

National Fostering Stocktake: Independent call for evidence

Submission from The Fostering Network, June 2017

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 per cent 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 national fostering stocktake in England

1. The Fostering Network welcomes the Government's announcement of the national fostering stocktake. Over the last few years the political and policy focus has been on other areas such as adoption, special guardianship orders and residential care. As over three quarters of children in the care system are cared for by foster carers, improving the outcomes of most children in care therefore starts with improving foster care, and it is right that it receives the focus of a strategic national review.
2. Our written submission to the call for evidence 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 2016¹ which was published earlier this year. Our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as matching, placement stability, training and support of carers and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 2,530 (1,942 England only) responses which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers across the UK. We would be happy to expand on any of the points highlighted in our response.
3. Fostering, while rooted in providing families for children, is not a single entity. Some foster carers offer occasional short break care, others emergency or short-term placements, while some provide children with a home for their whole childhoods and transition into adulthood. Many foster carers do a mix of these forms of fostering. Some foster carers are approved to

¹ State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016, The Fostering Network (2017)
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/stateofthenationsfostercare2016.pdf>

provide care specifically to members of their extended family; these “kinship” or “family and friends” foster carers may have different needs and expectations from some of their “mainstream” colleagues. Our recommendations throughout this submission principally relate to mainstream foster carers. It is important that these differences are recognised in any recommendations made by the national fostering stocktake.

4. Throughout the text, where we refer to local authorities, this includes trusts with statutory responsibility for children in care. Independent fostering providers refers to both non-profit and profit-making fostering services.

Introductory points

5. We know that good foster care is a protective factor for fostered children’s education and wellbeing, despite the trauma of coming into care and the difficult starts these children have often had in life. Foster carers provide children with stability, security, attachment, and often their first positive experience of family life. As well as providing this family environment, foster carers are also the primary advocates and first educators for the children they look after. Foster carers make a difference which is recognised by schools, by local government, by Ofsted, and by many others in wider society. In November 2015 University of Oxford research² revealed that educational outcomes improve for fostered children compared with those who are in need and stay living with troubled families. Various research by Sinclair, Schofield³ and others also shows the positive impact of the care system on many vulnerable young people.
6. We also know that there are many challenges within the care system that make it more difficult for foster carers and others working with fostered children to do their jobs properly and successfully, and that these challenges contribute to poor experiences and outcomes for some fostered children. These challenges include foster carers’ “terms and conditions” as well as systemic issues around the way foster care is structured and delivered. We are clear that while some issues in fostering would be best addressed by legislative and regulatory change, many are actually problems to do with practice and the prevailing culture, both of which need challenging where they are causing problems or preventing an improvement in outcomes for children and young people.
7. Currently it is unclear how we measure outcomes for children and young people in care and who has the national and local oversight for outcomes. There are challenges around collecting a comprehensive and consistent set of data and measuring the impact of fostering (or any other form of care) in terms of children’s outcomes. This was highlighted in the National Audit Office

² The Educational Progress of Looked after Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data, The Rees Centre (2015) http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/EducationalProgressLookedAfterChildrenOverviewReport_Nov2015.pdf

³ For example, Sinclair, I., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, I. (2005) Foster Placements: Why They Succeed and Why They Fail, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London; Schofield, G., Beek, M., Sargent, k., Thoburn, J., (2004) Growing up in foster care, BAAF

report, which found in 2014 that the Department for Education (DfE) could not demonstrate that it is meeting its objectives for children in foster and residential care. The report stated that the DfE did not have indicators by which it measures the effectiveness of the care system. In addition, there was a lack of understanding of what factors contribute towards the costs of care. We would like to see the stocktake try to address some of these challenging issues which are essential to the improvement of the foster care system. All outcomes should be child-centred and children and young people should be the driving voice in deciding which outcomes are important to measure.

8. The legislative framework, policies and structure of local service delivery teams creates a barrier to providing a smooth continuum of care for young people up to age of 21 years. Policies and services focus on 0-18 years and then the young person becomes a 'care leaver'. If legislation, policies and support structures were more child/young person focused and saw this as one journey from child to adulthood it would overcome many of the problems that currently exist for care experienced young people.
9. The issues currently being experienced in foster care are complex and require detailed investigation as part of the stocktake process. However, foster care needs also to be seen in the wider context of the children in care system and the links and dependencies it has on other forms of permanence and care options and of course returning children to live with their birth families.
10. The approach over the last decade has been to review parts of the care system in a piecemeal fashion rather than looking at the children's social care system in its entirety and starting from the child or young person's perspective. These reviews have mirrored the complexities of a system that focuses on placement type and legal status rather than the young person at the centre, and as such have been unable to develop a clear picture of the system as a whole and then deliver potentially radical solutions which focus entirely on the needs of children.

Submission layout

11. We have structured our response into four interlinked areas:
 - the **foster care system**, which includes the way in which fostering is commissioned, delivered, regulated and inspected;
 - the **foster care workforce**, to include the status, role and function of foster carers;
 - **outcomes for children and young people** in foster care; and
 - **staying put** implementation issues.
12. In each of these areas we have highlighted the key issues in fostering, both those which require legislative or regulatory change or those which require practice or culture change. We have also put forward possible solutions. Many of these issues are complex and solutions will need to be debated and tested as part of the stocktake process.

Part one: Foster care system

(Stocktake question: What improvements could be made to the way that fostering provision is commissioned, delivered, regulated and inspected to improve outcomes and value for money?)

The increased demand for children in care services coupled with the drastic cuts to local authority budgets due to austerity measures has placed a growing pressure on the care system in England. The number of looked after children is now at its highest point since 1985 and the demand for placements varies significantly across the country.

In England 51,850 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2016. This is nearly four-fifths (79 per cent) of the 66,630 children in care looked after away from home. Therefore with the vast majority of children and young people in care living with foster families any change to the demand and funding of looked after children's services will impact heavily on fostering.

It is not just the increase in demand in terms of numbers but also the complexity of needs of the children and young people coming into care. Children and young people coming into the care system may, for example, have been exposed to child sexual exploitation, trafficking or gangs, in addition to abuse, neglect and family dysfunction. This changing landscape of need places an increasing pressure on foster carers to develop new skills and expertise.

In addition to the above, the cuts to other parts of the social care system requires foster care to fill these gaps e.g. the closure of parent and child specialist units and residential care provision. Also, funding cuts to other areas of social care such as early intervention services and tightening eligibility criteria to access mental health services impact on foster care.

As a consequence the foster care system has had to develop from an informal, voluntary and unregulated activity to a more formalised, highly regulated and professionalised system of care for vulnerable children and young people, often with complex needs.

In this section we have outlined the key issues for the different aspects of the foster care system. We have started to outline possible alternative models and approaches to structuring the foster care system.

These ideas are at an early stage of development and require detailed discussions and testing with the sector. All the recommendations we put forward in this section have a central aim to improve outcomes for children and young people.

1.1 Assessment of children and young people's' needs

All services for children and young people in the care system are dependent on accurate, high quality assessments of need and effective commissioning to meet the identified needs. In order to get the right placement first time for each child there needs to be an accurate assessment of their needs. When a child has to move placements this can be hugely unsettling and often results in poorer outcomes for the child as well as being more costly. We welcome the publication of the

Children's Commissioner's Stability Index to measure and try to begin to understand the impact of multiple placement moves.⁴

The Fostering Network understands the challenges around assessing and predicting need but we believe there is much room for improvement. It is essential that individual social care assessments of children and young people are aggregated in each local area in order to strategically plan the services required for the looked after children population.

Under existing legislation local authorities are legally required to publish sufficiency statements which detail how they intend to meet the accommodation needs of their looked after children population. We believe that this is not being done routinely in each local authority and is not being used strategically to plan for services required and respond to changing trends in the care population. We believe these statements could be closer scrutinised at a local, regional and national level to determine the types of care placements required and to inform targeted recruitment programmes for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population.

Local authorities must assess not only the placement needs of children and young people but also the other social care, educational and health needs in order to provide therapeutic services and support for children and young people, many of whom have suffered, abuse and neglect before coming into the care system.

Cuts to local authority services have led to a severe reduction in early intervention children's services. Last year's report from a group of children's charities, Losing in the Long Run,⁵ found Government funding for early intervention services is expected to be cut by 71 per cent from more than £3.2 billion to less than £1 billion between 2010 and 2020. Early support services prevent problems from escalating and risks being identified at an early stage. As this type of support is cut so drastically we are left with a situation of crisis intervention which often results in children and young people entering the care system with severe emotional and behavioural problems and requiring specialist support.

We believe that planning for children and intervention should happen in a timely manner and not just in response to crisis. Planning for individual children should allow them to be matched to a carer in the context of that carer's household and the needs of the other children living there, rather than each child's care planning being considered in isolation with no thought being given to competing or conflicting needs of the wider household.

⁴ Stability Index: Overview and Initial Findings, Children's Commissioner (2017), <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Children%27s%20Commissioner%27s%20Stability%20Index%202017%20Overview%20Document%201.3.pdf>

⁵ Losing in the Long Run, NCB, Action for Children and the Children's Society (2016), https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Policy_docs/losing_in_the_long_run_-_final_report%20%281%29.pdf

Recommendation

- **Each local authority must conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population** in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform a targeted recruitment programme for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population. Local authorities must work with IFPs to achieve this – this is clearly stated in the sufficiency statutory guidance.⁶ If this was done at a consistent standard and framework at a local level, it would be possible to aggregate results regionally and nationally for other purposes i.e. recruitment campaigns.

1.2 Effective use of the foster care workforce

1.2.1 Recruitment and managing vacancies

Recruitment of foster carers is a year-round activity. In an ideal world, this recruitment would only be to find foster carers to meet children’s needs; all recruitment would be targeted and based on needs analyses, with local authorities/trusts and IFPs working together to identify who is needed and where. In reality, however, all fostering services are able to recruit foster carers without regard to whether the skills they bring and homes they offer are actually needed for children, or to whether other carers already exist who could provide the necessary placements.

As a result, there is a fundamental disconnect between the supply of foster carers and the demand for their services – local authorities have responsibility for all looked after children and therefore can choose to place them with their own foster carers or those fostering for IFPs. IFPs can recruit as many foster carers as they like, but often have little knowledge of current and future demand trends and no influence over commissioning of services. Therefore, if no local authorities choose to use their services, or if these carers don’t provide the skillsets or homes required, no children will be placed with them.

The mixed economy has therefore led to a situation in which recruitment in foster care is often driven by increasing numbers rather than by meeting the needs of children currently in the care system. Anecdotally, we hear of local authorities recruiting foster carers to bring children back “in-house”, and IFPs recruiting foster carers without reference to whether any local authority has a need for the skills and placements they can offer. Because few foster carers are paid retainers between placements, it is of little cost for fostering services – LA and IFP – to keep foster carers on their books even if they are not being used; we know that some foster carers have vacancies for long periods of time, and that they understandably find this very frustrating, particularly if their fostering service is still recruiting new foster carers.

In fact, fostering services often operate in competition with each other over access to new foster carers, with potential applicants being exposed to advertising from multiple fostering services in any one geographical area. This leads to duplicated costs of advertising, as well as potentially confusing

⁶ Sufficiency: statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children. Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010).

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/273812/sufficiency_-_statutory_guidance_on_securing_sufficient_accommodation_for_looked_after_children.pdf

people who just want to become foster carers but do not know which service to choose. In addition, we hear stories of fostering services encouraging existing foster carers to move services rather than recruiting people new to fostering, through financial incentives being offered to move existing carers from one service to another and placements being threatened unless the carer agrees to move. This in effect is just moving existing pool of carers around the system rather than meeting individual children's needs – our State of the Nation 2016 report found that 14 per cent of foster carers had moved service, with a further 2 per cent in the process of moving.

We end up with a situation in which there is constant recruitment, foster carers with vacancies and shortages of carers for some "types" of children such as teenagers. We believe that fostering services should work together to make best use of the existing foster carer workforce, and to recruit only where there is a need. We would like to see the increased use of regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment, to increase effectiveness and reduce duplication. Communicating with foster carers about why they have vacancies is also crucial.

Recommendations:

- **All recruitment of new foster carers should be targeted to meet needs of the current care population, based on local authority's needs assessments.** No fostering services should be recruiting foster carers for whom there is no demand. Instead local authorities and IFPs should work together to make best use of the existing foster carer workforce and ensure they are recruiting the right foster families to meet the needs of the children in and coming into care i.e. target and match skills of carers with the needs of children. Fostering services should encourage any potential applicants whose skills they don't currently need to contact an alternative fostering service which does need these skills.
- **All fostering services must publish an annual statement of vacancies and usage of existing foster carers, as well as need going forward.** This will help prospective foster carers to make an informed choice between fostering services.
- **Closer joint working protocols should be encouraged between local authorities and independent fostering providers.**
- **An increase in regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment should be explored,** to increase effectiveness and reduce duplication
- **Fostering services should pay their foster carers between placements.** While some foster carers may choose to hold a vacancy until a young person who matches the their skill set needs a placement, many foster carers offer a home to a broad range of children and expect to be working as a foster carer on a full-time basis.
- **If a fostering service thinks it is unlikely that they will place a child with a family, they should be clear about this.** For short term gaps, they should consider whether the foster carer can widen the range of children they take or use their skills more creatively between placements (as long as they are being paid a retainer) to support other foster carers, provide short break care, undertake or deliver training, or assist in recruiting foster carers. If a

fostering service thinks it is unlikely that they will place a child with a family in the long run, they should tell the carers to allow them to make decisions about the future.

1.2.2 Commissioning

The National Audit Office report (Children in Care, 2013) stated fostering services were not being commissioned based on thorough assessments of the child's needs but rather based on costs. The consequence of this is placements are being measured on cost rather than on improving outcomes for children and young people. Over the last few years anecdotal feedback from our members is in line with the NAO finding, we therefore feel this area requires further exploration.

In order to measure whether we are commissioning effective fostering services we have to be clear of the purpose of the care system and specifically the purpose and benefits of foster care. The Fostering Network believes the care system should protect children from further harm, offer an environment where the child can rehabilitate from past harm and neglect and improve the outcomes for the child so they can realise their potential. We have to ask if the current system is achieving this for our looked after population.

Over the last 10 years the foster care sector has moved to a formal contracts commissioning framework. There are approximately 33 different contract frameworks operating in the UK at the moment, some with capped price contracts. As well as the commissioning approach changing over the years the market split has changed. When the independent sector first began to operate in fostering it was to meet the local authority shortfall and to offer specialist placements; the independent sector now accounts for 34 per cent of the market share (Ofsted 2016).

However, even though more formalised approaches have been developed, the fundamental principle underlying most commissioning is still simply spot purchasing. Price has become a focus of commissioning foster care placements. Decisions are being made based on short term affordability rather than what are in the long-term best interests of the child; we need an outcomes based framework.

The fixing of local authority budgets annually does not lend itself to long-term care planning. There are clear tensions between local authority and independent fostering providers about the true costs of a foster placement, and the differing methods used to calculate costs make it almost impossible to assess value for money. There needs to be more work on how much a 'good' foster placement costs and how we quality assure placements – The Cost of Foster Care⁷, produced by The Fostering Network and BAAF in 2005 and updated in 2010 by the University of Loughborough, could provide a model here.

Local authorities have multiple roles in the fostering system - child protection, assessment of needs and care planning, corporate parent, placement matching, service delivery and commissioning of services. Local authorities often adopt a sequential approach to commissioning fostering services

⁷ The Cost of Foster Care, The Fostering Network and BAAF (2005); Update to The Cost of Foster Care, Loughborough University (2010), <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/update-cost-foster-care.pdf>

and look at the in-house services first where they have invested resources and then look externally based on a tiered contracts approach. There needs to be consideration of how we can move away from the competition being created between the two sectors (local authority and independent fostering services) and move towards a more collaborative approach whereby all potential foster carers are in the available pool for children referred.

Finally, commissioning teams within local authorities are often split from practice teams and hold little detailed knowledge of fostering. Some local authorities have adopted a regional commissioning approach and employed individuals to manage regional commissioning frameworks. Feedback on this approach tends to be that it prevents independent fostering services developing a relationship with individual local authorities and that relationships with the commissioning structures are price focused rather than child focused. Moreover, no one is either calculating or considering the costs of these commissioning teams, which have become bureaucratic with significant infrastructure and maintenance costs.

Recommendations:

- **Foster care commissioning should sit within local authority children's services and not the finance/business division of the local authority.** This move would re-focus commissioning on children rather than budgets and bring the decisions closer to practice and those who hold a detailed knowledge of fostering.
- **Commissioners need to understand and exercise their duty of care to looked after children as part of their corporate parenting role.**
- **All the different contract frameworks currently in operation should be reviewed and assessed to see if a common approach can be adopted.** We would recommend a national fostering contract.
- **The commissioning framework for fostering needs to link to outcomes for children and young people rather than cost.** The Care Inquiry⁸ recommended that frameworks for commissioning services for children in care and leaving care should require a minimum 60/40 weighting in favour of quality over cost.
- **There should be a move away from spot purchasing and towards a framework which takes a longer-term view of spending.**
- **Long-term fostering and staying put need to be embedded as part of the commissioning contract and be part of every local authority's sufficiency duty.**

⁸ Making Not Breaking: Building Relationships for our Most Vulnerable Children, The Care Inquiry (2013), <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/care-inquiry-full-report-april-2013.pdf>

- **A comprehensive needs analysis of the local looked after children population must drive any new commissioning models.** New commissioning models are emerging. For example, Peterborough has contracted out all their permanence services to one agency to allow the local authority to focus solely on child protection. Regional partnership frameworks and local consortia exist across some areas of the country. Other models have been proposed such as the Children England National Care Bank. These models and others all need to be examined and tested to assess if they actually address the problems with the current system and ensure it doesn't undermine care planning for children and young people.
- **Responsible authorities should adhere to existing regulations that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held** and views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carer and the fostering service as well as the placing authority. This will ensure placement decisions are being made purely in the best interests of the child and not for any financially motivated or other reasons.

1.3 Monitoring and inspection of fostering services

Ofsted's submission to the Education Committee's fostering inquiry advocated for the introduction of aspirational quality standards for all children living away from home replacing the current fostering national minimum standards (NMS). The Fostering Network recommends that these should be an enhancement of the existing NMS to ensure that fostering services are compliant with the existent legislation, regulation, national minimum standards and statutory guidance. The current processes are in place to ensure that fostering services fulfil their statutory functions and then quality standards could underpin and inform the aspirational outcomes for children and young people that are "the right to family life" and improved life chances.

There is a need to introduce a "sub-judgement" for fostering services as part of the local authority single inspection framework. Currently there is no sub judgement for fostering unlike for adoption yet the majority of children in care live in foster families this would be an opportunity to gauge the quality of fostering services. Furthermore a recent Serious Case Review evidences the need for Ofsted to scrutinise fostering service practice to safeguard children and young people and to guard against poor practice.

Feedback from some of our members has shown concern that the most challenging placements are being commissioned to independent providers and that these commissioned placements are subsequently being disrupted to bring the child back in-house. Ofsted inspections currently gather data on these placement breakdowns (disruptions) but we think there is further work to be done on how this data is used to quality assure services and commissioning practices and to assess the impact of placement breakdowns on children's outcomes.

Finally, we feel that the modular inspections of leaving care must include specific consideration of policy and practice in relation to those young people who have, or wish to have, a staying put arrangement. The inspection should specifically look at arrangements for young people with staying put carers who were both inhouse and IFP foster carers. We receive reports from fostering service members that IFP carers who offer staying put arrangements do not always receive the same service

and support as in-house carers. If this is occurring this may well have an impact on the young people who they are caring for. As discussed in part four the definition of staying put carers needs to be changed to adequately reflect that former foster carers are foster carers.

Recommendations

- **We recommend the introduction of quality standards for fostering but any “new” standards should be in addition to the NMS rather than in place of them.** In our experience there is still a need to have a set of standards which sets out the role and function of a fostering service – the NMS have provided clarity in this area to the benefit of all key stakeholders.
- **A sub-judgement must be introduced for fostering services as part of the local authority single inspection framework** to ensure the quality of fostering services can be assessed. It is also essential to ensure inspectors of children’s services hold specialist knowledge in fostering.
- **Modular inspections of leaving care must include specific consideration of policy and practice for those young people living in staying put arrangements.**

1.4 Long-term fostering

As stated above fostering is not a single entity and therefore it is worth considering whether it can be best served by a single legal framework or whether a different approach for different types of fostering is required.

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 (SGOs) and adoption, are legal orders and can only be granted, or ended, by the courts. All decisions on long-term foster care sit within local authority children’s services department.

The implications of this can be placement drift rather than early decisions being made on which results in children staying with foster carers for years by accident rather than design. Also, feedback from our members through our State of the Nation survey shows placements can end when they feel 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. This includes allegations, where child protection thresholds in place for all other children are not adhered to, and children are moved without a proper assessment. The State of the Nation report also found placements can end with little independent review and scrutiny of the decisions.

This lack of legal permanence leads to children in otherwise stable long-term relationships feel less secure and more vulnerable to disruption, in a way that those living in adoptive families or under SGOs do not.

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 actually seen as permanent as adoptive and special guardianship placements are.

When making a decision about permanency for a child decision makers need to be clear why a child is being placed in long-term foster care as opposed to SGO or adoption. The key difference between long-term foster care and other permanency options is the child remains in the care system which offers a protective and nurturing environment, remains in a family setting, is able to remain in contact with their birth family and is afforded rights to therapeutic services, access to social work support for the child and foster carer and care leaver entitlements.

Recommendations

- **Long-term foster care must be given equal status and protection as other permanence options and to ensure long term fostering relationships are respected and valued.** Our view is that children in long-term fostering placements should have a legal order ensuring stability and security of that placement.

Part two: Foster care workforce

(Stocktake question: The status, role and function of foster carers in relation to other professionals as part of the team working with a child in care.)

Foster carers' employment status is a confused picture. For example, for tax purposes they are considered to be self-employed, but at the same time they can only work for one fostering service at once, unlike other self-employed people. There is also a confusion over their role; while some fostering services insist that foster carers give up or cut down on their other paid work in order to foster, others are clear that foster carers must earn money outside of fostering, and indeed actively encourage "professionals" to bring their skills to fostering alongside their work.

The foster carer workforce holds a diverse range of opinion on the issue of employment status. This lies on a spectrum from expert volunteer on the one hand to fully professional child care expert on the other. The Fostering Network appreciates that this is complex area. We hear regularly from many foster carers, and while we know many do think full employment by a fostering service might be a way to deal with the problems they are encountering, others – including long-term foster carers and family and friends carers – are less sure. For example they are concerned about the potential impact this could have on tax arrangements, combining fostering with other employment outside of the home, and being able to say no to a placement if it doesn't suit their family situation. This is an area that needs more focus and exploration.

Regardless of employment status, The Fostering Network's starting point is that all foster carers must have:

- Status and authority
- Equal respect as key member in the team around the child
- Payment for time and skills, as well as all expenses covered via allowances
- Support and training.

According to Ofsted, there were 62,365 approved foster carers in England on 31 March 2016. This is a slight decrease on the 62,625 of 2015. Most long-term foster carers are white: 84 per cent. This is slightly below the national level among the adult (aged 25 and older) population in the 2011 census: 88 per cent.

Around 12 per cent of the foster care workforce leaves or retires each year and The Fostering Network currently estimates that a further 7,000 foster families are needed in the next year across the UK⁹. In particular:

- 97 per cent fostering services have a particular need for foster carers for teenagers;
- 86 per cent fostering services have a particular need for foster carers for sibling groups.

Across the UK, 60 per cent of looked after children are teenagers and, in England alone, there are 455 groups of siblings who have been separated despite being assessed to live together.

⁹ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets>

Recommendation:

The recruitment and retention of foster carers should be driven by the needs of the existing care population, and be based on local authority needs analyses. See part one for more detail.

2.1 Part of the team

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 these children to the best of their ability. However, according to the State of the Nation 2016 survey, 32 per cent of foster carers felt that children's social workers do not treat them as equals.

We have noted a rise in fostering being increasingly described as "parenting" or "parenting plus" in some parts of the sector; while foster care of course provides children with a home and family and therefore involves parenting, the needs of most fostered children and the system within which foster carers work require them to be child care experts at the heart of the team.

As part of our State of the Nation survey of 2016, when asked "would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?", only half of foster carers said yes. This represented a marked decrease from our 2014 survey, when the corresponding result was two-thirds. We wanted to find out why a growing number of foster carers feel unable to recommend the role. Analysing the answers of those who answered 'no' to this question showed that foster carers felt increasingly unsupported and underpaid, and that they were not treated as equal members of the team.

One example is what happens when foster carers face an allegation, which is unfortunately something that many will experience during their fostering career. Most foster carers accept that allegations are an occupational risk, and nearly all of them will be unsubstantiated or unfounded. However, once an allegation is made, carers are not treated as other professionals; they are too often left not knowing timescales, not being given access to independent support and having financial support removed. In contrast, their social work colleagues would be afforded HR, legal and emotional support should an allegation be made against them.

Moreover, foster carers must be involved in decision making for a child's future, but many feel they are excluded. Many foster carers also feel that they are still not given the authority to make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care. According to the State of the Nation survey, 33 per cent of short-term placement carers felt that they were only allowed to make appropriate decisions some of the time, rarely or never.

Another long-standing issue is that of information sharing: in our State of the Nation survey, 31 per cent of foster carers reported that they were rarely or never given all of the information about a fostered child prior to placement. This was often about the complexity of the child's needs and challenging behaviour. This is of real concern, because without full disclosure, it is extremely difficult for foster carers to make an informed decision about whether they can look after a child and meet their needs, as well as keeping everyone else in the household safe.

Foster carers need proper supervision and support from their supervising social worker. It is best practice that foster carer review meetings should be independently chaired, although we believe this does not happen routinely.

Recommendations:

- **Foster carers must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions.** Although this already exists in guidance, it is still not happening with sufficient regularity. Strengthened guidance needs to address the need for all professionals – social care, education, health, police and so on – to understand and respect the role and responsibility of foster carers.
- **Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; their views must always be taken into consideration.**
- **Foster carers and fostering services must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them and those around them safe.** As part of the team around the child, foster carers must be given access to children’s files, particularly for long-term placements.
- **We recommend all foster care reviews are independently chaired.**
- **A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations, and ensuring adherence to timescales.** Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.
- **Foster carers must be made aware of their statutory entitlement¹⁰ to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.**

2.2 Support

Fostering is an immensely rewarding role but it can often be challenging. Therefore the support foster carers receive from their fostering service and their peers is crucial and often makes a difference to the stability and success of placements.

Our 2016 State of the Nation survey found that foster carers, on the whole, reported a positive view of support from their supervising social worker, with 66 per cent declaring it to be *excellent* or *good* and 15 per cent saying it was *acceptable*. However, in our 2014 survey the result for the same question was 73 per cent, so there has been a slight drop in the overall rating of supervising social worker support.

We found that out of hours and respite support is currently poor for many foster carers. One third of foster carers describe out of hours support as could be better or poor, while only a quarter of foster carers described respite provision as excellent or good, down from one-third in our 2014 survey¹¹.

¹⁰ This is a statutory requirement in respect of allegations, found in National Minimum Standard 22. Source: Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards. Department for Education (2011).

¹¹ State of the Nation’s Foster Care 2016, The Fostering Network (2017)
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/stateofthenationsfostercare2016.pdf>

Recommendations

- **Support for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child** they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- **All fostering services should provide a dedicated full-time support service** for foster carers and **ensure access to respite provision** for all foster carers.
- **Peer support opportunities** should be enabled and promoted at a local level.

2.3 Status and portability

We often hear that foster carers feel insufficiently supported by their fostering services. Foster carer charters are an important first step in setting out what this support should entail. They can help to get foster carers the recognition they deserve and need to provide children with the best possible care, and represent a strong step, along with fees, improved status and authority, and better training, towards a professional foster care workforce.

While we know a number of fostering services have a charter in place, and we have recently sent our updated charter to all fostering services in England, much more can be done to encourage more fostering services to take them up, to embed those that currently exist into practice, and to ensure that all charters remain relevant and respected by the whole team around the child.

Increasing the status of foster carers is also about legitimising the occupation as something owned by the foster carer rather than their service. However the process of transferring to another fostering service often requires repeating the assessment process for the new fostering service, a key factor which hampers portability of the workforce. Foster carers responding to the State of the Nation 2016 survey stated that it was not just the bureaucratic hindrances of repeating the assessment process that deterred them from transferring agencies, but also the lack of placements and income during the transition period. With such periods usually lasting several months, this immediately discourages all foster carers who rely on fostering to provide an income for the household. There are also implications for currently fostered children when a foster carer moves services, who are likely to face being moved out of their home during the reassessment process.

We believe that an immediate improvement to the portability of foster carers could be made by the introduction of a register, a centrally held list of approved foster carers in England. A central list would serve a number of purposes in addition to improving portability, as follows:

- improving safeguarding of children and young people, as currently there is no way of knowing that an applicant previously fostered elsewhere if the carer chooses to withhold the information;
- increasing portability of the workforce, enabling them to transfer providers more easily, which as a result could drive up standards in training and support for foster carers;
- supporting the creation of a standardised pre- and post-approval training framework linked to the register; and

- improving the formal status of foster carers to allow the role to be more recognised and valued within the sector and by the general public.

Recommendations:

- **There should be a national register of foster carers in England.**
- **It must become a statutory duty for all fostering services to have a charter in place that is reviewed every three years, with a clear and transparent process that allows foster carer and fostering service staff to provide challenge if it is absent or not being adhered to.**
- **When transferring service, the original fostering service should pass on all assessment and review paperwork for the past three years – currently this is in the regulations but it does not happen in practice.**
- **All fostering services should be required to give a reference to the new fostering service. This would require a change to the existing fostering regulations: currently the regulations say that the new fostering service has to ask, but the old fostering service does not have to provide a reference.**

2.4 Training

The training support and development (TSD) standards are the only national requirement for foster carers' professional development. Apart from training in positive control and care of children, and safer caring, there are no other legal requirements.

Children and young people coming into the care system have an increasingly complex set of needs, due to their diverse experiences, for example child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gangs or arriving as unaccompanied asylum seeking children. There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers to meet these needs, and yet there is no nationally defined learning and development framework for foster carers that could address this.

A standardised and accredited framework for training for foster care would set out the areas in which foster carers must demonstrate or develop knowledge and skills, and would provide the framework for services to develop their foster carer training programme. However, standardisation does not need to lead to a lack of flexibility in training. There will always be a need for foster carers to undertake specialised training relating to the demands of their specific situation and the needs of the children they are caring for. Personal development plans should be able to address both the standard and the specialised training.

However, it is not just about training for foster carers: other professionals should have knowledge of foster care woven into their own training and development processes. This is because, as already argued, foster carers are part of the team around the child but are often not treated in that way. They are viewed as the junior partner, and unduly pressurised to take placements that don't correspond to their skills, knowledge and experience.

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. CSW 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. There is also a need to ensure that all stakeholders in the team around the child understand fostering and the role of foster carers, including education and health professionals, police and commissioners.

Recommendations:

- **A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in England, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.** Within this national framework there must be flexibility for training to be tailored to allow foster carers to meet the individual needs of children and promote their own personal development.
- **It is essential that knowledge of fostering is included in training for social workers to enable them to work more effectively with the primary carers of the vast majority of looked after children.** Other professionals working with looked after children should also be given training to understand the role of foster carers.

2.5 Finance – allowances and fees

2.5.1 Allowances

Our State of the Nation 2016 survey asked foster carers about allowances. We asked them if they felt their allowance, and the expenses they could claim, met the full costs of looking after fostered children.

Over half of all foster carers said that their allowances did not meet the full costs of looking after fostered children. When we asked this question two years ago 80 per cent of respondents felt their allowances did cover the costs of fostering. In 2016 this figure has fallen sharply to only 42 per cent.

Foster carers told us that allowances have been frozen, while additional payments such as mileage have been cut and that teenagers are especially expensive and the costs far exceed the allowances foster carers receive.

The Fostering Network’s annual survey of fostering allowances 2016/17 showed that one quarter of local authorities (39) paid the Department for Education’s recommended allowances. Just over half of local authorities (85) paid above the recommended allowances¹².

Eleven local authorities paid below the Department for Education’s recommended rates for 0-4 year olds. This is extremely disappointing a full decade after these minimum levels were introduced.

¹² Survey of foster care allowances 2016-17: England Summary. The Fostering Network (2017).

Foster carers and fostering services rightly have high expectations of what children in care should experience, but in many cases, the level of allowances do not allow for those expectations to be met. Caring for a teenager can be especially expensive with the cost of, for example, driving lessons, mobiles and holidays.

Even though the survey of local authority allowances showed that 93 per cent paid the Department for Education's allowances or higher, with over half of foster carers saying that their allowances did not cover costs, it is clear that the national minimum allowances need reviewing.

2.5.2 Fees

While there are national minimum rates specified by the Department for Education for allowances – the money to be spent on looking after the child – the payment of foster carers' fees for their time and skills is determined locally. Only 57 per cent of foster carers reported receiving a fee in 2016, and this can be just a token amount of as little as £34 per week. The median weekly fee payment – of those 57 per cent who *do* get paid for their time – is £161.50. If this were a weekly wage for a typical 40 hour week it would represent £4.04 per hour. Moreover, while foster carers must be consulted on payment schemes and levels, there is no national guidance on how fees should be determined.

We believe that all foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and experience, at a level equivalent to that of a residential care worker. This varies hugely but starting salaries (outside London) are approximately £17,000. Taking £20,000 as an average (to allow for London weighting and some carers getting more, as well as an expected rationalisation of the workforce if retainers were introduced) and multiplying it by the number of fostering households in England (44,625), gives around £0.9 billion per year. Alternatively using the minimum wage for a 40-hour week as a baseline comes to approximately £0.7 billion per year.

There are a number of issues to consider when exploring fee payments to foster carers:

- While we support retainers, there are foster carers who perform respite care only, or who don't take a placement for a long time by choice. Alternatives to retainers would be required in these situations.
- Moreover, some foster carers are more specialist and would command a higher fee, which could then lead to the issue of perverse incentives: we would not want to see a foster carer penalised for turning a young person's life around from being a "challenging" to a "less challenging" placement and thereby receiving a reduction in pay.
- Some family and friends and long-term foster carers may not want to be paid – we have no firm evidence for this, but hear it anecdotally and would like to see a system that has the flexibility to reflect these.
- Some foster carers have full-time jobs outside the home – should they also be paid as foster carers for these hours, while other foster carers are with children or carrying out other fostering tasks all day?
- In some households both people in a couple would consider themselves primary foster carers and therefore deserving of pay.

Despite the complex issues involved in considering fees, we believe we will only get the high quality service we need if central and local governments are prepared to invest in it.

Recommendations:

- **The Government should review the level of national minimum fostering allowances**
- **All fostering services should be required to pay an allowance at a level that meets or exceeds the Department for Education’s national minimum allowance, and the Government must fund all local authorities to allow them to achieve this.**
- **All foster carers should be paid for their time and skills, preferably via a tiered payment scheme which includes retainer fees between placements.**
- **The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about their entitlement to allowances and fees.**

2.6 Whistleblowing

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) does not cover foster carers. Foster carers are in a vulnerable position if they choose to speak out about alleged wrongdoing or poor practice. We are concerned that this may act as a disincentive to foster carers, putting vulnerable children at risk.

Recommendation:

We support the recommendation of the Whistleblowing Commission chaired by Sir Anthony Cooper that the Government uses the powers set out in section 20 of the Enterprise Regulatory Reform Act 2013 to extend PIDA to cover foster carers.

2.7 Foster Carer Approval

Once they have been approved as a foster carer, the foster carer’s terms of approval will be determined by the fostering service. This is commonly based on the age range of children, for example 0 to 11 or 0 to 21 – the latter making provision for staying put in the future.

If a foster carer is deemed suitable only to offer certain types of placements, this should be made clear not only in their terms of approval, but also the foster care agreement. Foster carers should not be asked to provide types of placement for which they are not approved.

Recommendation:

- **Foster carers should be advised in writing of their terms of approval. This will make clear the type of fostering placement they will provide, and this clarity should also be in their foster carer agreement.**

- **Foster carers must not be asked to provide types of placement outside of their approval range.**

2.8 DBS checks

Current practice regarding DBS checks is variable across England particularly in respect of the “timeliness” of DBS checks being completed for rising 18 year olds living in fostering households¹³ i.e. foster carers own children and looked after young people transitioning to adulthood.

In the current provision there is no mechanism to allow for checks in respect of children’s services and adults services to be run simultaneously e.g. if a former foster carer moves to work in adults services details held on an enhanced DBS check do not automatically “flag” across and vice versa. Furthermore children’s services are not permitted to request the adults barred list nor are adults services permitted to request the children’s barred list.

Recommendations

- **The DBS, DfE and the Home Office should undertake a thorough review of the regulations which govern DBS checks for prospective foster carers and all adult members of a foster care household, including a review of the Update Service.** This would serve to both address the current problems/difficulties in practice across DBS offices in processing checks on young adults and would serve to ensure that children and young people in foster care are afforded consistent practice in respect of safeguarding.
- **All fostering and adoption enhanced DBS checks need also to include information about whether someone is unsuitable to work with vulnerable adults as well as children.** This information is relevant to safeguarding children in the care system.

¹³ The requirements for a DBS enhanced check on prospective foster carers and members of their household aged 18 or over is determined under The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013; Regulation 26(1A) and (2) Schedule 3.

Part three: Outcomes for children and young people

(Stocktake questions: What works best within fostering settings to improve outcomes for the children and young people placed? How the experiences for young people can be improved when entering foster care, transitioning between placements and leaving foster care.)

3.1 Relationships

It is well evidenced that those children who lack stability while in care have poorer outcomes¹⁴. An essential way to achieve stability is to focus on the relationship and attachment the child has with their foster carer(s). Attachments impact on social and emotional development, educational achievements and mental health. The Care Inquiry found that the 'golden thread' running through the care system was relationships. The Inquiry recommended that there should be a renewed focus on using the powers and resources from all sectors in nurturing positive and meaningful relationships for children who cannot stay with, or return to, their birth parents.

Foster carers not only have a vital role to play while the child is living in their home but also in supporting the child as they move on, whether this is a move home or a move to another placement. Children and young people in care and care leavers told us that being able to stay in touch with their former carer was very important to them. However, surveys that The Fostering Networks carried out in 2015¹⁵ showed one third of foster carers and one third of children and young people had been prevented from having contact and over half of the children and young people surveyed said they were not supported at all to keep in contact with former foster carers. The practice of cutting off the relationship between the child and their former foster carer is damaging and social work practice in this area needs to change.

Another key relationship for children in care is that they have with the independent reviewing officer (IRO). IROs play a crucial role in ensuring children's relationships are recognised, supported and sustained. IROs currently work within local authority structures which many feel can affect their impartiality in representing the best interests of children. We would like to see IROs becoming independent of local authorities and having more authority, in order to be independent and effective, and to be able to truly ensure decisions are in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations:

- **IROs should work for a body outside of the local authority structure, and given more authority to make independent, effective decisions in the interests of the child.**
- **The Government should 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**

¹⁴Data Pack Improving Permanence for Looked after Children, Department for Education (2013)

¹⁵Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On. The Fostering Network (2016).

home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process

- **How children in care's relationships are being built and supported should be considered as part of Ofsted inspections.**

3.2 Improving outcomes through innovation

In recent years The Fostering Network has run a number of innovative programmes and projects across the UK which seek to improve outcomes for fostered children and young people, including Mockingbird and Inspiring Voices. The learning from these programmes supports the organisation's objectives to innovate so that our members are able to respond to the changing world of fostering and allow us to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care and leaving care.

The Fostering Network will continue to deliver the Mockingbird programme over the next three years and beyond. This an alternative method of delivering foster care with the potential to improve placement stability, safety and permanency for children and young people in care and to improve support for, and retention of, foster carers. The Mockingbird Family Model, upon which the Mockingbird programme is based, increases the protective factors around children through the provision of an extended network of family support. It uses the concept of a 'constellation' which is where six to 10 'satellite' families of foster and kinship carers live in close proximity to a dedicated hub home of specially recruited and trained carers offering respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities.

Relationships are central to the Mockingbird programme, with hub carers and foster carers providing frontline care and with social workers able to concentrate on successful relationship building. The hub empowers families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate, and offers children a more positive experience of care. The hub also builds links with other families important to the children's care plans and to resources in the wider community which can provide them with enhanced opportunities to learn, develop and succeed.

Through delivering these programmes clear themes have emerged which we believe can be used to improve local arrangements in the delivery of foster care services:

- **Peer support:** The programmes are based on the central principle of peer support. Peer support can increase the knowledge and confidence of foster carers and prevent problems from escalating which offers children a more positive and stable care experience. Peer support can also be a cost-effective intervention.
- **Foster carers valued as equal members of the team around the child:** We believe it is essential that foster carers are respected and treated as skilled co-professionals, and are recognised as part of the team working with the child. Often the foster carer is the person who knows the child best. In order for foster carers to be respected as a professional child care expert they need to be given all the information on each child, be fully involved in decision making and empowered to make appropriate day-to-day decisions concerning the children in their care, as explored in part two.

- **Involvement in decisions:** Children and young people should be involved in all decisions made about them, particularly when it involves placement moves or contact arrangements.

Recommendation:

- **Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown, such as the Mockingbird Family Model, should be further explored and invested in.**

3.3 Involvement of young people in their care

At the heart of improving outcomes for children and young people is ensuring they have a strong voice in all decisions which affect their care. Too often, despite good intentions, children and young people's voices are absent from the system, decision making and reviews. We believe that this absence is a contributory factor to a range of the perceived issues within the system.

Last year The Fostering Network completed a project, Inspiring Voices, designed to raise young people's and foster carers' awareness of, and engagement with, children in care councils in England. Through this project we ran regional consultation events for young people across the country. The project exposed a great variability in provision. There is a direct link between well-resourced structures and young people being able to influence the design and delivery of services.

The Fostering Network believes that all fostered young people should have their voices heard and be given the opportunity to shape and co-produce children's services in partnership with local authorities and decision makers.

Recommendation:

- **Local authorities should ensure that they have in place mechanisms for listening to the voices of their fostered children, whether they live with in-house carers or are placed with an IFP, e.g. through children in care councils.**

3.4 Access to therapeutic support

The Fostering Network is part of the Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers and we fully support Alliance call for robust assessment of looked after children's mental health needs, clear pathways for accessing mental health support and sufficient provision.

Recommendation:

- **Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services when needed, without delay.**

3.6 Life-long care

Children living with their own families are rarely expected to move out and stand on their own two feet at the age of 18, and in fact many rely on family support for many years into adulthood. We would like to see this same “life-long” approach to young people who have grown up in care with the state as corporate parents. Staying put and other 18+ living options are a good first step, but we believe that local authorities should continue their commitment as corporate parents in the longer term. This would have long-term benefits for the individual and both benefits and savings for society as a whole.

Recommendation:

- **Local authorities must be proactive in offering long-term support for care experienced young people, and must outline this in the local offer for care leavers (which is required under the new Children and Social Work Act 2017).**

Part four: Staying Put

(Stocktake question: How the experience of young people can be improved when entering foster care, transitioning between placements, and leaving foster care.)

4.1 Funding

The £40m 'new burden' funding for the first three years of staying put comes to an end in 2017. We welcome the Government's commitment in Keep on Caring to continue to provide funding to local authorities to implement staying put over the life of this Parliament using the £22m provided in 2016/17 as the baseline. However, moving forward we believe there is a need to give careful consideration to the amount of central funding allocated for staying put and how this is calculated. Since the inception of the policy all key stakeholders have highlighted funding to be inadequate and the root cause of the many of the implementation issues.

There are a number of variables that need to be considered when assessing the cost of staying put for local authorities: the number of young people staying put; the length of time they stay and the level of financial support offered by each local authority.

For the past two years both the Department for Education and Ofsted have collected data on the number of young people living with former foster carers and the length of time they stay. The latest statistical releases for 2015/16 show a large difference between the datasets both on the number of care leavers (DfE – 2,670; Ofsted – 4,025) and the number of young people living with a former foster carer aged 18 years (DfE – 1,440; Ofsted – 2,190). Both datasets have the same percentage (54 per cent) for the number of young people remaining with their former foster carers. Ofsted's data release highlights the substantial difference in the numbers but states the reasons are unclear.

4.2 Lack of information and planning

Staying put should be considered as part of the long-term care plan for all looked after children and young people in a long-term/permanent placement. Information should be available to all stakeholders including: children, their families, foster carers, fostering service providers, children's social workers, IROs and leaving care services.

Feedback from a recent foster carer survey by The Fostering Network showed that that this is often not the case. Some foster carers said that planning starts as late as the young person's 18th birthday. There is a lack of awareness of local policies on staying put among foster carers and young people, and it is not being incorporated in a timely way into the care planning process, therefore not being seen as part of the spectrum of care. Significantly, we often hear that young people are not fully involved in the process.

Our survey found that fewer than one in five foster carers said planning always/often starts when a long-term placement is being considered.

Recommendations:

- **Local authorities should ensure all fostering service providers, foster carers and eligible young people are aware of their local staying put policy.**
- **Staying put should be introduced as an option as early as possible in the care planning process and children and young people should be involved in all the decisions which impact on their care.**

4.3 Finance

Feedback from foster carers clearly shows that financial reasons are a key factor preventing foster carers from agreeing to staying put arrangements. Many carers have reported that their income diminishes once the young person reaches 18. For some foster carers this will be too little to allow them to continue to provide a home for the young person, and will therefore cause strong relationships to be severed.

Foster carer fees are often stopped once a young person in their care reaches the age of 18. The fee is a foster carer's income in recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience. The Good Practice Guide for Staying Put, developed by the Children's Partnership, states that "no young person should lose out due to lack of financial support to themselves or their carer."¹⁶ Foster carers should not be financially disadvantaged if taking on a staying put arrangement.

Nearly one-quarter of foster carers we surveyed said their young person did not remain with them because they could not afford a drop in income.

We surveyed local authorities about Staying Put allowances for 2016/17 and found that 40 per cent reported a reduction in allowances post 18. Currently staying put allowances vary across England by as much as £215 a week. Allowances start at around £85 a week. The national minimum allowance for a foster child aged 16 is £185 a week, increasing to £216 in London.

We also found that many fostering services – over a quarter of those surveyed in 2016 – reduce allowances to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that this shortfall is made up by the young person claiming benefits (in particular housing benefit), and then forwarding this on to the foster carer. While this may be a sensible method of reallocating local government funds, it sets up young adults as benefit claimants immediately upon reaching 18. We would like to see any reallocation of benefits being made directly to the foster carers, without having to go via the young person.

¹⁶ The Children's Partnership, 2014. http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_113930-2.pdf. The Children's Partnership is the voluntary and community sector strategic partner to the Department for Education 2013-15, led by 4Children and the National Children's Bureau and in collaboration with Barnardo's, the Family and Childcare Trust, NCVS, NSPCC and in producing the guide, The Fostering Network.

Recommendations:

- **Following the success of the national minimum fostering allowance, there should also be a national minimum staying put allowance, and an expectation of no financial detriment for foster carers who offer staying put placements, in line with existing guidance.**
- **There should be a reallocation of housing benefit between public authorities and payment must be made directly by the relevant authority to the foster carer.**

4.4 Continued approval as a foster carer

There has been some uncertainty about the ability of fostering services to recommend continued “suitability to foster” for carers who do not have space/capacity to offer fostering placements in addition to Staying Put arrangements. When the young person does leave at the end of the staying put arrangement, the foster carer is left with the issue of having to seek re-approval – a lengthy process which is both unnecessary and costly.

Our survey found that 12 per cent of foster carers said their approval as foster carers was terminated in instances where they provided a staying put arrangement but not a foster care placement.

Recommendation:

- **The Department for Education should issue guidance to fostering services, making clear that if a foster carer wishes to maintain their approval they should be supported to remain as a foster carer by their fostering service for the duration of the staying put arrangement.**

4.5 Training and support

We have concerns that training and support for staying put carers is inadequate. Our staying put survey found that only 26 per cent of foster carers who did not have a foster placement received support from a supervising social worker for their staying put arrangement. Additionally from our survey:

- 30 per cent of foster carers said the quality of ongoing information and advice was very low.
- 35 per cent of foster carers said the quality of training and development was very low.

Recommendation:

- **Pre and post-approval training for all foster carers should include staying put.**
- **All staying put carers should have continued support and training throughout the duration of the arrangement.**

4.6 Independent Fostering Providers

Commissioning for staying put is not a contract requirement for Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs) and they often will not receive a fee from the local authority in respect of the staying put arrangement.

Recommendation:

- **We would like to see a principle in place that a young person should not be disadvantaged because of the contractual arrangement between their (former) foster carer's agency and the local authority.**

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