

State of Scotland's Foster Care

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June 2019

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Foreword

Over the past few years, our State of the Nation report has become recognised as the most comprehensive insight into foster carers' views of fostering in the UK. I am delighted that we have now extracted the data specifically for Scotland and hope that the publication of this report will be of use to the independent care review in making their recommendations, to the Scottish Government and policy makers in creating positive change, to fostering services in benchmarking their own activity, and to foster carers in understanding how their own experiences compare with others.

We greatly appreciate the time which foster carers took to complete our State of the Nation survey. While we are pleased to hear of positive experiences and of good practice examples, we are extremely concerned to read the message from foster carers about the lack of support, training, respect and remuneration they receive. If we want foster carers to nurture the children they care for and for genuinely positive lifelong relationships to develop – if we want foster care to be the very best it can be in Scotland – then we must ensure that foster carers themselves are properly treated and supported.

We – everyone involved in fostering in Scotland – need this to be a year of action. This report and the messages it draws from the foster carers who took our survey, reinforces the need for urgent change to the support, training, attitudes towards, and terms and conditions for foster carers.

We will, of course, be urging the Scottish Government, the Care Inspectorate, the care review and other policy makers and fostering services across Scotland to implement the recommendations in this report.

If we want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up, then we believe these recommendations are important steps towards ensuring that foster carers and the children and young people they are caring for are supported by a fostering system that will help us to reach that aspiration.

Sara Lurie
Director of The Fostering Network in Scotland
June 2019

About the State of the Nation's Foster Care

Three-quarters of children in care living away from home and family in Scotland are being cared for by foster families. This means that improving the outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care. Foster carers are well placed to tell us about how foster care is working for the children they look after and highlighting the areas that need to be improved. The Fostering Network regularly conducts an in-depth survey of foster carers throughout the UK and we publish our State of the Nation report based on the survey findings.

In 2018 our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as placement stability, training and support for carers, and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 4,037 responses from across the UK, with 500 from Scotland, which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers.

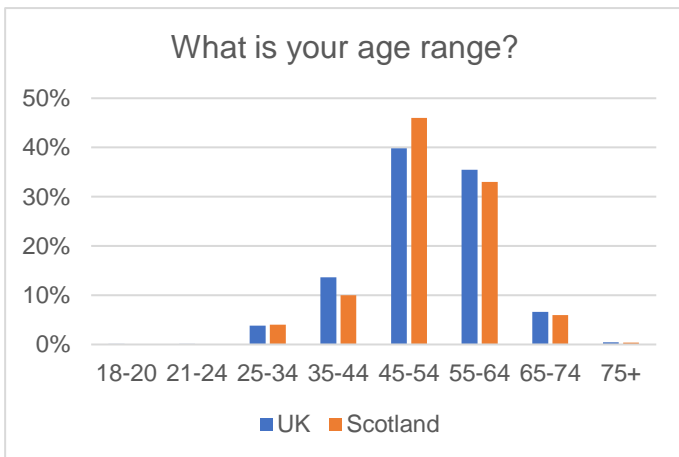
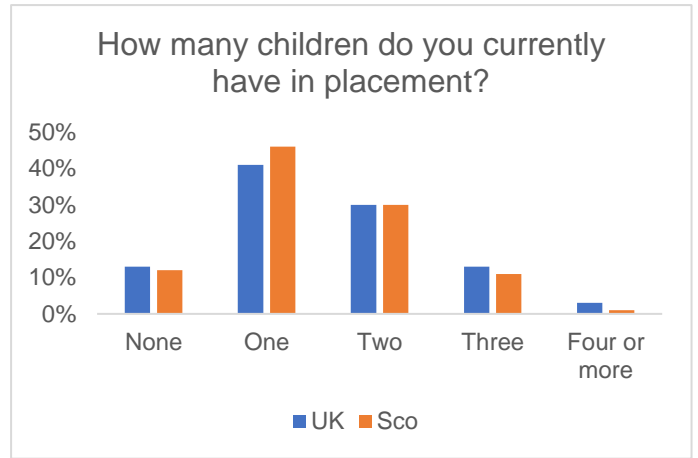
The Fostering Network will use the survey findings to influence the foster care agenda and create change through bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers. We will work with key stakeholders to advocate for the report's recommendations to be implemented in Scotland, with the aim of ensuring all fostered children are given the best possible care.

To read the UK report, please visit www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn .

1. Foster carer profile

500 foster carers from Scotland responded to our 2018 State of the Nation survey.

- 64 per cent foster for a local authority and 36 per cent for an independent/voluntary provider.
- The number of fostered children currently in placement: none - 12 per cent, one - 46 per cent, two - 30 per cent, three - 11 per cent, and four or more - 1 per cent.
- 19 per cent of respondents were male and 81 per cent were female.
- Nine out of ten (89 per cent) foster carers who responded were between the ages of 35 and 64, with the most common age range being 45-54 (46 per cent of the total).



The typical foster carer in Scotland, based on survey respondents:

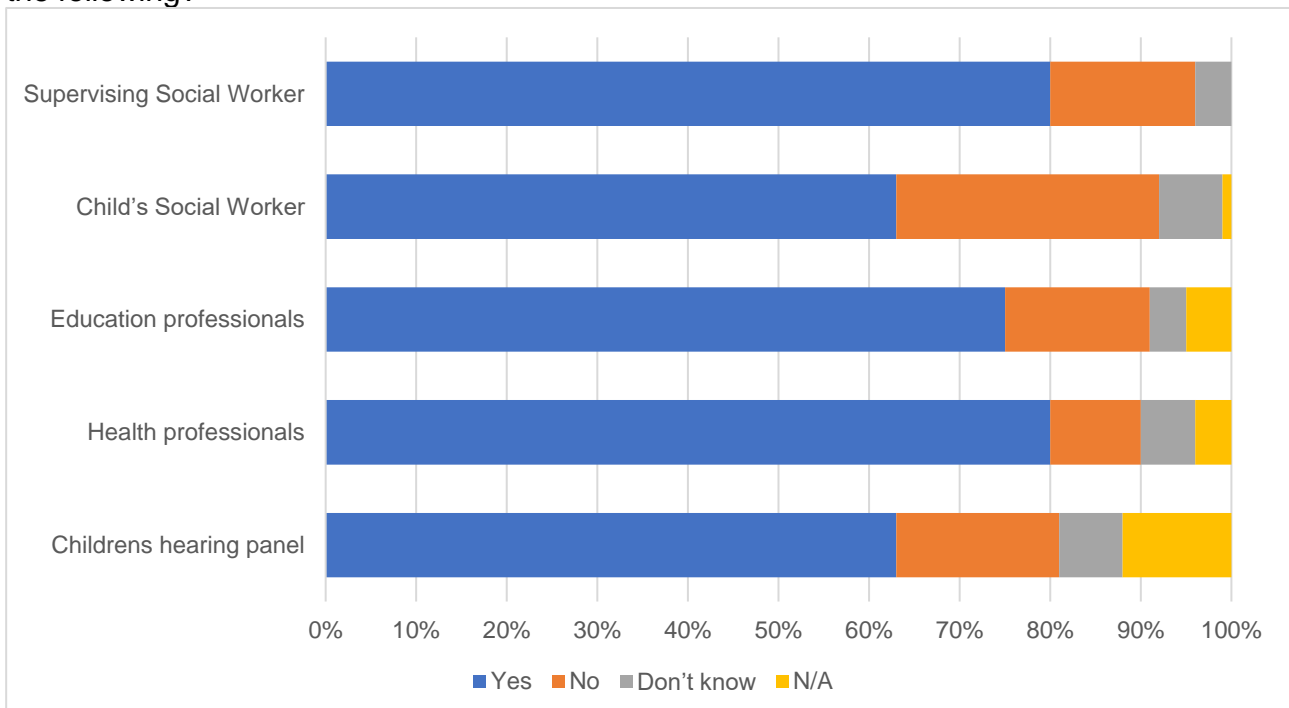
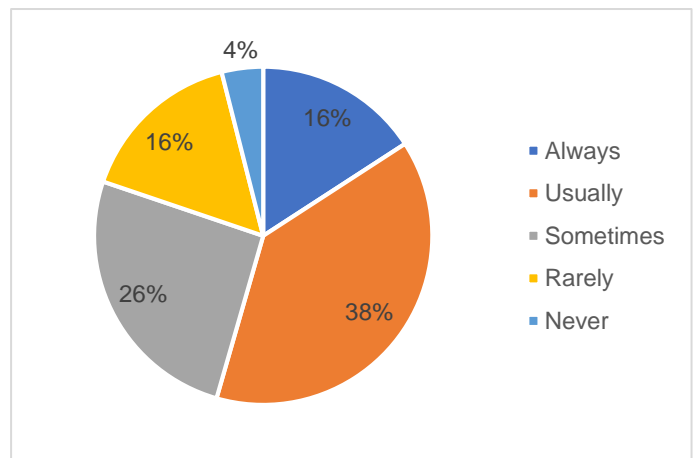
- is aged between 45 and 64
- is female
- is fostering with their partner
- currently has one or two children in placement
- has no birth children currently at home.

2. Status and authority

A foster carer is a key member of the team around the child and often, as the person who lives with and looks after the child on a day-to-day basis, the one who knows and understands them best. For many children, birth parents still hold parental rights and responsibilities. Foster carers often have the least authority out of all those in the team supporting the child. To ensure children are not disadvantaged in respect of day-to-day decisions, this day-to-day decision making should be delegated by local authorities to foster carers.

Key findings

- Nearly one third of foster carers (29 per cent) say it is not clear what day-to-day decisions they have the authority to make.
- Foster carers were asked: when authority is not delegated to you on certain matters, do you feel that social workers respond to your or the young person's requests for decisions in a timely manner?
 - Always/usually - 54 per cent
 - Sometimes/rarely/never – 46 per cent
- These figures indicate a clear delay in the system at a local level which ultimately results in fostered children being prevented from fully participating in normal family, school and social activities.
- In general, do you feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by the following?



- While it is encouraging that 80 per cent of foster carers feel that they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team by their supervising social worker, it is concerning that 16 per cent say they do not. Moreover, when it comes to the child's social worker, the number of respondents who feel they are treated as an equal member of the team drops to 63 per cent.

Recommendation for the Scottish Government and the wider sector

- The foster carer role must be recognised by all those involved in the children's sector as a key member of the team around the child.
- The Scottish Government draft guidance on decision making for foster carers needs to be finalised, published, promoted and implemented.

Recommendations for local authorities and fostering services

- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.
- It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.
- When foster carers are informed of the day-to-day decisions that they can make, they need to have the authority to make these decisions to ensure that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family.

3. Training and support

3.1 Training

Foster carers tell us that the children and young people they foster require additional support, and children need carers who have an understanding of the impact of early trauma and aware of the needs for the children they care for. There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers to meet these needs. The Scotland learning and development standard for foster care was written in 2017 and is available to download from the SSSC website¹. However, implementation of this standard is on hold pending the outcome of the care review.

The training gaps highlighted below are a clear indication of the specialised role of foster carers and highlight the challenges faced by today's carers.

Key findings

- 45 per cent of carers who are supporting a child with mental health needs say they have been unable to access the relevant specialised support.
- When asked about the issues and challenges faced in the past 24 months, 50 per cent of respondents said they had looked after a fostered child who had either:
 - caused violence in their home
 - self-harmed
 - gone missing from the home; or
 - been involved with the police.
- The top five training gaps identified by carers are therapeutic parenting, behaviour management, mental health, specialised first aid and attachment.



- Since 2016 there has been a marked increase, from 36 per cent to 54 per cent, in the proportion of carers reporting that they have an agreed training plan in place for the next 12 months. This is still very low and lags behind the rest of the UK, which is 59 per cent.

- There is an improvement since 2016 (from 83 per cent to 89 per cent) in the proportion of carers feeling the training provided had helped with their fostering.

¹SSSC Standard for Foster Care 2017 <https://www.sssc.uk.com/knowledgebase/article/KA-01352/en-us>

Recommendation for the Scottish Government

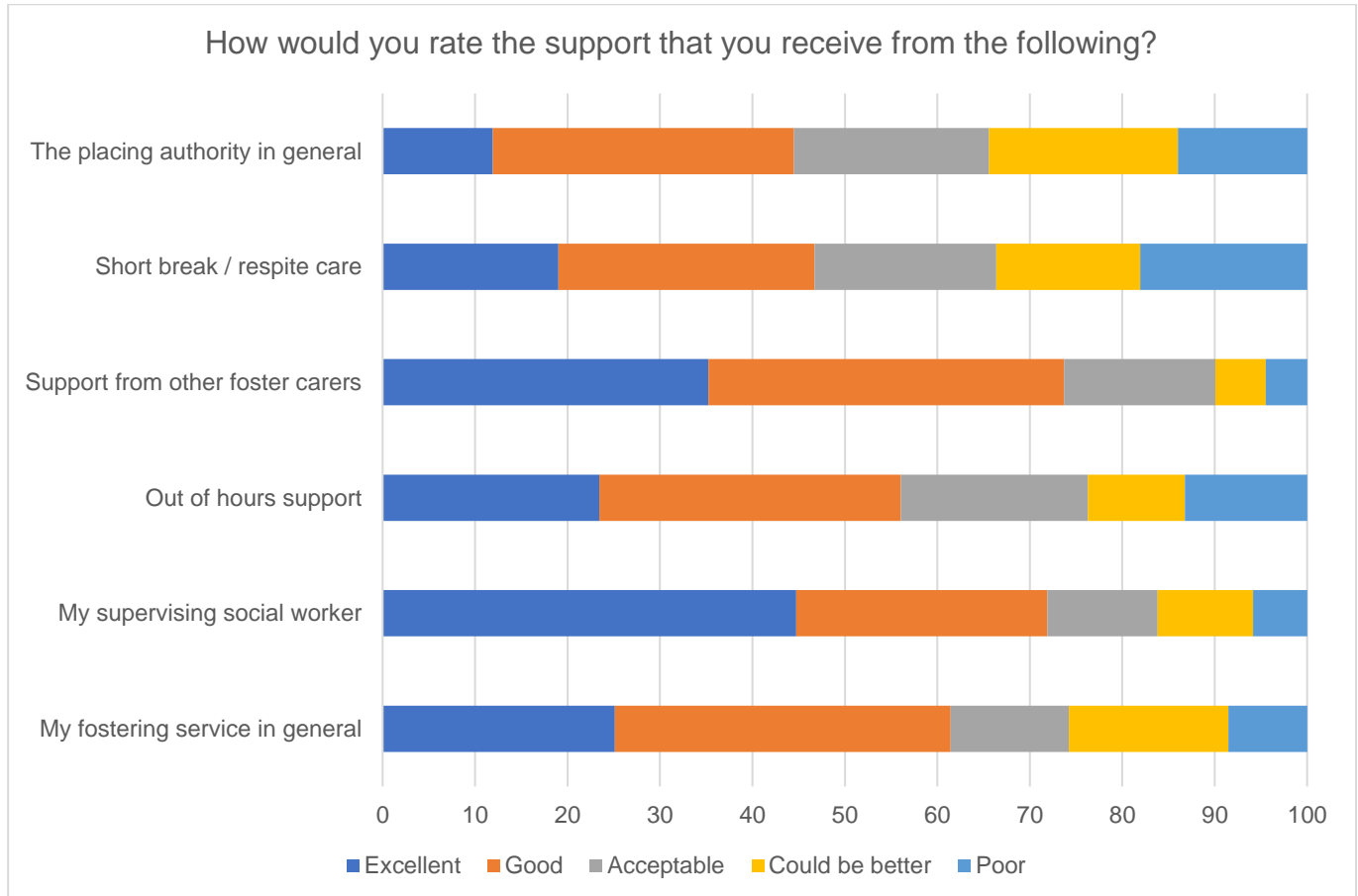
- The learning and development standard for foster care needs to be reviewed to ensure it fully covers accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training. It should then be implemented across Scotland.

Recommendation for fostering services

- All foster carers should have an agreed annual training plan that addresses both the core and specialised training required to meet the needs of the children they are caring for.

3.2 Support

Fostering is an immensely rewarding role, but it can often be challenging. Therefore, the formal support foster carers receive at an organisational level and the informal support from their family, friends and peers is crucial and can make a difference to the stability and success of placements.



Key findings

- 56 per cent of foster carers feel that their out of hours support was excellent or good.
- Just under half (46 per cent) feel they received excellent or good short break/respite support.
- Foster carers have a more positive perception of formal support at an individual level from their supervising social worker (72 per cent saying excellent or good) than the support from their fostering service (61 per cent saying excellent or good).
- Only 44 per cent of foster carers rated support from the child’s local authority as excellent or good. This finding supports the often reported disconnect between foster carers and children’s social workers which can reduce the effectiveness of the placement.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Support for foster carers, and other members of the fostering household, should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- All services should provide a dedicated, responsive out of hours fostering support service for carers.
- All services should provide clarity on the availability of short break provision and it should be delivered as agreed.

4. Stability

Stability means ensuring that every child in care is found the right placement as soon as possible and that the local authority supports the placement to ensure that it lasts for as long as the child needs it. Where this is with a foster family, this means that both the child and foster family should be offered all the support and help they need to make the relationship successful. Although some placement moves may be in the best interests of a child, we believe that too many looked after children are experiencing multiple moves and placement instability.

We are concerned that for some children the decisions to end a placement are not in their best interests. Decisions are often made without an independent mechanism in place.

A child's psychological and emotional wellbeing can be compromised every time they have an unplanned move, and placement instability often contributes to a range of poor outcomes, including poorer educational achievement, breakdown of relationships with trusted adults and the ability to make and maintain such vital relationships in the future.

Key findings

- Over the past three years one-third of foster carers said they have experienced an unplanned placement ending when they felt it was not in the child's best interests.
- Over two-thirds (67 per cent) of foster carers were not given the opportunity to feed referral information into the next placement.

Recommendation for the Scottish Government

- A process must be developed and implemented in Scotland to independently review end of placement decisions to ensure they are in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations for local authorities

- Independent review of placement decisions should be mandatory. With the exception of a child protection concern, placements should not end unless a review has been held and views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carers and the fostering service as well as the local authority.
- Foster carers should always be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition.

5. Continuing Care

'We have loved fostering, it has truly enriched our lives. I'm glad we do it and we have helped nine teenagers at very difficult times in their life. But we haven't been supported when trying to encourage the young person attending university.'

The Fostering Network led the successful Don't Move Me campaign across the UK to allow those leaving foster care to remain with their former foster carer as they enter adulthood. This provision is now legally in place. In Scotland young people (born after 1 April 1999) from the age of 16 are eligible for Continuing Care.

The latest national figures for the destination of young people leaving care show that just three per cent of those beyond minimum school-leaving age when they ceased to be looked after continued to live with former foster carers (Aug 2017-July 2018). This is just 116 young people².

While the number of foster carers who answered questions in our survey about Continuing Care are small (151), their answers, and the Scottish Government's own figures, suggest that this important policy is experiencing implementation issues. The introduction of Continuing Care in 2015 should have provided care experienced young people with stability and security as they continue their education and plan their futures, but insufficient funding combined with a lack of planning and promotion of Continuing Care means that too many young people are forced to move on before they are ready.

Key findings

- 73 foster carers told us they had offered a home to a young person on a Continuing Care basis since 2016.
- However, another 35 foster carers had not been able to, due to factors controlled by the fostering service and/or local authority:
 - one quarter of these said they could not afford the drop in income
 - another quarter of these told us that the opportunity was denied to the young person because the fostering service was not registered as an adult placement service – meaning that Continuing Care could not commence.
- Of the foster carers who did provide a Continuing Care arrangement:
 - more than half had experienced a drop in their overall allowances and fees as a result
 - only a quarter rated the specialised training and support as high or very high quality, and the same number again said that there was **no** extra training or support offered to them.

Continuing Care has the potential to transform the lives of hundreds of young people every year. When introducing the policy, the Government acknowledged the positive difference extra time in a

² Scottish Government's Social Work Statistics 2017-18:

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics-publication/2019/03/childrens-social-work-statistics-2017-2018/documents/childrens-social-work-statistics-scotland-2017-18/childrens-social-work-statistics-scotland-2017-18/govscot%3Adocument>

stable home can make to a care experienced young person. Now it is time to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to stay living with their former foster carer if they want to. We need to create a culture where it is the norm, not the exception, that young people stay on with their foster family after 18.

Recommendations for the Scottish Government

- The Scottish Government should carry out a full review of how Continuing Care has been implemented.
- The Scottish Government should ensure that Continuing Care is properly costed and then fully funded. Additionally, there should be monitoring of the implementation of the policy to ensure practice is in line with national requirements and to share learning from best practice models.
- Continuing Care minimum allowances should be introduced, with such an allowance being sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person.

Recommendations for local authorities and fostering services

- Local authorities in partnership with independent fostering providers should establish contractual arrangements which include Continuing Care arrangements.
- All fostering services should have a Continuing Care policy in place. The policy should clearly explain for young people, carers and fostering service staff how placements will be funded and supported.
- Continuing Care must be introduced as an option in the pathway planning process as early as possible and should be raised with prospective foster carers during the assessment process.
- All former foster carers providing Continuing Care placements should be provided with a Continuing Care allowance and paid a fee in recognition of their time, skills and expertise.
- All fostering services should provide training and support to meet the needs of those offering Continuing Care arrangements.

6. Finances

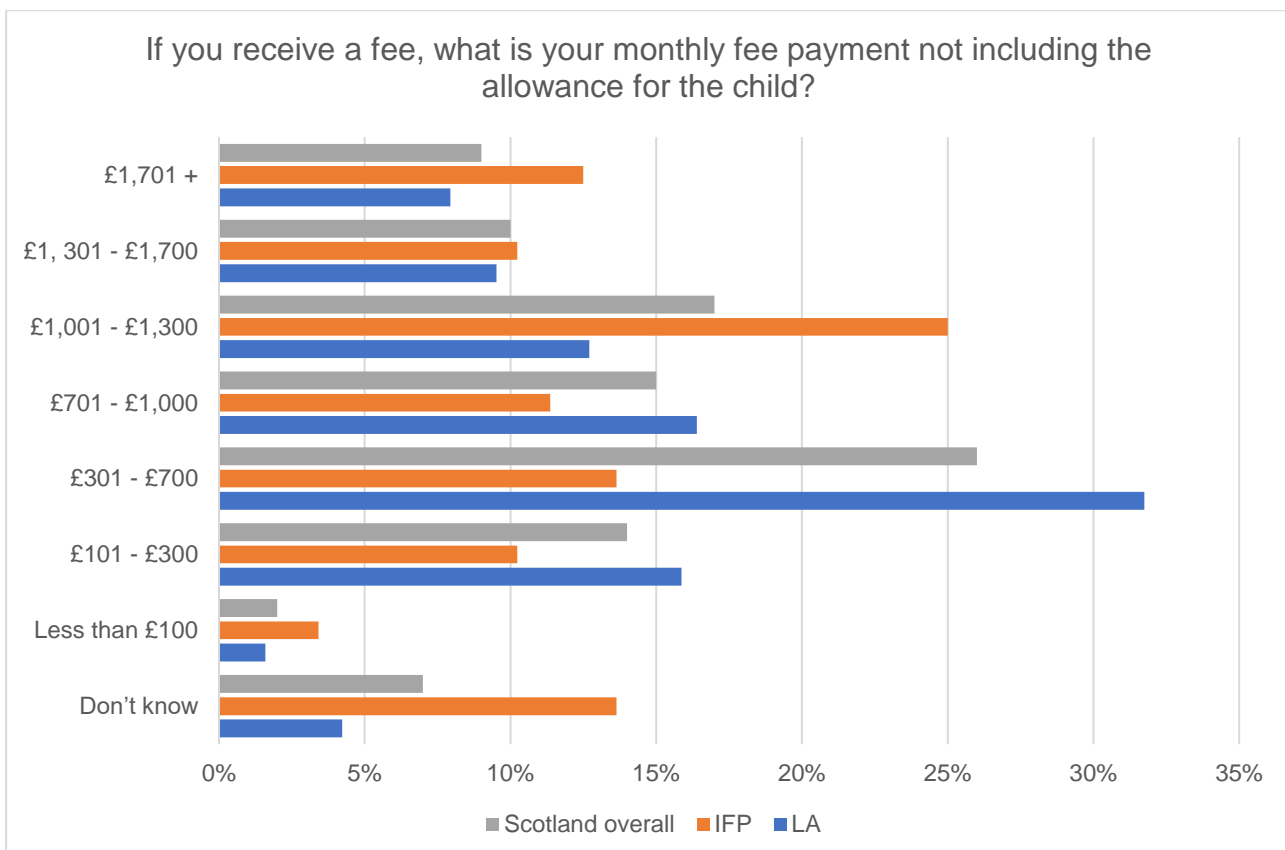
'I live on an island and travel regularly to the mainland for contact. While I feel my fostering allowance covers most living costs, this travel is an extra cost which other mainland carers don't face, and I feel disadvantaged. Social workers and other professionals visiting the island always have their costs met and would never be expected to fund their own travel costs.'

There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering. The allowance is designed to cover the costs of caring for a child. All foster carers in the UK receive an allowance. The other component is a fee which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. Not all foster carers receive fees.

National minimum allowances are established in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Despite years of campaigning and a promise from the Scottish Government that is now over ten years old, there is still no recommended minimum allowance for foster carers in Scotland.

Key findings

- 60 per cent of foster carers feel the fostering allowance and the expenses they can claim do not meet the full costs of looking after their fostered children.
- 89 per cent of foster carers believe carers should be paid a fee for their fostering work. 69 per cent of foster carers believe they receive a fee.
- Only 14 per cent of foster carers are paid at or above the equivalent of the national living wage for a 40-hour week.



Recommendations for the Scottish Government

- The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance.
- Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a fee payment which recognises their time and skills.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Fostering allowances must be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.
- Foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and expertise, preferably via a tiered payment scheme, and carers should receive retainer fees between placements and while any investigation is ongoing in relation to an allegation.
- In the interest of clarity for foster carers, the administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two.
- Allowance and fee levels should be publicly available.

7. Transferring fostering service

While foster carers are self-employed for taxation purposes, they can usually only foster for one fostering service at a time, however derivative approval is within legislation. Transfer protocols are in place in Scotland to guide the way in which fostering services should manage the movement of foster carers between fostering services.

Key findings

- 13 per cent of foster carers wanted to move fostering service recently but did not do so. The top two reasons given for not moving were:
 - too much time and effort to go through the assessment and approval process again
 - their long-term placement would have to leave.
- more than eight in 10 of those carers who did move had to redo the whole approval process when they transferred, which took on average six months to complete.

Recommendation for the Scottish Government

- A central register of foster carers should be introduced in Scotland, which would greatly enhance portability of the foster care workforce by providing a licence to practise approach. When a foster carer decides to move to another fostering service, the new fostering service would be able to carry out a check of the central register to confirm their approval status and then would only need to go through the fostering service's recruitment and interview process.

Recommendation for local authorities

- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.

8. Approval range

Foster carers will usually be given terms of approval which set out the number and age range of children, and any other information about the type of foster care that they are approved to provide. Over time the foster carer may request a change in their approval range or the fostering service may suggest a change. This and previous surveys highlight a trend of foster carers being pressured to take children from outside their approval range and then not being given additional support and training.

The high percentage of foster carers being asked to take children from outside their approval range could be an indication that local authorities are struggling to recruit and retain the right pool of foster carers to meet the needs of the current care population.

Key findings

- Just over half of foster carers (53 per cent) have been asked to take children outside their age approval range.
- A third (32 per cent) of foster carers have been asked to take children from outside their approved type of fostering.
- Three-quarters of foster carers (73 per cent) were not given additional support or training if taking a child outside of their approval range.

Recommendation for the Scottish Government

- Regulatory and inspection frameworks should be designed and implemented which require local authorities to carry out a needs analysis of their local looked after children population to inform targeted recruitment and commissioning.

Recommendation for local authorities

- 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 and commissioning strategy for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Foster carers should only be asked to take children within their approval.
- Where it has been agreed by the foster carer and agency decision maker that a foster carer's approval should change, they should receive additional training and support as required.

9. Allegations support

'I felt isolated and left in the cold, with very little communication from all other professionals.'

An allegation within foster care is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or other member of the fostering household has – or may have – behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child, or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. Unfortunately, facing an allegation is something that many foster carers will experience during their fostering career and will inevitably be a distressing time. The vast majority of allegations will be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

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.

Key findings

- Only 48 per cent of foster carers have received allegations training (UK was 58 per cent).
- Nearly a third (28 per cent) of foster carers have experienced one or more allegation during their fostering career.
- Following their allegation, two-thirds (67 per cent) did not receive independent support. This is unchanged from 2016.

Recommendations for fostering services

- As part of the assessment process, fostering services must be confident that the prospective foster carer is aware of the implications of having an allegation being made against them.
- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales. Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.
- Foster carers must be given access to independent support throughout the allegation process.

10. Contact with former foster children

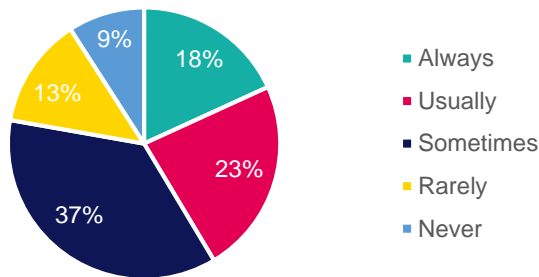
The relationship between fostered children and their former foster carers is increasingly being recognised as extremely important to the development and wellbeing of the child.

While there may be times when it is not in a child’s best interests to keep in contact with their previous foster families or others, these should be the exception rather than the rule. We asked foster carers to tell us about their experiences of staying in touch with children and young people they previously fostered.

Forming and maintaining attachments in childhood can make it easier for young people to have stable relationships in later life.

Key findings

Do you keep in contact with former fostered children?

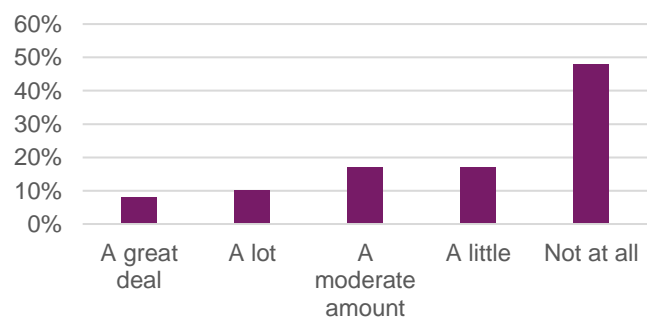


- 41 per cent of foster carers told us that they usually or always keep in touch with their former fostered children. 21 per cent, however, rarely or never remain in contact.

- Almost a third (30 per cent) of foster carers said they had been prevented from keeping in contact with a child they had fostered.

- By far the most likely parties to have prevented ongoing contact between a child and their former foster carer were the local authority, fostering service or social worker. The child’s adopters were the next most commonly cited group, with birth family and future foster carers accounting for a minority of cases.
- 65 per cent of foster carers told us they received little or no support to maintain contact with their former fostered children, while just 18 per cent felt they get a great deal or a lot of support.

How supported do you feel in maintaining contact with former fostered children?



Recommendation for the Scottish Government

- Guidance should be introduced to ensure that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them. Foster carers should be 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.

- All those in the team around the child should embed the Keep Connected principles³ in their work to support children to maintain their relationships.

³ Keep Connected Principles:

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/keepconnectedprinciples.pdf>

11. Views and attitudes on fostering

'Fostering is the most rewarding job on the planet, but also one of the hardest. However just to see a smile on a face that arrived full of fear is priceless.'

In this report we have summarised how foster care is a complex and sometimes challenging job. It is important also to understand what motivates people to do this work, whether they would recommend it to other people, and how they think fostering can be improved.

Key findings

- What makes you continue to foster? We gave a list of 11 reasons from which foster carers could choose as many or as few as they liked. The top three reasons chosen were the same as 2016:
 - I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care - 89 per cent.
 - I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family - 75 per cent.
 - I really enjoy working with the children - 74 per cent.
- Would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?
 - 61 per cent said yes.
- When do you think you will stop fostering?
 - 45 per cent said they will continue for 'as long as I am able'. This is a drop from 53 per cent in 2016.
- What one thing would you change to make foster care better? This was an open answer question, and the top three themes that emerged were:
 - improve pay
 - be treated more as a professional
 - receive better support.

These three themes remain unchanged from 2016 and are clearly reflective of the issues we have highlighted in this report.

Appendix

Methodology

The State of the Nation survey was launched in July 2018 and ran for two months. It was conducted online, using SurveyMonkey. The survey was promoted to foster carers via our website, member e-news, social media, podcasts, and our membership magazine, Foster Care. In total 4,037 foster carers from across the UK took part in the survey, which represents just over four per cent of the estimated total foster carer population of 91,093. This was a significant increase over the 2,500 respondents we received in the 2016 survey. 500 foster carers from Scotland took part.

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