



Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales

**- a review of the first year of the Welsh Government's looked after
children's Education Strategy**

EVERY CHILD • EVERY CARER • EVERY DAY

1 Caspian Point, Pierhead Street, Cardiff Bay, CF10 4DQ
t 029 2044 0940 e wales@fostering.net www.fostering.net

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About the authors

Maria Boffey is the Business and Community Development Manager for The Fostering Network Wales, bringing a wealth of experience across fostering, and both young people and foster carer engagement.

Since joining the Fostering Network in 2002, she has developed, managed and delivered many programmes, training courses, workshops, consultations and events for children, young people and adults. She is the editor of The Fostering Network Wales' highly acclaimed young people's magazine *Thrive*, as well as co-author of *Men Who Care: experiences and reflections of male foster carers*. She has written several guides, including *Don't You Forget About Me: A guide to developing a peer support group for the sons and daughters of foster carers* and *Men Are Good Foster Carers Too: Supporting male foster carers and inspiring confidence*. She co-authored the book *Building Relationships Through Storytelling* with Dr. Steve Killick. Maria also co-authored the chapter *Safer Caring in a Digital World in Safer Caring: A new approach* (Slade, 2012) with Dr Sangeet Bhullar. She is the author of *Fostering in a Digital world* (2013).

Maria was also a key contributor to *The Skills to Foster™* training programme focusing on the practical, day-to-day skills that all foster carers need. Maria was also a key contributor to 'When I'm Ready' development and was a member of the Welsh Government monitoring group. She is part of the National Fostering Framework Strategic Technical Group.

Maria currently manages the Fostering Excellence programme and has written a variety of key education documents for foster carers, including the recent *A Foster Carers' Guide to Education*, published by The Fostering Network.

Alain Thomas is the principal consultant at Alain Thomas Consultancy which was established to provide support to organisations involved in community development and social welfare. Alain delivers research, evaluation, organisational development and training services to public and third sector organisations in Wales, other parts of Europe and the developing world. As an associate of The Fostering Network, he has facilitated numerous fostering focus groups to review and strategic plan and evaluate fostering initiatives.

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Executive summary

Background

The findings of this consultation and subsequent report are based upon two focus groups held with foster carers (one in North Wales and one in South Wales), and a workshop with foster carers who are members of The Fostering Network Wales national foster carer advisory group. A total of 28 foster carers were involved in the consultations which took place between November 2016 and February 2017.

The report sets out the response of foster carers to a Welsh Government action plan, aiming to enable looked after children to succeed in education. The action plan is itself a response by Welsh Government to its earlier consultation with foster carers, carried out by the Fostering Network during 2015-16.

www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/educationreport.pdf

The Welsh Government action plan was published in January 2016 and it is evident there has been very little time for outcomes to manifest themselves. It is encouraging, though, that participants were able to identify some early positive changes which they attributed to direct action by the Welsh Government.

The content of the action plan was generally welcomed by foster carers. However, they expressed concerns about issues they had raised during the previous consultation which they felt had not been translated directly into action points by Welsh Government into its strategy.

The Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG)

The use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) generated a strong response. Foster carers welcomed the doubling of the grant for certain age groups and accepted that there were benefits to using most of the grant to benefit all eligible children.

However, they had some major concerns. They strongly believed that looked after children experience different needs to other children and that an element of the grant should be allocated to respond to the needs of individual looked after children.

They also strongly believed that the use of the PDG should be more transparent and said it was essential to evidence that the grant was being used for its intended purpose and not being absorbed into mainstream provision in schools.

Foster carers broadly welcomed the guidance provided by Welsh Government about how the PDG should be used. However, they said not all foster carers, nor all schools, were aware of these guidelines and that more active dissemination of this information was very much needed.

Foster carers wanted to be more involved in decisions about how the grant should be used in relation to their foster children.

Foster carers also said they should be involved in their foster children's personal education plans. Current practice was inconsistent across Wales and that this should be addressed.

Foster carers welcomed the actions taken by Welsh Government to identify and promote good practice, including *A Foster Carer's Guide to Education in Wales* and the *Making it Happen* magazine both published by The Fostering Network. www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/education.

They also welcomed the new Welsh Government grant funded Fostering Wellbeing programme recently awarded to The Fostering Network Wales. Fostering Wellbeing is a programme which has been funded by Welsh Government and will be delivered by The Fostering Network here in Wales during 2017-19. The programme combines social pedagogy principles and learning from The Head, Heart, Hands programme with core elements of education focused activities from London Fostering Achievement.

Support

Foster carers asked for more support to be provided in general to respond to the particular needs of looked after children.

They expressed concerns about inconsistent practice over exclusion from school and that exclusion practices should be standardised.

Further concerns were voiced that continuity of support was broken when the child moved from one local authority area to another. More co-ordination was needed between local authorities and independent fostering providers (IFP's).

Foster carers strongly believed that support for looked after children with mental health issues is extremely inadequate at present.

Learning and development

All the proposals regarding learning and development were warmly welcomed by foster carers, including:

- the proposed workshops to gather best practice and inform a new toolkit and online community of practice
- the rolling out of attachment friendly school training
- the new guidance for designated lead members of staff and school governing bodies; the proposed mapping exercise
- the additional training modules for staff with responsibility for young people
- the masterclasses for foster carers, designated teachers and LACE co-ordinators.

However, foster carers strongly believed that the new training being provided post PGCE should be compulsory for teachers with particular responsibilities for looked

after children, and that all teachers should receive at least some form of training relating to looked after children. It was particularly important to support and incentivise teaching assistants to attend training because at present they were unlikely to do so.

Serious concerns were expressed that most foster carers are not treated in the same way as children's birth parents by most schools. This was an important barrier to their involvement in their foster children's education, which should be removed.

Hopes and expectations

The Welsh Government's proposed actions to raise expectations were generally welcomed by foster carers, including:

- the work to follow up the recommendations in the Estyn thematic review
- the proposed promotional drive aimed at elected members
- the guidance for designated lead members of staff and governing bodies.

Foster carer involvement in schools

Foster carers strongly voiced that they would like to be registered with Social Care Wales. Such registration would help provide them with more of a professional status.

However, foster carers had made four further suggestions during the previous consultation to increase their involvement in schools and they were very concerned these had not been addressed:

- They had asked in general that their knowledge of the children they foster should be put to better use.
- They believed they should be involved in deciding how to use the PDG in relation to their child.
- They suggested that the use of the PDG should be linked to the personal education plan to create a single coherent process.
- They said that they should be included as equal professionals in meetings which influence their child's education.

School governors

The proposals for a governor to represent the interests of looked after children on school governing bodies was welcomed as long as steps were taken to ensure a clear and consistent approach across all of Wales.

The relationship between social workers and foster carers

Foster carers felt that improved relationships with social workers would benefit looked after children and they re-iterated their view that more activities, such as joint training, should be organised to bring foster carers and social workers together.

Stability

Foster carers welcomed the recognition by Welsh Government of the impact of instability, but they had yet to see any changes in practice which would reflect a new commitment to improving stability.

Additional issues

At present in Wales, the Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO*) is always a qualified teacher, who for their own professional development will ensure they participate in further training for the role.

Foster carers believed that SENCOs should be qualified and experienced persons in the field of special needs.

They also raised concerns about looked after children reviews being held without the child being present and at times when the child was unlikely to be adequately represented.

* Following recent legislation, SENCOs will soon become known as Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Co-ordinators

1 Introduction

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.

The Fostering Network was established in 1974 and is the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in fostering, bringing together all those who provide, plan and deliver foster care.

Our UK membership includes almost all local authorities and registered providers of foster care. We have a strong membership base in Wales with over 5,400 foster carers, all local authorities fostering services and the majority of independent fostering agencies.

The Fostering Network is the leading charity in Wales representing the voice of foster carers, their families, looked after children and care leavers. In Wales, we have a strong track record of delivering real improvements for looked after children and those who care for them.

All of our work is designed to improve the lives of children and young people in foster care. We advocate strongly for improved support for children and young people in care, specifically to support their emotional wellbeing, recognising their complex and difficult backgrounds. We provide an extensive range of publications, training, information and advice on all fostering issues. We work with our members to implement good practice, informed by our research and experience, to ensure foster care is improved for children. We campaign to improve the support that foster carers receive and work with fostering services to address the shortage of foster carers. We also ensure that the voices of fostered children are heard at the heart of the foster care system.

Our staff includes foster carers, registered social workers and other experts from across the spectrum of foster care, including those that have been fostered themselves. Together we have many years' experience and unrivalled expertise. That is why we are the voice of foster care.

In terms of organisational expertise, user consultation consistently shows our support, advice and training are highly valued:

- We manage the Welsh Government funded Fosterline Wales.
- Our The Skills to Foster™, the definitive pre-approval training for foster carers, is used by the vast majority of fostering services using our Train the Trainers approach and ethos around co-delivery by foster carers and fostering service representatives.
- Our Welsh Government funded Fostering Excellence programme is our new national programme of improvement and support, placing foster carers at

the centre of the team around the child. Through our bespoke programme of work, we aim to improve the experience of looked after children in Wales, support foster carers to provide permanent stable and aspiring homes, and ensure that looked after children in Wales are able to make a positive and valued contribution to future generations. We work with social services, education and with health, recognising that these are the key services that a child or young person will come into almost daily contact with. The programme is structured into seven bespoke areas, matching the needs that foster carers, fostering services, other professionals and looked after children have told us they require greater support on.

- The Fostering Network is leading the Confidence in Care consortium of four charities and academic bodies which was been awarded £4.75 million from the Big Lottery Fund to deliver a five- year programme aiming to improve the life chances of looked after children across Wales. This programme will primarily be achieved through the training of 1,500 foster, kinship and residential carers, using the SLAM Fostering Changes training.
www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/confidence-in-care

We have the expertise and track record for engaging and working with some of Wales' most vulnerable children, and foster carers in Wales. We have a long history and extensive experience of fostering community engagement, consultation, capacity-building, building consensus and action planning through participatory appraisal and event facilitation. Successful engagement with stakeholders is a pre-requisite for much of the planning work we do.

As the leading charity supporting foster carers across the UK, The Fostering Network has unrivalled expertise in consulting with, engaging with, and representing the views and ideas of foster carers. We are able assist Welsh Government by:

- organising and leading on stakeholder workshops and events
- presentation of technical information
- facilitation of group discussions
- recording and reporting
- community engagement- drop-in events focus groups, visioning exercises
- preparation of consultation documents
- bespoke consultancy and advice
- training for practitioners, foster carers and other stakeholders.

The Fostering Network Wales has an impressive track record of introducing and rolling out transformational programmes and services across Wales. The Fostering Network has resources, training, publications and advice lines to help foster carers make the most of educational services and opportunities available to them. We lead the fostering agenda, influencing and shaping policy practice at every level. We also develop and pilot new approaches to delivering foster care training and support to foster carers. This means we are constantly improving our expertise and knowledge,

and so our advice, information and support are always up-to-date and available to Welsh Government.

The Fostering Network welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Welsh Government's consultation on the first year of its strategy, focusing raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales.

As the everyday carers for looked after children, it is critical to enable foster carers to be consulted and engaged with this ongoing process and an ambitious strategy.

About this report

This is a report of a consultation with foster carers in Wales carried out by The Fostering Network Wales for the Welsh Government between November 2016 and February 2017, to review the first year of the looked after children's education strategy.

The Fostering Network welcomes Welsh Government identifying foster carers as a key stakeholder group whose views and ideas need to be gathered as part of the work to raise the ambitions and educational outcomes of looked after children - a shared priority of both The Fostering Network and Welsh Government.

The consultation explores the views of foster carers to proposals set out by Welsh Government its strategy and action plan *Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales*.

gov.wales/newsroom/educationandskills/2016/new-plan-to-help-looked-after-children-reach-their-potential/?lang=en

The strategy is accompanied by an action plan which sets out by theme a commitment to improve educational outcomes for children who are looked after. It contains a timeframe for specific actions to be undertaken by the Welsh Government and its key partners.

A foster carers' review of progress against the strategy was undertaken to assess progress in implementing the following strategy's aims and objectives:

- Raise educational aspirations and attainment of looked after children and the ability of those who care for them (i.e. foster carers) to support their educational development;
- Reinforce collective accountability for looked after children and effective leadership across the Welsh Government, regional education consortia, local authorities, schools and further and higher education institutions.
- Make education a priority and point of focus and stability for looked after children, especially during periods of upheaval and uncertainty.
- Ensure necessary support is in place to enable positive life and career choices and reduce the chances of looked after children entering the youth justice system.

- Identify data to aid practice, policy making and monitoring of educational outcomes
- Ensure excellent practice is identified, promoted and shared wherever it exists.

Methodology

For this consultation, two focus groups were carried out, one in north Wales and one in the south, involving a total of 13 foster carers in North Wales and nine in South Wales. Previous Fostering Network evaluations have indicated that foster carers feel more comfortable in a focus group model, which enables peer support, challenge and debate. Our evaluations also indicate that foster carers have traditionally been more likely to engage in activity delivered at a regional rather than national level. Focus groups with foster carers are a well-tested approach and ensure engagement, as they are used to this format, as one which supports peer networking, sharing of information and an opportunity to shape views and ideas in a confidential and supportive environment.

The focus group consultation method led by The Fostering Network has been used with foster carers and local authorities across Wales for over a decade. Our evaluations of previous work indicate that the approach is robust and demonstrates the following strengths:

- reflects what foster carers want
- ensures engagement in a non-stigmatising environment
- generates a richness of data, using both quantitative and qualitative methods
- useful to obtain detailed information about personal and group feelings, perceptions and opinions
- saves time and money compared to individual interviews
- provides a broader range of information and feedback
- offers the opportunity to seek clarification
- provided useful material such as quotes for public relations and presentations.

The focus groups took the form of discussions about the responses made by Welsh Government to the suggestion raised by foster carers during the previous consultation in 2015-16.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/educationreport.pdf

Foster carers' suggestions, together with Welsh Government's response, were displayed on charts around the room, these had also been circulated to foster carers in advance. Foster carers were given a number of different coloured dots to use as 'voting counters'. They were asked to stick dots of one colour next to responses by Welsh Government which they liked, and to use another colour to indicate responses which they had concerns about. They were told to use the dots to reflect the weight of their opinion, i.e. if there was a response they particularly liked, or had grave concerns about, they could allocate more than one dot to it. The discussion

then focused on the suggestions and responses which accumulated the greatest numbers of dots of either colour.

This voting technique worked very well to focus the discussion on the points which were of most concern or most popular. The outcomes of the vote also provided a rough quantification of the views of foster carers.

The suggestions and Welsh Government responses are summarised and reproduced, together with the number of votes (both 'likes' and 'concerns') attributed by participants, in the body of the report below.

The findings of the draft report were then discussed at a meeting with six further key informer foster carers who are members of The Fostering Network Wales national foster carer advisory group. A similar 'dot voting' exercise was carried out to focus discussion. Four points from the draft report were explored in more detail. The outcomes of this discussion reinforced the findings of the focus groups in relation to the points concerned.

2 Early changes as a result of the Education Strategy

At the start of each focus group participants were asked: 'Have you seen any changes as a result of the new measures put in place by Welsh Government'?

Both groups said that it was too soon for them to notice many changes that could definitely be attributed to measures put in place by Welsh Government. Some participants in the South Wales group said that they had seen no change yet and that in fact some things had got worse.

'The grant in our school has been cut for educational and out-of-hours support. They said there isn't an infinite amount of money.'

'More extra educational support has been promised but nothing has materialised yet.'

'It's had no impact so far.'

However, participants from both groups also gave examples of some early changes in the use of the PDG, which they believed were a consequence of new Welsh Government measures. Most of these comments came from the North Wales group.

'The grant has been increased. Yes, we're seeing some results from this.'

One participant from North Wales said that her school was employing a new full-time teaching assistant, and another, also from North Wales, said that more teaching assistant time was now available in her school. Two participants, one from North Wales and one from South Wales, said their foster child had received a laptop computer and extra tuition time.

'I've got a 16 year old and from the PDG, this last year, she's had a new laptop and tutoring for maths and English. So money is coming through. That has happened during the last year. That is an improvement.'

One participant from North Wales said that her school was recruiting 'champions for looked after children, and attributed this to action by Welsh Government.'

'In our school we are currently negotiating champions for looked after children, so early support can be quickly offered if issues arise. That is a result of Welsh Government action.'

The Welsh Government Action Plan (1) was published in January 2016 and this consultation took place in November 2016. There has consequently been very little time for the plan to be translated into action and for outcomes to manifest. It is, therefore, encouraging that some participants in the consultation were able to identify some early positive changes which they attributed to action by Welsh Government.

3 Overall response to Welsh Government proposals

The two focus groups responded in a broadly similar way to the actions set out by Welsh Government. However, there was a slight difference in tone.

The North Wales group felt that the proposals 'looked good' and that whether the outcomes proved positive would depend on how the proposals were implemented in practice. The group welcomed the positive intent of the proposals.

The South Wales group was slightly more sceptical, and the general feeling was that a lot of the action proposed had been talked about before. They too accepted that the intention was good, but they would need to see evidence of 'real action'.

Not surprisingly perhaps, participants made more comments about the responses they were concerned about than about those they liked. This imbalance reflects a desire for further improvement and should not distract from the generally positive, if guarded, response of foster carers, to the proposals.

4 Finance - the Pupil Deprivation Grant

The discussion around finance focused on the PDG. Participants commented most on how the grant was used and the lack of involvement of foster carers in influencing its use.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
Foster carers believed that additional funding (the PDG) should be used primarily to benefit individual looked after children in a consistent manner across all local authorities in Wales and that foster carers should be able to influence how this funding is used in relation to their child. In 2017-18 an additional £4.5m will be invested in the early years PDG, doubling the support provided to disadvantaged pupils aged three and four eligible for free school meals. This expanded provision takes the total investment in the PDG to some £93m in 2017-18.	4	8

The four likes received by this Welsh Government action were because of the doubling of the PDG for nursery and reception aged children. Foster carers welcomed this and, as noted earlier, some had observed early evidence of positive consequences.

The eight concerns were because foster carers felt the PDG should focus more on meeting the needs of individual children, and because they felt they were not involved enough in influencing how the grant should be used in relation to the children they foster.

The argument that the grant should be allocated to individual children was built around foster carers' view that looked after children have needs that are different to other children and should, therefore, receive support tailored to those needs. One participant expressed the case particularly clearly:

'The grant was originally set up for low income families, free school meals equals the PDG. That is totally fair and there is no argument. But, as I said, our children are not deprived in the same way, they may not be deprived financially, though many are, our children are emotionally deprived. School is stressful for our children; they have problems with attachment, concentration, lots of things.'

This view was widely shared among participants in both groups. It was reinforced during the discussion about support (section five of this report), and by discussion which took place at the national foster carer advisory group (reported at the end of this section).

Another generally held view was that foster carers were not always involved in deciding the kind of support their foster child received. Both focus groups offered examples of best practice where the foster carer was involved, but also bad practice where they were not.

One participant provided a good illustration of what can happen:

'I think foster carers should have some input into how and what the PDG is spent on. I currently have a child in a primary school and the money is being used for one-to-one tuition half a day a week. Because he's got a statement I think that's a good use of the money. I have a child in high school and they have no idea, they are going to give her a laptop but she has a laptop already, she doesn't need two laptops, so why not ask me what she does need?'

This is a good illustration of why foster carers believe that there would be benefits for schools and looked after children if they were more involved in decisions about how best to support their foster children.

Foster carers also said they should be involved in their foster children's Personal Education Plans (PEPs). Some were involved by their schools, but the picture was inconsistent. Some local education authorities were said to be better at involving foster carers than others, practice was reported to vary within fostering agencies, between schools, and even between individual teachers.

Not surprisingly, some foster carers described trying to become more involved as being a 'struggle'.

One foster carer described her pro-active approach which had resulted in better communications with the school.

'My child has behaviour meetings with school every four to six weeks. I organise these as she has aggressive behaviour and so may be (disadvantaged)if I don't help the school manage this. I involve the SENCO as she goes to meetings to represent the school, for example, in special care meetings.'

Foster carers responded positively to the actions taken by Welsh Government to identify and promote best practice. These attracted six 'likes' and no 'concerns' in the voting exercise.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>Examples of good practice in using the PDG and involving foster carers in this (or its equivalent pupil premium in England) should be identified and lessons drawn from these.</p> <p>The Welsh Government should explore good practice examples of funding to looked after children , for example Fostering Achievement in Northern Ireland managed by The Fostering Network.</p>	<p>1. The Fostering Network’s Fostering Excellence programme funded by Welsh Government sponsors: -Education masterclasses which foster carers will be able to attend, focusing on issues such as attachment and higher education -Foster carer ambassador scheme, including a peer support initiative.</p> <p>2. Welsh Government and The Fostering Network are discussing a social pedagogy approach being developed in Wales. Agreement in principle to develop a Fostering Wellbeing pilot project to pilot the approach.</p> <p>3. Welsh Government is working with The Fostering Network to produce learning materials including a Wales specific <i>A Foster carers’ guide to education</i>. The guide will be published by the end of the year, promoted widely and supported by training.</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>0</p>

One reason for the strong positive response has already been mentioned, namely that foster carers were concerned about the variable practice across Wales.

‘It really is a postcode lottery, it depends on your council, the area you are in.’

An appropriate response to this situation would be to aim to standardise practice towards the positive end of the spectrum and the proposals above were seen to be working towards that end.

One foster carer also suggested that there were examples of good practice within Wales that could be shared.

‘There are four education areas in Wales, and one area. Powys is doing lots of work around attachment issues with lots of schools. It’s really successful Exclusions are down, and the initiative is good for all children.’

Foster Carers welcomed the publication of The Fostering Network’s *A Foster Carers’ Guide to Education* and responded positively to the new Fostering Wellbeing programme by The Fostering Network based on social pedagogy principles. Foster carers broadly welcomed the additional information being made available about the PDG. No concerns were expressed about this proposal, which received two likes.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
Steps should be taken to increase the understanding foster carers have of the PDG, and what it may be used for.	<p>Details about the PDG have been included in <i>A foster carers' guide to education</i> and a link to resources which includes a toolkit and guidance: gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/deprivation/pdg-and-early-years-pdg/?lang=en</p> <p>A link to the evaluation of the grant has been included see: gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-pupil-deprivation-grant/?lang=en</p>	2	0

Some focus group participants were not sure about how the grant could or could not be used. Some believed it was *only* available to pupils in receipt of free school meals and one said it could not be used to buy computers and other digital equipment.

Other participants reported that some schools were not sure about the purpose of the grant and that schools used it in different ways.

'Some schools are really good at applying the grant, they have the expertise, and others really are not.'

Other comments were that there was no transparency about how the grant was used, and that foster carers did not know the rationale for decisions about the use of the grant.

Clear guidelines exist about the use of the PDG, but not all foster carers are aware of these and it appears that not all schools are either.

There is clearly a need for more dissemination of information about the PDG and the action taken to date is helpful.

Consideration could also be given to ensure that an individual with additional learning needs experience, or a trained teacher, oversees the use of the grant in each school. The use of the PDG could also be linked to personal education plans by a requirement to state, in the plan, how the use of the grant will benefit each individual pupil. The benefits that have actually accrued to each child could be reviewed periodically.

The national foster carer advisory group members chose to develop the points about how the PDG was currently used. They believed there was a widespread lack of awareness about guidance covering how the grant should be used. They said that clear guidelines were available. However, far from all foster carers, and probably far

from all schools, are aware of these. This strengthened findings from the initial focus groups.

Participants also said that there was a widespread lack of awareness about how the grant was actually used. One participant searched online during the group discussion and quickly found guidelines, on the Welsh Government website, stating that all schools should publish an account of how they used the grant. However, all participants in the discussion believed that most foster carers were not aware of these guidelines and would not, therefore, feel able to use them to make schools more accountable.

The view of members of the national foster carer advisory group was that the use of the PDG needed to be included in each child's review.

A discussion took place at the national foster carer advisory group about whether the PDG should be used to benefit all eligible children (as it is at present), or whether it would be better to apportion the grant between individual children.

Most participants agreed that there were some advantages to using the PDG to benefit all eligible children through general schemes. However, the use of the grant should still be transparent and accountable and there was a strong feeling that the PDG should not be used to fill gaps in provision elsewhere in the school. Transparency about how the grant was used would also help ensure this did not happen.

However, there was a general view among participants that many looked after children had additional learning needs that were not being met. A strong view emerged, that schools needed to be more responsive to the needs of individual looked after children and that an element of the PDG should be allocated to this end.

Whilst recent changes to the distribution of the looked after children's element of the PDG allows regional education consortia to take a more holistic approach to strategic resource allocation, which benefits whole populations of children in care in their region. The Fostering Network recommends that education consortia provide a clear steer to schools in relation to how the PDG can be utilised and indeed its funding more transparent.

Further, The Fostering Network recommends that Welsh Government develop a tool-kit for schools providing clear, succinct and accessible advice on how the grant might be best spent to improve specific outcomes for looked after children with a focus on a more targeted approach.

Additionally, The Fostering Network believes it is important that we all view education in its broadest sense and promote learning and development in a variety of ways to help children and young people learn new skills, develop and enhance natural talents, pursue new interests, improve learning and gain a real sense of self-worth and achievement. It is particularly important for fostered children to have

access to a range of extracurricular arts and cultural activities as these can make a significant contribution to children's development in order to reduce placement breakdown, increase self-worth and empowerment, increase confidence and self-esteem, develop new creative, life and social skills and emotional awareness. Foster carers are in the best position to know the children they foster and many also know the availability of local and community resources -funding must support and reflect this.

We recommend directly working with foster carers as primary educators and directing funding towards of a wider range of educational supports and resources outside the PDG grant, including one to one tuition, driving lessons and provision of IT equipment to support a child's educational and personal development. Funding should also include the funding of extra-curricular and personal development activities, such as music lessons and sports coaching, as well as providing the necessary equipment.

Educational funding should offer practical and financial support directly to foster families and that foster carers should have a say in how it is allocated. Such funding should recognise the crucial role that foster carers play in encouraging and supporting children and young people in foster care to gain a sense of achievement and to reach their potential. Consideration should be given to this budget being held and administered by a separate body other than a local authority or education consortia.

The Fostering Network in Northern Ireland has been delivering one such scheme, training Fostering Achievement since 2007 and the impact of the programme is increasingly apparent in improved outcomes for young people. Of those young people in receipt of tuition from Fostering Achievement and taking GCSEs in 2016, more than twice as many gained five or more A*-C grades compared to the general looked after child population.

www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/fostering-achievement

5 Support

No specific actions were listed by Welsh Government in response to the call for additional support.

The two likes received by this section appear to approve the suggestion by foster carers that schemes such as the Conwy FIT card should be encouraged.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>Additional funding should be made available to provide extra tutoring, professional support for emotional issues, and access to activities.</p> <p>The above forms of support should be available to looked after children in all schools and should be provided flexibly in such a way as to avoid stigmatising the child.</p> <p>Schemes such as the Conwy 'FIT card' scheme and the Flint 'Activate' scheme should be encouraged.</p>		2	5

Participants, in the South Wales group, in particular, commented on the lack of support available to help with the particular needs of looked after children. Some participants in this group described quite acute support needs.

'The situation we are in at the moment, any support would be better that what we are getting now. They say they can't afford to pay for a tutor, and so my child is getting three hours a week and it is simply not enough. He is vulnerable and needs support. He has issues. We try to educate him the best we can, but there is no support there.'

One focus group discussed the support that was provided when children were excluded from school. This varied with some participants reporting good support and positive relationships with their school, while others experienced the opposite.

'In my experience when a child has been excluded from school, the school has always sent work home, and we did the work at home, that was a good thing. But I don't think it happens now.'

'Home tutoring is very patchy. I know of one child who was five years old and was excluded and it took a month to even get a tutor to his house, and then it was one and a half hours a week.'

Once more, there was general agreement that levels of support should be standardised upwards towards current best practice.

Some participants believed that exclusion from school was used too readily by some schools with, negative consequences for the child.

'Exclusion is used too easily, it is used to scapegoat the children, to get rid of them rather than deal with the issues. The child can then be tarred throughout the whole county, so no school will take him.'

Several participants had experience of moving to a different local authority area or of their foster child doing so. They expressed concern that continuity of support was broken when this happened. One described their experience as follows:

'Our child was in LA1 but moved to LA2, and we are stuck in the middle. The councils do not work together. Once you cross boundaries it becomes a nightmare. When our child moved over the border from LA1 they just withdrew funding after the child had seen the same counsellor for four years. They are both just washing their hands.'

6 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

The Welsh Government's publication of draft guidelines on collaborative working between Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the counselling services was met with some concern by foster carers. The response attracted two likes and six concerns.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
The Fostering Network recommends that all children in care have prompt and high quality, holistic assessments of their physical, emotional, and mental health needs, and regular reviews. It is important that CAMHS deliver effectiveness to ensure that children requiring early help, and those who have specialist needs have access to timely, child-centred assessment and support.	Welsh Government are aware of this issue and are consulting on it. The Minister for Health and Social Services and the Minister for Education and Skills have agreed to the publication of the summary of responses to the Welsh Government consultation on draft guidance on collaborative working between CAMHS and the counselling services which was carried out in July 2016.	2	6

The discussion showed that concerns focused on the capacity of CAMHS. There was a widespread view that CAMHS were unable to meet the level of need for their services. Participants provided numerous examples to support this view.

'In our area there are no practitioners who can do the assessments on behalf of CAMHS. Some have retired and have not been replaced. We have been waiting two years for our child to be assessed. There is a huge waiting list.'

'I have a child who is waiting to be seen by CAMHS and we haven't even had an acknowledgement of the request for an appointment to get her psychiatric assessment.'

'CAMHS is a shambles, not at all timely, they need more resources.'

One participant said that her local authority had provided support through a counsellor, which may be an early example of the collaborative working referred to by Welsh Government.

Foster carers' experience is clearly that support for looked after children with mental health issues is extremely inadequate at present.

The Fostering Network recommends that that all children in care have prompt and high quality, holistic assessments of their physical, emotional and mental health needs and regular reviews. It is important that CAMHS deliver effectiveness to ensure that children requiring early help and those who have specialist needs have access to timely, child-centred assessment and support.

7 Learning and development

The proposal to hold two educational practitioner workshops attracted a large number of both likes and concerns. Probing showed that the concerns were due to a misunderstanding about the purpose of the workshops. Once it was explained that the purpose of the workshop was to gather experience of best practice from practitioners, to inform the toolkit and online community of practice, foster carers responded positively to the proposal.

'It would be useful for those who are interested.'

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>The content of training provided to teachers and others who interact with looked after children through the education system should be checked to identify whether and how far it addresses the issues particularly affecting looked after children and the role of the foster carer.</p> <p>Steps should be taken to fill any gaps.</p>	<p>Welsh Government and LACE co-ordinators will hold two educational practitioner workshops before the end of the year, to begin to develop guidance/toolkit on roles and responsibilities of designated lead member of staff in schools, and on governing bodies. Designated teachers from primary, secondary and specialist schools will be invited. LACE coordinators and consortia leads are identifying delegates to attend. This work will feed into the Education Strategy of the Welsh Government, and specifically into future work around promoting the role of the looked after children link governor.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discussions are ongoing with CASCADE-Cardiff University about developing an online community of practice for looked after children practitioners, with a focus on education, including case studies and resources and the national contact list of key personnel. 2. Attachment friendly school training is being rolled out across Wales with direct school delivery. 3. Welsh Government to develop and publish guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the designated lead member of staff in schools, and on governing bodies in supporting that function. <p>To support the implementation of the guidance, the Welsh Government will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - undertake a mapping exercise to establish what training is available for the designated lead member of staff and disseminate examples of good practice at stakeholder events - commission appropriate training modules to support schools and further education staff with a responsibility for young people who are looked after. - deliver stakeholder events to promote the new training modules. 	<p>7</p>	<p>8</p>

The proposals relating to learning and development were generally welcomed by foster carers who gave clear reasons why training and awareness raising were important.

'Yes we definitely need training for teachers who deal with looked after children, their needs and issues are different.'

'All schools should have resources and information about looked after children and strategies to cope with their different behaviours, not just attachment but other conditions...'

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
Education professionals should be encouraged to take up existing opportunities to better understand the needs of looked after children, for example, attending activities run by local foster care forums and making use of information provided by foster carers.	The Fostering Network Wales has organised masterclasses for joint delivery with LACE co-ordinators across Wales. Designated teachers and LACE co-ordinators to attend. The first one will be held in December 2016, at least three more will be held in 2017.	2	0

Foster carers strongly believed that it should be compulsory for teachers with responsibilities for looked after children to attend the training that was being made available, they should not just be 'invited'.

Foster carers also said that all teachers should receive some training regarding looked after children. Some felt that all teachers should attend the specialist in-service training being offered to teachers with responsibilities for looked after children, others suggested that working with looked after children should be included in teacher training, or offered as a topic for inset days and continued professional development encouraged.

'Schools may send one or two teachers to attachment friendly training and then expect those two teachers to cascade the knowledge down to their colleagues, but all the teachers should go to the training.'

'Teachers have five or seven inset days. I think every school should have to do two days on attachment issues.'

The national foster carer advisory group chose to develop this point. Participants strongly agreed that all teachers should receive some training regarding looked after children, especially with a focus on attachment. They believed that without such training teachers would not understand the impact of early trauma and how this could lead to challenging misbehaviour. They felt that teacher training should require an explicit focus on foster care, to adequately prepare teachers for their role in supporting looked after children.

'If a child comes in with a broken leg they'll move the chair for him, but they don't see the impact of early trauma.'

The Fostering Network believes that teachers can provide considerable support to children in care, but they need more support to do this effectively. We would like to see the development of a toolkit that helps schools, fostering services and teachers make sure they're in the best place possible to build relationships with their students, whilst promoting awareness and understanding of the issues looked after children and young people face.

Foster carers in the focus groups believed that training for all teachers would help them to understand the role of the foster carer, as well as the particular needs of looked after children. This would help create better relationships between staff and foster carers, and enable teachers to better meet the needs of looked after children. For example, most foster carers said that their schools did not class them as having parental responsibility for their foster children (only one said she was classed in that way). This meant that they were not as closely involved in their foster child's education. Foster carers felt that if teachers understood the role of the foster carer, they would understand why there would be advantages to all concerned if they were treated in the same way as birth parents.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>Education professionals should be encouraged to take up existing opportunities to better understand the needs of looked after children.</p> <p>Further information, support or training should be offered to foster carers. Topics should include their rights and responsibilities in relation to their child's education, how a school works, support available, confidence building and assertiveness.</p> <p>All foster carers should be encouraged to take up the training or support available.</p> <p>More co-ordinated collective action could help improve relationships with schools.</p> <p>A tailored core training package should be available to foster carers, teaching professionals and others, such as social workers and learning support assistants, across Wales.</p>	<p>1. The LAC Education Stakeholder Group in Welsh Government will work with the Attachment Network Wales to focus awareness of practitioners, teachers and foster carers on attachment and early childhood trauma and promote opportunities to increase knowledge and understanding and sharing learning.</p> <p>2. Welsh Government will work with further education institutions to build upon the good practice gained from Buttle UK. Good practice materials, based on the Buttle Quality Mark principles, were published by Welsh Government in November 2015. These were disseminated to higher education institutions in Wales which come under CLASS Cymru. The Learning and Work Institute has undertaken work to embed the principles, including converting the existing materials into an interactive 'toolkit' for FE institutions and capturing the views of stakeholders around improving foster carers' understanding of post-16 learning.</p>	<p>8</p>	<p>1</p>

<p>Training should cover four areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A vision and aims, and how all can play a role in raising educational attainment. 2. Working together to raise attainment: understanding the education system, roles, responsibilities, delegated authority and sources of support. 3. Happy children learn: strategies to support emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn. 4. Building local networks of support. <p>Participants will gain new knowledge, understanding, skills, confidence and practical strategies. Additional sessions should be targeted at hard to reach carers (including family and friends of foster carers).</p>			
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Foster carers also said that teaching assistants should be supported to attend the training that was available. In their experience, teaching assistants often spent a lot of time with their children. However, they believed that teaching assistants were currently unlikely to attend training because they would not be paid to do so. Foster carers felt it was very important to incentivise teaching assistants to attend training and, because most were on a relatively low hourly rate, it would probably be necessary to include training as part of their paid work to enable them to attend. However, they recognised that doing this would currently result in extra costs to the school. They felt that this difficulty needed to be recognised and addressed.

At present in Wales, teaching assistants would be paid while attending relevant training, but there is an extra cost to the school to pay for supply cover for the time they are away from the classroom, especially if it is a one-to-one teaching assistant.

The Fostering Network believes that all teachers and one-to-one teaching assistants should have training that includes a basic understanding of the care system and the challenges and barriers that children in care face.

8. Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and children who are fostered

The action being taken by Welsh Government was generally welcomed by foster carers. It attracted eight likes and two concerns.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>All teachers should be encouraged to have the same expectations of looked after children as they have of other children.</p> <p>Each looked after child should be treated as an individual with regard to their educational potential.</p>	<p>Work to follow up the recommendations in the Estyn thematic review is underway. Welsh Government has written to directors of education and of social services, asking how they will implement the recommendations.</p> <p>Summer 2017: Welsh Government to develop a marketing, promotional and training drive to ensure all elected members are aware of the expectations placed on them in respect of children who are looked after</p> <p>Welsh Government and others are developing guidance to support the designated lead member of staff for LAC in schools and on governing bodies.</p>	8	2

Relatively few comments were made about these actions. One participant said that targeting the guidance on the lead member of staff and the representative on the governing body placed a lot of responsibility on them, and that a lot would depend on the quality and commitment of the individuals concerned. Another participant said that this could add to variations in standards between areas.

'It will be done by a leading member of staff, but all members of staff should be involved. It depends on the quality and conviction of the designated member of staff.'

9. Foster carer registration – recognition and status

The prospect of foster carers being registered with Social Care Wales was very well received. This is reflected by the seven likes and no concerns received by the relevant part of the action. Foster carers felt that registration would help them to be perceived more as professionals, and help put their relationships with other professionals on a more equal footing.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
A system of registration for foster carers with Social Care Wales should be established.	The Care Council will be changing into Social Care Wales from April 2017. Social Care Wales will build on past successful work, and for the first time, will bring together workforce regulation, workforce development, service improvement and research in one organisation. The Fostering Network Wales is lobbying for the professionalisation of foster carers within this process of change. For up to date information see: http://www.ccwales.org.uk/we-are-changing/#sthash.oNr8PkaW.dpuf	7	0

Participants in one group briefly discussed that foster care should perhaps be unionised in some way. One said they had never felt so isolated before in their lives, while another commented that foster carers were more likely to have allegations made against them than teachers.

Some participants also said that registration should follow the foster carer across local authority boundaries. At present, if a foster carer moved into a new local area they needed to re-apply to be a foster carer. The process was said to be invasive and time consuming. It was argued that DBS (police) checks currently move with the individual and that foster carer registration should do the same. This would help address continuity of care issues referred to earlier (section five).

The table below includes four action points which foster carers felt were needed during the previous focus groups. All the action points relate to specific ways in which foster carers might be more involved, by schools, in the education of their foster children.

The general feeling was that Welsh Government had not acted upon the views of foster carers and this section attracted nine concerns. One participant wrote:

‘Welsh Government have not answered any of the points highlighted.’

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>The knowledge foster carers have of their children should be put to good use by other professionals, to benefit the child.</p> <p>Foster carers should be involved in deciding how to use the PDG in relation to their child because they have a good insight into their child's needs and can therefore make a valuable contribution to determining how to meet these needs in a way that will improve educational attainment.</p> <p>The use of the PDG should be linked to the personal education plan to create a single coherent process, which should make it easier for schools to involve foster parents in the PEP.</p> <p>Foster carers should be included as equals in meetings which influence their child's education, unless there are exceptional over-riding considerations.</p>	See above	1	9

Participants also provided detailed examples of schools still not including and valuing the additional, and often unique, perspective, the foster carer can add to understanding and dealing with the issues which arise for the child in school. The overwhelming view was that foster carers are still not treated as equals, that this resulted in negative consequences for the child and represented a missed opportunity for the school itself.

'I think that the foster carer needs to have a relationship with the teachers and the school. They can tell the foster carer if there are any behaviour changes in the child at school, and the foster carer can inform the school if there are any problems at home. It's a two way street.'

'We are often told by schools that a professional meeting is being held but the foster carer is not invited. We are not treated as professionals. They only invited people who are paid professionals, but we are a professional in the caring profession. We should be invited.... We live with that child and don't clock off at 5pm.'

'I am a professionally qualified nurse but I've never been treated as a professional as a foster carer.... I'm not treated with dignity, respect, nor valued. I'm often treated as a troublemaker but I'm only trying to do my best for the child.'

There are continuing difficulties in the working relationship between social workers and foster carers. It is clear that foster carers see themselves as the poor relations in

their partnership with social workers and educators. In these situations it will be the looked after child who will miss out.

One participant said she was treated as if she was her foster child's birth parent by the school and that this allowed her to see her child's records, which she found very helpful. However, other participants made it clear that her experience was not the norm and that they were not treated in the same way as a child's birth parent. All foster carers believed that they should be treated in the same way as a child's birth parents.

The Fostering Network Wales' national foster carer advisory group chose to develop this point and participants' views strongly re-inforce those expressed by foster carers during the focus groups.

There was strong agreement among participants that all foster carers should be involved in their foster children's personal education plan. Only two out of the six foster carers attending the national foster carer advisory group were so involved at present.

Participants also reported that some schools now had individual development plans (IDPs) rather than personal education plans. Participants who knew about these felt that they were an improvement on personal education plans but that foster carers were no more likely to be involved in individual development plans than in personal education plans.

The Fostering Network believes that IDPs and PEPs should have a specific requirement that addresses how staff and foster carers will work together to improve children's educational experiences and outcomes.

Participants in the national foster carer advisory group also said that foster carers needed to be clear about their responsibilities and rights regarding their foster children. At the moment most were not. They said that the LACE co-ordinator, the parents' social worker, the child's social worker, and the foster carer should all be included in communications.

The Fostering Network believes that transforming educational outcomes for looked after children requires a cultural transformation as to how foster carers are regarded. Foster carers should not be regarded as simply caring for the child, but moreover should be seen as the key adult with responsibility.

10 School governing bodies

The proposal to encourage the appointment of a governor to represent the interests of looked after children on school governing bodies drew generally favourable comments.

Participants said things such as:

'Schools will be more open to looked after children.'

'Governors run the schools we need them on board.'

'It is already happening in some schools.'

Currently, all schools in Wales must have a designated teacher responsible for looked after children and it is the governing body's responsibility to ensure this is done. The Fostering Network would encourage the Welsh Government to adopt a similar model to the England requirements – to also have a designated governor and to receive a report at a governing body meeting from the designated teacher, at least once a year.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>The possibility of having a looked after children's representative on school boards of governors should be explored.</p>	<p>1. http://www.governorswales.org.uk/news/2016/11/14/consultation-consolidation-and-revision-school-gov/ Consultation - Consolidation and revision of the school governance regulatory framework in Wales for February 2017. WELSH GOVERNMENT is consulting on the school governance regulatory framework in Wales. They are consulting on proposals to place a stronger focus on skilled governing bodies, including allowing governing bodies to take decisions about their constitution and membership to meet the particular needs of their schools.</p> <p>Welsh Government proposals will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revise the school governance and staffing regulatory framework • simplify the legislative framework by ensuring that there is a consistent approach to school governance in all maintained schools in Wales. <p>2. Welsh Government to promote the role of the looked after children link governor and encourage all governing bodies to select a governor to represent the interests of these young people as standard good practice - Summer 2018.</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>6</p>

The six concerns probably relate to a general view that there should be a clear and consistent approach across all boards and that the proposed action which spoke of 'promoting' the role of a link governor for looked after children was quite vague. It may be that some clear recommendations or the production of guidelines for school governors, regarding the role would help allay these concerns.

11. The relationship between social workers and foster carers

This section calls for closer contact between foster carers and social workers with responsibility for looked after children. Foster carers queried why the response column was blank. The seven concerns reflect the fact that Welsh Government did not suggest any response to the views of foster carers.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
<p>A specific action is that all LAC social workers should attend foster carer forums consistently.</p> <p>In more general terms activities to bring social workers and foster carers together, in order to promote mutual understanding in a 'non-threatening' setting would help build the more positive relationship that all agree is needed.</p>		1	7

There was discussion in both groups about the need for closer and better relationships between social workers and foster carers.

Participants said that some foster carers enjoyed good and close relationships with their foster child's social workers, however, others did not.

'The foster carer must force the social worker to listen and to give them insight into the child, push the social worker and make them understand the real situation.'

The general view was that better relationships would benefit looked after children because foster carers and social workers possessed different insights and expertise, and had different types of influence over the child. Sharing their experience and knowledge would enable better decisions to be taken to benefit the child.

'Social workers are the ones who make the decisions but we are the ones who know the children.'

'There is a lack of continuity, involving the foster carer is paramount.'

A suggestion was made in one of the groups that it would be beneficial to bring social workers and foster carers together to discuss issues, develop understanding and build a closer relationship. Participants thought this would be positive so that all could begin to see things from each other's point of view. There was a feeling that it would be important to be careful in how such meetings were set up and that

perhaps there was a role for the third sector to help create the non-threatening and respectful environment for such encounters to take place.

The national foster carer advisory group chose to develop this point. There was general agreement that better relationships between foster carers and social workers would help the foster child. Participants agreed that relationships could sometimes be difficult. Participants would welcome steps that would enable foster carers and social workers to understand each other better.

12. Stability

Foster carers were keenly aware of the impact of instability. The recognition by Welsh Government, of the impact of instability was welcomed. However, participants had yet to see any impact resulting from this commitment to action. Many participants on the other hand, were able to provide examples of actions by other professionals which increased instability. This accounts for the seven concerns expressed about this issue.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
The impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school and respite care provision.	This principle has been recognised by Welsh Government and there is a commitment within the Education Strategy to work towards this. Putting children at the centre has become the guiding principle of interventions within the strategy.	0	7

Participants described the impact of having foster children allocated to them who attended a school a long way away.

‘Two children were placed with me and I had to drive them 20 miles each way every day to school. Sometimes I question whether placements are correct to enable stability.’

‘I was asked to keep two children long term. Three years so far, and I wanted them to attend the good local school, five minutes’ walk away. I was told by the social worker that the school was “too posh” and so I now drive them eight minutes from home, which is enough to make it so they are not in school and making friends with children from their own neighbourhood....Had they been my natural children they would have been entitled to go to the school five minutes’ walk away.’

Frequent changes to social workers was something else which increased instability. Participants provided several examples of this affecting them. One said:

‘On the day of the handover for our little lad, the social worker was supposed to supervise the handover but she didn’t even turn up. Next day we received a ‘phone call saying ‘sorry I couldn’t turn up, I am no longer his social worker, his new social worker will be in touch’. Social workers just get changed like that, where is the consistency, where is the continuity?’

The Fostering Network believes that the impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school, and respite care provision.

Children in foster care who experience the fewest placement changes fare better in education. Having a stable home with a sense of permanence and stability helps children achieve more in school. The Fostering Network believes that more is needed to be done to recognise and protect school as a provider of permanence and stability. Many children have periods at home interspersed with periods in care, often not in the same placement. School is often the most stable factor for children in care. More needs to be done to ensure that while the rest of their life is in flux, school is settled and education is a constant.

13. Additional Issues

A number of additional issues were raised by participants. None of the comments made in discussion related specifically to the action and response in the table below.

What actions need to be taken	Actions taken by Welsh Government	Likes	Concerns
Best practice in promoting educational attainment among looked after children should be identified and rolled out.	Welsh Government to continue to capture the views of young people and foster carers on their experiences in education to measure progress made against the strategy.	3	2

The role of the SENCO

Several comments were made about the role of the Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in schools. Foster carers reported that in Wales anyone could be a SENCO and that they may not have a qualification or relevant experience. They believed that a SENCO should be qualified and experienced persons in the field of additional learning needs. They said this was currently the case in England and that there were also examples of best practice in Wales. For example, one participant provided the example of a school in Conwy where the SENCO was a specialist teacher who kept regular contact with children who were fostered.

Annual Reviews

Concerns were raised about looked after children reviews being held without the children being present or adequately represented. One participant said that looked after children reviews were often held in school holidays and at short notice. This meant that educators could often not attend because they were on holidays. When this happened they sent a report. Foster carers also found it difficult to attend during school holidays because of commitments with their own children. The result of this was said to be that looked after children often 'slipped through the net'. The participant said this was the exact opposite of a child-centred approach.

14. Summary of the main findings

Early signs of change

The Welsh Government Action Plan was published in January 2016 and this consultation took place in November 2016. There has, therefore, been very little time for the plan to be translated into action and for outcomes to manifest. It is, therefore, encouraging that some participants in the consultation were able to identify some early positive changes which they attributed to action by Welsh Government.

Overall response

The two focus groups responded in a broadly positive way to most of the actions set out by Welsh Government. The most concerns were usually expressed when the Welsh Government had not responded to suggestions made by foster carers during the previous consultation.

The use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant

Foster carers welcomed the doubling of the PDG and had observed early evidence of positive consequences.

Foster carers accepted there were some benefits to using the PDG to benefit all eligible children. However, they felt that an element of the overall PDG should be allocated to meet the needs of individual looked after children. They strongly believed that looked after children experience different needs to other children and should, therefore, receive additional individual support tailored to those needs.

Foster carers strongly believed that the use of the PDG should be more transparent. It was essential to evidence that the grant was not being absorbed into mainstream provision.

Foster carers wanted to be more involved in decisions about how the grant should be used in relation to the children they foster. Some foster carers were currently involved but practice was inconsistent across Wales. They strongly believed that they were in a unique position to provide valuable information to help schools decide what would most benefit the children they look after, and that an opportunity was being missed by not harnessing the knowledge they had of their foster children. The importance of foster carers in giving educational support to enhance the social, personal and educational development of children and young people in foster care needs to be more recognised and financially supported.

Foster carers also said they should be involved in their foster children's PEPs. Some were involved by their schools but, once more, the picture was very inconsistent.

Foster carers responded positively to the actions taken by Welsh Government to identify and promote best practice, they welcomed The Fostering Network's foster carer's education guide and associated masterclasses, and the forthcoming Fostering Wellbeing programme of work. They felt that practice was currently variable across

Wales and that these proposals sought to standardise practice towards the positive end of the spectrum. Foster carers identified an example of best practice in one area of Wales they felt could provide additional useful lessons.

Foster carers broadly welcomed the additional information being made available about the PDG. However, although clear guidelines exist about the use of the PDG, foster carers believed that more dissemination of information was very much needed. Not all foster carers were aware of these guidelines and participants said that not all schools were either.

Suggestions were received that an individual with special needs experience or a trained teacher should oversee the use of the PDG in each school. The use of the PDG could also be linked to PEPs by a requirement to state, in the plan, how the use of the grant will benefit each individual pupil. The benefits that have actually accrued to each child could be reviewed periodically.

Support

Foster carers repeated their calls from the previous consultation for more support to respond to the particular needs of looked after children.

Foster carers also pointed out that the support provided by schools when looked after children were excluded varied greatly. For example, some provided work to be done at home but many did not. Once more, there was general agreement that levels of support should be standardised towards the positive end of the spectrum. Some participants believed that exclusion from school was used too readily by some schools, with negative consequences for the child.

Several participants expressed concern that continuity of support was broken when the child moved from one local authority area to another. More co-ordination was needed between local authorities.

There was widespread concern among foster carers that CAMHS did not have sufficient resources to meet the level of need for their services. Foster carers' experience is clearly that support for looked after children with mental health issues is extremely inadequate at present.

Learning and development

Foster carers responded positively to the proposal to hold workshops to gather experience of best practice from practitioners to inform a new toolkit and online community of practice.

The rolling out of attachment friendly school training, the new Welsh Government guidance on the roles of the designated lead member of staff and of school governing bodies, the proposed mapping exercise, and the additional training modules for staff with responsibility for young people who are looked after were

also generally welcomed by foster carers, who gave clear reasons why training and awareness raising were important.

The masterclasses for designated teachers and LACE co-ordinators being delivered by The Fostering Network and LACE co-ordinators were also welcomed by foster carers.

However, foster carers strongly believed that the new training being provided should be compulsory for all teachers with responsibility for looked after children and that all teachers should receive some training relating to looked after children, for example, as part of the training of new teachers, or inset days for existing teachers.

Foster carers said that teaching assistants were currently unlikely to attend the new learning opportunities. They said teaching assistants should be supported to take up the learning because they often spent a lot of time with looked after children. It might be necessary to help the school fund supply teacher/one-to-one cover to allow teaching assistants to attend courses.

The Fostering Network recommends that such training should be built into school improvement plans, annual staff training plans and to become part of an ongoing rolling programme of training.

Most foster carers are not treated in the same way as children's birth parents by schools. A particular concern is that they usually do not have access to their foster children's educational records. This is an important barrier to their involvement in their foster children's education.

Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and foster children

The action being taken by Welsh Government was generally welcomed by foster carers.

The work currently underway to follow up the recommendations in the Estyn thematic review was general welcomed by foster carers who liked the fact that Welsh Government had written to directors of education and of social services asking how they will implement the recommendations.

The proposed promotional drive to ensure elected members were aware of the expectations placed on them in respect of children who are looked after, together with the guidance being developed to support the designated lead member of staff for looked after children in schools and on governing bodies was also welcomed by foster carers.

However, some foster carers were concerned that the guidance was targeted at lead members of staff and the looked after children representative on the governing body. They felt this might mean that too much would depend on the quality and commitment of the individuals concerned, leading to yet more qualitative differences across Wales.

Foster carer engagement with schools

The prospect of foster carers being registered with Social Care Wales was very well received. Foster carers felt this would help provide them with more of a professional status, which would assist them in their relationships with other professionals. Foster carers believed that any registration should accompany individual foster carers if they moved across local authority boundaries.

Some foster carers said they felt very isolated and that additional steps would be welcome to address this.

Foster carers had made four suggestions during the previous consultation to increase their involvement in schools. They had asked in general that their knowledge of their foster children should be put to good use to benefit their foster children. They believed they should be involved in deciding how to use the PDG in relation to their child. They also suggested that the use of the PDG should be linked to the PEP, to create a single coherent process which should make it easier for schools to involve foster parents in the PEP, and that foster carers should, usually be included as equals in meetings which influence their child's education. Foster carers were very concerned that Welsh Government had not acted upon the views of foster carers in relation to any of these suggestions.

The proposal to encourage the appointment of a governor to represent the interests of looked after children on school governing bodies drew generally favourable comments from foster carers. However, some concerns were expressed that there should be a clear and consistent approach across all boards and that the proposed action was quite vague. Clearer recommendations or the production of guidelines for school governors regarding the role, could help allay these concerns.

The Fostering Network recommends Welsh Government adopt the England model, that it should be mandatory for school governing committees to identify a lead person on the committee with responsibility for supporting and promoting the interest and needs of children in care.

We also recommend that the name and role of the lead governor for looked after children should be known to foster carers, and opportunities given to develop partnerships between the two.

The relationship between social workers and foster carers

During the 2015 consultation, foster carers had called for steps to promote closer contact between themselves and social workers with responsibility for looked after children. During the current consultation they expressed concern that Welsh Government did not suggest any response to their views.

The general view was that better relationships would benefit looked after children because foster carers and social workers possessed different insights and expertise, and had different types of influence over the child. Sharing their experience and knowledge would enable better decisions to be taken to benefit the child.

Foster carers re-iterated their view that activities should be organised to bring foster carers and social workers together.

The Fostering Network believes that foster carers, in general, have a more positive view of their working relationships with their supervising social worker than they do with their foster child's social worker. Efforts should be made in bringing these two groups together in specific learning and development opportunities to reduce tensions. The training content should be informed by foster carers' perspectives and delivered with foster carer co-trainers. Participants will gain new knowledge, understanding, skills, confidence and practical strategies to use in working with each other and with the children in their care. Foster carers wanted to be trusted, respected and valued by social workers. Joint training is a way of including foster carers in the team around the child.

Further, The Fostering Network Wales believes foster carer training should be accredited so that the other professionals with whom they work would have more confidence in their ability. This principle has been validated by the successful outcomes of the London Fostering Achievement programme.

Stability

Foster carers were keenly aware of the impact of instability. The recognition by Welsh Government of the impact of instability was welcomed. However, participants had yet to see any impact resulting from this commitment to action. Foster carers provided examples relating to changes of school, placements being allocated away from a child's school, and frequent changes of social workers, which increased instability.

Additional Issues

Foster carers believed that SENCOs should be qualified and experienced persons in the field of special needs

At present in Wales the SENCO is always a qualified teacher, who for their own professional development will ensure they participate in further training for the role.

They also raised concerns about looked after children reviews being held without the child being present and at times when the child was unlikely to be adequately represented, for example, during school holidays when teachers and foster carers might have difficulty attending.

15 Conclusion

This report has provided an in depth picture of how foster carers view the first year of the looked after children's education strategy. The intention of the consultation was not only to recognise the many examples of best practice and improvements as a direct result of the strategy, but to also challenge to strive for greater improvement in key areas, as identified by foster carers themselves.

The report reflects the reach and expertise within The Fostering Network, to provide foster carers with a voice in the policy making process. The report discusses issues of practice and of policy and makes recommendations for policy makers to consider. The findings reflect an ongoing willingness by foster carers to play an ongoing participative role in supporting the children and young people in their care to achieve their potential. In doing so they deliberated and contemplated how local education authorities, schools and fostering services may be enabled to better work with foster carers to achieve this shared objective.

An ongoing theme, evidenced in these findings is that foster carers remain concerned that their skills and expertise still remains ignored and undervalued, as they do not feel they part of the team around the child. They regard themselves overlooked by professionals and they don't feel that their experience as the primary carers of the children and young people is valued, perhaps as much as it should be. This report consolidates the findings outlined in our earlier consultation with foster carers.

In particular, they drew attention to the PDG, support, learning and development, their relationship with the team around the child, stability, and their status as professionals.

The Fostering Network believes that it is essential that Welsh Government's looked after children's strategy should to continue, and indeed it should be widened it to support foster carers, recognising them as first educators, providing educational support and resources to enhance the social, personal and educational development of the children and young people in their care.

We must all look further than just improving educational achievements for children in care, there must also be a focus on their health and wellbeing. Not only are these important outcomes by themselves, but happy and healthy children are more likely to achieve educational success and grow into successful adults.

16. Next steps

The Fostering Network team would welcome further dialogue on the elements raised in this consultation with foster carers, and will continue to play a key role in raising the educational attainment of looked after children and young people in Wales.

We propose that further work is undertaken to:

- Disseminate the findings of this report to foster carers, policy makers, social work practitioners, third sector organisations and organisations and individuals representing education.
- Bring together foster carers, social care and educational professionals to discuss the issues together.
- Continue and develop the publication of foster carer resources, such as *Making it Happen* and events, such as the masterclasses, to continue to inspire foster carers to help fostered children and young people in their care raise their ambitions and fulfil their potential in education. Encouraging them to consult, challenge and collaborate with schools as an integral part of the team around the child.

The Fostering Network Wales can offer bespoke and responsive consultancy-based services and interventions as Welsh Government further develops its looked after children's education strategy.

References

1. Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales, Welsh Government, Action Plan 2015 – 1026. January 2016.

For further information please contact:

Maria Boffey
Programmes and Business Development Manager
The Fostering Network Wales
1 Caspian Point
Pierhead Street
Cardiff Bay
CF10 4DQ

Tel: 029 2044 0940
Maria.boffey@fostering.net