

The Education Committee: Children's Social Care Workforce Inquiry

Response from The Fostering Network, September 2019

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75% of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Response to the Education Select Committee Children's Social Care Workforce Inquiry

- The Fostering Network welcomes the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the children's social care workforce. Children's social workers are pivotal throughout the fostering journey from matching a child with their foster carer to dealing with issues around contact with birth family, delegated decision making, allegations, care and pathway planning and placement support.
- Our written submission highlights the key issues and makes recommendations for change, based on our extensive experience and research, most notably the findings of our [State of the Nation's Foster Care report](#) published earlier this year. We would be happy to expand on any of the points highlighted in our response.

Introductory points

- We are clear that while some issues in fostering would be best addressed by legislative and regulatory change, many are problems to do with practice and the prevailing culture, both of which need challenging where they are causing problems or preventing improvement. Some of these practice and cultural problems focus on the children's social work workforce. Below we have highlighted the key issues around children's social workers interaction with foster carers and social work practice in relation to fostering.

1. Children's social workers and foster carers

Role of foster carers in the social care workforce

Foster carers are a key part of the team working with fostered children. They must be treated as co-professionals and given all the information and authority they need to be able to look after children to the best of their ability. However, according to the State of the Nation 2019 survey, 42 per cent of foster carers felt that children's social workers do not treat them as equals. Foster carers often feel overlooked and excluded from key meetings about the child in their care. As one foster carer illustrates,

"I feel we are only classed as "professionals" when we are agreeing with everyone else, but if we are not in agreement then we are ignored – especially by children's social workers".

Children's social workers (CSWs) need to understand fostering and foster carers much better, so that they can develop realistic expectations and the skills to support them, as well as being a voice and advocate for the child. Supervising social workers (SSWs) have a split role – support and supervision – and there is no reason why CSWs cannot have one as well. The best children's services already do this. CSWs need to build relationships with foster carers and view them as a tool through which to meet the needs of the child. This allows for intervention before a crisis, and not at too late a stage.

Many foster carers view their supervising social worker very positively. In our latest State of the Nation survey 79% of foster carers said they felt treated as an equal and valued member of the team by their supervising social worker, a figure that held steady in our surveys since 2016.

Recommendations:

- **Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.**
- **Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.**
- **It is essential that knowledge of fostering is included in initial and continued professional development training for social workers to enable them to work more effectively with foster carers who are the primary carers of the vast majority of looked after children.**

Delegated authority

The mechanisms are in place at a policy and guidance level to ensure that foster carers are given the delegated authority to make daily decisions about the children in their care, and we believe there has been some improvement, however, there are still issues at a practice and cultural level to be resolved; 35 per cent of short-term carers and 21 per cent of long-term carers "sometimes, rarely or never" feel able to make day-to-day decisions about their fostered children. We believe that the "blame culture" in social care is at least partly responsible for social workers' reluctance to allow foster carers to make these decisions without their involvement.

While foster carers look after fostered children on a day-to-day basis, they often have the least authority out of all those in the team supporting the child. The source of the tension about where responsibility and authority lie in foster care is the fact that the corporate parent is the local authority and is removed from those who have day-to-day responsibility for the care of children, the foster carers. The impact of this is ultimately on the child and it can hinder their ability to participate in normal family, school or social activities. We asked foster carers in our State of the Nation survey if

there is clarity from the children's social worker about what day-to-day decisions they have the authority to make; just over one-quarter (26%) said it is not clear. It is also concerning that when we asked foster carers if social workers responded in a timely manner to the decisions which were outside the authority of foster carers to make that half (51%) of foster carers reported that the children's social worker responded in a timely manner only 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never'.

Recommendation:

- **It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.**

Maintaining relationships

It is damaging for children to lose their positive relationships when they have to move within or out of the care system. The relationship between fostered children and their former foster carers is increasingly being recognised as extremely important to the development and wellbeing of the child.

However, in our State of the Nation 2019 survey, more than two thirds of foster carers reported that they receive little or no support to maintain contact with former fostered children and 28 per cent have been prevented from doing so, often by a social worker. Cultural change is needed to make sure foster carers are actively supported to continue their relationship with the children they looked after.

Recommendation:

- **We call on the Government to ensure that guidance and regulations require that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and that foster carers are enabled to support their former fostered children as they move home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process. The importance of maintaining relationships with former foster carers needs to be incorporated into social work training and practice.**

2. Social Work Practice

Caseloads

The pressures of heavy caseloads on children's social workers often results in high turnover and therefore a lack in continuity in relationships for children in care. The turnover of social workers – which is so damaging to both fostered children and foster families – should be urgently addressed.

Recommendation:

- **Children's social workers must be given manageable caseloads to improve availability and consistency of support for fostered children.**

Long term fostering

There has been a legal definition of long-term foster care in England since 2015, which is welcome, but we now need to consider how long-term foster care sits in the broader permanence framework. Other permanence options, such as special guardianship orders and adoption, need the courts to decide when to start and end them, but with long-term foster care all decisions can be made within the children's services department. The impact of this is placement drift – children staying with a foster carer for many years by accident not design – and sometimes placements ending when it is not in the best interests of the child, but rather for financial reasons, or lack of support, or a difficult relationship between the carer and social worker, and other reasons that would likely not be accepted if a court were involved. The Fostering Network wants to see long-term foster care being given equal status and consideration in permanence options, and for long-term fostering relationships to be respected, valued and seen as permanent as adoptive and special guardianship placements are.

Recommendation:

- **The Inquiry should assess how embedded understanding of, belief in and support for long-term foster care is into social work practice and local policy.**

Stability in care and scrutiny over placement endings

Stability means ensuring that every child in care is found the right placement as soon as possible. Where this is with a foster family, both child and carer are supported to help make the placement work for as long as the child needs. Careful matching between the child and the foster family is the first step in achieving stability.

Although some placement moves may be in the best interests of a child, too many looked after children are experiencing multiple moves and placement instability. For example, in England the mean duration of the 49,240 foster placements ceasing during 2016-17 was 369 days. 26 per cent of foster care placements that ceased had lasted less than a month, 48 per cent had lasted between a month and a year; 12 per cent had lasted between one and two years; and only 13 per cent of placements had lasted for more than two years¹.

We are concerned that some of the decisions to end a placement are not in the best interests of the child and that independent scrutiny over placement decisions is not being routinely applied. There are regulations in place in England and Wales which state a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and the views of all concerned have been taken into account. However, we believe these are not being routinely adhered to.

1 Children's Commissioner Stability Index 2018

Over the past three years one-third of foster carers said they have experienced an unplanned placement ending when they felt it was not in the child's best interests. Of those carers who have experienced an unplanned placement ending that they felt was not in the child's best interest, only 21% could say for sure that it was preceded by a review. This is a drop from 30% in 2016 which could indicate the start of a worrying trend.

Recommendation:

- **Responsible authorities in England should adhere to existing regulations and ensure that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and views of all concerned have been taken into account, including those of the child. A placement should only end if it is in the child's best interests.**

3. Social work training

The social work degree is generic in its nature. Children's social workers and social workers working in fostering and adoption post-qualifying must understand the range of permanence options to ensure that children and young people have the best possible life experiences when they are growing up in care. It is a statutory requirement for adoption social workers to have a minimum of three years post qualifying experience in order to work in adoption. Currently there is no such similar requirement for children's social workers or supervising social workers.

We welcome the post qualification learning and development and continued professional development programmes being rolled out across England which have specific requirements for social work practitioners to demonstrate their competence to practice. The Fostering Network were part of the expert advisory group that developed the content. In addition, the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Permanence (2016) advocates the use of a strengths-based approach to the assessment of the knowledge, skills, understanding and experience of prospective permanence carers. We welcome the approach outlined in the Statement.

Recommendations:

- **There must be an increased emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training and post qualifying learning and development to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care.**

Kate Lawson, Policy Manager

Kate.Lawson@Fostering.net

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