

State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016

What foster carers think and feel about fostering

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EVERY CHILD • EVERY CARER • EVERY DAY

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Foreword

In 1974 a group of foster carers and social workers sat around a kitchen table in Camden, north London. Their mission? To improve the experiences of fostered children, by recognising the role of foster care and foster carers, and ensuring that national and local governments across the UK did the same. And so the organisation that eventually became The Fostering Network was born.

Forty two years later, what has changed? On one level, an immense amount. It is widely recognised that good foster care transforms the lives of children, and that a family setting is the best option for the vast majority of children in care. Foster carers now get minimum allowances across the UK with the exception of Scotland, and we are hopeful that the Scottish Government will remedy this very soon. Over half of foster carers now get paid, and the need for support, training and delegated authority is more universally accepted. The majority of these improvements are a direct legacy of the work of those 1970s carers, having been driven by the campaigning, advice and practice innovation work of The Fostering Network and its members.

But – and it is a big but – there is still a huge way to go. This report, sharing the views of over 2,500 foster carers from across the UK, makes difficult reading in places. It shows clearly the ongoing need for everyone involved in the fostering world to recognise and value foster carers as the key professional in the team around the child, and for their terms and conditions to be enhanced, formalised and protected. The impact of these issues not being addressed over many years is that, despite being deeply committed to the children in their care, too many foster carers are not definitely willing to recommend fostering to others.

This year, the Westminster Government is embarking on a fostering stocktake in England, while the education committee has embarked on a fostering inquiry. North of the border, the Scottish Government is carrying out a review of care, and looked after children's issues are also on the agenda in Wales and Northern Ireland. We have already begun to share the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this report with these governments, and will continue to do so over the coming weeks and months.

For decades fostering has benefited from a dedicated, committed and expert workforce of foster carers who spend their days and years helping fostered children transform their lives. We believe that the State of the Nation report acts as a warning to governments across the UK that this dedication should not be taken for granted any longer. Real change is needed, and it is needed now.



Kevin Williams
Chief Executive

Executive summary

Our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as matching, placement stability, training and support for carers and status of the workforce. We received a record 2,530 responses, giving us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers.

Views and attitudes of foster carers

What makes you continue to foster?

Top three answers:

- To make a difference to the lives of children in care
- To offer children a positive experience of family life
- I enjoy working with children

When do you think you will stop fostering?

(responses from foster carers aged under 55)

- I will continue for as long as I am able – 53%
- In more than 10 years – 17%
- 6-10 years – 13%
- 1-5 years – 11%
- 7 months – 1 year – 2%
- 0-6 months – 4%

One change that would help you improve the lives of children you care for:

- Improved communication and support from the fostering service
- Being treated more as a professional
- Better financial support

Key finding: Even though the majority of foster carers said they want to continue to foster for as long as they are able, only 55 per cent would definitely recommend fostering to others. The findings indicate there is dissatisfaction with the system but carers continue to be committed to the children in their care.

Workforce issues

Training and support

- 49 per cent of foster carers did not have an agreed training plan for the next year
- 27 per cent of foster carers described respite support as *excellent or good*
- A third of foster carers described out of hours support as *could be better or poor*

Status and authority

- 32 per cent of foster carers felt that children's social workers do not treat them as an equal member of the team around the child

- Only 14 per cent of foster carers had moved to another service – but 12 per cent had wanted to but had not
- A third of short-term placement carers felt that they were only allowed to make appropriate decisions *some of the time, rarely or never*

Key workforce recommendations:

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.
- Registers (centrally held lists) of approved foster carers should be created in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Governments should revisit the minimum levels of fostering allowances and the Scottish Government must introduce minimum recommended allowances.

Practice issues

Information sharing

- 31 per cent of foster carers reported that they were *rarely or never* given all of the information about a fostered child prior to placement
- 46 per cent of foster carers said their fostered children were *unlikely* to receive information about independent visitors

Placement stability

- 49 per cent of respondents had experienced a placement ending when they felt it was not in the child's best interests
- 61 per cent of foster carers who had experienced a placement ending said it had not been preceded by a review

Approval range

- Almost a third of foster carers had been referred children from outside their defined approval range
- 52 per cent of those who had taken children from outside their approval range had felt pressured into it
- Three-quarters of those who had taken a child from outside their approval range said they received no additional training and support from their fostering service

Key practice recommendations

- Foster carers should always be given all of the available information they need about a child.
- Responsible authorities in England and Wales should adhere to existing regulations that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held.
- Local authorities should conduct local needs analysis of their population of looked after children in order to determine the types of care placements required and to inform recruitment and commissioning.

1. Introduction

Three-quarters of looked after children in the UK are being cared for by foster families. This means that improving the outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care. 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. This is our second State of the Nation report, our first was published in 2014.

In 2016 our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as placement matching and stability, training and support for carers, and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 2,530 responses which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers across the UK. We would like to thank all those foster carers who took the time to complete the survey, and share their views and experience of fostering.

The Fostering Network will use the survey findings to influence the 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, with the aim of ensuring all fostered children are given the best possible care.

We recognise there are different frameworks and approaches in each of the four nations of the UK, but the needs of foster carers and children are the same across the UK, and the principles are the same. Therefore we are making one set of recommendations, while understanding that they may need different interpretation, application and timescales in each country.

2. Methodology

The State of the Nation survey was launched in July 2016 and ran for three months until September 2016. It was conducted online, although hard copies were available upon request. The survey was promoted to foster carers via our website, member e-news, social media and our membership magazine, *Foster Care*. In total 2,530 foster carers from across the UK completed the survey online: 1,942 of these fostered in England, 359 in Scotland, 122 in Wales and 107 in Northern Ireland. These numbers represent four per cent, eight per cent, three per cent, and five per cent of the total foster carer populations respectively.

Figures cited in this report refer to the percentages of those who responded to the question being discussed. As well as analysing the data and comments for each question, we also compared the data with previous surveys where possible and analysed the data for similarities and differences between countries and types of fostering providers, such as public authority, independent fostering providers (IFPs) and independent voluntary providers (Scotland). Where country variations are not highlighted the findings were reflected across the UK.

When 'local authorities' are referenced in the report, the term refers to local authorities or children's trusts in England, Wales and Scotland, and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. 'IFPs' refers to both independent fostering providers and independent voluntary providers (Scotland).

Fostering, while rooted in providing families for children, is not a single entity. Some foster carers offer occasional short break care, others emergency or short-term placements, while some provide children with a home for their whole childhoods and transition into adulthood. Many foster carers do a mix of these forms of fostering. Some foster carers are approved to provide care specifically to members of their extended family; these 'kinship' or 'family and friends' foster carers may have different needs and expectations from some of their 'mainstream' colleagues. Our recommendations throughout this report principally relate to mainstream foster carers.

We will repeat the survey every two years in order to track progress or changes in foster carers' attitudes to, and experiences of, the various issues they face.

3. Views and attitudes of foster carers

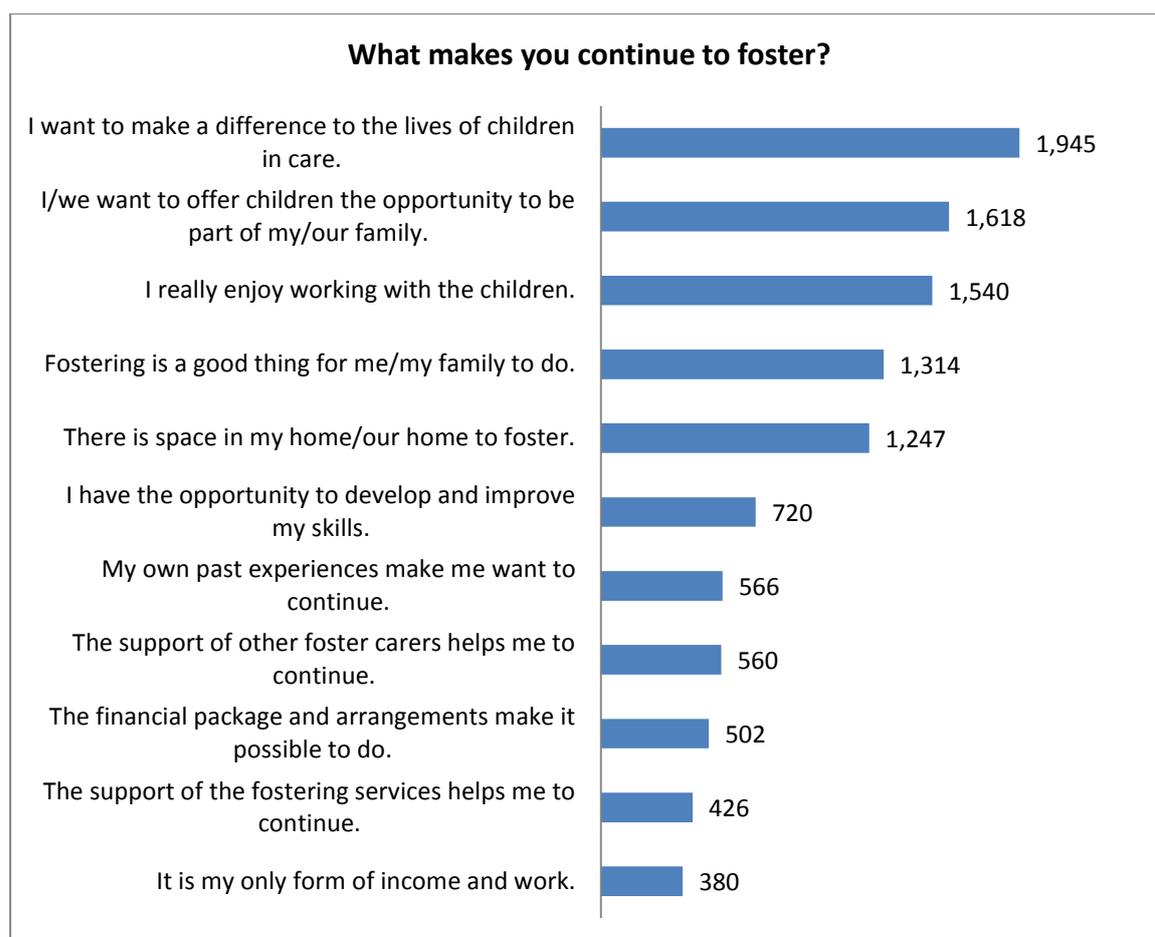
3.1 Motivations to foster

We asked foster carers:

What makes you continue to foster?

We gave a list of 11 reasons, from which they could choose as many or few as they liked. The results are shown in the graph below. **The principal reason foster carers were motivated to continue to foster was ‘to make a difference to the lives of children in care’, with over 90 per cent of the respondents choosing this option.**

Other important motivations for fostering were: a sense that foster carers can offer a positive experience of family life, enjoying working with children, and having the space to do so. It is notable that only a relatively small minority of carers felt that the support from their fostering service and financial matters contributed to their decision to continue to foster.



We asked a similar question in 2014, and the main motivational reasons have not changed in the intervening two years, except that there is now an even stronger sense in the fostering community that they want to make a difference to children’s lives – the percentage of those

choosing this most popular theme has increased from 84 to 91 per cent of respondents. The following open-ended comments back up the headline figures above and give a flavour of the foster carer workforce in 2016.

'Love to see troubled children blossom and achieve their dreams.'

'We have been fostering for 16 years. Our own children have known no other life and consider themselves to be part of the team. The fostered children are an integral part of our close and extended family, because that's what fostering is about: an ordinary life in an ordinary family setting.'

'The fee is poor, social workers are overworked... if I found another job I'd be gone. It is only due to the children that I stay.'

'The eldest of our foster children is now in university. We are so proud of his achievements and feel that we have obviously influenced his decisions by giving him the support, and belief in his capabilities. All of the challenges are negated when you achieve this outcome. Making a difference matters... All of our foster children are thriving. It doesn't always have a successful outcome but when it does it makes it all worthwhile.'

We also asked:

Would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?

In response, just over half of foster carers said yes. Unfortunately this is a marked decrease from our 2014 survey, when the corresponding result was two-thirds. Those fostering for IFPs were more likely to recommend fostering compared with those fostering for local authorities, with 'yes' results of 63 and 54 per cent respectively.

We wanted to find out why a growing number of foster carers feel unable to recommend the role. Analysing the answers of those who answered 'no' to this question showed that foster carers feel increasingly unsupported and underpaid, and that they are not treated as professionals.

'Intrusive assessment by poorly trained staff. Judgemental attitude of children's social workers, stress of rules, regulations, non-existent support, constantly feel vulnerable, no long term security for child, inadequate financial support for working carers.'

'No employment rights, no regular pay or work, can go months between placements with no money.'

'Not enough support, more and more work you have to do yourself, lots of paperwork, you don't feel valued, it's a lonely job, can be tough on your own family, you don't get listened to, decisions are made without your input and they won't be explained to you, you don't always get paid expenses even though you put them in on time... it's not about the children anymore it's about budget.'

'There is no backup and support for carers and we have seen many good caring families fall apart and become scapegoats for the incompetence of social workers. We have had some bitter experiences ourselves but have fought on for the children.'

'You have no rights at all. Very often your opinion is disregarded as you are not regarded as having any degree of common sense as you are "only the foster carer".'

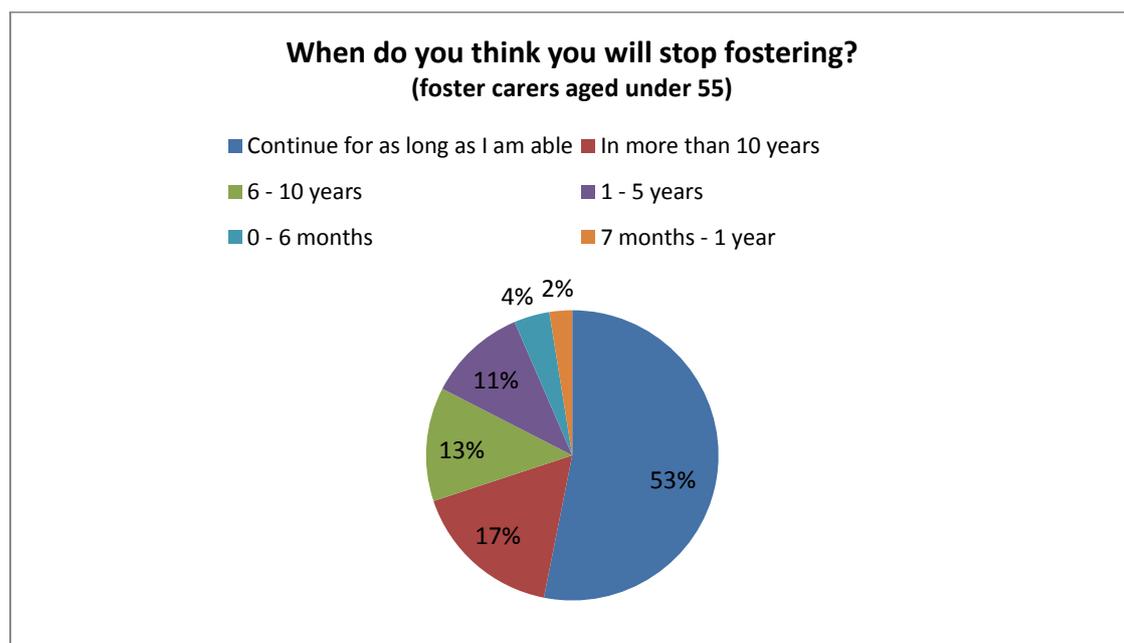
'When we started fostering we were not adequately informed of the risks to our family. We are now older and wiser, but the level of intrusion that a demanding placement can make on day to day life is severe and our family is usually not a priority. We have also been placed at risk due to lack of disclosure of all pertinent information relating to placements which has placed our children at risk (we are parent/child specialists).'

'Over the last few years it has become virtually impossible to treat foster children as we would our birth children. If we can't treat them equally this creates issues within the house in a huge variety of day to day situations (e.g. birth son and foster child at same college. I had to ring the college and social worker to get permission for birth son to bring foster child home when there was extreme weather. If he'd been a birth child I'd have just rung them both).'

We asked:

When do you think you will stop fostering?

Despite the concerns about recommending fostering to others, a clear majority of foster carers aged under 55 plan to continue to foster for at least 10 years or as long as they are able. Only six per cent think they will leave within a year.



Meanwhile, 71 per cent of foster carers think that foster carers and fostering are *quite or very well respected* by the public in general. This figure has not changed since 2014.

Finally in this section, we asked foster carers:

If you could choose one thing to change to help you and other foster carers to improve the lives of the young people you care for, what would it be?

There were 1,642 responses to this open-ended question, and many respondents took the time to give very detailed answers. The top three themes emerging, with illustrative quotes beneath them, were similar to those found in other parts of this survey and are as follows:

- **Improving the communication and support from their fostering service (312 responses)**
 - *'Better communication to keep us informed of changes in the child's life. We heard about the agreement that our foster child was now able to have supervised contact with his mother, and that his father had been released from prison, from our four-year-old foster child himself. These are material facts that should have been communicated to us. This kind of communication does not seem to be any kind of priority at all.'*

- **Being treated more as a professional (249 responses)**
 - *'More recognition of the increasingly difficult and complex task that foster carers take on and an acceptance that is no longer the informal "looking after some kids" process that it once was. It is now an increasingly professional role and it should be valued and rewarded in line with the complexity of the task.'*
 - *'For decisions and social workers not to be so subjective. You could have one social worker's views conflict so much with another's. Decisions made through the courts are made due to the evidence submitted by the social working team. I often feel that foster carers' views are totally undervalued. I have been made to feel like I am the best foster carer in the world when I am agreeing with the child's social worker, but once I question a decision or comment, I am quickly told I am too involved with the child and then become the "problem foster carer". I raised this at a support group once, there were 22 foster carers present and they all had experienced this first hand. To me that says that there should be more training for social workers in how to respect and value foster carers.'*
 - *'For the local authority to embed the values in The Fostering Charter.'*
 - *'Whistleblowing protection so foster carers can report poor and bad practices.'*
 - *'Make professionals listen more to foster carers. We live with the children 24/7 not just for an hour a month.'*

- *'To be an equal voice with the other professionals, so that foster carers views are respected and listened to. We are the people who get to know the children best and should be seen as important advocates for these children.'*
- **Better financial support (165 responses)**
 - *'I have not been able to take any children for the last few months as I have had to go back to work, as we could no longer survive on one income. I think foster carers should be paid: for financial reasons I can no longer foster as you cannot work and foster babies at the same time. This has been a really hard decision for me as I loved fostering.'*
 - *'Social services (managers) to realise the fostering payments are a LIVING wage and we are not working whilst looking after the children: they want us to be available 24/7. So when they keep trying to find ways to cut our payments via respite or mileage we become more of a charity. We love our children but it's our job, and social services constantly play on our emotions knowing we won't give up on the children but they will continue to make changes until we are looking after the children for FREE!'*
 - *'The foster care allowance is, sadly nowhere near enough to fully help the child as much as possible. I feel it is very sad that foster carers are just expected to dip into their own pockets time and time again. Foster carers badly need more money in their fostering allowance.'*
 - *'Don't penalise me financially for looking after over 18s.'*

These are recurring themes and similar to those found in 2014.

Other prominent ways to improve foster care identified by at least 100 foster carers each were: more freedom to make decisions about children they care for, less 'red tape', and better support and understanding of foster care from children's (as opposed to supervising) social workers.

4. Foster care workforce issues

4.1 Training and support

4.1.1 Training

Foster carers work within a tightly regulated service and are increasingly being required to have a thorough understanding of child development and the legislative system within which they work. Depending on the needs and age of the children they are looking after, foster carers also require an understanding of many areas including the education and health systems, mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency, child sexual exploitation and the asylum system.

In order to become a foster carer, all successful applicants receive pre-approval training. Currently this is not standardised across the UK but the majority of fostering applicants use The Skills to Foster training, published by The Fostering Network. However, expectations regarding the learning and development needs of foster carers, once approved, are currently inconsistent across the four nations of the UK. In England there is no standardised post-approval framework that covers the training expectations of foster carers after they have met the induction standards, set by the Department for Education. In Wales, induction standards exist but are not currently mandatory so not used by all agencies. In Northern Ireland and Scotland there are neither induction standards nor post-approval learning and development frameworks, although the Scottish Government is currently developing a framework. The lack of formal post-approval standards often means that the provision and take up of learning and development by foster carers is varied across the UK.

We asked foster carers:

How many days training related to your fostering have you undertaken in the past 12 months?

Most foster carers had between one and five days training in the past 12 months. Only six per cent in the UK as a whole had received no training, although Northern Ireland showed a discrepancy with a fifth of foster carers receiving no training in the past year.

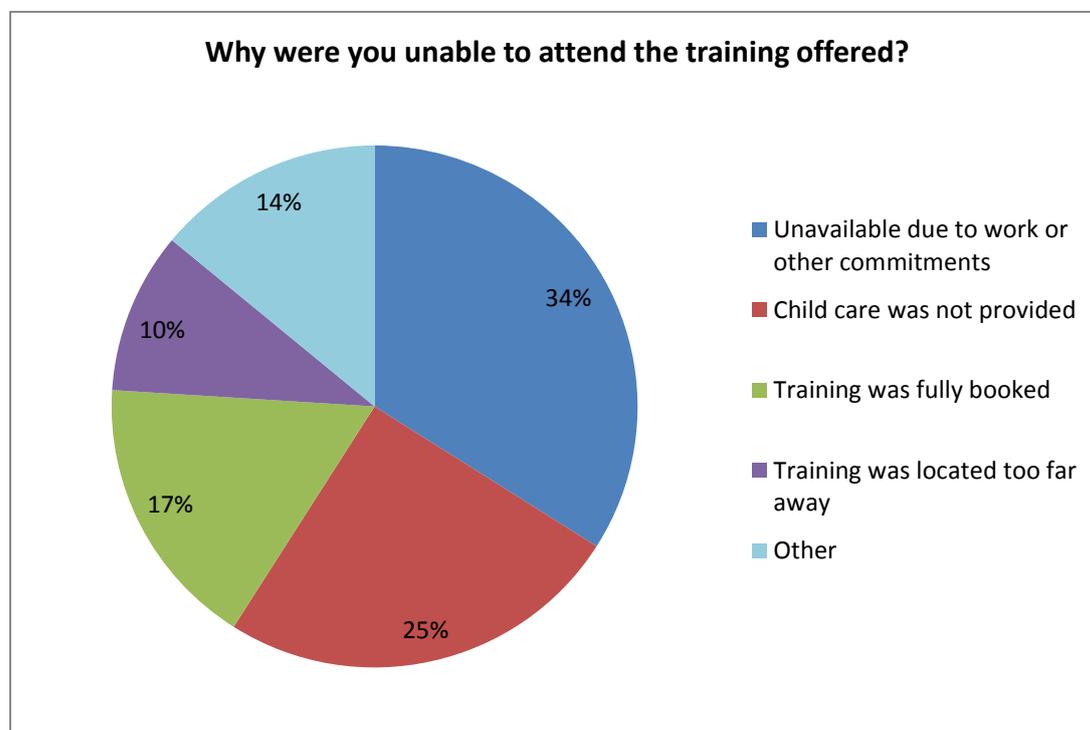
Across the UK, of those who had taken part in training the vast majority (82 per cent) felt it had helped with their foster care. This reflected the position in our 2014 survey.

We also asked foster carers:

Have you got an agreed training plan for the next 12 months?

Just under half of all foster carers (49 per cent) did not have an agreed training plan for the next 12 months and the same proportion of carers felt there were training courses they would have liked to attend but did not.

Foster carers who were unable to attend training were asked why, and over 1,000 respondents provided reasons:



Those carers working for IFPs were less likely (40 per cent) to miss training opportunities than local authority carers (50 per cent).

4.1.2 Support

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

We asked foster carers:

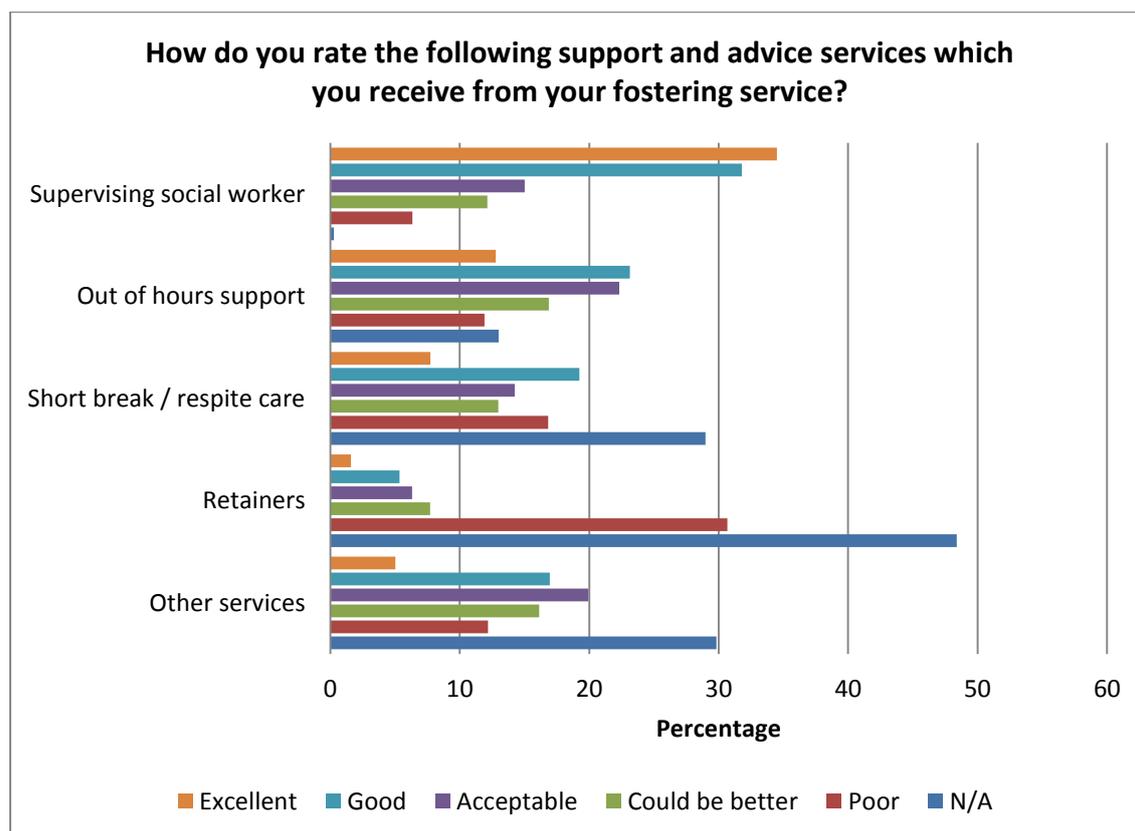
Do you currently have a named supervising social worker?

How many supervising social workers have you had in the past 24 months?

Nearly all foster carers (96 per cent) stated that they had a named supervising social worker and over three-quarters (77 per cent) had only one or two social workers in the past two years. The degree of stability and continuity of supervising social workers is encouraging.

We also asked:

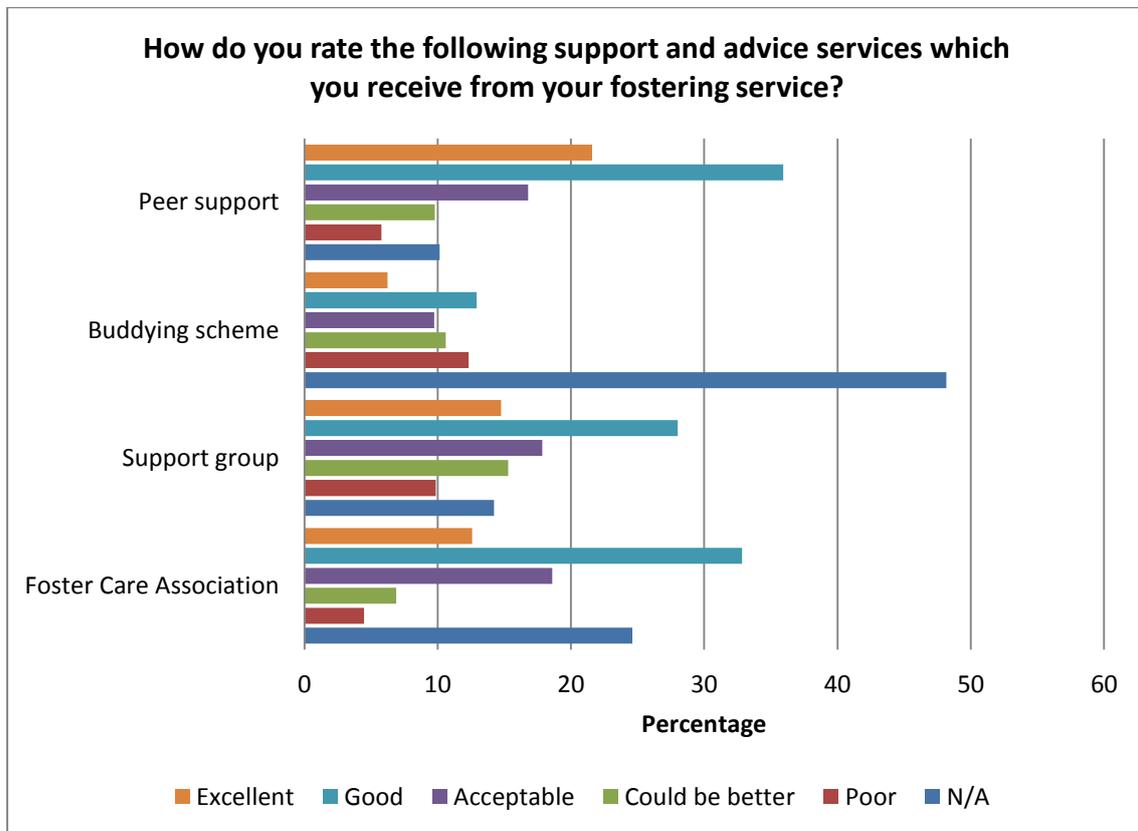
How do you rate the support and advice which you receive from your fostering service?



Foster carers, on the whole, reported a positive view of support from their supervising social worker, with 66 per cent declaring it to be *excellent* or *good* and 15 per cent saying it was *acceptable*. However, in our 2014 survey the result for the same question was 73 per cent showing a slight drop in the overall rating of supervising social worker support.

It is disappointing that **a third of foster carers describe out of hours support as *could be better* or *poor*.** Out of hours support remains as essential as ever to foster care, particularly given the increasingly complex needs of children coming into the care system.

In terms of respite/short break support only a quarter of foster carers described this provision as *excellent* or *good*, down from one-third in our 2014 survey.



For other types of support it is clear that more formal peer support schemes are not widespread and this support could be improved. Foster Carer Associations (FCAs) were appreciated where they existed, but a quarter of foster carers said FCAs were *not applicable* to them, likely indicating that they were not available. Peer support is extremely valued by foster carers, with nine out of 10 respondents describing peer support as *essential* or *useful*.

It is interesting to note that views about the types of support available were noticeably more positive from those working for an IFP than from those working for a local authority.

The majority of comments in this section focused on the lack of access to respite provision as well as the heavy caseloads of social workers impacting on the quality of support available to foster carers.

'We are discouraged from taking respite.'
'Respite is frowned upon.'

'We have an excellent supervising social worker who does so much unpaid overtime it is unreal, in order to get her job done.'

4.1.3 Recommendations for change – training and support

Recommendation for governments

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.

Recommendations for fostering services

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

4.2 Status and authority

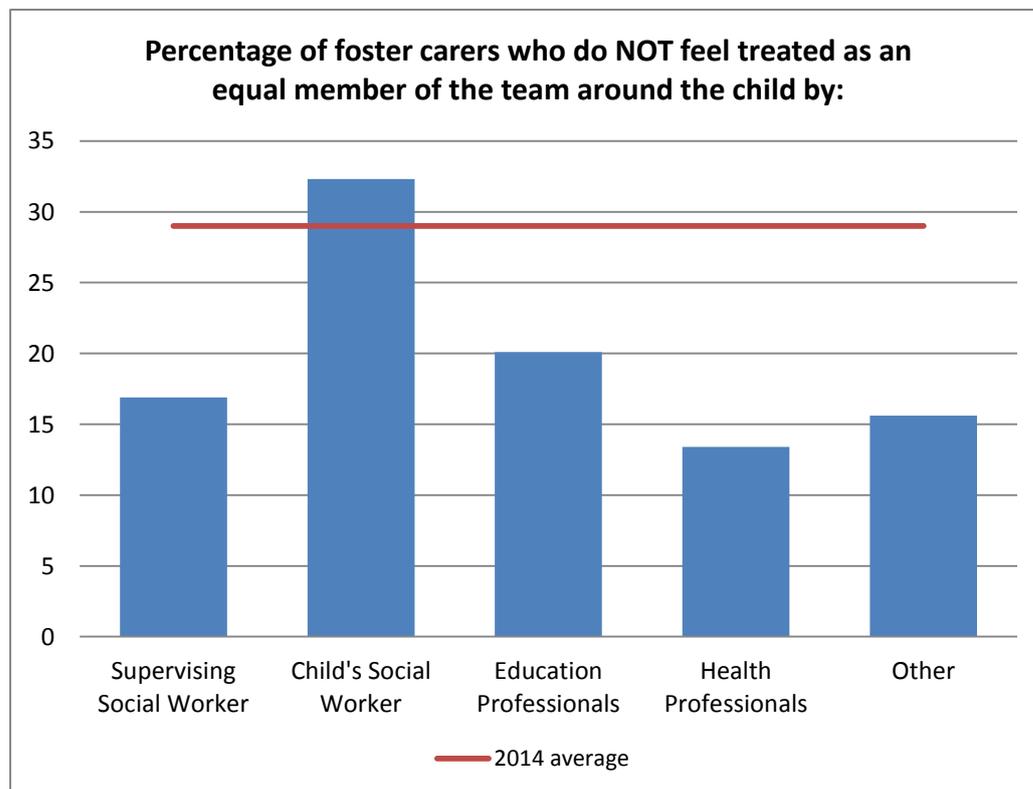
4.2.1 Part of the team around the child

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.

We asked foster carers:

Do you feel other key professionals treat you as an equal and valued member of the team around child?

The graph below shows the percentage who felt they were **not** treated as equal and valued by each professional group.



Even though responses were generally positive, and there has been an improvement since 2014, we still have concerns that a third of foster carers felt that children's social workers do not treat them as an equal team member. The open comments further highlight the lack of support from children's social workers as a key issue.

'Child's social worker is obstructive and condescending.'

'I have fought very hard to get others in the team around me to see me as an equal professional, many social workers particularly the child's team often afford us no respect whatsoever...it's something that needs improving.'

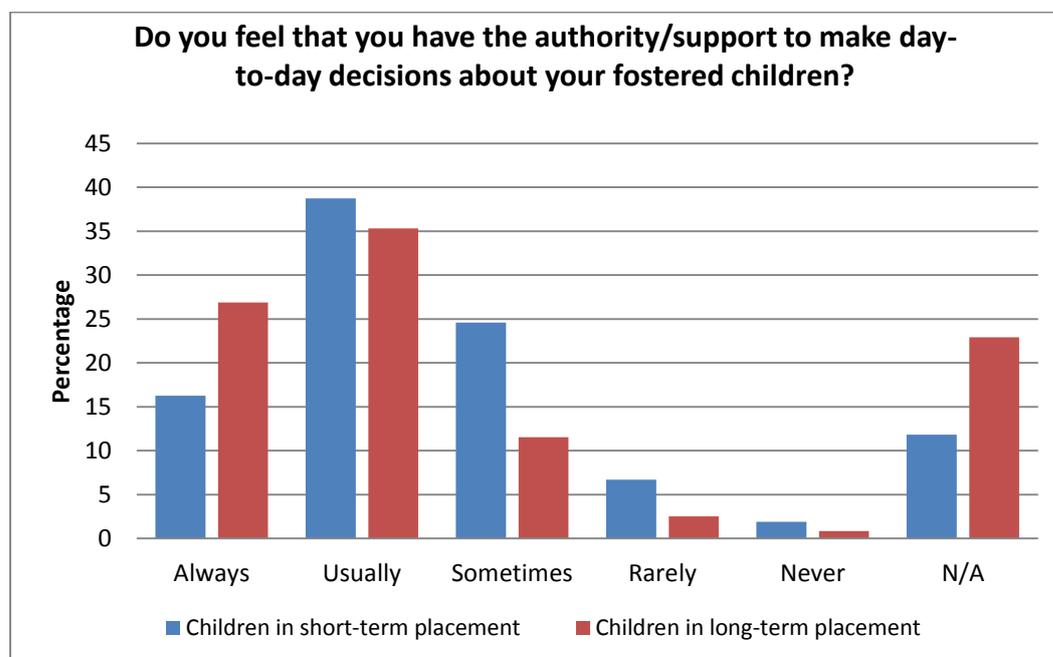
'It is rare that a child's social worker will recognise that the foster carer knows the child better than they do, therefore they don't take our opinions and advice into consideration, almost always at negative cost to the child. We are not treated as professional nor knowledgeable most of the time. And this is at the cost of the child's mental health and ability to develop to their potential.'

4.2.2 Delegated authority: day-to-day decision making

While foster carers look after fostered children on a day-to-day basis, they often have the least authority out of all those in the team supporting the child. The source of the tension about where responsibility and authority lie in foster care is the fact that the corporate parent is the local authority and is removed from those who have day-to-day responsibility for the care of children, the foster carers. The local authority is often discharging its role as corporate parent within a large bureaucratic and regulated structure and one where a culture of blame can create a real sense of anxiety about delegating decisions to carers. The impact of this is ultimately on the child and it can hinder their ability to participate in normal family, school or social activities.

We asked foster carers:

Do you feel that you have the authority and support to make day-to-day decisions about your fostered children?



The findings show that over half (55 per cent) of those caring for children on short-term placements and 62 per cent of those caring for children on long-term placements felt they could make decisions most of the time.

However, 33 per cent of carers looking after children on short-term placements and 15 per cent of carers with long-term placements still feel that they are only allowed to make appropriate decisions *some of the time, rarely, or, in a small number of cases, never able to make these decisions.*

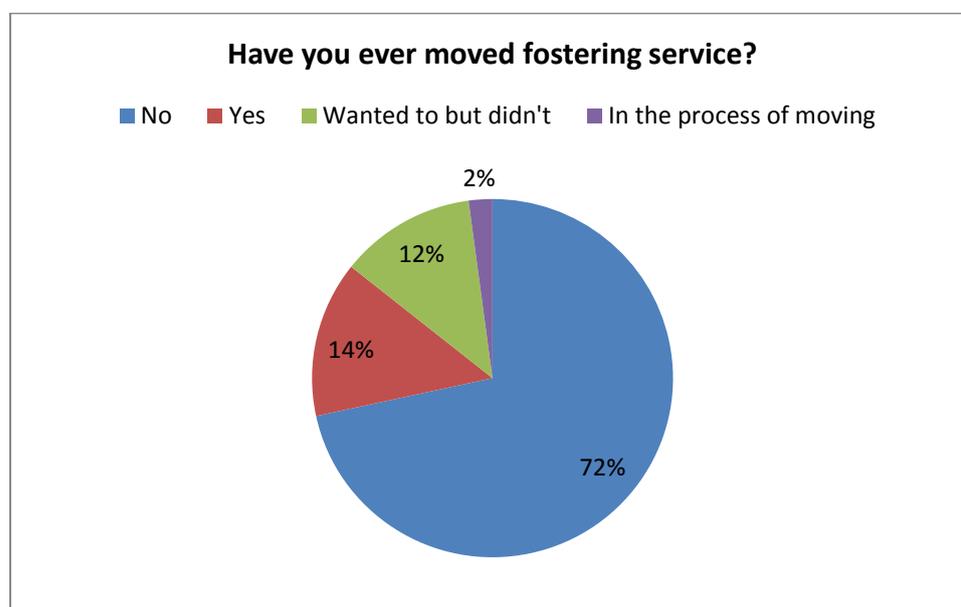
Therefore, despite improvements to the mechanisms and guidance¹ around delegated authority (day-to-day decision making), it is clear that guidance is not consistently being applied in practice across the UK and foster carers are still not always being trusted to make decisions, which may leave the children in their care feeling different from their peers and detracting from their experience of 'normal' family life.

4.2.3 Portability of the workforce

We asked foster carers:

Have you ever moved fostering service?

The majority of respondents (84 per cent) had never moved to another fostering service. **Only 14 per cent of foster carers had moved to another service with an additional two per cent in the process of moving. Significantly, 12 per cent of respondents had wanted to move but had not moved for a variety of reasons.**



¹ Scotland published revised guidance on this matter in 2015: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/10/9827/1>; England in 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delegation-of-authority-to-carers-developing-your-local-policy>; Wales in 2011: <http://gov.wales/topics/health/publications/socialcare/guidance1/delegatedauthority/?lang=en>; and Northern Ireland in 2010: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/looked-after-children-2010-circulars>

We received 452 open comments to this question; from these replies four clear themes emerged:

- **Transferring between local authority fostering services and independent fostering providers**

Foster carers moved from local authorities to IFPs and vice versa for different reasons. In general, they moved from local authority services to IFPs because they felt they would receive better support and training. Those who moved from IFPs to local authority services mainly did so because they wanted to receive more placement referrals and felt placement referrals would increase if they fostered for a local authority.

'We moved from a charity to a local authority as there was not enough work with the charity.'

'Have thought about moving to a private agency as training and support looked better but limited placements...'

- **Disrupting the child's current placement**

A number of respondents wanted to move to another fostering service but did not want to disrupt their current long-term placement and felt they could not guarantee the continuity of care for the children in placement with them during their transfer between fostering services.

'Threats that the children in our care may be withdrawn by the authority.'

'Have given serious consideration to leaving local authority but have long-term matched children and don't want to disrupt their placements.'

- **Overly bureaucratic transfer process**

The process of transferring to another fostering service often requires repeating the assessment process for the new fostering service, a key factor which prevents portability of the workforce. Some foster carers stated that it was not just the bureaucratic hindrances of repeating the assessment process that deterred them from transferring agencies, but also the lack of placements and income in the transition period which often takes a number of months.

'Our fostering authority would require us to stop before beginning the approval process elsewhere. We would have no income for 6-9 months...'

'The thought of having to go through another lengthy Form F is off-putting. Whilst I don't have issues with the necessity of it, the timescales are often protracted which would leave everyone on an unsettled footing.'

- **Some foster carers were not comfortable working for profit-making fostering agencies which limited their ability to move to another fostering service**

Some respondents questioned the ethical basis for making placements with ‘for profit’ agencies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and felt that all placements should be provided by the local authority. IFPs cannot be profit-making in Scotland.

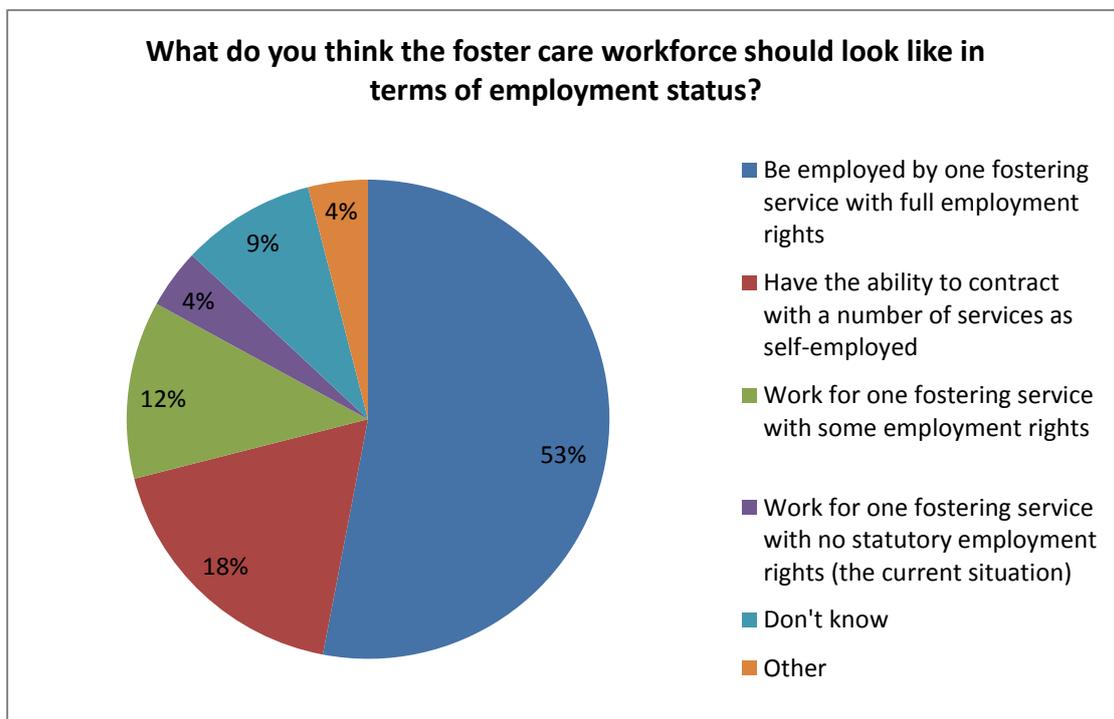
‘I work for the local authority. It does not sit well with me that some agencies could make money and a profit from children and families.’

4.2.4 Employment status

Currently most foster carers are self-employed for taxation purposes and, outside Scotland, are restricted to working for one fostering service at a time. A foster carer does not have employment rights as defined in law such as paid holiday, protection from discrimination and workplace pensions; although a fostering service may choose to offer these benefits.

For the first time we asked the following question to find out foster carers’ views:

What do you think the foster care workforce should look like in relation to employment status?



Just over half of respondents (53 per cent) felt foster carers should be employed by one fostering service with full employment rights, although almost a fifth of respondents felt foster carers should have the ability to contract with a number of fostering services as self-employed. The survey findings are clear that foster carers feel the status quo is not working

and needs to change, with only four per cent of respondents wanting the current situation to remain.

From our work on this issue outside of the survey, we know that some foster carers and others believe that the best solution to tackle issues such as support, training and remuneration is for foster carers to be employed by a single fostering service with the associated employees' rights. Others are less sure on this solution, as they are concerned about the potential impact that employment with one fostering service could have on current tax arrangements, combining fostering with other employment outside of the home and being able to refuse a placement, as well as the complexities of applying this status in households with two carers.

We believe that an immediate difference could be made by the introduction of a register, a centrally held list of approved foster carers in each of the four nations. A central list would serve a number of purposes:

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

Over the coming months we will continue to explore with our members and others in the sector to try to understand the long-term impact of any change in employment status and the best options for foster carers doing a range of roles.

4.2.5 Recommendations for change – status and authority

Recommendations for governments

- Registers (centrally held lists) of approved foster carers should be created in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- The role of the foster carer should be better incorporated into social work training to ensure an improved understanding and closer professional collaboration between social workers and foster carers.

Recommendations for local authorities, children's trusts, health and social care trusts and fostering services

- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; 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 fully contribute to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers, especially those caring for children on long-term placements, must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions.
- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.

4.3 Finances: Allowances and payments

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 **payment** (also known as a fee) which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. Not all foster carers receive payments.

4.3.1 Allowances

Every year The Fostering Network checks the allowances paid by all local authorities in England and Wales and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland to ensure they meet national minimum levels. We campaign for them to be brought up to these levels where they are falling short; we have been successful in this regard, as only a very small minority of these fostering services now fall short.

We also collate allowances in Scotland, where there are currently no recommended minimum allowances for foster carers, although the Scottish Government has committed to making national recommendations in the near future. We continue to push for this through our Scottish allowances campaign.

We asked:

Do you feel that this allowance, and the expenses you can claim (e.g. for mileage), meet the full costs of looking after fostered children?

When we asked this question two years ago 80 per cent of respondents felt their allowances did cover the costs of fostering. In 2016 this figure has fallen sharply to only 42 per cent. **Foster carers are reporting that their general allowances are being frozen, while at the same time, mileage, one-off payments for initial placement costs and special occasions are being cut, meaning that the full costs of caring for a child are not being covered.**

'It can be very expensive when a child arrives with nothing, no expenses are paid for this. Holidays, Christmas and birthday allowances haven't been paid for five years but the allowance has stayed the same.'

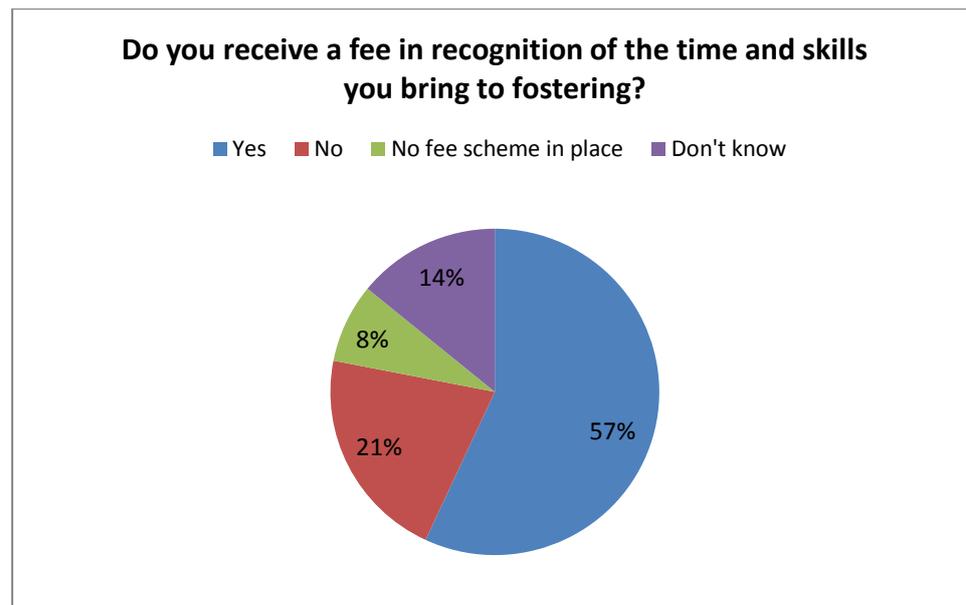
4.3.2 Payments

In contrast to allowances there is no minimum recommended fee for foster carers in any country of the UK, nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services. Due to the lack of a framework around fee payments the amount received across the UK varies widely. We asked foster carers if their fostering service has a fee scheme, 70 per cent answered *yes* and 12 per cent answered *no*, with the remainder answering *don't know*.

On a regular basis we ask foster carers the question below so we can track progress with fee payments:

Do you receive a fee payment in recognition of the time and skills you bring to fostering?

57 per cent of respondents reported that they do receive a fee payment, which is an increase from 2014 where 47 per cent of respondents answered yes to the same question. It is encouraging that more foster carers are receiving a payment. However, **29 per cent are still not receiving a payment and worryingly 14 per cent are unclear whether they are receiving any payment.** This uncertainty usually stems from some fostering services making a lump sum payment which does not make a clear distinction between fees and allowances.



Those fostering for an IFP were less likely to report receiving a fee (46 per cent) compared with those fostering with a local authority (60 per cent). One explanation for the difference, as stated above, could be that some fostering services combine the payment for the fee and allowance. However, we believe this practice should not continue and all fostering services should clearly distinguish between fee payment and allowances.

In addition, **over half of respondents (56 per cent) say their household income is reliant on the money they receive from fostering and 65 per cent of respondents receive no welfare benefits.**

4.3.3 Retainers

The picture emerging for retainer fees between placements is very poor. Of those respondents who rated retainer fees (1,192) just under three-quarters (74 per cent) felt they were *poor or could be better*. These findings reflect a wider concern about foster care finance that can be seen throughout this survey, especially when combined with the above finding that for over half of foster carers their household income is reliant on the money they receive from fostering. Retainer fees were less likely to be paid by IFPs.

4.3.4 Combining with other work

A third of foster carers reported that they had other paid work in addition to fostering; this proportion has remained static since our last survey two years ago. This figure was similar across the UK, except in Northern Ireland where 52 per cent of carers surveyed undertook paid work other than fostering.

This finding could indicate that the time and effort needed to foster effectively precludes additional paid work for at least one adult in the household, that this has been prevented by the fostering service, or that the foster carer has chosen not to have other paid work as the fostering income combined with other household income is sufficient to allow them to stay at home.

Of those who live with a partner, just over half (54 per cent) of the partners held paid work other than fostering.

In a third of all fostering households – both those fostering alone and with a partner – no adults had a paid job other than fostering.

4.3.5 Recommendations for change – finances: allowances and payments

Recommendations for governments

- The Scottish Government must introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance as a matter of urgency.
- Minimum levels of fostering allowances should be reviewed annually to ensure they are sufficient to cover the entire costs of caring for a child and should take action to ensure all fostering services pay at least the minimum.
- Foster care must be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills, preferably via a tiered payment scheme which includes retainer fees between placements.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Fostering allowances must be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a fostered child.
- Foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and expertise, and carers should receive retainer fees between placements.
- The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about their entitlement to allowances and fees.

5. Foster care practice issues

5.1 Information sharing

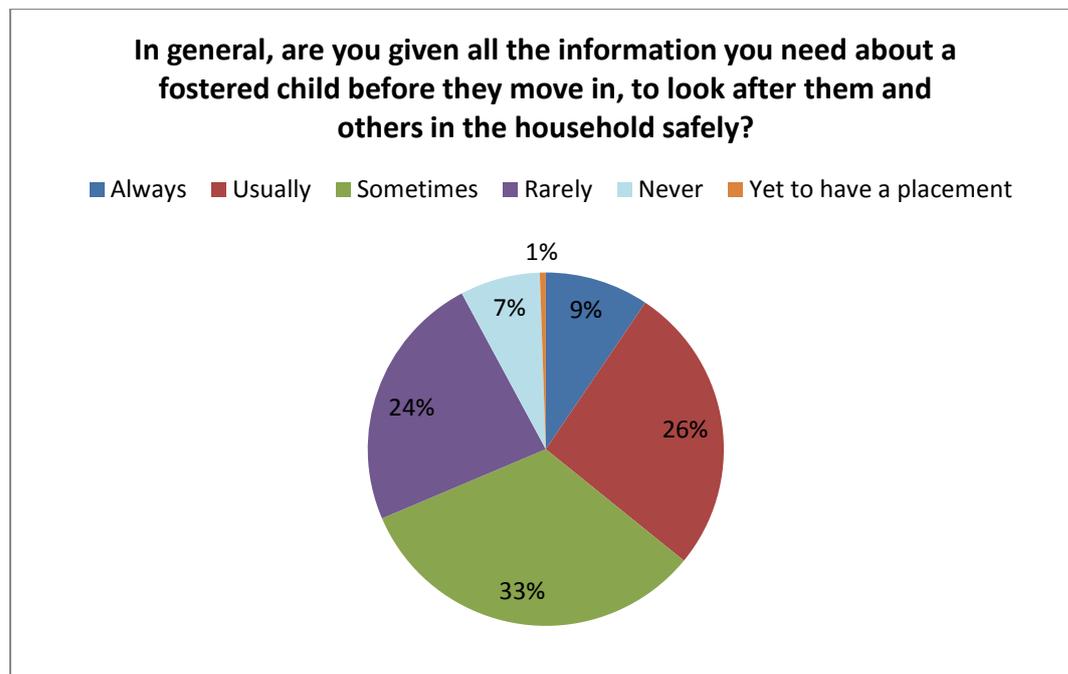
A key part of being treated as an equal and respected member of the team around the child is to be entrusted with the information about the fostered child both prior to and during the placement. Information sharing allows foster carers to make an accurate assessment of whether they can care properly for the child and also to indicate whether they require additional support or training.

We asked:

In general, are you given all the information you need about a fostered child before they move in, to look after them and others in the household safely?

In our 2014 survey a key finding was that fewer than one in 10 foster carers said they were *always* given the information they need to look after fostered children and others in the household safely, with more than a quarter reporting that they were *rarely* or *never* given this information.

Two years on the number of foster carers reporting that they are *rarely* or *never* given all the information about their fostered child prior to placement has risen to 31 per cent, while the number saying they always receive the information has remained similar. This practice places all those involved at risk and is detrimental to meeting the needs of the child in a considered and safe way.



Over the last two years there has been some country variation to this question; there is a slight increase in Wales and Scotland of foster carers *always* or *usually* receiving information prior to placement and a drop in England and Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland (45 per cent), along with Scotland (46 per cent), is the best at *always* or *usually* sharing information with foster carers prior to placement. Those fostering with IFPs were more likely to receive more information about a child prior to placement than those who fostered for a local authority.

From the many comments we received on this question a number of themes emerged:

- Foster carers were receiving basic information at the referral stage and more information was filtering through in the first few weeks or months of the placement. Many foster carers stated that it would have been useful to have contact with the previous carers prior to placement in order to understand the needs of the child more fully.

'You never get the full true information, you have to find that out for yourselves, it's usually just the positive information. It would be helpful to be able to speak to the last carer for the full picture.'

- Foster carers felt they were given limited information by their fostering service or social worker in order to secure the placement; in many cases the information withheld was related to the child's behaviour. This type of practice can result in poor matching and an increased likelihood of placement breakdown.

'They tend to withhold crucial information of behavioural type so that you don't refuse a placement! Then later they disclose it after an incident takes place.'

'Issues are often understated. Social workers tend to underplay issues from previous placement breakdowns in order to secure the child's next placement.'

- Foster carers reported information being limited and no one person having detailed knowledge of the child.

'Information is often patchy, no one person seems to have a complete overview i.e. health, education, history, personality etc. It takes months sometimes to assimilate all the information about a child from several different sources.'

- Some respondents reported that when information was provided it was out of date or incorrect which has a direct impact on the quality of matching decisions.

'Paperwork generally not up to date. Never have contact with previous carers, who have insights into the child. Social workers often miss essential details.'

- A number of foster carers stated that the quality and quantity of information was dependent on the child's social worker. Firstly, in terms of how well the information

is completed and then how much information the social worker decides to share with the foster carers.

'Varies - often information is passed between social work teams so not passed to me as a carer. Children's social worker team often working with different agenda and lacks understanding of how important it is that foster carer knows information.'

Overall, foster carers believe if they were better informed they would be in a better position to meet the child's needs and provide better care; the quote below from one respondent reflects many of the comments received:

'As foster carers, children's services believe that we do not require all the historical information known on children taken into care. This could possibly be because they feel if we have all the information we are less likely to accept a placement. The reality is, if we had all the information, we would be better prepared to make an informed decision as to the suitability of the placement for our household. It would also prepare our reactions to any traumas suffered and put us in a better position to manage any behaviours we encounter from the placement.'

5.1.1 Recommendations for change – information sharing

Recommendation for governments

- Increased emphasis should be placed on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care. The role of foster carers should be addressed by any social work reforms to encourage more collaborative working between social workers and foster carers.

Recommendation for local authorities, children's trusts, health and social care trusts and fostering services

- Regulations and/or standards already make clear the information authorities must provide to foster carers before a child is placed with them. A change to practice and culture should be developed which ensures this information is being passed to fostering services and foster carers to allow appropriate matching and fully supported placements.
- Foster carers must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe.

5.2 Support and information provided to fostered children

5.2.1 Support

In addition to asking about the support offered to foster carers, we wanted to explore the quality of support provided to their fostered children.

We asked:

How many social workers has your fostered child had in the past 24 months?

How do you rate the support your fostered child(ren) receive(s) from their social worker?

In terms of social work support the majority of children (74 per cent) had one or two social workers in the last 24 months; 23 per cent had three or four social workers and the remaining three per cent had five or more social workers.

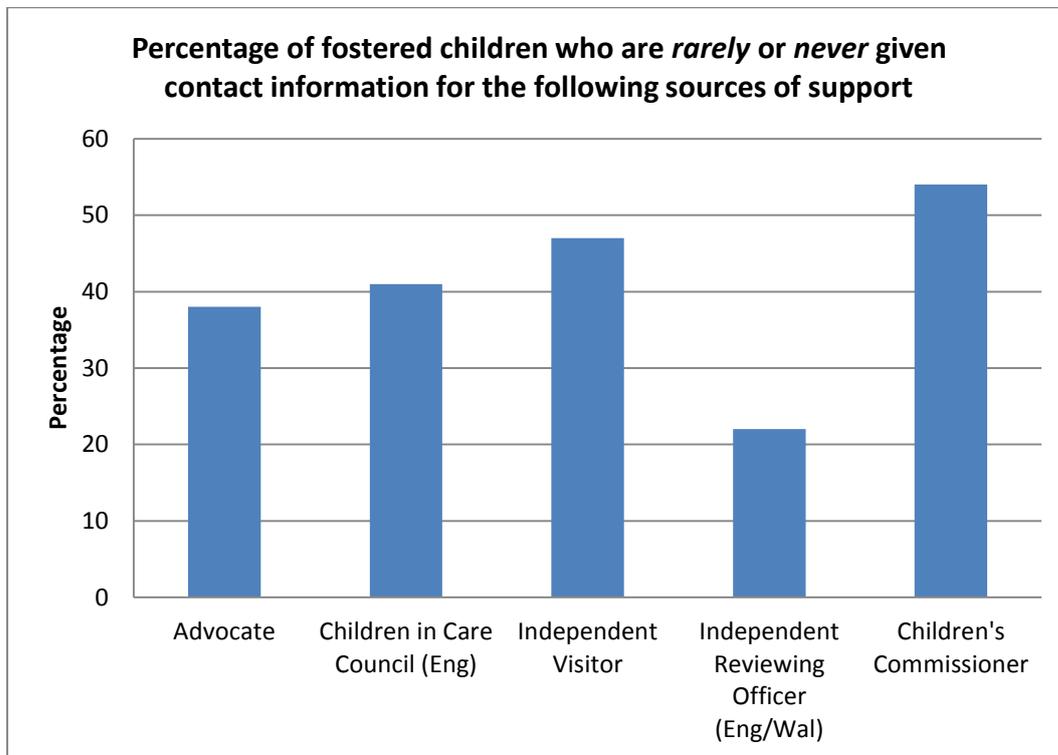
Those surveyed in Scotland had the highest number of children (85 per cent) having only one or two social workers and Wales and Northern Ireland the lowest number of children (68 per cent) with only one or two social workers. Such a low turnover rate may help to explain why respondents in Scotland were highest in rating the quality of social work support for children as *excellent* or *good*.

Across the UK exactly half of foster carers surveyed felt the quality of support received from their children's social worker was *excellent* or *good*; 21 per cent of respondents felt the support was *acceptable* and 28 per cent felt the support *could be better* or it was *poor*.

5.2.2 Information

We also explored the quality of support and information provided to their fostered children, asking foster carers if their fostered children had received information about the following: Children's Commissioner, independent visitors, children in care councils (England), advocates and independent reviewing officers (England and Wales).

It is concerning that a high percentage of children, according to their foster carers, are not receiving vital information about support and advocacy services. Children in care should have guaranteed access to independent support with an adult they can trust and who can represent their best interests.



When a child comes into care in England and Wales they should be appointed an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who will ensure their wishes and feelings are being listened to as part of the care planning process and their best interests are protected. In our survey, contact information for IROs was best known among fostered children; just over half of respondents from England and Wales felt their fostered children ‘always’ or ‘usually’ received information about IROs. However, it is a worrying finding that more than one in 10 foster carers said their fostered children were unlikely to receive information about IROs, especially considering that this statutory role has responsibility for scrutinising decisions and ensuring that they are made in the best interests of the child. Moreover, only 46 per cent of foster carers said that their fostered children were not likely to receive information about independent visitors, who can play a crucial role in befriending and supporting children in care.

A number of respondents cited the heavy caseloads of children’s social workers and reduced direct contact time with their social worker as reasons for children not being informed about services. The reduced direct contact time prevents a relationship of trust building between the child and their social worker. Many foster carers felt it now depended on them to pass vital information on to the child at the start of a placement.

5.2.3 Recommendations for change - support and information provided to fostered children

Recommendations for local authorities, children's trusts, and health and social care trusts

- All fostered children should be made aware of the support and services available to them and should have access to an independent adult they can trust and who can represent their interests if required.

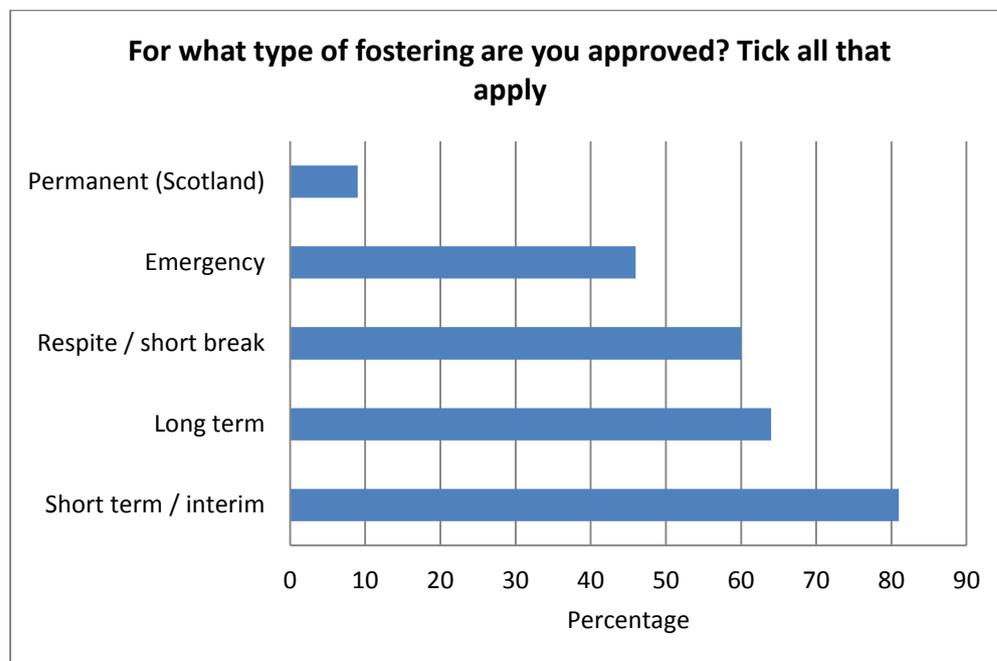
5.3 Approval range

Foster carers will usually be given terms of approval which set out the number of children, their gender, age range 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.

Every year The Fostering Network hears from foster carers who have been pressurised to take children from outside their approval range. We wanted to explore this issue further in our survey. We asked foster carers:

For what type of fostering are you approved?

What is your defined approval age range?



The majority of foster carers were approved to look after children of all ages (0-18 years), with the highest percentage in England (68 per cent) and Wales (70 per cent).

We then asked:

Do you get children referred to you from outside your approval age range?

Do you get children referred to you from outside the type of fostering you have been approved for?

Have you felt pressurised to take a child from outside your approval range?

Almost a third of foster carers have been referred children from outside their defined approval age range and type of fostering.

Over half (52 per cent) of carers who had taken children from outside their approval range had felt pressured into it. Local authority carers were more likely to feel pressurised in this way than those fostering for IFPs.

When asked to expand on their experiences, respondents indicated that they felt guilty for refusing to accept a placement. Some respondents empathised with children's social workers and the demand for placements due to the continuous rise in the number of children coming into care and the complexity of their needs.

'Social workers will contact me saying that they are desperately seeking a placement and can I help? It is extremely difficult to say no in a situation like that as most times it's a social worker you have known previously and you feel you have to try to help.'

As stated earlier in the report, some respondents felt information about the child's behaviour or mental health was underplayed or withheld in order to secure the placement.

Foster carers who have been caring for a number of years felt their experience gave them the confidence to refuse placements but had seen newly approved carers being 'taken advantage of' with inappropriate referrals.

Finally, we asked:

If you have taken a child from outside your approval range were you given additional support and training?

Three-quarters of such respondents were given no additional training or support by their fostering service. Poor matching outside a foster carer's defined approval range and lack of additional support are key factors in placement instability and breakdown.

5.3.1 Recommendations for change – approval range

Recommendations for governments

- 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.

Recommendations for local authorities, children's trusts, health and social care trusts and fostering services

- Local needs analyses of the population of looked after children should be carried out in order to determine types of care placements required, and to inform a targeted recruitment and commissioning programme for foster carers.
- Fostering services in England, Wales and Scotland should always comply with existing regulations when proposing a change to a foster carer's terms of approval.

5.4 Allegations

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. Nearly all of these will be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

Once an allegation has been made it is inevitably a distressing time for the foster carer, and often carers and their families are left with little support or information about the process.

Our survey found that over half of carers (56 per cent) had received training on managing allegations. Those working for IFPs were more likely to receive such training (74 per cent). The vast majority of respondents (80 per cent) were aware of their entitlement to receive independent support throughout the process of an allegation.

Of all the respondents to our survey, **33 per cent had experienced an allegation. For these foster carers we asked specific questions about the support they had received throughout the process:**

- **21 per cent felt it was *not easy* to access independent support**
- **47 per cent were not offered support for the children in their household**
- **42 per cent were unsupported financially**
- **55 per cent were unclear on timescales**
- **28 per cent of foster carers had fostered children removed during the investigation.**

Of all those foster carers who were subject to an allegation, only two per cent were substantiated. 71 per cent were unfounded, 17 per cent unsubstantiated and 10 per cent were still undergoing the investigation.

Allegations made against foster carers continue to be an area of real concern for The Fostering Network. Most foster carers accept that allegations are an occupational risk. However, once an allegation is made, carers are not treated as other professionals; they are too often left not knowing timescales, not being given access to independent support and having financial support removed. Also, we are concerned that fostered children are still being removed from foster families after an allegation when child protection thresholds have not been met.

5.4.1 Recommendations for change – allegations

Recommendations for fostering services

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations, and ensuring adherence to timescales.
- Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.

5.5 Placement stability

For a number of years The Fostering Network has been concerned about the slow progress in getting children and young people into the right placement first time. Since 2009 the number of children in care who have had three or more placements in the same year has remained fairly static (11 per cent 2009-14 and 10 per cent in 2015 in England²).

We asked foster carers:

Have you experienced a placement ending when you felt it was not in the child's best interests?

Just under half of respondents to our survey (49 per cent) said yes.

Over 750 respondents went on to provide detailed comments to this question with the following clear themes emerging:

- Short timescales are given when a placement is coming to an end.
- Foster carers often experience children and young people being returned to care after a failed attempt to return to their birth family. Many foster carers cited the lack of preparation as the reason for this breakdown and a clear lack of support and resources focused on the birth parents.

'Children who have returned to family before ready or to a family member at short notice and this has not been successful, returning the child into foster care a few weeks later.'

- Many foster carers felt they are not listened to when the decisions are made about returning a child to their birth family. Foster carers are often managing contact arrangements with birth families while the child is in placement and hold an in-depth understanding of the child's relationship with their family.
- Some carers felt some placement moves were financially motivated and decisions about children's placements were based on short-term affordability rather than what is in the best interests of the child.

'Children were moved to inappropriate placement with a family member who was originally rejected but reassessed due to financial constraints.'

- A lack of information prior to placement led to placement breakdown. This is a recurring theme in this survey.

² Department for Education statistics: Children looked after in England (including adoption) annual returns.

'The child had very severe disabilities and I felt I wasn't experienced enough to look after him, not enough information given before placement; moved to another placement but moved on as same problem with new foster carers...'

We asked:

If you did have a placement end that you did not feel was in the child's best interests, was it preceded by a review?

For the majority (61 per cent), the ending had not been preceded by a review. Even when a review did occur, some foster carers were not involved or listened to because they were not deemed to be one of the professionals in the team around the child

'We were not invited we were told only professionals could attend!'

'The decision was made by a social worker assistant and I was told I was not a "relevant person" so no details could be discussed with me.'

'I submitted a report outlining why I thought their return to parents was not in their best interests but it was not even considered at the final meeting.'

'It was a shambles and our opinions and reports of the child's deteriorating behaviour were not taken seriously. Earlier intervention and proactive support could have prevented the downturn in his life and future life chances.'

5.5.1 Recommendations for change – placement stability

Recommendations for governments

- Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown should be further explored.
- Adequate funds must be invested in foster care to ensure that children do not suffer from the pressures on local authority/commissioning budgets.

Recommendations for local authorities, children's trusts, health and social care trusts and fostering services

- Responsible authorities in England and Wales should adhere to existing regulations that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carer and the fostering service as well as the placing authority.
- All new and existing foster carers should be offered appropriate training and support to ensure they can offer support to children with complex needs. This should be bespoke support to meet the needs at different stages of the placement.

- A much higher value must be placed on the relationships a child has throughout their lives, including those with former foster carers, and these relationships must be protected and nurtured.

6. Conclusion and summary of recommendations

The main findings from this year's survey will be used to help shape our policy and campaigns priorities. We will use the findings to influence the 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 implementation of the report's recommendations, with the aim of ensuring all fostered children are given the best possible care.

We will repeat the survey every two years in order to track progress or changes in foster carers' attitudes and experience on key issues.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendations for governments

Training and support

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.

Status and authority

- Registers (centrally held lists) of approved foster carers should be created in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- The role of the foster carer should be better incorporated into social work training to ensure an improved understanding and closer professional collaboration between social workers and foster carers.

Finances: allowances and payments

- The Scottish Government must introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance as a matter of urgency.
- Minimum levels of fostering allowances should be reviewed annually to ensure they are sufficient to cover the entire costs of caring for a child and should take action to ensure all fostering services pay at least the minimum.
- Foster care must be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills, preferably via a tiered payment scheme which includes retainer fees between placements.

Information sharing

- Increased emphasis should be placed on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care. The role of foster carers should be addressed by any social work reforms to encourage more collaborative working between social workers and foster carers.

Approval range

- 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.

Placement stability

- Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown should be further explored.
- Adequate funds must be invested in foster care to ensure that children do not suffer from the pressures on local authority/commissioning budgets.

Recommendations for local authorities, children's trusts, health and social care trusts and fostering services

Training and support

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

Status and authority

- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; 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 fully contribute to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers, especially those caring for children on long-term placements, must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions.
- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.

Finances: allowances and payments

- Fostering allowances must be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a fostered child.
- Foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and expertise, and carers should receive retainer fees between placements.
- The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about their entitlement to allowances and fees.

Information sharing

- Regulations and/or standards already make clear the information authorities must provide to foster carers before a child is placed with them. A change to practice and culture should be developed which ensures this information is being passed to fostering services and foster carers to allow appropriate matching and fully supported placements.
- Foster carers must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe.

Support and information provided to fostered children

- All fostered children should be made aware of the support and services available to them and should have access to an independent adult they can trust and who can represent their interests if required.

Approval range

- Local needs analyses of the population of looked after children should be carried out in order to determine types of care placements required, and to inform a targeted recruitment and commissioning programme for foster carers.
- Fostering services in England, Wales and Scotland should always comply with existing regulations when proposing a change to a foster carer's terms of approval.

Allegations

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations, and ensuring adherence to timescales.
- Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.

Placement stability

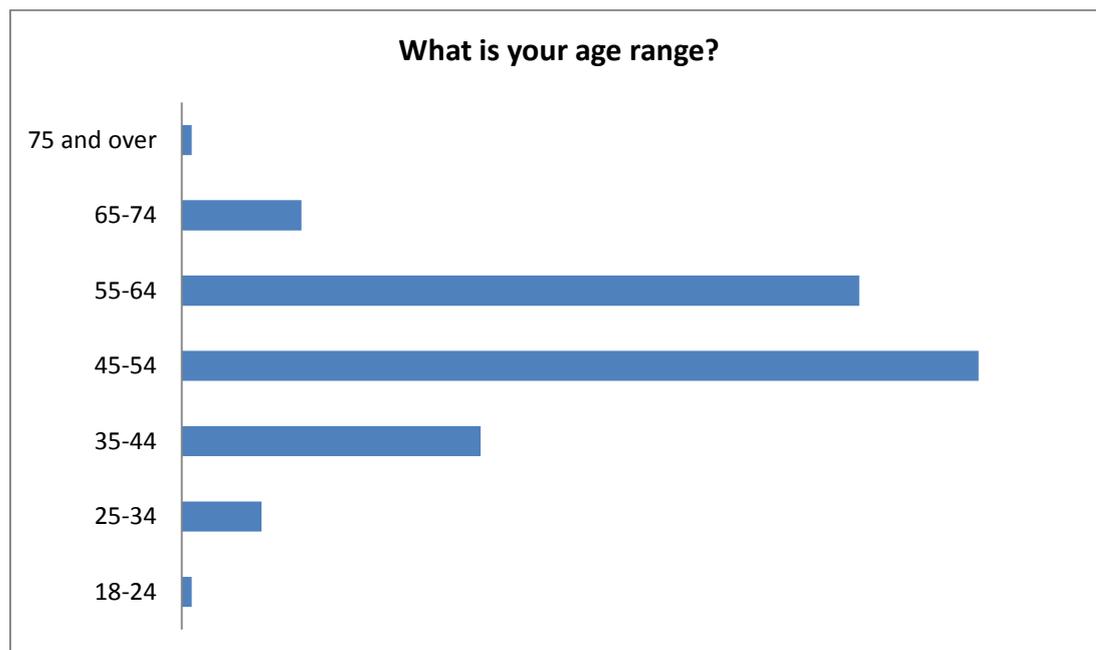
- Responsible authorities in England and Wales should adhere to existing regulations that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carer and the fostering service as well as the placing authority.
- All new and existing foster carers should be offered appropriate training and support to ensure they can offer support to children with complex needs. This should be bespoke support to meet the needs at different stages of the placement.
- A much higher value must be placed on the relationships a child has throughout their lives, including those with former foster carers, and these relationships must be protected and nurtured.

Appendix - Foster carer profile

The survey was completed by 2,530 foster carers in total, with 1,942 living in England, 359 in Scotland, 122 in Wales and 107 in Northern Ireland. The large majority of respondents (80 per cent) fostered for local authorities, children’s trusts and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland, with the remainder fostering for independent/voluntary fostering providers.

Gender and age demographics

The vast majority (82 per cent) of foster carers who completed the survey were women. The gender split in all four UK countries was very similar, with a wide age range of 24 to 75. 89 per cent of foster carers who responded were between the ages of 35 and 64, with 40 per cent in the centre of that range being aged 45 to 54 years. In making comparisons with our State of the Nation findings in 2014 there has been a slight drop in the number of carers in the 35 to 54 age range, along with an increase in the number of carers in the 55 to 64 age range from 26 per cent (2014) to 34 per cent (2016). This shows an ageing population of predominantly female foster carers and a very small percentage of carers under 34 years.

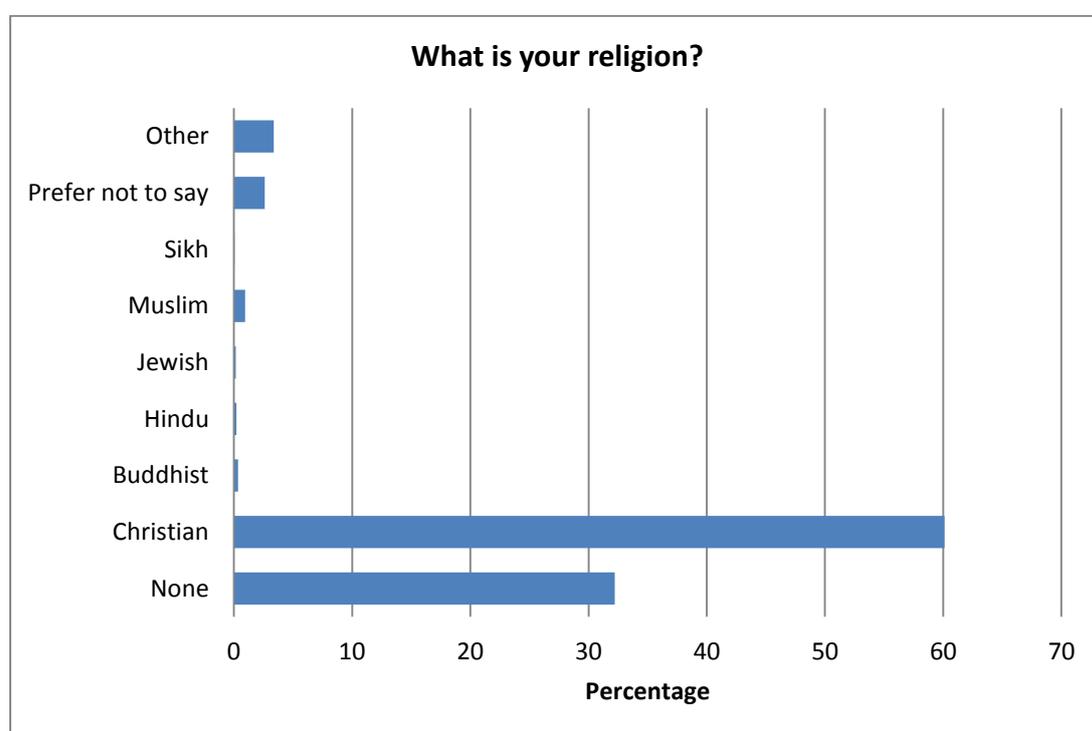


Around 12 per cent of the foster care workforce leaves or retires each year and The Fostering Network currently estimates that a further 9,000 foster families are needed in the next year across the UK.

Ethnicity and religion

Most respondents (93 per cent) were white, which is a higher representation of white respondents when compared with national statistics on foster carer ethnicity³ and the ethnic profile in the latest census⁴. Foster carers from black and minority ethnic groups, especially black Caribbean carers, were more likely to foster for independent fostering providers (IFPs).

In our 2016 survey we asked about foster carers' religion for the first time. The majority of respondents identified as Christian (60 per cent) and a significant number of respondents (32 per cent) stated no religion. There was a slightly higher number of Muslim foster carers fostering for IFPs than for local authorities.



Fostering households

Just over three-quarters (77 per cent) of respondents fostered with a partner who was also approved as a foster carer. Local authority carers were more likely to foster alone than those fostering with IFPs.

We asked foster carers how many fostered children and young people they had with them at the time of the survey. Fifteen per cent had no fostered children living with them. This could be foster carers between placements, those who have been approved to foster but have not yet begun or those who have recently retired from foster care.

³ Ofsted, Fostering in England, 2014-15: 85 per cent foster carers were white

⁴ Office for National Statistics 2011 census: 87 per cent of adults who were white and 13 per cent who were of BME backgrounds

40 per cent were caring for one child, 30 per cent two children, 11 per cent three children and three per cent were caring for four children or more.

The majority of foster carers had no other children in their household other than those they were fostering. 37 per cent of foster carers had one or two birth children living in the household, while 13 per cent had adopted children living at home.

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 fostered children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.

We are the essential network for foster care, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children, inspiring, motivating and supporting them to make foster care better. Together, we're a powerful catalyst for change, influencing and shaping fostering policy and practice at every level.

We work to ensure all fostered children have a positive experience of family life, supporting them to have high aspirations, to overcome the challenges of their early lives and to achieve their very best.

We help foster carers to improve children's lives. We champion the vital role they and their families play in helping fostered children, and work to ensure they are properly recognised, valued and supported.

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