



Understanding the impact of allegations made against foster carers in Wales

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About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. 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 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.

Acknowledgements

This report has involved foster carers from across Wales who have been generous with both their time and expertise. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to them, as this report is ground in, and informed by, their everyday experiences.

I would also like to extend special thanks to Alain Thomas and Janet Stanton for facilitating the foster carer consultations and the subsequent report, and Alun Richards, Fosterline Wales co-ordinator, for providing his feedback on the text.

Maria Boffey

Head of Operations

The Fostering Network Wales

Foreword

Without doubt, fostering children and young people transforms the lives of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. But, while fostering is hugely rewarding and satisfying, there can also be tough and challenging times, none more so when a foster carer is subjected to an allegation.

Imagine if, after many years of caring for a child, that child – or someone associated with them – accuses you of abuse or neglect. This could be a child you love dearly, a child you have been advocating for and supporting wholeheartedly for month after month. Such a situation is likely to be difficult enough without extra stress, uncertainty and, at times, tensions in the relationship between the foster carer, their independent agency, the local authority and the birth family.

Imagine the prospect of also facing a lack of support or communication, or even losing other children in the household, regardless of whether the allegation is true or false. In addition to the ending of the weekly allowance, a member of the family may be suspended from work, the foster carer's own children may be the subject of child protection enquiries and they may be asked to sign an agreement of no unsupervised contact with other children during the investigation. Likely, you will not know for many weeks what the accusation is or who is making it, until a police interview is arranged. This is a situation many foster carers find themselves in during their fostering career.

Here at The Fostering Network Wales, not a week goes by without at least one foster carer contacting us to seek advice and support as they grapple with the stress and emotional turmoil of being subjected to an allegation having been made against them.

As a foster carer myself, one of my biggest concerns is the prospect of facing an allegation being made against me or other members of my household. Allegations made against foster carers are not uncommon, yet the majority, after prolonged investigation, are unfounded. Nevertheless, the negative impact of the investigation process leads to many foster carers giving up fostering for the sake of themselves or their families. Knowledge about the current investigation process can also be a significant factor that deters other prospective foster carers from pursuing a career in fostering, at a time when there is a serious shortage of foster carers to look after children and young people who are unable to live within their own families.

This report highlights the impact of allegations made against foster carers and also the need for substantial improvements in the way the allegations investigation process is carried out. It has been informed by the experiences of foster carers throughout Wales who have given personal accounts of their experiences, and also draws on their wisdom about how the allegations process can be significantly improved for all involved.

Colin Turner

Director, The Fostering Network Wales

About allegations

What is an allegation?

An allegation is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or another member of the fostering household has, or may have, acted in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child, or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children.

Allegations are more serious than general complaints against foster carers because in Wales, the allegations have to be investigated by the local authority under the auspices of the All Wales Child Protection Procedures 2008, shortly to be replaced by the National Safeguarding Procedures. Allegations should be treated differently from concerns about poor standards of care.

The local authority in which the foster carer lives, the fostering service they work for, the local authority responsible for the fostered child and the police will all be involved in deciding exactly how an allegation is investigated.

Unfortunately, facing an allegation is something that many foster carers will experience during their fostering career. The majority of these will be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

How prevalent are allegations and how are foster carers supported?

In Wales there are approximately 3,700 foster families, looking after more than 4,400 children. The Fostering Network estimates that fostering services need to recruit a further 550 foster families to ensure that all fostered children can live with the right family for them. At this time there are no statistics about the rate of allegations and support available specifically relating to Wales. The Fostering Network's 2019 State of the Nation's Foster Care survey of over 4,000 foster carers across the UK found that:

- More than a third (35 per cent) of fostering households have experienced one or more allegation, up two per cent from 2016.
- Only 58 per cent of foster carers have received allegations training. This represents a slight improvement on the 56 per cent in 2016, but it is still disappointing.
- Following their allegation, two-thirds (67 per cent) did not receive independent support, which is unchanged from 2016.

How are allegations investigated?

There are six stages outlined in the All Wales Child Protection Procedures 2008. They are summarised here because some of the foster carers quoted in the following report refer to them. For more detail, consult the procedures via this website [here](#).

1. Referral
2. Initial assessment
3. Strategy discussion
4. Strategy meeting
5. Child protection section 47 enquiry by social services and/or the police
6. Child protection conference

Why do some children make allegations?

In some cases, children make allegations because they are true. All allegations, therefore, must be fully and transparently investigated. It is in these instances that the sometimes stressful and emotional investigation process is shown to be necessary.

However, for some children, making a false allegation may be about trying to exert power in a situation in which they may feel powerless. They might be trying to achieve something – a placement move, perhaps – that they do not believe they can achieve in any other way.

Some children make allegations because they have misunderstood the care they are getting, in a way that makes them feel unsafe – possibly because it appears to mirror some behaviour linked in the child's mind to past abuse.

To foster carers, allegations can feel like a powerful weapon in children's hands; and the impact of an allegation on foster carers' lives is enormous. But the child's behaviour is not coming from a position of power. Allegations often demonstrate the angry feelings of children who have had little power in their lives.

Executive summary

Facing an allegation of abuse or neglect can be one of the most challenging situations a foster carer and their family can ever experience.

During summer 2018, The Fostering Network carried out a consultation with foster carers, which aimed to explore their experiences of facing an allegation and the subsequent investigative process. The findings of this consultation were supplemented by a literature review.

This report highlights the need for substantial improvements in the way the allegations investigation process is carried out. Only by addressing these issues will it be possible to encourage greater numbers of people to take up and remain in fostering – leading to improved outcomes and better life chances for looked after children and young people.

Effects of allegations

The research found that as an allegation and the subsequent investigation unfolds, foster carers and their families can experience:

- significant negative impact upon their physical health and emotional wellbeing
- severe financial hardship
- immense strain on their relationships with family, friends, their own children and other professionals in the team around the child.

Policy and practice recommendations

1. Foster carers must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe.
2. The decision to initiate the allegations investigation process should be made by a senior social work social work manager and clearly documented.
3. A risk assessment should be carried out before removing children from fostering placements.
4. Foster carers should be prepared for allegations through the assessment process and post-approval training.
5. Safer caring should be built in to fostering.
6. Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.
7. 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.

Detailed recommendations about types of support that could be offered

A wide range of different types of support should be offered to everyone involved. This support could include:

- One-to-one independent support.
- Peer mentoring.
- Telephone support, for example, from Fosterline Wales.
- Financial support.
- Support for the child making the allegation.
- Support for foster carers' own children and other children in the household.

It is also important that foster carers should not be prevented from seeking vital support from their family and friends.

Next steps

The Fostering Network Wales will continue to work alongside the Welsh Government, foster carers and fostering service members, to identify ways of continuing to improve the management of allegations and their investigations. We have a range of proposals of further specific work to enable this to be achieved.

Introduction

The purpose of this report

Facing an allegation of abuse or neglect can be one of the most challenging situations a foster carer and their family can ever experience.

According to foster carers that The Fostering Network has supported, the experience of having an allegation made against them and the outcomes of the subsequent investigation can have far-reaching practical and emotional implications, not only for the foster carers involved, but also their own children, the fostered children in their care and their wider family and friends.

Some foster carers leave fostering as a result. At a time when there is a shortage of foster carers in Wales, such losses to the profession should be prevented, where possible.

Previously, The Fostering Network has not documented in a systematic way the experiences of foster carers in Wales who face an allegation. Furthermore, there is little Wales-specific research into the prevalence of allegations made against fostering families and the impact they have.

The Fostering Network, therefore, has taken an initial step to hear first-hand from foster carers who have experienced allegations made against them. During summer 2018, The Fostering Network carried out a consultation with foster carers which aimed to explore their experiences of facing an allegation and the subsequent investigative process.

The key findings and recommendations from this report will inform future training, finance and support for foster carers and their families, with the aim of improving the way that allegations can be dealt with in the future, both in Wales and across the UK. This report will also influence the work of a national working group, tasked with developing UK-wide practice guidance for the investigation of allegations made against foster carers.

Methodology

Two recent UK studies into the effects of allegations on foster carers were considered. Additionally, The Fostering Network Wales has produced an analysis of emerging themes from enquiries to its independent support services. The main findings of these are summarised in Section 2.

The main part of this report is based on the detailed responses of 16 foster carers, from across Wales, to a consultation.

An open invitation was sent to approved foster carers in Wales who were members of The Fostering Network, inviting anyone who had been involved in the allegations process to take part in the consultation. An initial focus group was held in Cardiff, which was attended by 12 foster carers from across south Wales, all of whom had experienced allegations proved to be unfounded.

Three one-to-one, in-depth interviews were carried out with foster carers from north Wales. (See Appendix for the focus group and interview topic guide.)

One foster carer, who was unable to take part in the consultation in person, provided a detailed written account of their experiences.

The Fostering Network Wales provided two further anonymised case studies from foster carers who had received independent support from The Fostering Network during the allegations process.

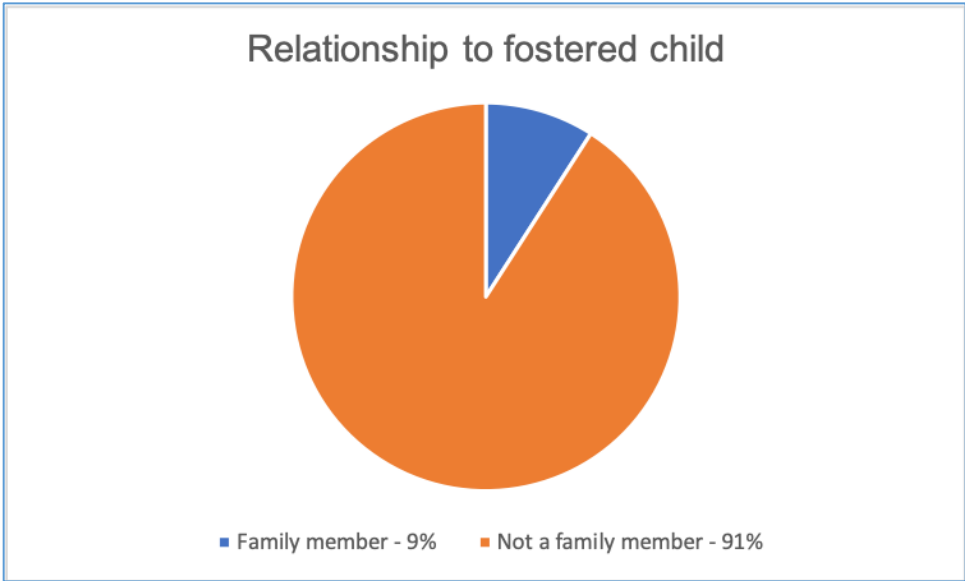
Of the consultation participants, 11 completed a short questionnaire, giving an overview of the nature of the allegations and their fostering experience.

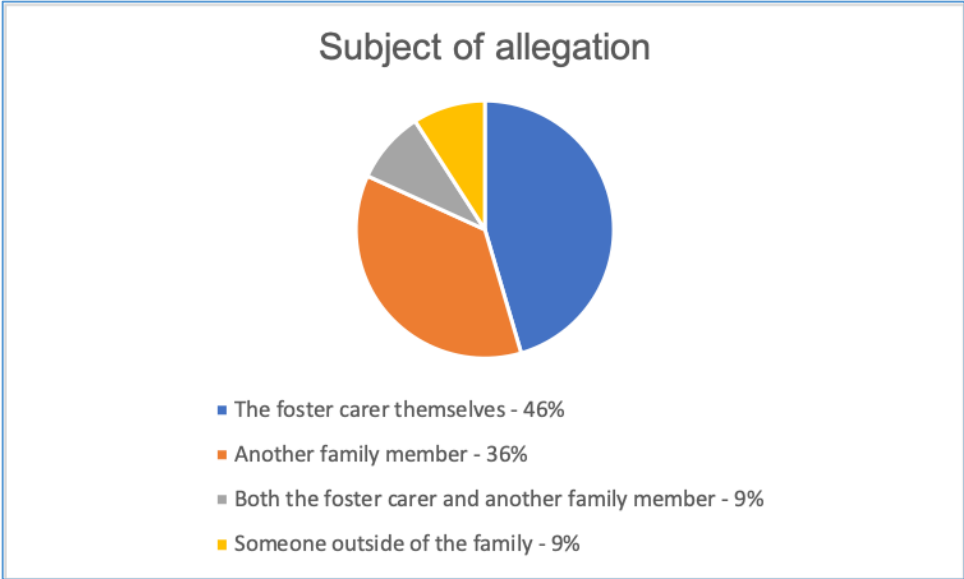
Most had been involved in just one allegation. Five allegations were about the foster carer, four about another family member and one about somebody outside the fostering family.

Participants were mainly experienced foster carers, with all but one having fostered for five years or more.

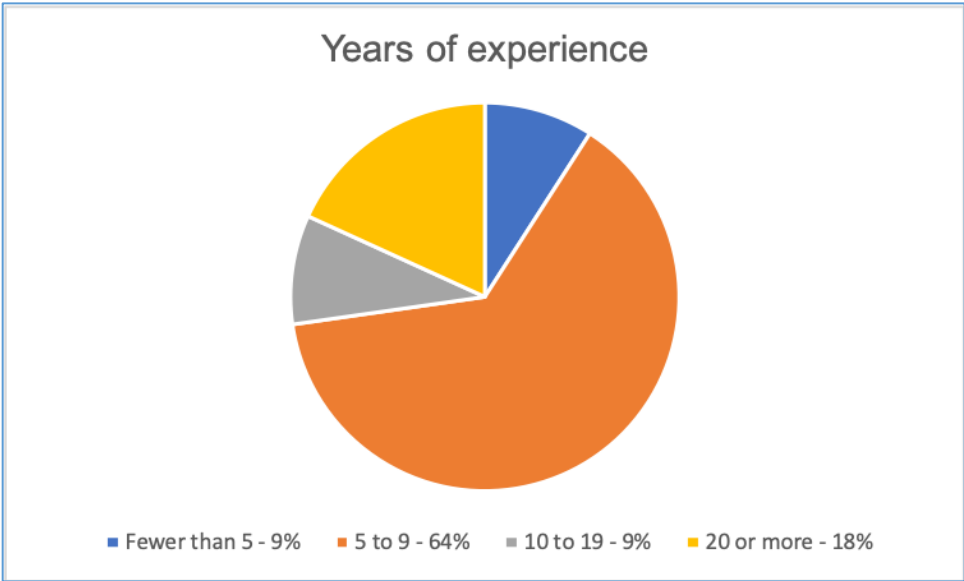
The group, therefore, included a good depth of experience of fostering and some diversity in relation to the subject of the allegations. The characteristics which were recorded are summarised in the charts below.

Background of consultation participants





Fostering experience of consultation participants



It is acknowledged that it can be common for an unstructured sample of people electing to take part in a consultation, about a topic which has affected them personally, to be biased towards those who have had a strongly negative experience. Consequently, this must be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

This is mitigated, to an extent, by the fact that participants in the consultation remained current foster carers. Those who have left fostering following an allegation are likely to have had the worst experiences of all and it was not possible to include their views in this consultation. Such ex-foster carers are often not sufficiently motivated to continue fostering, lack trust in staff or are not prepared to put their family at further risk of more allegation.

While most contributors to the consultation shared negative experiences of the allegations process, one participant made it clear that she had received good support from her fostering service and her experiences are included in this report.

The strength of this report is that it is based upon data from personal experience, with participants giving consistent testimony, describing severe adverse impacts resulting from allegations, and that this matched very closely the findings of the other sources of literature available.

Other relevant research

Two published studies and one unpublished paper were particularly relevant to this consultation subject.

Study 1: *Maltreatment and Allegations of Maltreatment in Foster Care. A Review of the Evidence*, Biehal and Parry (2010)

This review of UK evidence about the effect of allegations upon foster carers described the impact of allegations as 'devastating', with foster carers experiencing feelings of shock, disbelief, distress, anger and powerlessness.

It referred to studies which found that foster carers were rarely told of the nature of an allegation and which also highlighted that the insensitive way allegations were handled, often led to a breakdown of trust between foster carers and social workers.

Foster carers were uncertain about the process of investigations into allegations, and they frequently lacked support during an investigation, partly because social workers were often not allowed to communicate with them, but possibly also because some social workers were not knowledgeable about the process themselves.

Investigations could last a long time, causing prolonged feelings of distress. Foster carers complained of being excluded from the process of an investigation and not being treated with courtesy and respect. This, along with the poor feedback they received about the conclusions of an investigation, increased the stress of the situation for many foster carers.

Several studies reported that children were routinely removed once an allegation had been made. The severe distress caused by the allegations process led many foster carers to want to give up fostering.

Study 2: *Pilot Study into the Impact of Allegations Made Against Foster Carers Who Accessed FISS or FosterTalk Services*, Dyson and Sebba (2014)

A more recent small-scale pilot study into the impact of allegations made against foster carers, undertaken by a service that provides independent support to foster carers, analysed 37 case records of foster carers who had been the subject of allegations, and conducted six in-depth telephone interviews with foster carers who had received independent support, and one with a foster carer who had not.

The study found that the allegations came without warning, which made them more traumatic, and that foster carers received very little or no information about the nature of the allegation for several weeks.

Allegations took a long time to be processed: on average four and a half months, but in one case two and a half years.

Most foster carers lacked knowledge about the process the investigation would follow when the allegation was made and felt ill-equipped to deal with it. They said they felt they had been judged to be guilty until proven innocent and expressed strong feelings of isolation from social workers who had previously supported them.

In conclusion, the study suggested that the impact of allegations on foster carers is extreme and devastating. There are life-changing consequences which may include the break-up of the foster family and extreme stress on individuals and the relationships between them. The emotional impact often results in major stress, illness and long-lasting fear and there may be severe economic consequences arising from the reduction or removal of income.

Study 3: *Emerging Themes from Fosterline Wales Advice Line and the Practice and Independent Support Teams in Wales*, Alun Richards The Fostering Network Wales (2018, unpublished)

To inform this consultation, The Fostering Network Wales analysed information from a total of 390 enquiries relating directly to allegations made to Fosterline Wales and The Fostering Network's independent support service data, between 2011 and 2018. This analysis was summarised in an unpublished paper about the emerging themes from the enquiries.

The analysis found that fostering services tend to react risk-aversely to allegations and do not always undertake a risk assessment in respect of the fostered child's immediate safety and protection, or the impact upon the child of being moved so abruptly.

In addition, fostering services do not appear to take into consideration the context within which the allegation occurred, notably the track record of the foster carer; any pattern of challenging behaviour of the fostered child or previously unfounded allegations by the fostered child; the possibility of malicious statements being made; and the views of other children in the placement.

The abrupt nature of the removal of a fostered child when an allegation is made, along with the complete severance of ongoing contact between the child and their foster carers, can have a negative impact on both the foster carer and the child. In many cases, fostered children were not even given the opportunity to say goodbye to their foster family.

Foster carers also expressed concerns that no opportunity was provided for them to share important information about the fostered child with new carers, which could help both the child and the carers in a new placement.

Generally, following the outcome of investigations, there was an absence of a formal review or 'analysis for learning' which could influence and inform improvements in future practice, about the process of investigations into allegations and, importantly, improved support for fostered children and foster carers.

Foster carers reported that their views were rarely given credence by investigative staff and they considered that fostering services often demonstrated defensive and unsympathetic behaviour towards them, often closing all communication. Foster carers also relayed that some of the staff they had to deal with appeared unskilled in dealing with the allegations process.

The analysis emphasised the severe impact an allegation has on foster carers, demonstrating that fostering services gave little or no consideration to this.

Foster carers reported emotional impacts which could lead to ill health, loss of income and sometimes loss of employment, damage to family relationships, loss of confidence, stress, loss of faith in their fostering service and social services, and little evidence of 'natural justice'. They described experiencing feelings of humiliation, guilt, stress, isolation and vulnerability.

The experience of an allegation led to many foster carers ceasing fostering and some subsequently pointed out that if they been told of the 'true experience' of an allegation during their pre-approval recruitment, they would not have gone forward with their application in the first place.

Findings of the consultation

The commentary below draws upon the results of the consultation with 16 foster carers which took place during summer 2018. (See the Methodology in Section 1 for a full explanation.)

How prepared foster carers were to deal with an allegation

None of the foster carers who took part in the consultation were prepared for the process or the consequences of facing an allegation.

Foster carers spoke of the shock of being told about the allegation; for most of them the allegation came as a complete surprise and they were unprepared.

'I walked into contact and they told me there was an allegation, out of the blue.'

'You think that you are prepared, but you are not.'

Very few foster carers knew about how the investigation process worked nor how long it might take. This compounded their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

One foster carer spoke about not knowing their rights.

'It was made a lot worse because we didn't know what our rights were when faced with the allegation. If my partner had said, "I'm not leaving the house," what would have happened?'

Foster carers said that training about allegations may have helped, but even this could not fully prepare them for the emotional impact of facing an allegation.

'You can attend training, but...when an allegation comes there is total shock and devastation.'

'I don't know if you can ever be fully prepared. You can go on training and read things online, but it's different when it happens to you.'

One foster carer pointed out that training about allegations could prove counter-productive as it would have an adverse impact on recruitment of foster carers.

'I am passionate about training, but an allegation is emotionally devastating. If you tried to show people this in training, the majority would walk.'

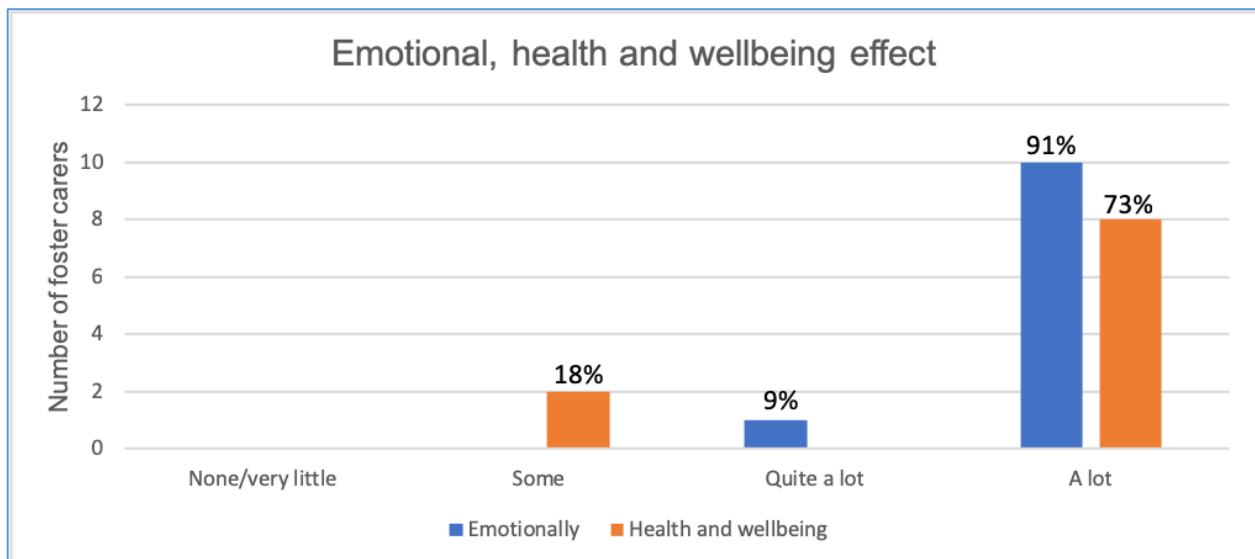
The impact on foster carers' health and wellbeing

Foster carers described how the impact of an allegation had affected their emotional and physical health and wellbeing in many adverse ways, some severe.

Participants in the focus group completed a short questionnaire, about halfway through the discussion, and after it had been clearly established that the process of facing an allegation was a difficult experience for them. The questionnaire aimed to ascertain the impact of the allegation on their health and wellbeing.

Their responses are shown in the chart below. It is clear from this that most of the foster carers considered that the allegations had made a significant negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

Emotional, health and wellbeing impact



Foster carers spoke of feeling fear, guilt, shame, loss, losing confidence and not being able to trust people any more.

'[Your] confidence hits rock bottom.'

'Even if found to be innocent, someone will believe you did it.'

'You ask yourself, "could I have done anything differently?"'

'I woke at night screaming. It was the same emotion as when I lost my mother.'

Foster carers gave numerous examples of the physical and emotional consequences of their experience of an allegation.

Several reported having difficulty sleeping.

'...a massive emotional impact. I had to go to the doctor because I couldn't sleep, I couldn't function.'

Two foster carers reported that they went to their GP and were prescribed anti-depressants.

Others described further physical symptoms, these ranged from stress-related conditions and, in one case, a life-threatening illness.

'I started to lose my hair. I suffer from alopecia. It's stress-related alopecia...I stopped eating.'

'I came out in hives.'

'In November, I was run down and fell really ill. I had fluid on the lungs and was taken to high dependency. I had lost two and a half stone in weight. They said I had gone so low the infection went right through me.'

One foster carer described how she feared the suspicion of guilt would lead her husband to self-harm if he were to become the subject of a sexual abuse allegation.

'I lived every day in fear that if ever a sexual allegation came [my husband's] way, he would not cope with the fact that one person thought he was guilty of that.'

Many foster carers said that one of the consequences was that they lost trust in other social care professionals and became more defensive.

'As a foster carer, I'm really guarded since the allegation was made.'

'Paranoid.'

'It closes you down.'

However, a potentially positive outcome resulting from the emotional consequences of an allegation was described by two foster carers, who said the experience had made them more vigilant, and that it had helped them to put down clearer boundaries.

'[The allegation] made me more alert to signs and signals that things are not so good. You're more on your game.'

Many foster carers deplored that a record of an allegation would remain on their file whether it was proven or not. They felt that this implied that their integrity would remain in question.

'I've been told that it's kept on file because something like this could come up again.'

'I feel very vulnerable. As a foster carer you are open to this year after year.'

'Now I know [it's] not true, but it's still on the files. Anyone coming along will read that.'

Within the focus group, there was a strong consensus that foster carers needed to get 'closure and vindication' once an allegation had been proved unfounded, and that the current practice of keeping the allegation on their record does not provide them with this.

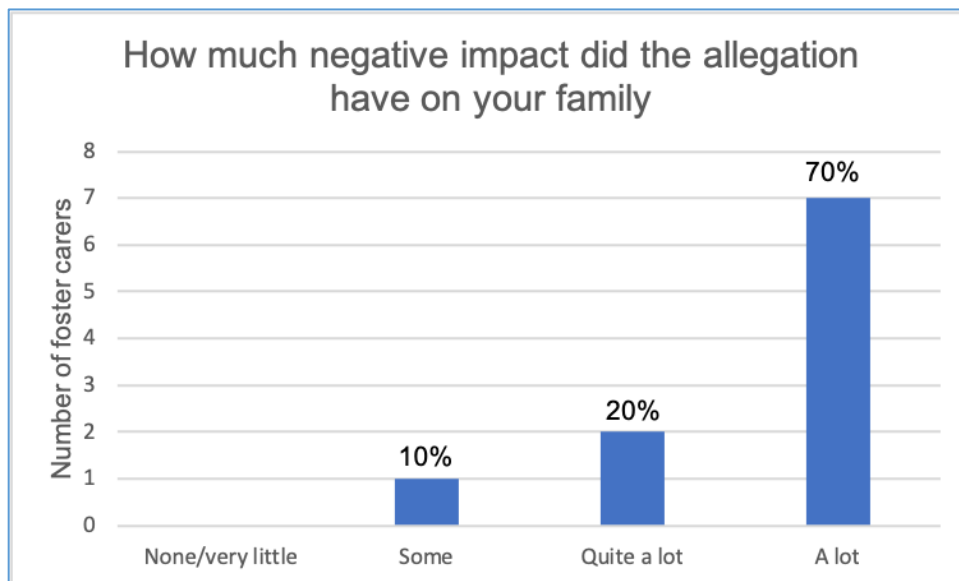
Several foster carers shared further concerns, such as the impact of an allegation on their future employment, the sense of repulsion felt when attending a police station under caution, their own and their family's reputation in their local community being damaged and, if they left fostering as a result, their fostering service dispensing with their established fostering skills and knowledge.

The impact on foster carers' families and on relationships

Foster carers described that allegations had a negative impact on their families as well as themselves.

The chart below shows that most foster carers in the focus group believed that an allegation had 'a lot' of negative impact on their family.

Impact on the family



In some cases, this impact was financial. Some fostering services suspend fees and allowances until the investigation process is concluded, which means that fostering families that rely on this income can suffer financial hardship.

‘Some people have to claim benefits. Some lose their home.’

Others were able to replace the loss of fostering income by taking other jobs; one foster carer became a carer in another field, for example.

One foster carer spoke about how the allegation had led to him losing his job (outside fostering) and his family having to move.

‘Our fostering payments stopped immediately, and I lost my job due to the long investigation. We had no income. We then lost our house.’

Some foster carers relayed how they were instructed not to speak to anyone about the allegation, cutting them off from the support they would otherwise receive from family and friends. Foster carers said that this made them feel extremely isolated, at a time when they most needed this support network.

‘It is difficult because you cannot discuss it with anyone, that is a huge thing.’

Several foster carers said that seeing the consequences of an allegation had led their own children to distance themselves from fostering.

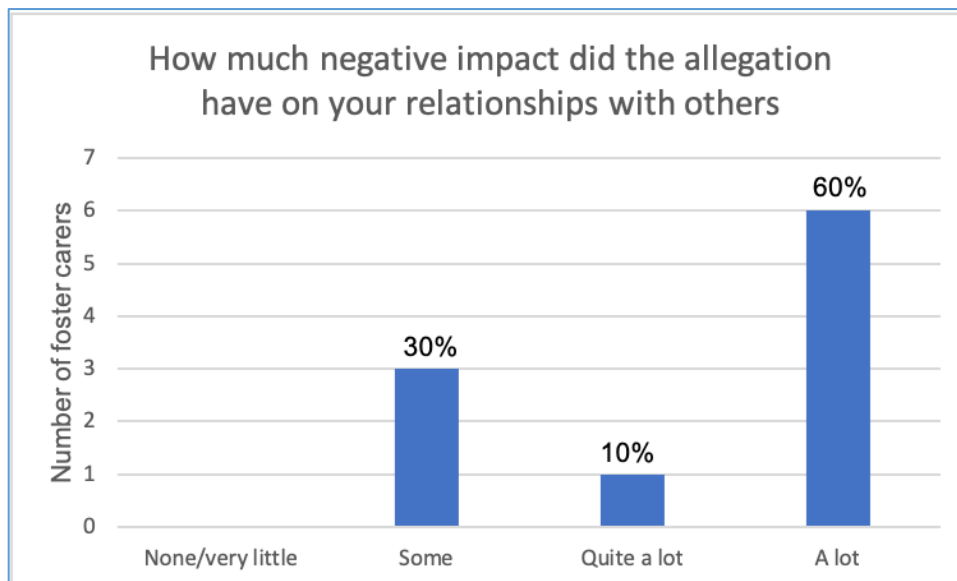
‘Our son was one of our supporters who could look after a child if we weren’t able to for whatever reason. After the allegation he refused.’

It was also reported that some family members had been deterred from fostering themselves owing to their experience of the allegations process.

'My children thought they would foster too, like us, but after the allegation they didn't think they would be strong enough to cope with it.'

Foster carers described different levels of negative impact on their relationships within and outside their family.

Impact on relationships



Several foster carers said the allegation had detrimentally affected their relationship with their partner.

'Me and my wife nearly divorced.'

'My husband is very much my rock. It very much took over our lives when it was going on.'

Several foster carers reported that the allegation had seriously affected their relationship with their supervising social worker.

'The relationship between myself and the supervising social worker completely broke down. They couldn't, or wouldn't, give me information.'

As mentioned above, in some cases, foster carers lost trust in other social care professionals.

'My relationship with professionals has changed. Unfortunately, I don't trust them anymore. There are lots of situations when I read things, emails, and I think, I didn't say that.'

Foster carers described how they perceived a sudden change in the nature of the relationship with other professionals when an allegation was made. One foster carer explained that prior to an allegation they used to have regular contact with their supervising social worker who they regarded as a person they could turn to for information and support. However, once an allegation was made, contact was immediately broken off; this was an abrupt severing of an important relationship and resource.

Another foster carer emphasised the need for continuing contact of some sort with the fostering service, a view that was widely shared.

'What would have helped is to get a social worker who knows me, to call and ask, "are you OK?". I felt completely dumped.'

One foster carer described how the atmosphere in their home had changed since the allegation, saying she felt less comfortable there and had lost trust in the fostered child.

'It is not a natural environment any more. The children think it's a home, but I do things differently now. I wouldn't be left with her for a long time.'

Other issues arising from the allegations process

Foster carers raised several fundamental issues during the focus group discussions and in the one-to-one interviews, but one in particular centred around their belief that each allegation should be dealt with according to the specific context in which it is made, taking into account the history of the child making the allegation.

There was a clear acceptance that children who make allegations against foster carers must be listened to and their views, wishes and feelings clearly documented. However, there were also strong views expressed about the fact that foster carers should not be treated as guilty until proven innocent.

Other than in exceptional circumstances, a review and a risk assessment, in keeping with the [Code of Practice for Looked After and Accommodated Children](#), published under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (paragraph 279), should be carried out as good practice before a child is moved from a placement to balance the risks against the potential trauma that can result from placement disruption.

However, foster carers reported that mitigating factors often did not seem to be considered and that swift removals of children from their placements felt like 'safeguarding gone crazy'.

Foster carers in the focus group explained that some children make multiple unproven allegations. As explained earlier, the reasons for this can be complex, but foster carers emphasised that this is often not considered when allegations are dealt with by fostering services.

There was a discussion during the focus group about how children with complex and difficult backgrounds often learned certain behaviour to gain control of their situations. Foster carers emphasised that when caring for children like this they could be at higher risk of allegations and these vulnerabilities should be recognised, monitored, discussed, documented and managed via the child's care and support plan.

Foster carers reported that some of the children and young people referred to in this report had a known history of making allegations. Yet, in every case, the response from the fostering services followed the same standard procedures.

Case study 9 describes a situation when a foster carer attempted to work with children's social services to introduce a new process to test the allegation before action was taken. However, it transpired that little or no action was taken to implement the agreed process and the placement subsequently broke down.

Several foster carers reported that even though the investigation had concluded no further action was required following an allegation, the fostering service still insisted on following the complex allegations procedures through to its end. There was a feeling that this was because the fostering service wanted to cover its own back and protect its reputation, rather than make decisions that were in the best interest of the fostered child or the fostering family.

Some participants argued that foster carers are treated differently to other childcare professionals when allegations are made.

'If I was a teacher, I would have got support, from HR, employee counselling services, and a manager. I would have also continued to get paid throughout the investigative process. But foster carers get nothing, and we don't have a union. We are treated differently to professionals.'

'Two months before the child made an allegation against me, he accused someone in social services of assaulting him. There was an internal investigation. When the child made an allegation against me, within 10 minutes he was gone. There was a police and section 47 investigation. Teachers and social workers are treated differently.'

'I feel that they call foster carers professionals when it suits them, but at the end of the day we are baby sitters, we are not involved in any meetings and if something goes wrong you are already judged.'

Foster carers who have had such experiences feel a strong sense of injustice. This leads some to consider ceasing fostering following an allegation.

'That's why I am thinking of stopping fostering. I am out in a year.'

However, other foster carers spoke of their continuing commitment to fostering, despite the trauma of facing an allegation.

'You have to remember it's a wonderful job, doing wonderful things with children.'

'I was in care. I was abused in care. I came into fostering to make a difference to children. Through the way the allegations were handled, I feel I was abused by the care system as a foster carer. I still keep going, for the children.'

Many foster carers reported how they now behave and care for fostered children differently, having experienced the allegations process, and in particular how they have become more risk averse.

What support did foster carers receive and what else could have helped?

Most foster carers felt they were not well supported throughout the allegations process.

Of the 12 focus group participants, 11 said they had received either no support or poor support. One foster carer said she had received good support and that her supervising social worker was always available to her.

One foster carer described a situation where she felt she was treated insensitively, but she suggested if there had been a few small changes to the procedures – delaying one meeting and asking professionals entering another meeting to wait elsewhere – it would have been helpful.

'The meeting for part four was at 11am and I was asked to come in at 10am to discuss contact arrangements with the birth family. This was awkward and difficult, because I didn't know if the children would still be with me after the meeting. Also, when the meeting [with the birth family] finished, there were 12 people waiting outside. I knew 11 of them and I knew they were waiting to go in and talk about me. That was insensitive.'

Foster carers were able to identify many forms of help and support which would have helped them during the allegation process had it been available.

Full information at the start of the placement about the background of their fostered child would help foster carers understand them better, and prepare foster carers for possibly challenging behaviour, to be alert to potential risks, to enable them to de-escalate the situation. Several foster carers said they did not know the full history of the child who had made the allegation against them including, in one case, a previous history of allegations.

'We didn't have information before the placement, we did not know that he was classed as 'a runner'. He has been in [several] different placements in [a short period of] years; there have been various allegations and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services involvement.'

Foster carers also need to be better informed about the allegations process and kept up to date with developments.

'One of the first things that is needed is to tell foster carers about the allegations process.'

Most participants in the focus group did not know what to expect when an allegation was made. One, who had received training, said that even this did not prepare her because it was not until an allegation was made that the information became relevant. This appears to suggest that information would be more useful if provided at the time of an allegation, as well as in advance.

It was striking that none of the focus group participants had been offered a policy or procedure document and none had seen The Fostering Network's [Allegations](#) Signpost publication. They were not aware of the All Wales Child Protection Procedures (AWCPP) until they found themselves in the middle of it.

This indicates the need for foster carers to be automatically given information about the allegations investigation procedure, so they know what to expect as soon as an allegation is made. One foster carer suggested this should include information about the investigation process, what questions to ask and foster carers' rights.

Foster carers also pointed out the importance of being kept up to date with information about progress with the investigation, especially given the isolated situation they find themselves in.

'What would have helped is being kept informed and up to date about what was going on, not being excluded. You are very much on your own.'

'If I had had more information during the week, things might have turned out differently.'

Foster carers agreed that the time it took to investigate an allegation varied from one case to another, but that some could be very lengthy. One foster carer said an investigation had taken one and a half years; another was involved in an allegation lasting nine months. They felt that an expected timescale was needed to avoid excessively lengthy processes and that foster carers should be made aware of this.

The financial consequences of an allegation can be severe as the removal of fostered children can lead to a significant loss of income from the allowances, particularly to a household looking after several children and when an investigation takes a long time.

One example of good practice was identified, whereby a fostering service paid foster carers a retainer of £100 per week per child while an allegation was being investigated. Focus group participants agreed a retainer should be standard practice.

Several foster carers emphasised that the child making the allegation needed support too. They pointed out that, in the case of a false allegation, the child needed help to

understand why they did it, and to address underlying issues which might help prevent them from making further false allegations in future.

It was also suggested that fostered children were too easily removed from a placement when they (or someone else) made an allegation. An argument was presented that this was often not in the best interests of the other fostered children involved and that a full assessment of the level of risk involved in maintaining the placement should be undertaken before they were moved.

One foster carer argued that if fostered children were removed from their foster home after an allegation was made, this would negatively affect the trust they had built up in foster carers and the care system, reinforcing challenges that they already faced.

'The children come to you with attachment issues. You have worked on these. The children are then taken away. What is that teaching them?'

There was general agreement among focus group participants that training in safer caring (including information about allegations) should be compulsory. They felt now, that the training available focused too much on statistics. They believed that training should cover:

- Where to go for support and information about the legal rights of the fostering family.
- A clear explanation of the allegations investigation process with timescales.
- How to put together a family safer caring plan.
- How to obtain an advocate.
- How to deal with the emotional and financial consequences of an allegation.

However, we should remember the point made earlier about the limitations of training and that no amount of training can truly prepare someone for the impact of an allegation.

One foster carer said that allegations should be covered during the assessment process for prospective foster carers. She argued that this would be an early opportunity to explain the process and the implications to all those in the foster family facing an allegation. However, she acknowledged the same limitations that other foster carers expressed about training.

'Nobody can prepare you for what it's like when you get an allegation, but this would help.'

She also believed that the reason allegations were not covered fully, either in training or during assessment, was the fear of a negative effect on recruitment at a time when more foster carers are required.

'They shy away from exploring the consequences of allegations when preparing foster carers because they are afraid foster carers will not come through, but they need to be aware.'

Many foster carers said that independent support from an individual would have been, and in some cases was, the most important type of help.

Most participants in the focus group had not been offered independent support, some had not been aware it was available, nor were most participants aware of The Fostering Network Wales' Fosterline Wales telephone advice service.

'As a foster carer, you have no advocate.'

One foster carer had been told about independent support, but their fostering service told him they could not afford it. This prompted a discussion about the availability of independent support and whether it should be an option or provided as mandatory. There was a strong feeling that independent support should be made mandatory to all foster carers facing an allegation and that this should not depend on a fostering service's budget.

Foster carers said that facing an allegation was an emotional experience and that emotional support was needed throughout the process. As well as support from an independent support worker, foster carers mentioned other forms of support which could be useful. Several said they would have welcomed support from a social worker who was not involved in the investigation, but who had a connection with them.

'What would have helped is having someone to talk to from the office, who knew me and could ask "are you OK?" and say, "this is the process, this is what is going to happen".'

'The link worker [supervising social worker] should be allowed to continue to offer support.'

One foster carer's fostering service told her about Fosterline Wales, which she found very helpful.

'They were amazing, they allowed me to talk and get things off my chest. They tried to guide me through the process, they would say "don't panic".'

In some areas, foster carers are trained as mentors and one mentor took part in the consultation. She could see how a mentor could provide very useful support to a foster carer facing an allegation, but as a mentor herself, expressed a concern that she did not feel as fully equipped for the role as she might be and that ongoing training for the peer mentoring role would be particularly important to supporting foster carers facing an allegation.

A foster carer cited one local authority area in Wales that they felt responded well when allegations are made. One reason given for this was that they had a pool of highly

experienced foster carers available to provide support to other foster carers. Another was that they made good use of The Fostering Network Wales, including making referrals for foster carers facing allegations to access The Fostering Network's [independent support service](#).

Finally, some comments made during the focus group discussion suggested that foster carers felt a strong need to be shown trust and respect while an allegation is being investigated, and that doing so might help them significantly. For example:

'[What would help is] not to adopt the policy that a foster carer is guilty until proven innocent.'

'The father of the foster children showed total faith in me; that helped.'

'To reassure you, these things happen, and it's happened to many foster carers. Make us feel this is normal and that we are not the only ones in the world to go through it.'

Case studies

Participants in the focus group shared the story of the allegation they had been involved in, in pairs or groups of three. They were then asked if they wanted to share their story with the full group and five were able to do so within the time available.

The three foster carers who were interviewed on a one-to-one basis provided an account of what had happened in their situation, as did the foster carer who submitted her story by email. Two further case studies were provided by The Fostering Network Wales.

The following nine case studies echo and reflect the key themes and issues that emerged throughout this consultation and provide first-hand examples of the context and consequences of allegations.

Case study 1

I started fostering over 20 years ago and within the first six months an allegation was made.

I had sibling girls. The older girl was quite aggressive, whereas the younger one wasn't.

I entered a room and found the older girl attacking my son. I moved her off him and calmed her, then consoled my son.

Two days later a social worker came and said that a complaint had been made that I had caused bruising. I had been trained [in my professional role at the time] to hold the child by the shoulders at arms-length [in such situations]; this is what I had done.

No police were involved, but there was a case conference.

My explanation was accepted, but it took three months before I was told there would be no further action. During this time, I was worried my own son would be removed. The older girl asked to be removed, but her sister chose to stay, saying that it was typical of her sister.

I had no support at the time. I felt like a pariah. I was advised not to attend training or support groups and I had limited support from my link worker. I felt angry towards the department and the child. I was fearful and worried about the consequences.

Case study 2

I'd had the same children for five years and everything was going well. One of my foster children had special needs and did not get additional support in school. Another of my foster children was receiving one-to-one support, though I did not think they needed it, so I questioned this with the teacher and head teacher.

An allegation was made by the first little boy and there was a child protection meeting within 48 hours: the foster children were removed within four and a half weeks.

I had excellent support from my link worker and ex-link worker.

Nevertheless, the impact was immense and my daughter came back to stay with me. The impact on one foster child was such that [they] lost [their] hair and eye lashes.

Case study 3

I was fostering two children, one teenager and one under 10. Last August my partner and the elder foster child were not getting on. The older child was saying, "I am nearly an adult", and didn't appreciate the boundaries that had to be set. He made lots of little allegations which were either unfounded or withdrawn. Then he made an allegation and did not withdraw it.

The foster son then went missing. The police found him but said that he was safer where he was.

The police said my partner would have to leave the house. We weren't told what the allegation was. After my partner left the foster child returned. This went on for a week and we only found out what the allegation was when the investigation was concluded.

On day three, my partner asked to see me. He said he couldn't believe I had kept the foster child there. It was very difficult for me because I went into fostering to make a difference for children. I initially felt I would not take the foster child back, but I spoke to a psychologist who explained that the foster child didn't take into account the consequences of making the allegation.

The day the investigation was over my partner left...and the relationship was over after 20 years.

I went to the post-allegation review. It was horrendous. I was made to feel the kids would be taken away from me. These kids get into your hearts.

Case study 4

I had two foster children and one of them had special needs. The placement was going well and I was being pushed by the social worker to take them on permanently. I was not prepared for that commitment.

Plans were then made to move the children to another foster home. One boy was emotionally impacted. He said he did not want to go.

The prospective foster carers made promises to them. One foster child became abusive and resistant even though this hadn't been in his nature. He was given a child advocate. He was frightened and did not want to move schools.

The boys got very aggressive one morning and punched me in the hallway. I said I was not putting up with it and told them to get in the car. The child said that he was telling social services and I replied, 'Yeah, yeah...'

I did notify social services of the incident as I was concerned it would escalate. On the way home, he was apologetic in the car. My husband put his hand on the boy's arm and the boy shouted, 'Phone social services, he's got me around the neck.' The child was putting marks on his own neck. I phoned social services straightaway, but they didn't get back to me immediately. The next day a social worker came and told us an allegation had been made.

My partner is so honest and morally upright. He's never been even close to breaking the law. It was nearly the end of his career: depression, guilt, shame and nobody to talk to.

Case study 5

I had been fostering for two and a half years before there was an allegation that my teenage son had raped one of my foster girls. I subsequently found that this was the fourth boy she had accused of rape in two years.

My son was questioned by the police and bailed: he was not allowed around children. Two other foster children were removed, but a teenager I fostered chose to stay and she believed my son.

My son was removed from his school and could no longer attend sessions at a voluntary organisation. Although he was found to be not guilty, it has left him with massive trust issues. I have since refused to foster teenagers. I had threatening phone calls from one teenage girl, 164 in one day. I had no support from the fostering agency.

Case study 6

One male foster carer reported that a teenage girl had made an allegation against him and she was brought back to stay in their home for a month after the allegation. The couple had been fostering for seven years. The allegation was made on the Friday evening and the teenage girl was allowed to go home with them and they had no support at all over the weekend.

When they got in, the foster carers told the girl that she did not have to speak with them; they made her food and said she could stay in her room if she preferred.

Both foster carers felt anxious, as if they were treading on eggshells. The wife felt unable to leave her husband unattended in the room with the foster child and this was a very difficult situation to manage and live with.

It had been a student social worker who had made the decision to allow the girl to go back to the foster carer's home and it was weeks before the situation was discovered and responded to by more senior staff.

Case study 7

I have been a foster carer for four years and, in that time, I have had two allegations made against me. One was from a teenage girl who was very challenging she threatened to thump my own son (who was two years younger) on two occasions.

I had another foster child at the time; he was a lot younger and had special needs. She was very jealous of him. When she left she alleged that I had been slapping him across the face. Because of his needs, his own social worker was visiting monthly, plus he was in weekly therapy. His social worker confirmed that she had no concerns whatsoever.

The teenage girl's social worker also didn't believe her. Yet my agency took months to investigate. The local authority had said they believed the allegation was unfounded earlier in the investigation. However, I was told by my supporting social worker, off the record, that the agency just wouldn't let this drop and he didn't know why.

I had to wait a further three months before going back to panel as they were in the middle of recruiting new members. I had to wait six months in total.

Case study 8

I was driving with the three children in the back of the car. The middle one started screaming. I thought she was trying to take the seat belt off, and then I saw she was trying to squeeze underneath it. I tightened the belt. She calmed down.

On Friday at 6.30pm, two police officers and a social worker came to the house and said they were investigating a section 47 complaint. The girl had gone to school and said she had kicked the baby in the head and I had slapped her leg. The police were happy there were no criminal charges, but they stayed for three hours. The social worker stayed to decide whether they needed to remove the children.

My manager had an amazing approach. He had a part four done within one week, but while this was going ahead no-one from social services contacted me. I was in a mess and in trauma.

They said the allegation had not been substantiated and the children would not be removed.

But since that day, my attitude to social services has dramatically changed, because if the investigation had carried on it would have been on my criminal record and I wouldn't even be able to get work in a shop.

I considered whether to give up.

Case study 9

Our foster child was a young man who had made many allegations against us and many other people. My problem was getting social services to take it seriously, no matter how many allegations he had made previously.

Quite a few times he would tell me he was going to make an allegation against me, so I would phone and email the school and social services, and several times social services didn't reply.

He made allegations against someone outside the family. I knew he was lying. I said, "you need to calm down". When he came home he admitted he had lied because he knew he would get attention at school.

On another occasion he said teachers had been throwing him around. I knew that was not true. I kept flagging up issues like this, but I was point blank ignored by social services.

After the allegation against someone outside the family, I demanded a meeting. My foster son and his social workers came to my house. I demanded something be put in place mainly to protect my foster son (who was a young adult). In the end they put a

robust risk assessment in place. The purpose was to stop him crying wolf, but protect him at the same time, in case an allegation was genuine. Three or four people who knew him would ask him in different ways if the allegation was true.

Nothing happened (the agreed process does not appear to have been actually implemented).

It made me think, what happens if allegations against foster carers are not true. I now want to see all my records to see what has been written about me.

The school did get back to me. I am grateful for that. They will challenge what he says. Social services never replied at all, they did not even acknowledge me. Ideally, they would have done work with him to understand the severity of his problem (the number and frequency of allegations). Acknowledgement would have been the minimum.

The headmaster did talk to him about the consequences of his allegations and that was good. You could see the light dawning on him, but that was only one person and the headmaster should have been backed up.

I did go through CAMHS but the person I dealt with had no understanding of the severity of the problem.

He is now in a residential home.

Conclusions and recommendations

Facing an allegation of abuse or neglect is something that some foster carers will, unfortunately, experience during their fostering career. This is inevitably a distressing time for everyone involved. Being subject to an allegation and its investigation can often have serious and devastating consequences for foster carers, their families and their future career in fostering. The fostered children involved can also suffer unnecessary disruption to their placements and subsequent negative effects on their wellbeing.

This consultation indicates that practical steps should be taken to mitigate the impact, better publicise the support which is available and increase support for foster carers. The report demonstrates that *how* this process is managed is a significant factor in ensuring the right outcome for both fostered children and fostering families.

Fostering services need to have clear, transparent processes for dealing with allegations against foster carers, ensuring that their foster carers are aware of the process. They must treat their foster carers fairly and honestly – in line with the procedures set out – and give them appropriate support throughout the process of any investigation. Managing the process effectively, sensitively and in a timely manner is crucial.

Foster carers should be communicated with clearly and regularly and be given the same support that would be afforded their colleagues in the social work and fostering teams.

As the ones who spend the most time with their fostered children, foster carers must be considered on an equal footing with their colleagues in the team around the child, even in times of uncertainty. This would be an important step towards recognising the status of foster carers as the professionals that they are and reducing the traumatising and long-term impact of an allegation upon all involved.

Most foster carers accept that allegations are regrettably an occupational risk – and, of course, it is vitally important that serious allegations are investigated and that children are listened to. However, the lengthy period of uncertainty, and lack of support that many foster carers experience is something that can be easily avoided to enable them to feel that they remain a true part of the team around the child and are fully supported.

This report highlights the need for substantial improvement in practice. Denying this support would not happen to any other child care professional and that it continues to be denied to foster carers reflects a lack of understanding and acceptance of the place of foster carers as co-professionals in the team around the child.

Only by addressing the issues which matter to foster carers, as outlined in this report, will it be possible to encourage greater numbers of people to take up and remain in fostering – leading to improved outcomes and better life chances for looked after children and young people.

The following conclusions and recommendations aim to mitigate these consequences.

The impact of allegations on fostering families and foster care in Wales

• Impact on foster carers' health and wellbeing

As an allegation and the subsequent investigation unfold, foster carers and their families can experience negative impacts on their physical health and emotional wellbeing. The consultation and other studies refer to feelings of guilt, shame, humiliation, loss, anger, isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness and loss of confidence.

Stress related ill-health can occur, such as hair loss, sleeplessness or weight loss. For some people, the stress associated with the allegations process significantly accumulates and can contribute to the development of serious illness.

• Financial impact on foster carers

Many foster carers suffer a loss of income during the investigation as some fostering services suspend their fees and allowances until the outcome of the allegations process which can take a significant amount of time to conclude. Some foster carers who rely on their fostering income suffer severe financial hardship, in some cases extreme, to the point of losing their home.

• Impact on foster carers' families and relationships

An allegation can cause strain in many relationships in foster carers' lives – with their partners, their families and the other professionals that they work with.

The consultation shows that an allegation can strain the relationship between partners who foster and, in some cases, destroy it. Foster carers' children can be affected by the distressing impact of an allegation, as well as having to take part in interviews by social services staff or the police. The relationship between a foster carer and their supervising social worker is often impaired and sometimes trust is broken completely.

• The impact upon fostering in Wales

The highly distressing impact of an allegation makes foster carers anxious to ensure that it does not happen again. Most foster carers will feel vulnerable to further allegations and some will even submit their resignation. At a time of shortages of foster carers, this should be avoided where possible.

Policy and practice recommendations

- 1. Foster carers must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe.**

It is essential that at the start of a placement, and throughout the placement, that foster carers are given all the information they need. This will enable foster carers to better understand the child, in order to devise a suitable family safer caring plan to accompany the child's care and support plan.

- 2. The decision to initiate the allegations investigation process should be made by a senior social work social work manager and clearly documented.**

For no other child care profession would the threshold to trigger an investigation be so low, or the support given to those being investigated be so minimal.

The decision to initiate an investigation following an allegation made against a foster carer or member of their family should be made by a senior manager in children's social work and the reason for doing so should be clearly documented.

The investigation process should be carried out in accordance with the guidance in the All Wales Child Protection Procedures 2008.

- 3. A risk assessment should be carried out before removing children from fostering placements.**

It is right that children should be listened to and appropriately safeguarded. It is also accepted by foster carers that the child welfare should always be regarded as paramount. However, equally important is the necessity for foster carers to have their voice heard, and the context within which allegations take place taken into account, including the child's history and any record of previous allegations, when determining an appropriate response.

Fostered children are frequently removed from their foster home immediately following an allegation. It is not uncommon for this to happen directly from school, which means they have no further contact with their foster family and are even prevented from saying goodbye. Important information about the children and how they are best cared for are rarely passed on to the new placement.

Experiencing such a sudden change may exacerbate any existing problems that the fostered children have and lead some fostered children to experience unnecessary trauma, and lose trust in the care system completely.

The foster family too often suffer shock and trauma from the sudden removal of the fostered child and the ending of the placement.

It is very rare that a thorough, robust and measured risk assessment is undertaken to assess whether it is 'safe enough' for the child to remain with the foster carers during the allegation investigation.

On many occasions, the foster carers are not consulted about their opinions regarding whether the child should return.

Risk assessments should be taken as a very first step in informing decisions as to whether the fostering placement should continue with the foster carer.

Other than in exceptional circumstances, a risk assessment of the impact of removal on the child and the foster carers should be carried out as standard before a child is removed from a placement. This would allow more children to remain in the placement and often reduces the impact of an allegation on everyone involved.

4. Foster carers should be prepared for allegations through the assessment process and post-approval training.

Finding out that an allegation has been made against them will often be a sudden shock for many foster carers.

Improved information about the allegations process and where to find support in the event of an allegation being made should be provided during pre-approval assessment and as part of post-approval training for foster carers.

5. Safer caring should be built in to fostering

To minimise the risk of unfounded allegations occurring, foster carers should be supported and trained to practise safer caring – the approach to foster care that balances fostered children's rights to live normal lives with the need to keep them as safe as possible.

All fostering families should have a safer caring plan which is revisited at each looked after child review.

6. Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.

Often we hear from foster carers that they are not given adequate information or supported through the investigation process. This can create uncertainty and stress.

Foster carers should be provided with detailed information about the allegations investigation process immediately after an allegation is made as per the All Wales Child Protection Procedures.

7. 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.

Investigations into allegations can continue for an unnecessarily long time. Some may be concluded within weeks, but at the other end of the spectrum others take over a year and sometimes longer.

The impact of an allegation on a fostering family is often further exacerbated by these unexplained, often significant delays in the investigation.

A framework with milestones should be established for each investigation and the foster carers made aware of this. Foster carers should be regularly updated about progress from the local authority safeguarding manager.

This would help reduce foster carers' anxiety and help avoid any breakdowns in relationships between the foster carers and the other authorities involved.

8. Foster carers' records should be based on factual evidence and not opinion

Even if an allegation is unfounded, some foster carers feel that their reputation will never entirely be redeemed because the allegation remains on their record indefinitely, even if the outcome is no further action.

Some feel that this will affect not only their future career as foster carers but other employment prospects outside fostering.

Detailed recommendations about types of support that could be offered

Fostering services should note current examples of best practice in support provision and, where necessary, commence a programme of improvements, including the provision of independent support services.

• The role of family and friends

Foster carers are often instructed not to speak to anyone, including their family and friends, while an investigation into an allegation is taking place. This cuts them off from key sources of support they would usually turn to in a crisis. Fostering services should relax their practice to conform to current guidance, so that foster carers are able to receive support from family and friends.

• One-to-one support

The consultation shows that one-to-one support for foster carers offered by an independent support service, such as that provided by The Fostering Network Wales, during the allegations process, is considered to be vital and effective.

Independent support can be of great help and benefit to foster carers in the course of an investigation, as it offers:

- Information and advice about the process of enquiries and the rights and responsibilities of all parties.
- Emotional support for foster carers and their families.
- Mediation – the process of an investigation can put enormous strain on the relationship between foster carers and their fostering service.
- Advocacy – some foster carers may wish their independent support worker to advocate on their behalf, for example, in meetings.

However, foster carers are not always made aware of this right to independent support and budgetary constraints may lead to it not being offered by some fostering services.

Additional research is needed to find out what barriers may prevent foster carers accessing support services, and identify ways of making advice and mediation services, and independent support more widely available.

Foster carers should also have access to stress counselling. For example, foster carer members of The Fostering Network can access a confidential [stress counselling service](#).

- **Peer mentoring**

The consultation shows that peer mentoring or support from experienced foster carers was felt to be very effective, but some mentors feel they lack sufficient training and support themselves.

Appropriate training should be provided to existing mentors and further efforts should be made to recruit additional mentors. Support and guidance should be available to mentors once they begin to support foster carers facing allegations.

- **Telephone support**

Telephone support was also found to be helpful, but many foster carers are not aware this is available.

The existing telephone support services, such as [Fosterline Wales](#) should be promoted more widely and be made more easily accessible. For example, one fostering support organisation displays their telephone support facility prominently on the home page of their website. This makes it easy for someone visiting the site who may be feeling stressed and anxious to access the helpline.

- **Financial support**

Fostering services do not always make it clear to their foster carers what financial support there will be to help them following an allegation and provision is also inconsistent across different fostering services.

To have a reduced income or even no income at all for the duration of an investigation can be devastating for a family which often has no other source of income, in some extreme cases foster carers have lost their home.

Foster carers facing an allegation need a guaranteed minimum and ongoing source of income. Providing foster carers with a retainer, as some fostering services do, would be one way of providing this. Again, a clear timeframe for the investigation could limit the financial impact.

- **Support for the child making the allegation**

The child making an allegation needs to be offered support, especially if they have to undergo a sudden placement move, and to help address underlying issues if they have made a false allegation.

- **Support for foster carers' own children and other children in the household**

Discussions should be held with the foster carers about whether support is necessary for their own children and other children in the household.

The Fostering Network also notes that additional research should be undertaken focussing the experience of birth children involved in an allegation process.

Next steps

The Fostering Network is committed to exploring the areas raised and continuing to work with the Welsh Government alongside our foster carer and fostering service members, to identify ways to improve the approach and management of allegations.

There is an urgent need for change in Wales. The Fostering Network Wales would welcome further dialogue with Welsh Government on the issues raised in this consultation with foster carers. The Fostering Network Wales can offer bespoke and responsive consultancy-based services and interventions to support the Welsh Government to work towards an improved approach to managing allegations against foster carers.

We propose that further work is undertaken to:

- Disseminate the findings of this report to foster carers, policy makers, social work practitioners, health service practitioners, youth justice practitioners and to bring foster carers, social care, health and education professionals together to discuss the issues.
- Continue to develop The Fostering Network Wales' resource base, including Fosterline Wales and the development of foster carer advice and mediation services. Such steps would have a positive effect on the retention of foster carers.
- Undertake evaluation and research of the provision of independent support services for foster carers.
- Include the theme of allegations and safer caring on the National Fostering Framework post-approval training for foster carers, including consideration that such training should be mandatory within six months of approval and refreshed annually, to ensure that foster carers are enabled to safeguard fostered children and minimise the possibility of allegations being made.
- Embed findings and practice development into the National Fostering Framework work streams including training, support and the provision of foster carers' fees and allowances.
- Undertake a review of Section 4.3.2 in the AWCPP 2008 as it is no longer fit for purpose.
- Review and update the Welsh Government Allegations Toolkit (2011), to emphasise the need to provide training and independent support for foster carers and is compatible with the National Safeguarding Procedures.

The Fostering Network's allegations initiative

In July 2018, The Fostering Network launched a [new initiative across the UK](#), to explore the area of allegations and identify what practical support can be put in place to help services with the effective management of allegations and also give foster carers the level of confidence they need to do their job effectively.

The Fostering Network believes that it is best placed to bring the fostering community together, using our UK-wide network, to identify current practice, provide guidance and offer support to foster carers across the UK, ensuring the best possible outcomes for all young people and foster carers at what is a challenging and sensitive time.

The aims of this initiative are to improve standards of management and support during allegations. We will do this by collecting data, identifying good practice and providing practical support and guidance to the fostering community across the UK.

For further information please email maria.boffey@fostering.net

References

Biehal, N., Parry, E. (2010) [Maltreatment and Allegations of Maltreatment in Foster Care. A Review of the Evidence](#), Working paper No. WP2437. The University of York Social Policy Research Unit and The Fostering Network.

Dyson, P., Seba, J. (2014) [Pilot Study into the Impact of Allegations Made Against Foster Carers Who Accessed FISS or FosterTalk Services](#). Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and education, Foster Carers Independent Support Service, and Foster Talk.

Richards, Alun, *Emerging themes from Fosterline Wales Advice Line and the Practice and Independent Support Teams in Wales* (2018), unpublished paper, The Fostering Network Wales.

Supporting resources from The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network offers a wide range of resources, helplines, advice and mediation services, and training to help foster carers and their families if an allegation is made. See The Fostering Network's website [here](#) for an overview.

Independent support services

Independent support can be vital for foster carers in times of allegations or other disputes they may be involved in. The Fostering Network can provide independent support to foster carers via their fostering service through a variety of routes, including our unique and long-established advice and mediation service in England, and independent support in England and Wales.

Independent support services can be provided to foster carers in a variety of ways. A foster carer cannot get independent support from us directly. They must contact their fostering service to see if they have an advice and mediation contract with us to provide this support. If that is not the case, a foster carer can always ask them to spot purchase independent support their behalf.

Signposts in Fostering: [Allegations](#)

The Fostering Network has produced a guide designed to help foster carers understand what is likely to happen if an allegation is made against them or a member of their family. It contains:

- an explanation of what allegations are and why they are made
- suggestions of good practice to minimise the risk of an allegation
- advice about what to do if an allegation is made
- advice on how to seek legal support in the event of an allegation
- information on what might happen once an allegation has been made
- sources of further assistance and independent support.

Publications and training

The publication [Safer Caring: A New Approach](#) covers some of the wider issues and suggests ways of thinking about the principles of safeguarding children and young people while simultaneously protecting yourselves and your families from allegations and complaints.

The Fostering Network can also provide a training course on managing allegations, tailored to meet your fostering service's needs. Contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji, via sarah.mobedji@fostering.net for more information.

The Fosterline Wales advice line

Our [member helplines](#) provide confidential, independent and impartial advice for foster carers in the UK. Fosterline Wales offers a bilingual service and is available on 0800 316 7664. Fosterline Wales has also produced a factsheet about allegations, which you can see [here](#).

Legal protection insurance

The Fostering Network provides members with access to a legal protection insurance scheme. There is also [retired foster carer membership](#) insurance to cover members who are no longer fostering. Foster carer members of The Fostering Network can access our 24-hour legal helpline for expert advice on allegations and help with any legal queries on 0345 013 5004.

Appendix

Focus group and interview topic guide

A consultation with foster carers on allegations in foster care

Friday 8 June 2018 from 11am – 1pm at YHA Cardiff, East Tyndall Street, Cardiff, CF10 4BB.

Programme

1. Introductions and welcome

2. **Today:** the purpose of today, ground rules, confidentiality and the process of the discussion.

3. **What happened?** Take it in turns, around the table, to outline briefly the allegations participants have been involved in.

4. **How prepared were you** to deal with an allegation?

5. What was the **emotional impact** on you of the allegation?

6. What was the **impact on your health and wellbeing?**

7. What was the **impact on your family?**

8. What was the **impact on your relationships** with others (including external agencies, such as your foster care provider and social services)?

9. **What support did you receive, and what else could have helped?**

10. **Is there anything else at all you want to tell us?**

The next steps, followed by lunch.

Thank you very much for taking part. If you have any further questions following the event please call 029 2044 0940.

The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. By working with foster families, and the services that support them, we help everyone who is fostered to achieve the very best they can.

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