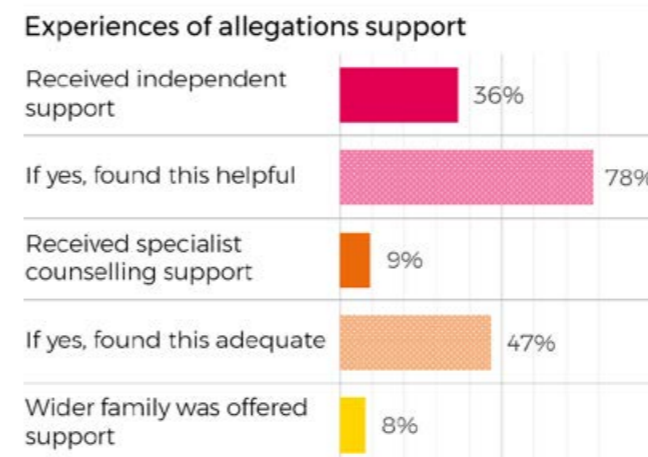
Allegations

An allegation is a claim from any person that a foster carer or another member of the fostering household has, or may have: behaved in a way that has harmed a child; committed a criminal offence against a child; or behaved in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. 14% of foster carers surveyed said they have experienced one or more allegations in the past 24 months.

Support

It is recognised as best practice for foster carers to receive independent support through the allegations process and in England this is a regulatory requirement. However, just over a third of foster carers surveyed said they received independent support in relation to their most recent allegation, the same as in 2021. Three quarters found this helpful, up from 59% in 2021.

Less than one in ten received specialist counselling support and around half of these found the support adequate. Similarly, less than one in ten said their wider family was offered support by their fostering service. Allegations against foster carers can be extremely distressing for them and affect their whole family, so this support is vital for their wellbeing and to enable them to continue fostering when it is right to do so.



Timescales of investigations

The most common duration of allegations investigations was up to one month (33%). Concerningly, one in six respondents (17%) said their latest investigation took six months to one year, and one in ten said the investigation took over a year.

Removal of children

A third of foster carers said a child they fostered was removed from their home during their most recent allegation investigation, up from a quarter (25%) in 2021. This time we also asked if the child was returned; around a fifth of foster carers said yes.

Less than half (42%) of foster carers who had a child removed said they received their usual level of foster carer fees during the allegation investigation.

Impact of allegations

We asked foster carers to share how experiences of allegations have impacted them. The most commonly reported impact was on their experiences of fostering (35%), including feelings about fostering, fear of allegations, relationships with services, and confidence as a foster carer. Additionally, a quarter (25%) described the impacts on their health, primarily their mental health.

// It has ruined me, my mental health, my trust in social services and left me doubting continuing in this profession as I'm terrified I could experience this again. //

We also asked foster carers what would improve the allegations experience for them. Their priorities were fairness (39%); better communication and information-sharing (35%); and better support for foster carers (30%).



Finances

All foster carers receive an allowance which should cover the costs of looking after the children they foster. Most foster carers also receive a fee in recognition of their role. However, our research continues to show that allowances and fees are often inadequate and many foster carers have to top up their income in other ways to be able to afford to foster.

Work and benefits

Across the UK, 40% of foster carers said they work alongside fostering, a very slight increase from 39% in 2021. A quarter (23%) said they receive benefits.

Allowances

Only one in three foster carers said the fostering allowance, and any expenses they can claim, meet the full costs of looking after the children they foster, down from over half in 2021.

A third of foster carers (30%) said they cover this extra cost by working, one in ten (12%) said they claim benefits, and almost three quarters (72%) said they use other personal income such as their foster carer fees, savings, or partner's income.

// The overall cost of living has increased but the allowances have remained low. Without benefits I would have to stop fostering. //

Fees

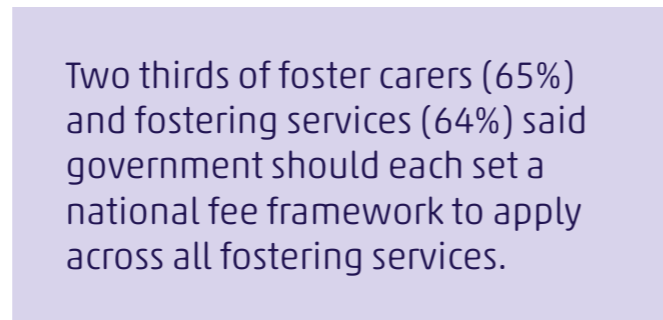
Only a quarter of foster carers said they feel their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs, for example bills, rent or mortgage, and food (not for the children they foster).

Two thirds (66%) of foster carers said they don't receive a retainer fee if they don't have a foster child living with them, a slight decrease from 70% in 2021.



Only a quarter of foster carers said they feel their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs.

While allowances are set nationally by each of the four governments of the UK, there is no central legislation or guidance about fees for foster carers. Fees are decided individually by each fostering service provider. We asked all survey respondents for their views on this.



Two thirds of foster carers (65%) and fostering services (64%) said government should each set a national fee framework to apply across all fostering services.

Managing finances

Just under **three quarters (73%) of foster carers said the cost of living has had an impact on their fostering**. They frequently mentioned facing higher household costs and having to cut back on spending, affecting the opportunities they can give to the children they foster.

// Most of the extra things, like after school clubs, swimming, playgroups, football clubs, etc are no longer possible. //

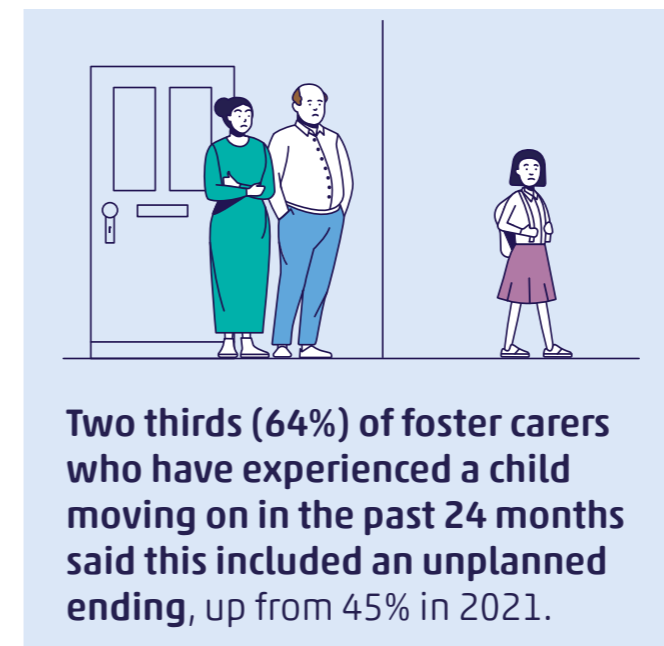


Part Three

Endings and post-foster care

Children moving on in foster care

Unplanned endings



Two thirds (64%) of foster carers who have experienced a child moving on in the past 24 months said this included an unplanned ending, up from 45% in 2021.

// 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. //

The most common cause of unplanned endings was the foster carer's own request (46%, up from 42% in 2021). Allegations accounted for the smallest proportion of unplanned endings (10%, down from 15% in 2021). The proportion of foster carers who selected each of the other options was broadly similar to 2021.

Reasons for unplanned endings

Foster carer's request	46%
Child's request	18%
Decision by fostering service	19%
Decision by child's social worker	17%
Due to an allegation	10%
Don't know	1%
Other - please specify	27%

Over a quarter (27%) specified another reason for their latest unplanned ending. These reasons most frequently related to **safeguarding** (with respect to the children moving on, other children in the household, or foster carers); general references to **'placement breakdown'**; and the **foster carer's own situation**, for instance their health.

In 2024, we also asked fostering services what they consider to be the main changes required to reduce unplanned endings for children in foster care. The top themes were:

- **Support (56%)** – including specialist and/or therapeutic support for children and foster carers, quicker access to support, and more preventative help.
- **Information and communication (29%)** – including local authorities sharing all the relevant information about children with foster carers and fostering services.
- **Better matching (16%)** of children and foster carers.

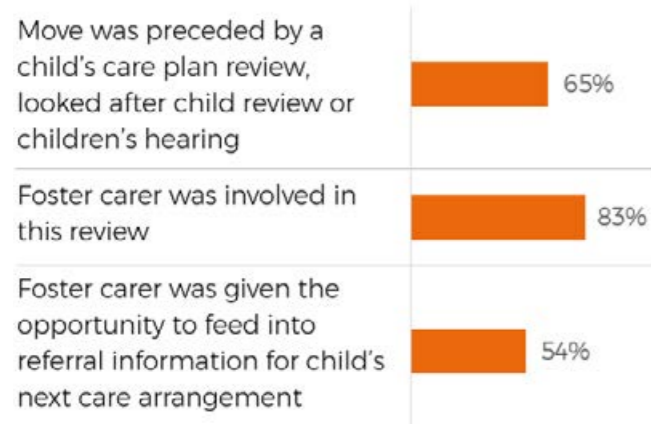


Planned endings

78% of foster carers who have experienced a child move on in the past 24 months said this included a planned ending. Of these, **65% said their latest planned ending was preceded by a child's care plan review, a looked after child review or children's hearing**. 83% said they were involved in this review.

Just over half (54%) of foster carers surveyed said they were given the opportunity to feed into the referral information for the child's next care arrangement in relation to their latest planned ending, compared to 57% in 2021.

Where the move was planned...



Views on decisions to move children

Only half of foster carers reported feeling decisions to move children are always or usually in the best interests of the child. Although still far lower than it should be, this has increased considerably from just under a third (32%) in 2021.

“I did not agree with the decision, my child only had 18 hours notice then the social workers came to take them to a children's home. I am utterly devastated and appalled I was not included in this decision.”

⁴ ONS (2024) Milestones: Journeying through modern life. ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/milestonesjourneyingthroughmodernlife/2024-04-08

Finances in post-foster care arrangements

Three quarters of foster carers are worse off financially as a result of offering post-foster care.

Three quarters of foster carers said they are worse off financially as a result of offering post-foster care. While this is the same proportion as in 2021, respondents in 2024 were more likely to be significantly worse off (52%) than in 2021 (44%). Just over half (54%) of foster carers said the young person is expected to contribute towards their allowance.

“This transition has been traumatic and felt like we were being abandoned ... purely because they have reached a chronological milestone rather than adapting to the child's needs.”



Post-foster care

Until recently, most young people in foster care were required to leave their foster home as soon as they turned 18, far earlier than their peers not in care – who leave home aged 24 on average⁴ – and often before they are ready. Following our ‘Don't Move Me’ campaign, young people in England can now stay with their foster family until the age of 21 through the **Staying Put** programme. Elsewhere in the UK, young people can stay with their foster families up to age 21 through **When I am Ready** in Wales, **Continuing Care** in Scotland (also available to those in kinship and residential care), and **Going the Extra Mile** in Northern Ireland (only for those in education, employment or training).

Transition planning

Early planning is important to ensure smooth transitions between, and out of, care arrangements. However, over a quarter (27%) of foster carers said services typically start planning less than six months before a young person's transition out of care or into a post-foster care arrangement. A further 17% said there is typically no planning.

Barriers to post-foster care arrangements

We asked foster carers to share the reasons any eligible young people didn't remain with them in a post-foster care arrangement when they reached the appropriate age. The top three reasons were the same as in 2021, but the percentages differed:

- **The young person didn't want to stay (31%, down from 42%).**
- **The young person entered an alternative arrangement** such as Shared Lives or supported lodgings (17%, down from 30%).
- **The foster carer's fostering income would decrease (16%, up from 13%).**

Comments on post-foster care arrangements

Foster carers had the opportunity to share anything else they would like to say about how well post-foster care arrangements are working for the young people they foster. The most common themes were:

- **Finances (34%)** – including challenges accessing financial support; the effect of finances on decisions about post-foster care; and the financial impact of entering a post-foster care arrangement.
- **Timings (21%)** – covering young people's readiness to move into independence, issues around planning, feeling pressured or rushed, and delays.
- **Benefits of post-foster care (12%)** – including the continuity and stability it gives young people.

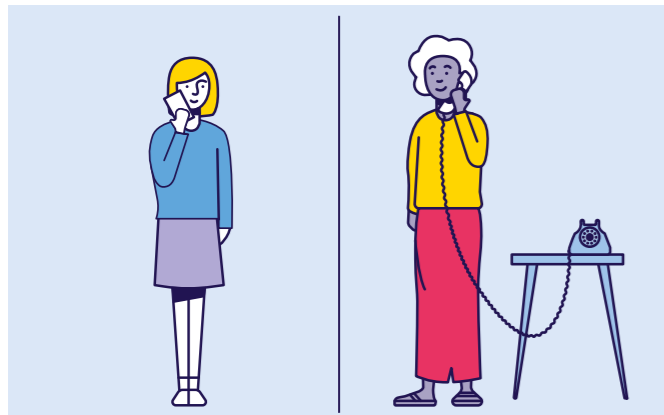
“It does not last long enough. Social services usually want the young person to move on to independent/ supported living because they don't have the money or staff to allow them to stay with us for longer. This is always against our wishes because we know that the young person is not ready to move from the family environment.”



Keeping in touch

Children and young people's relationships with their foster families are central to helping them feel safe and supported when they can't live with their birth family. When a child moves on from a foster family, they should be able to maintain their relationship with them for as long as they want.

Despite this, **less than half (48%) of foster carers in 2024 said they always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered.** Just over half (53%) said these relationships always or usually last long-term, for example, into the children's adulthood.



Less than half (48%) of foster carers always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered.

Only a fifth (21%) of foster carers said they feel very or quite supported to keep in touch with former foster children where appropriate.



Reasons for not keeping in touch

The most common reasons for not keeping in touch were that local practice (i.e., in the local authority or fostering service) didn't allow it (22%); the child's birth family (22%) or adopters (21%) didn't want the child and former foster carer to keep in touch; or the child themselves didn't want to keep in touch (20%).

Comments on keeping in touch

The most common themes around keeping in touch were:

- **Wanting to keep in touch (38%)** – foster carers value keeping in touch and see former foster children as part of the family.
- **Obstacles to keeping in touch (22%)** – services don't encourage or support keeping in touch, or actively prevent it.
- **Benefits of keeping in touch (16%)** – keeping in touch is important so children don't feel abandoned, for their understanding of their life story, and for their wellbeing.
- **Poor experiences with keeping in touch (12%)** – foster carers described a lack of support, decisions not being made in children's best interests, and broken promises.

“I have never been asked or encouraged to keep in touch with the children who have moved on, even when we have asked about them. Our long-term children, some now in their 30s, are still part of our family and usually come to tea once a week and even come on holiday with us every year.”



Part Four

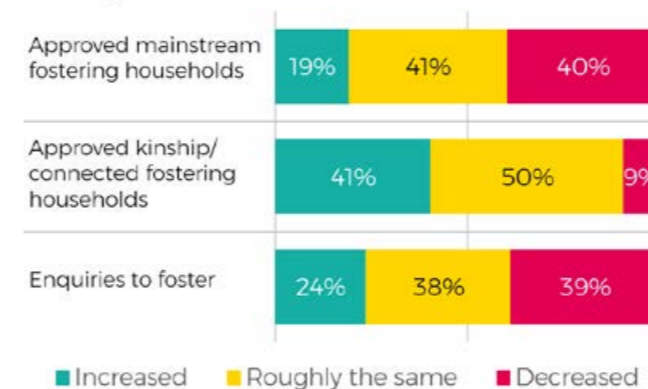
The system

Shortages of foster carers

The longstanding shortages of foster carers across the UK are arguably the clearest indicator of a sector in crisis. Every year we lose more foster carers than we gain, and the findings of this survey support this; most fostering services that responded to the survey said the total number of approved mainstream fostering households and enquiries to foster for their service has decreased or stayed roughly the same in the last year, as shown in the graph below.

However, they were more likely to say the total number of approved kinship/ connected fostering households in their service has stayed roughly the same or increased than decreased in the last year, potentially reflecting a shift towards prioritising kinship care for children where possible.

Changes in the total number of...



Overall, all but one service said there is a shortage of foster carers in their local population.

Retention

The retention of foster carers is just as important as recruitment, if not more so, to address the current shortages of foster carers in each nation. We asked fostering services to share the most effective thing they do to retain foster carers. The top three were **support, training, and finances.**

Around half (51%) of foster carers said they will continue fostering for as long as they can, up from 46% in 2021. Notably, in response to the question 'what motivates you to foster?' (see the section on Recruitment for discussion of motivations to start fostering), 66% of foster carers selected 'I am committed to the children I am currently fostering' as a key reason.

However, 60% of foster carers said they have either considered (46%) or are still considering (14%) resigning from fostering, most commonly due to:

- **A lack of support** from their fostering service (**54%**)
- **A lack of respect** from other professionals (**54%**)
- **Burnout or poor wellbeing** related to fostering (**53%**)

These were also some of the most common factors identified by former foster carers – who we surveyed for the first time in 2024 – as having contributed to them resigning (43%, 31% and 33% respectively), as well as a lack of rights and protections within the role (40%).

Additionally, 27% of foster carers who have considered resigning selected financial difficulties as a contributing factor. 25% of all foster carers we surveyed told us that their fostering income is an essential part of their household income, further emphasising the importance of financial support to allow foster carers to continue in the role.



Sufficiency planning

Of fostering services that completed our survey in 2024, 86% said they have a fostering recruitment and retention strategy. Less than half (48%) of services said they are always (22%) or usually (26%) involved in any local or regional sufficiency planning for the looked after children population, similar to 2021.

Most fostering services (66%) said they agree or strongly agree with proposals to create a national fostering recruitment and retention strategy in each nation of the UK.

Views and attitudes on fostering

Sadly, the number of foster carers who would recommend fostering to others has decreased. **Less than half (48%) of foster carers said they would recommend fostering** to others who may be considering it, down from 54% in 2021. **On average, foster carers in 2024 rated their experience of fostering as 6.8 out of 10, down from 7.1 out of 10 in 2021.**

We asked foster carers and fostering services what they think currently works well in fostering. The top themes were as follows.

What one main thing do you think currently works well in fostering?	
Foster carers' top responses	Fostering services' top responses
1. Positive relationships with social workers (21%).	1. Support for foster carers (41%), particularly peer support networks.
2. The foster care community (13%).	2. Fostering services' practice and processes (29%), including assessment, approval, matching, and teamwork within the service.
3. The impact of fostering on children and young people (9%).	3. The impact of fostering on children and young people (27%).

“My current supervising social worker and my young person’s current social worker are excellent. They show me and the child respect, listen to us, and involve us in making decisions. Keep us updated and support me and the child when we need it.”
Foster carer

“Dedicated staff who use the PACE approach in working with carers and young people. Having a multi-disciplinary team with therapists and children’s workers, education worker who provide additional support.”
Fostering service



We then asked what they would like to see changed.

What one main thing would you like to see changed to make foster care better?	
Foster carers' top responses	Fostering services' top responses
1. Finances (24%), including financial support for foster carers and funding in general.	1. Finances (38%), including financial support for foster carers and funding in general.
2. Foster carers' status and respect in the team around the child (23%).	2. Aspects of the fostering system (36%) including matching, social workers' capacity and closer working.
3. Support for foster carers and children in care (16%), including access to short breaks and mental health support.	3. Foster carers' status and respect in the team around the child (24%).

“Smaller caseloads for corporate parents. LA social workers have little time and are often over stretched to truly give the time necessary for the children who are placed in foster care. I have had to see too many changes in children's social workers due to them leaving the service due to burn out or moving on to better supported roles.”
Foster carer

“More targeted and robust support for the emotional and psychological needs of both foster children and foster parents. This would include expanded access to mental health services, regular emotional well-being checks, and more comprehensive training in trauma-informed care for all involved in foster care.”
Foster carer

“The biggest issue our carers raise is around the fostering fees, this detracts from the excellent care they provide and puts a strain on the relationship between the agency and the carers – if there was a national fee set which each fostering agency signed up to, this would take fees off the table and we could all focus on the children.”
Fostering service

“To have proper support systems in place for all Foster Carers – such as fortnightly visits from Supervising Social Workers, access to therapeutic support, and a say in the running of their service.”
Fostering service

“More respect for carers as partners and as the best placed people to effect change for children.”
Fostering service



Conclusion

Across many areas of fostering – including matching, learning and development, and finances – the evidence from this survey shows that foster carers' experiences, and by extension, those of the children and young people they foster, have worsened since 2021. On other issues such as allegations in fostering families, the findings continue to paint a challenging picture.

However, we've also seen examples of where the right support, particularly from supervising social workers, other foster carers, and through programmes like Mockingbird, can help foster carers to change children's lives. Respondents also shared their strong support for practical changes that would make a real difference for foster carers and children and young people. The following recommendations set out the key changes we believe governments, placing authorities and fostering services should prioritise.

Governments in each nation of the UK should:

- Create a national **recruitment and retention strategy** for foster care, and fund national foster carer **recruitment campaigns**, in each nation to increase the pool of available carers.
- Invest in the creation, implementation and monitoring of a **standardised framework for pre- and post-approval training** for foster carers in each nation.
- Introduce statutory 'opt-out' **maximum delegated authority** for foster carers to make day-to-day decisions on behalf of the children and young people they foster.
- Introduce a **register of foster carers** in each nation to increase foster carers' status and support matching of children with foster carers. Move responsibility for decisions about the removal of foster carers' approval to this body to increase independence.

- Address sufficiency issues within children and families social work teams, prioritising and financing targeted **social work recruitment** and regulation of caseloads.
- Invest in children's **mental health services** and **additional support for learning**.
- Fund **independent support services**, legal protection, representation and advocacy for all foster carers subject to an allegation, concern or complaint.
- Increase **allowances** to meet our recommended rates⁵ and introduce and fund a **national minimum fee framework**, with fees paid 52 weeks a year, and a **national pension scheme** for foster carers.
- Legislate and provide funding to increase the maximum age for foster care to age 25 to enable young people to stay with their foster families for longer, improving **transitions**.
- Produce statutory guidance to support children and young people's **ongoing relationships** with people that matter to them, including their former foster families where appropriate.
- Fund **innovative fostering programmes** that focus on prevention, retention and support, such as Mockingbird and Step Up Step Down.

⁵ The Fostering Network (2025) Fostering allowances. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/policies/allowances



Placing authorities should:

- Ensure children's profile information is collated by everyone who knows them best and is shared with fostering services to inform **high quality matching**.
- Put the views of children and young people at the centre of decisions on **family time** and **keeping in touch** with former foster carers.
- Ensure all children coming into care receive a **mental health assessment**.

Fostering services should:

- Ensure all necessary **matching information** about children is shared with potential carers, and children are informed about and have the opportunity to meet their new foster family, well in advance of any move.
- Provide **training** in a range of formats and at different times to increase attendance, focusing particularly on increasing uptake of training on trauma-informed care, and providing opportunities for more advanced training.
- Include detail on **day-to-day decisions** in care planning. Ensure foster carers are invited to, and supported at, care planning and review meetings.
- Prioritise improved **support for foster carers**, including therapeutic, peer, and out-of-hours support. Ensure all foster carers have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster.



About the data

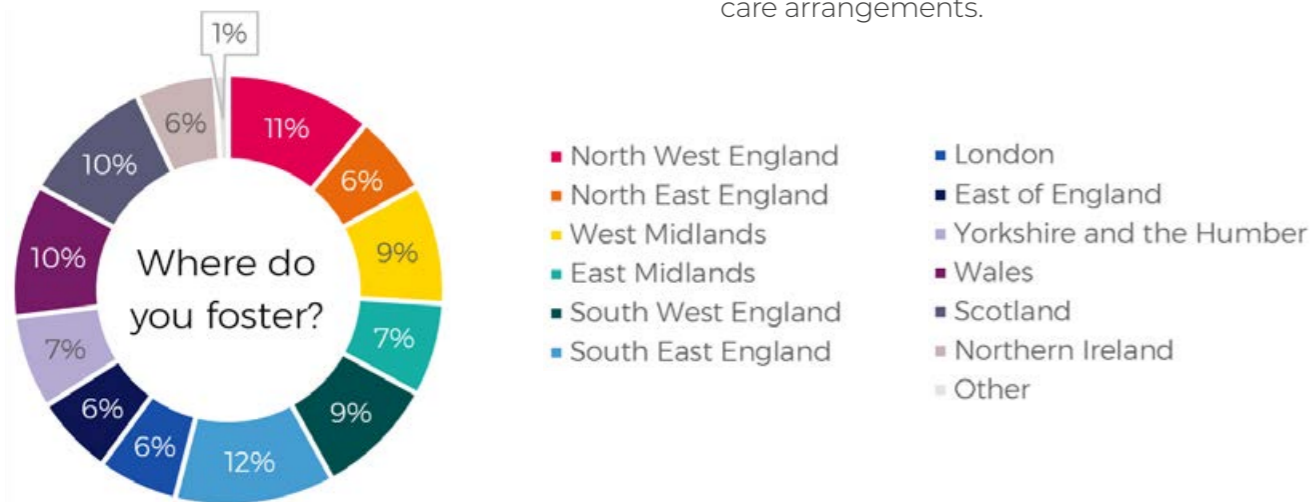
Our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey was completed by 2,883 current foster carers, 169 former foster carers, and 114 fostering services. The current and former foster carers' surveys contained very similar questions, largely about individuals' experiences of fostering, while the services' survey focused more on practice within services. All three surveys were open from 2 May to 14 July 2024 and hosted online using Qualtrics. The surveys were shared with all The Fostering Network's members and promoted through our website, magazine, social media and e-newsletters. Findings were analysed with the support of two independent consultants.

About the foster carer respondents

Of all current foster carers who completed the survey, **74% lived in England, 10% in Wales, 10% in Scotland, and 6% in Northern Ireland.** Foster carers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were slightly overrepresented compared to the actual proportion of fostering households in these three nations of the UK.⁶

80% of respondents said they foster for a local authority, children's trust, or health and social care trust. This is higher than the actual proportion who foster for local authorities or trusts in the UK, which is around two thirds. The remaining respondents said they foster for an independent fostering provider, either for-profit (13%) or not-for-profit (8%).

86% of respondents were mainstream foster carers and 14% were approved family and friends/ kinship foster carers (or pending approval); this is lower than the proportion of foster carers in the UK who are official kinship foster carers. Additionally, 8% of respondents were supporting young people in post-foster care arrangements.



⁶ Of the 52,296 total fostering households in the UK, 42,615 (82%) live in England, 3,800 (7%) in Wales, 2,988 (6%) in Scotland, and 2,893 (6%) in Northern Ireland. See The Fostering Network (2025) Fostering statistics. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics



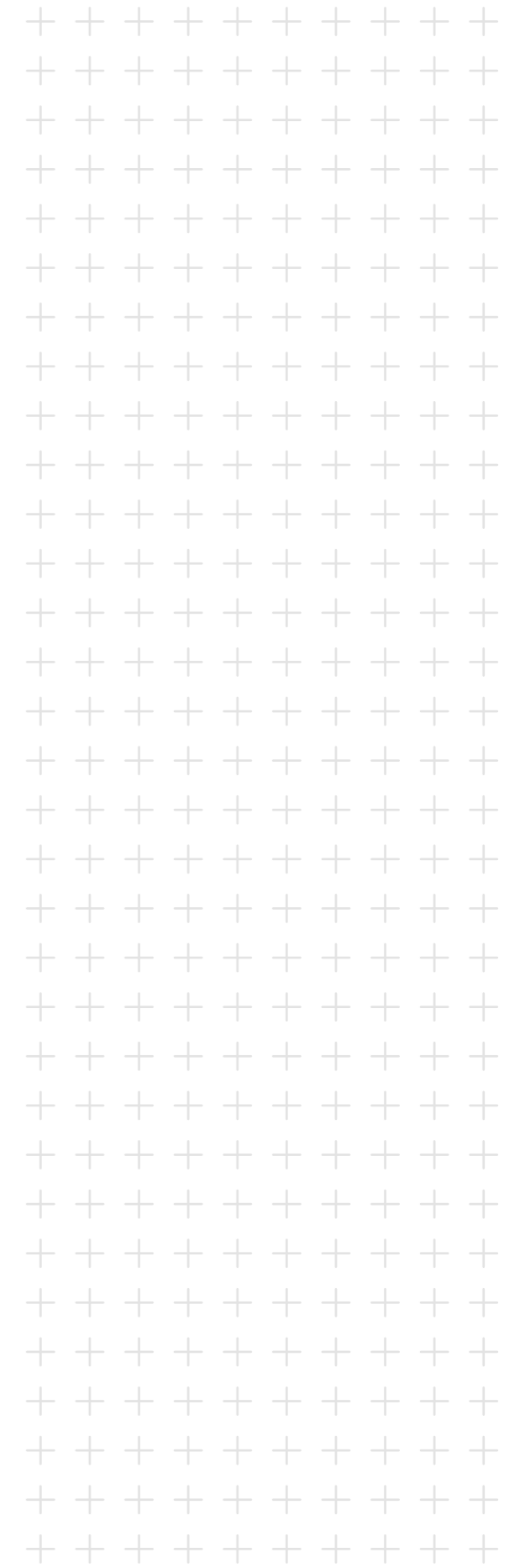
About the fostering service respondents

Almost three quarters (73%) of fostering services that responded were registered in England, 10% in Wales, 16% in Scotland and 2% in Northern Ireland. Similarly, **75% of services operated in England, 11% in Wales, 16% in Scotland, and 2% in Northern Ireland.**

Four fifths (61%) of services were local authorities, children's trusts, or health and social care trusts; these organisations were therefore overrepresented, compared to their approximately 36% share of the UK's fostering sector. The remaining respondents were independent fostering providers, either for-profit (20%) or not-for-profit (20%).

The total number of fostering households approved by services that completed the survey was 15,120, representing around **29% of all fostering households** in the UK.

25% of those who completed the fostering services' survey on behalf of their service were fostering service managers; 18% were team managers; 15% were registered managers; and the remaining respondents had a variety of related roles.



The logo for The Fostering Network, featuring the text "The Fostering Network" in white on an orange square background.

The Fostering Network

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 work to ensure all children and young people in foster care 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.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

Report authors:

Sioned Ellis

Natalie Williams

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For more information on the report, please contact policy@fostering.net

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