Independent Care Review

Submission from The Fostering Network, January 2018

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. In Scotland, we are proud to have 100 per cent organisational membership of local authorities and independent voluntary fostering providers and over 4,200 foster care households (94 per cent of fostering households) in membership. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Submission to the Independent Care Review in Scotland

1. The Fostering Network welcomes the Independent Care Review and the extensive engagement we have had with the review team throughout the first stage of the review. We welcome the consultative and inclusive approach the review team have taken to gathering the views of young people, foster carers and other key stakeholders. The Fostering Network has already submitted information to the review but we felt it would be helpful to submit evidence that pulls together the key issues in fostering and our recommendations for change. This submission is based upon our extensive experience and research, most notably the findings of our State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016[1] which was published last 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 (359 in Scotland) responses from foster carers which has given us a unique insight into the issues they currently face. All results from State of the Nation quoted in this paper are based on our responses from Scotland. We would be happy to expand on any of the points highlighted in our response.

2. 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.

Introductory points

3. 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 and national government, by regulators, and by many others in wider society. In November 2015 University of Oxford

---

[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

research[2] revealed that educational outcomes improve for fostered children compared with those who are in need and stay living with families experiencing extreme difficulties and hardship. Various research by Sinclair, Schofield[3] and others also shows the positive impact of the care system on many young people who, for whatever reason, are not able to remain with their birth families.

4. 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.

5. 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. We would like to see the independent care review 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.

6. The legislative framework, policies and structure of local service delivery teams can create a barrier to providing a smooth continuum of care and support for young people up to the age of 26 years. Continuing care aims to support the journey from child to adulthood, however, it is open to interpretation and therefore lacks consistency across Scotland.

Submission layout

7. 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
   * **continuing care** issues.

---

[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

8. 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 review process.

Part one: Foster care system

9. In Scotland there were 5,435 children living with foster families on 31 December 2016. This is three-quarters (75%) of 7,168 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.

10. It is not just the 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.

11. 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.

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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.

Assessment of children and young people's needs

15. 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. This is a point that has been clearly articulated by our young champions who speak about the benefits to the child or young person of getting the right placement first time.

16. 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.

17. 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 experienced, abuse and neglect before coming into the care system.

18. 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.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: 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 independent voluntary providers to achieve this. 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, such as recruitment campaigns.

Recruitment and managing vacancies

19. 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 and independent voluntary fostering providers 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 the children currently needing placements, or to whether other carers already exist who could provide the necessary placements.

20. 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 independent voluntary fostering providers. Independent voluntary fostering providers can recruit as many foster carers as they like. Therefore, if no local authorities choose to use their services, or if these carers do not provide the skillsets or homes required by the fostering service, no children will be placed with them.

21. 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 independent voluntary fostering providers 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 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.

22. In fact, fostering services sometimes operate in competition with each other when recruiting 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 people who just want to become foster carers but do not know which service to choose.

23. 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 and large sibling groups. 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. The Fostering Network previously piloted a joint recruitment project, funded by the Scottish Government. The successful pilot focused on Edinburgh City Council, Scottish Borders, E Lothian and Midlothian Councils. The learning from this pilot highlighted the success of having a lead agency facilitate the joint recruitment across the four local authorities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 2: 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 independent voluntary fostering providers 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 do not currently need to contact an alternative fostering service which does need these skills.

Recommendation 3: 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. Some of this information is gathered in the annual returns to the Care Inspectorate.

Recommendation 4: Closer joint working protocols should be encouraged between local authorities and independent voluntary fostering providers.

Recommendation 5: An increase in regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment should be explored, to increase effectiveness and reduce duplication

Recommendation 6: 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 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.

Recommendation 7: 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.

Commissioning

24. The Fostering Network believes foster care commissioning should be focused on children's needs and be outcome rather than cost based. We believe it is essential that a comprehensive needs analysis of the local looked after children population must drive any commissioning models and continuing care needs to be embedded into the commissioning contract.

Recommendations

Recommendation 8: Foster care commissioning should sit within local authority children's services and not the finance/business division of the local authority. This would re-focus commissioning on children rather than budgets and bring the decisions closer to practise and those who hold a detailed knowledge of fostering.

Recommendation 9: The commissioning framework for fostering needs to link to outcomes for children and young people rather than cost.

Permanent fostering

25. The key issue for permanent fostering is early decisions not being taken when the child is first placed which leads to placement drift and children staying with foster carers for years by accident rather than by 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.

Part two: Foster care workforce

26. Currently, foster carers have an ambiguous employment status. Most foster carers are considered self-employed for taxation purposes but foster carers are not encouraged to work for more than one fostering service and their approval is not transferable. 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.

27. 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 and permanent foster 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.

Recommendations

Recommendation 10: The Fostering Network believes 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.**

Recommendation 11: The Scottish Government should introduce a statutory minimum foster care allowance.

Part of the team

28. 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, 25 per cent of foster carers felt that children's social workers do not treat them as equals.

29. 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.

30. 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.

31. 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.

32. 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, 34 per cent of short-term placement carers felt that they were only allowed to make appropriate decisions some of the time, rarely or never.

33. Another long-standing issue is that of information sharing: in our State of the Nation survey, 25 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.

34. 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

Recommendation 12: Foster carers must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions. The Scottish Government guidance on decision making needs to be finalised, published, promoted and implemented. Currently, the guidance on decision making for foster carers on the Scottish Government website, which was produced more than two years ago following extensive consultation with foster carers, is in draft form. It is not acceptable to have draft guidance as the final product. It is also concerning that the Scottish Government is now advising foster carers to use this draft guidance if they need a steer on decision making when this guidance has no formal or legal status. Additionally, 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.

Recommendation 13: 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.

Recommendation 14: 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 permanent placements.

Recommendation 15: We recommend all foster care reviews are independently chaired.

Recommendation 16: 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.

Recommendation 17: Foster carers should be provided with independent support through the allegation process.

Support

35. 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.

36. 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.

37. 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 survey[4].

Recommendations

Recommendation 18: 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.

Recommendation 19: All fostering services should provide a dedicated full-time support service for foster carers and **ensure access to respite/babysitting provision** for all foster carers. Unlike day-to-day family life, foster carers often need the permission of their fostering service before asking a friend or family member to babysit, or for permission for a child they are caring for to stay overnight with a family friend or relative. Due to issues of confidentiality, foster carers are often unable to share information about a child with a family friend or relative, restricting further the pool of 'approved' babysitters/respite carers. In addition we are aware that while foster carers are covered by legal protection insurance, currently this is not extended to the wider network of support unless the person is an approved foster carer.

---

[4] 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

Recommendation 20: Peer support opportunities should be enabled and promoted at a local level. Evidence from our Big Lottery funded Fostering Community Champions project in Scotland suggests that foster carers across Scotland value not just local peer support, but a 'listening ear' often by phone, of another carer who has faced a similar situation. For example, when dealing with an allegation, supporting a child onto an adoptive placement, advocating for more school support and so on, having another carer to bounce off has led to feedback such as 'I was ready to give up but this advice was invaluable and reminded me why I am a foster carer in the first place'.

Status and portability

38. 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 foster carers to get 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.

39. 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 Scotland, 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.

40. We believe that an immediate improvement could be made by the introduction of a national register, a centrally held register of approved foster carers across Scotland. A national register would serve a number of purposes 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;
- 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

Recommendation 21: There should be a national register of foster carers in Scotland.

Recommendation 22: 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.

Training

41. 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. The recently published Learning and Development Standard for Foster Care has yet to be implemented and The Fostering Network is concerned that no resource has been allocated to assist fostering services to ensure the development and delivery of the training and support required to ensure the standards are met.

42. 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.

43. 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, experience, family circumstances and where they themselves feel most committed.

44. 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 birth families, education and health professionals, corporate parents and commissioners.

Recommendations

Recommendation 23: The learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training. Within this national standard 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.

Recommendation 24: 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. The young champions group have been very effective in delivering training on fostering to different professional groups.

Part three: Outcomes for children and young people

Relationships

45. It is well evidenced that those children who lack stability while in care have poorer outcomes[5]. 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.

46. 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 2015[6] 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.

Recommendations

Recommendation 25: 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 home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process

Recommendation 26: How children in care's relationships are being built and supported should be considered as part of Care Inspectorate inspection process.

Improving outcomes through innovation

47. 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 Fostering Links, Mockingbird, Head, Heart, Hands, Fostering Community Champions, Fostering Achievement, Step Up Step Down 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.

48. The Fostering Network will continue to deliver the Mockingbird programme in England and plans to extend it further, 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

---

[5] Data Pack Improving Permanence for Looked after Children, Department for Education (2013)
[6] Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On. The Fostering Network (2016).

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.

49. 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.

50. The Step Up, Step Down programme operates in Northern Ireland and has also been successfully used in England and Wales. The programme is based on the support care fostering model and uses highly trained and experienced foster carers to provide time limited, preventative support care to families. The foster carer role is broadened and expanded to enable the foster carers to work intensively alongside birth families to build their skills, capacity and networks. The programme gives parents the support of a foster carer who can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children. If the family experience a crisis situation, the child can stay with a foster carer for a short period of time, rather than being placed with strangers.

51. 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

Recommendation 27: Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown, such as the Mockingbird Family Model and Fostering Community Champions should be further explored and invested in.

Involvement of young people in their care

52. 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.

53. The Fostering Network's Big Lottery funded Champions project is an excellent example of how young people in foster care and the sons and daughters of foster carers have come together to share ideas and experiences, develop their confidence and create resources for the wider fostering community. In addition, their presentations to conferences and working groups across the sector, has enabled their voices to contribute to policy and practice development.

54. 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

Recommendation 28: Local authorities should ensure that they have in place mechanisms for listening to the voices of their fostered children, whether they live with local authority carers or are placed with an independent voluntary fostering provider.

Part four: Continuing Care

55. The results from our 2016 State of the Nation survey in Scotland and from calls to our helpline for foster carers, Fosterline Scotland, have shown the following themes emerging in relation to continuing care:

56. There is a lack of guidance and clarity for foster carers and young people, for example in areas such as:
    - The frequency of support and visits for young people
    - The role of the foster carer, for example is their status 'foster carer' or 'continuing carer'?
    - Expectations – training, support, support groups, visits and assessment and review.

57. Continuing care is not always being offered as an option when young people become eligible. Instead, for example, local authorities are trying to persuade carers to become supported lodgings carers without fully explaining the implications.

58. The continuing care allowance and/or fee is not known to the foster carer, and/or local authorities are paying the same rate as for supported lodgings.

59. Foster carers are being told that they could be deregistered if they do not offer continuing care even when the foster carer has stated that they are not able to look after young people post 18.

60. Foster carers are being told they must not ask about the financial package associated with continuing care.

61. There is not sufficient planning for continuing care arrangements prior to the young person's 16th/18th birthday.

Recommendations

Recommendation 29: The Scottish Government should ensure that continuing care is properly costed and then fully funded. In addition there should be monitoring of implementation of the policy to ensure practice is in line with national requirements and to share learning from best practice models.

Recommendation 30: Continuing care arrangements must be introduced as an option in the care planning process as early as possible and should be raised with prospective foster carers during the assessment process.

Recommendation 31: Continuing care minimum allowances for foster carers should be introduced across Scotland, with such an allowance being sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person. All foster carers supporting continuing care placements should be paid a fee in recognition of their time, skills and expertise.