



## **Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform**

### **Response from The Fostering Network**

#### **About 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 fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 58,000 individual members and 450 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover nearly 77 per cent of foster carers in the UK. In Wales, all 22 local authorities are in membership with us. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

### **Before care: Safely reducing the number of children in the care system**

#### **Priority 1**

More needs to be done to support families on a universal basis in Wales, particularly when the risk of family separation becomes a factor. Whilst the sector demonstrates recognition of the importance of supporting families to stay together when it is safe and in the best interest of children, universal service provision does not reflect what is needed. Most of the current preventative services in Wales have eligibility criteria and restrictions on their use. This frequently results in them being accessed and implemented too late. We need to develop accessible, sustainable, community-based, person-centred services, delivered by people in the community who can work alongside families in need of care and support.

The Fostering Network, with support from Welsh Government, are about to pilot an innovative approach to supporting families on the edge of care, utilising the foster carer workforce in a unique community, person centred approach. [Step Up, Step Down](#) has achieved positive outcomes for families in Northern Ireland, supporting children to remain within their families and communities. Step Up, Step Down will be fully evaluated as a model here in Wales, with the primary aim of reducing the recourse to care. As an organisation, we believe that the fostering workforce can be utilised in

innovative ways to create greater community support and build opportunities for development for foster carers who wish to engage. Step Up, Step Down is just one of many possible developments.

## **Priority 2**

Too many children born to parents raised by the state become looked after at some point during their childhood. We need to introduce a positive and proactive approach to supporting care leavers when they become parents themselves, regardless of their age and status. The duty of the corporate parent should be extended to support people throughout their life course. Foster carers could and should play a role in this, we need to create a lifelong support network around vulnerable children, being there for them when they need us, and even when they don't, creating a stable and available network of wrap-around support that takes them into adulthood.

## **Priority 3**

In Wales, like many other countries, we work on the assumption that every new parent will know what they need to know to be the best parent that they can be. This is a myth, and this approach is perpetuating poor childhood experiences. We can address this and ensure better outcomes for every child, especially those who are at risk of becoming looked after. If we could create a consistent offer to parents and expectant parents across Wales to offer quality, non-judgemental parenting support and training, this one policy action could change the lives of future generations. The offer should be available to everyone and we, as a country, would then normalise the need for support when you become a parent and remove all elements of stigma.

## **In care: Quality services and support for children in care**

### **Priority 1**

Creating a National Register of Foster Carers has the potential to make a significant difference in respect of the quality and availability of provision for children. A national register would bring foster carers in line within all other roles within the children's workforce which are registered and regulated, improving the status of foster carers. A register would enforce a vital layer of safeguarding which does not currently exist. This lack of oversight poses a risk to the vulnerable cohort of looked after children. Creating a national register ensures complete transparency of the foster care workforce, their skillset, location, and their availability for the children who need them. As an organisation, we are due to provide a paper to the civil service team for children's social care outlining the benefits of a national register of foster carers.

### **Priority 2**

Framing care experience. How we talk about care experience matters and can influence the development of services, quality of provision and public perception of care experienced children and young people and adults. Reframing care experience can result in a reduction in the stigma and negative stereotypes towards children, young people, adults, and families with experience of care. The radical reform should include work to influence a shift in public attitude and perception of the care system and care experience, as is being achieved in Scotland through The Promise and the work of Each and Every Child. At The Fostering Network, we are in the early days of scoping the establishment of this work in Wales and would welcome further discussion.

### **Priority 3**

National consistency of high-quality services available to support children and young people, and those that care for them. We need to shift away from 22 different ways, plus independent/third-sector variations, of setting up services and support. Children's outcomes are currently variable, dependent on where they live; which service their foster carer fosters with; which region they are in; what educational settings they can access; what health care they can access; their access to financial support; and ultimately the 22 variations on policy for every aspect of their care. There are many examples of local or regional variations to the way codes of practice, regulation, or good practice are implemented and interpreted. This prevents Wales from realising the expectations set out in the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014.

Legislating social work caseloads could be a starting point for harmonisation, ensuring a national commitment to consistency for children and families as well as supporting workforce development. A national social work model for practice based on 'solution focused' models would create a nation of social workers who seek to support families to seek solutions and would again have a consistent approach underpinning all of the work we do. A national register of foster carers (see priority 1) would also support this, ensuring that all foster carers have received the same standardised training and are signed up to the same code of practice, providing quality care for children.

## **After care: On-going support when young people leave care**

### **Priority 1**

The When I am Ready code of practice requires a full review with the recommendations then brought into legislation and implemented consistently throughout Wales. To best support young people, there should be monitoring of the implementation of the policy to ensure practice is in line with national requirements and to share learning from best practice models.

The financial arrangements need to shift entirely to ensure that they are delivered with a child centred approach. On turning 18, the young person currently has to apply for benefits to pay their foster carer for their housing and are required to sign a tenancy agreement to stay in the place they have considered home. The person that has been their parent is forced to become their landlord. We should not be asking young people to do this and labelling it 'When I am Ready'. For many children this change happens during their final year of education. Whilst striving for their future, they are also expected to become dependent on benefits as fostering allowances cease. If they chose to go to university, they cannot guarantee a bedroom during the holidays because of the lack of funds provided to foster parents. Welsh Government should ensure that When I am Ready is properly costed and then fully funded.

The fostering regulations should be strengthened in respect of assessments for foster carers who provide permanency, with recognition of approval statuses past 18 years of age to enable foster carers to continue their approval and commitment to the child. Current practice includes young people being given just 28 days to change their mind and return to the foster carers home if they have decided to move out or go to live in a hall of residence during term time.

Young people in these arrangements are no longer considered looked after. If the foster carer has no other children in foster care living with them, their fostering service may remove their approval status meaning foster carers can no longer foster unless they complete the approval process again (which can take many months) and could be resulting in some foster carers prematurely giving up fostering. Under current arrangements, foster carers who are providing permanence via the When I am Ready scheme are effectively being asked to make a choice to do so instead of being a foster carer, giving the impression that the care and support they would instinctively provide as a foster carer is no longer required of them.

## **Priority 2**

Establishing a system which recognises that foster carers must foster the child and their family. We must ensure that foster carers understand that a child cannot and does not exist in isolation from their family. Working with those family members, in whatever way is appropriate and safe, is key to achieving the best outcomes for the child. The fostering sector needs to be able to build positive relationships with birth families as data demonstrates that most of our young people will return to the care of their family during early adulthood. Last year, the primary reason for children leaving care was returning home to live with parents or person with parental responsibility. This is consistent, year on year.

The current approach does not always support and promote the development of healthy and appropriate family relationships that will enable children and young people to make informed decisions for their future. Care experienced children and young people need to see acceptance of the relationships that are important to them, which will in turn support their successful transition to leaving care and their future adulthood. This includes relationships with birth brothers and sisters, other children fostered within the families they are placed with, former foster carers, and other relations. Too many connections are severed during a care experienced child's journey through the system currently.

## **Priority 3**

Care leaver as a protected characteristic. To truly create change of a radical nature, we need to recognise Care Experience as a protected characteristic, taking shared responsibility for the current experience, and the futures, of children and young people who we are responsible for raising under our corporate parenting commitment.

## **Anything else?**

Data collection is not consistent or transparent across Wales. Data collection is not aligned to the Social Services and Wellbeing Act expectations. Any radical reform should have a robust set of impact measurements implemented at the same time. If we are to have ambition for our care experienced population, we need to know what difference we are making and what more we can do.

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