

The Fostering Network's response to the final report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England

November 2022

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About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and 450 organisational members, both local authorities (LA) and independent fostering providers (IFP), which cover nearly 77 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

We are members of The Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers, a coalition of third-sector organisations supporting care-experienced children and young people across England. The Alliance recently wrote a letter to the previous Children's Minister, setting out eight key areas we believe should be prioritised when the Government begin to implement recommendations from the care review. We support the eight principles laid out in the letter and hope that you consider these, alongside our full response below. You can find the letter [here](#).

Summary

The final report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England was published on 23 May 2022. The report called for £2.6bn to implement a 'fundamental reset of the system to improve the quality of life for children, their families and those in care' and set out a 'new deal for foster care'. For those children and young people who enter the care system, well-supported and stable foster care can make a huge difference and The Fostering Network welcomes the strong endorsement of the foster carer role and the recognition of issues that our members have been raising for many years. The report is wide-ranging. We consulted foster carers and fostering services over the spring and summer of 2022 to seek their views on the recommendations most relevant to foster care. We asked whether they thought those recommendations were likely to improve outcomes for children looked after. We analysed their responses over September and October 2022 in order to inform this response.

Recruitment: The Minister for Children accepted the Review's recommendation to recruit 9,000 new foster carers over the next three years in a statement to the House on 23 May 2022. We welcome the Government's commitment to tackle this issue so that children are cared for by foster carers in the right location and with the right skills to meet their needs. This work is vitally needed but must be done carefully, in conjunction with partners such as The Fostering Network and local services, to make sure it builds on current expertise and practice. Prior to the Review's publication The Fostering Network had highlighted the scale of the recruitment and retention crisis in fostering. We estimate that there is a need to recruit 8,100 foster carers across England in the next year alone. Fostering services welcomed the call for more wraparound support through the enquiries and approvals process. There was a clear consensus among foster carers and fostering services that retention is even more vital than recruitment. In January 2022 we published a report on [the status of foster carers](#) which explores this topic in detail and demonstrates the impact low status can have on retention and the care provided to children. Members have been clear with us that the current cost of living crisis is exacerbating an already difficult situation with many struggling to continue fostering. Recruitment and retention must be addressed urgently in order to secure the future of children coming into care.

Mockingbird: The Review recommended that all local authorities should develop a model of foster carer support based on the principles of Mockingbird. The Fostering Network supports this recommendation and strongly believes that The Mockingbird Family Model should be made available in every local authority area in England. Mockingbird is an award-winning programme that delivers sustainable foster care structured around the support and relationships of an extended family and is well evidenced to show increased wellbeing and outcomes for looked after children and young people and the foster carers that support them. Evidence shows the model creates better outcomes including placement stability. It also has a positive impact on foster carers, increasing rates of foster carer recruitment and retention, makes better use of available placements and foster carers report feelings of improved status as part of the team around the child. Mockingbird provides significant cost savings for the care system.

Delegated authority: Over 80 per cent of respondents to our survey on the Review's recommendations thought that giving foster carers delegated authority by default, to take decisions

which affect the day-to-day lives of children in their care would improve outcomes for children. The Fostering Network strongly supports this recommendation and urges the Government to accept it.

Staying Put: The Fostering Network supports the Review's proposal to extend the post-18 scheme, Staying Put, to the age of 23. Foster carers agreed this would improve the transition to independence for young people. We agree with the view that providing a Staying Put arrangement to young people in care should be assumed by default, with foster carers given the option to 'opt-out' if they are unable to provide it. However, there are still a number of issues with the implementation of the Staying Put duties that have resulted in local variability. As part of the process of extending the Staying Put scheme, we would like to see a full review of Staying Put and its funding.

Regional Care Co-operatives: Fostering services raised some concerns about the proposal to establish Regional Care Co-operatives with responsibility for recruitment and commissioning. The Fostering Network firmly believes that fostering is and should remain a local activity, to ensure that children can remain in their local communities connected to family, friends and familiar daily routines. We support the view expressed by fostering services that there is an urgent need to support fostering with the appropriate funding and structures locally, regionally and nationally but we are not convinced of the case for Regional Care Co-operatives to enable this. We believe resources should be focussed on the areas of change where there is most evidence of a positive impact on children.

Areas missing from the Review: Our members were clear that there were some important areas missing from the Review, without which we won't realise the benefits of change. The most critical is the retention of foster carers. Foster carers wanted the Government to focus on allowances, which a third said were not sufficient to cover the costs of looking after a child, even before the cost of living crisis hit.¹ The current national minimum allowance is based on research nearly 30 years old and foster carers should not be out of pocket as a result of caring for a child on behalf of the state. In our survey on the Review's recommendations, 59 per cent of foster carer thought the issue of fee payments for foster carers should have been covered by the Review. Foster carers provide specialist round-the-clock care, yet not all foster carers receive an income to support themselves, there is no minimum recommended fee and even when foster carers do receive a fee, the majority receive far below the national living wage per calendar month for a 40-hour week. The Government is also yet to take a view on whether self-employment is the appropriate status for foster carers, yet this was the main area foster carers who responded to our survey would like to see addressed. As well as the issues which affect their status, foster carers felt that wider systemic issues such as the retention of social workers, the provision of short breaks and the wider sector support for children in care (for example education, health, disability and mental health services) were not sufficiently addressed. 44 per cent of foster carers felt that allegations should have been covered by the Review. There is a big gap between policy and practice around allegations and it is currently the most common reason foster carers call our helpline. 47 per cent of foster carers wanted a recommendation to introduce a national register of foster carers. The Fostering Network believes this is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions.

Areas which need more work: The Fostering Network believes that kinship carers, if properly supported can play a key role in meeting the needs of children at risk of entering the care system. We would like to see more work to explore what this looks like in practice. We welcome the focus on providing support for families on the edge of care and would encourage the Government to test our '[Step Up, Step Down](#)' programme which has been successfully piloted in Northern Ireland and is now being introduced in Wales. Those we consulted about the Review's recommendations had mixed views on whether independent advocacy should replace the existing IRO and Regulation 44 visitor

¹ The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021](#)

roles. The Fostering Network has some reservations around the removal of the IRO role based on the feedback from our members. The Fostering Network supports in principle the proposed National Children's Social Care Framework and a more transparent Ofsted framework; we would welcome a more robust and fit for purpose framework centred on outcomes for children and stability, supported by measures which we know will support those outcomes including national standards for training and development of foster carers and foster carer pay, allowances and status in the team around the child.

Consultation with foster carers and fostering services

To gather our member's views about the Review's final report we:

- held two consultation events with foster carers in June
- consulted with a variety of different staff members (from marketing officers to practice leads) from at least 70 fostering services at 15 regional forums between May and August 2022
- conducted a survey of 594 foster carers about the Review's recommendations.

The evidence gathered from these engagements forms the basis of our response. This response also draws on evidence from our [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021](#) survey, the largest and most comprehensive survey of foster carers in the UK. We received 3,352 responses from foster carers, 2,656 (79 per cent) stated that they foster in England.

The Fostering Network has engaged with the Care Review since it was announced in December 2020. All of our written submissions to the Review are available [on our website](#) and some have been referenced in this response.

Care Review survey summary

Of the 594 respondents to our survey about the Care Review:

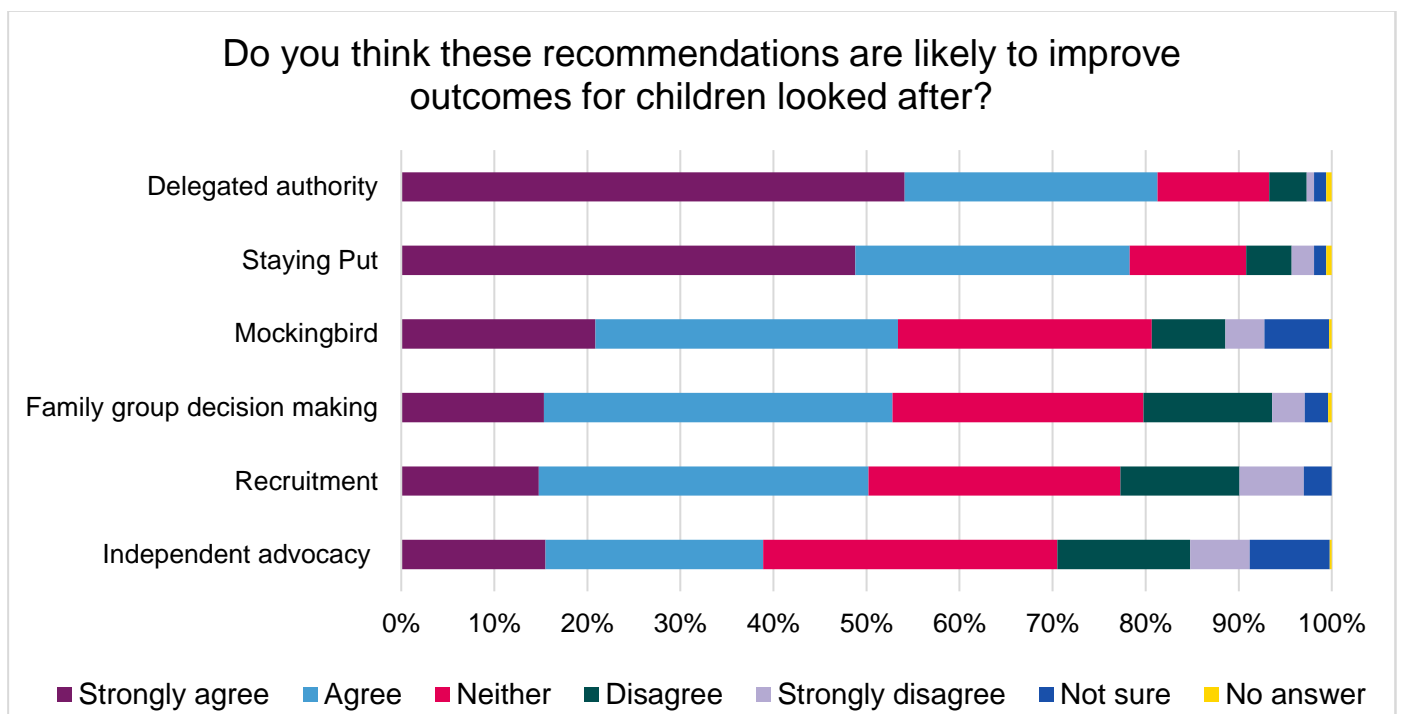
- All fostered in England and were members of The Fostering Network.
- **89 per cent were** foster carers, **five per cent** were kinship foster carers, **two per cent** were Staying Put carers, **two per cent** were former or retired foster carers and the remaining **two per cent** were a combination of roles, supported lodgings hosts, short break (respite) carers or Mockingbird hub home carers.
- **25 per cent** stated that they engaged with the review. Of those who did, the most common ways of engaging were by submitting a written response to the Review (N=62), attending a meeting/focus group hosted by the Review (N=50) or attending a meeting/focus group hosted by The Fostering Network (N=10).

Of all the recommendations in the Care Review's final report, we asked foster carers for their views on the six most relevant to foster care and whether they thought these recommendations were likely to improve outcomes for children looked after. These recommendations were:

1. **Recruitment:** the Department for Education should launch a high profile national foster carer recruitment programme to recruit 9,000 additional foster carers over three years.
2. **Family group decision making:** local authorities should identify important adults (e.g. family, friends, teachers etc.) that are already known to a child and may be willing to foster.
3. **Delegated authority:** foster carers should be given delegated authority by default, to take decisions which affect the day to day lives of children in their care.

4. **Mockingbird:** all local authorities should develop a model of foster carer support based on the principles of Mockingbird.
5. **Independent advocacy for children in care:** independent, opt-out, high quality advocacy for children in care and in proceedings should replace the existing Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Regulation 44 Visitor roles. The review proposes that the Children’s Commissioner for England should oversee these advocacy services, with the powers to refer children’s complaints and concerns to the court.
6. **Staying Put:** Staying Put should be a legal entitlement and extended to age 23 with an “opt-out” rather than “opt-in” expectation.

The review is wide-ranging. We focussed on these recommendations as they covered areas foster carers were likely to have experience or views on. The bar chart below depicts how foster carers responded to each recommendation. It shows that foster carers most strongly agreed with the recommendation around delegated authority and had most uncertainty around the recommendation to remove the role of the IRO. We will unpick these responses further in the following sections.

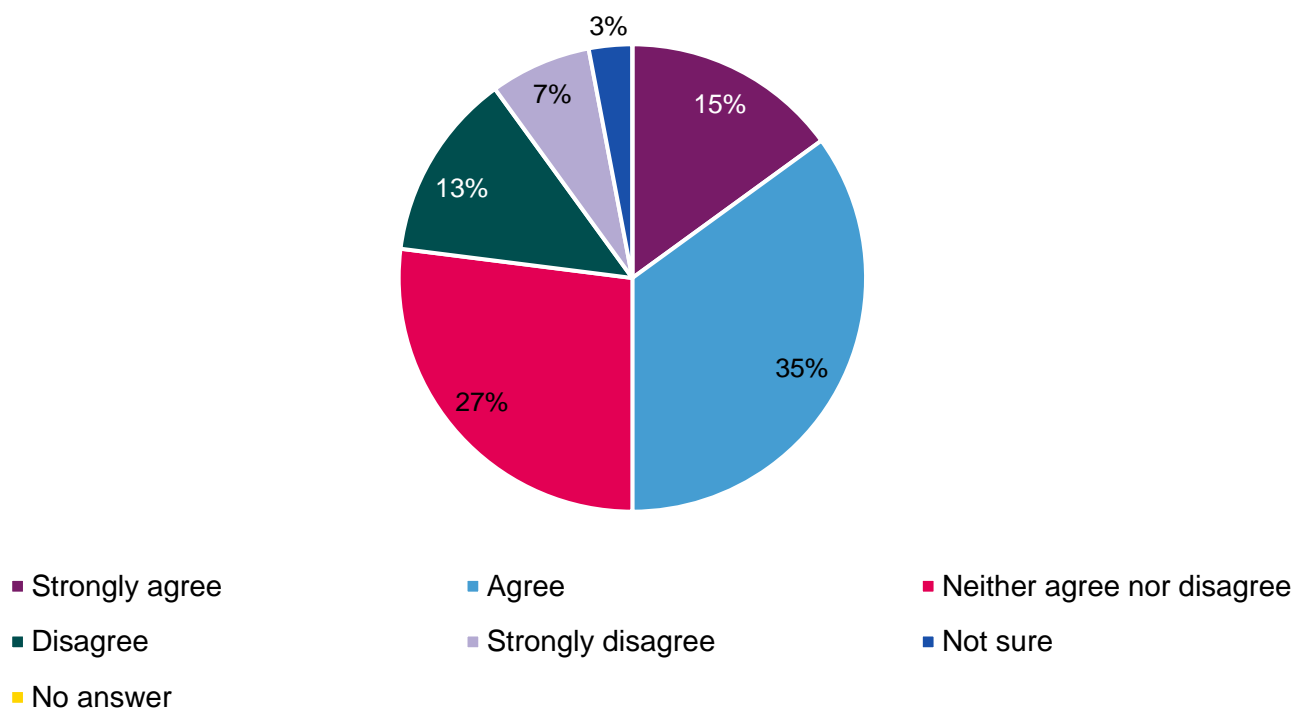


Recruitment

The Review recommends that the Department for Education should launch a high profile national foster carer recruitment programme to recruit 9,000 additional foster carers over three years.

Foster carers' views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



286 foster carers left comments in response to this recommendation. The most common theme by far, regardless of whether foster carers agreed or disagreed that the recommendation would improve outcomes for children, was that the Government needs to focus on retention when implementing this recommendation.

“I think we need more focus on retention of existing foster carers and the true reasons behind foster carer resignations and burn out. Recruiting new foster carers is essential but by dealing with the reasons for resignations we can support newly recruited fostering families much better.” – Foster carer who disagreed

“It is not just about recruiting new carers but retaining existing carers who have great experience and knowledge of the cared for child.” – Foster carer who agreed

Foster carers suggested that retention could be improved by improving support, training, the status of foster carers in the team around the child, and pay.

The second most common theme was around ensuring that the ‘right calibre’ of foster carers were recruited. Foster carers shared that it is vital standards are kept high due to the complex nature of the fostering role. Foster carers need to be able to provide loving, caring environments for children as well as have the skills needed to meet all of their children’s needs.

“Extra carers are urgently needed but they need to be of the right calibre. It shouldn't become a numbers game.” – Kinship foster carer who agreed

“Numbers don't necessarily mean quality placements, so while yes, there will be more potential placements available, it also increases the potential for failed placements and children hopping homes.” – Foster carer who neither agreed nor disagreed

Some comments also mentioned how the general public needs to have a greater awareness of the importance of foster care to encourage more people to come forward, including from different groups.

“I'm a single gay foster carer and am shocked at how few gay people - single or in couples - foster. I think more should be done to recruit within this untapped source. Seems most people want to adopt but [I] think many would be better suited to fostering, for a variety of reasons.” – Foster carer who strongly agreed

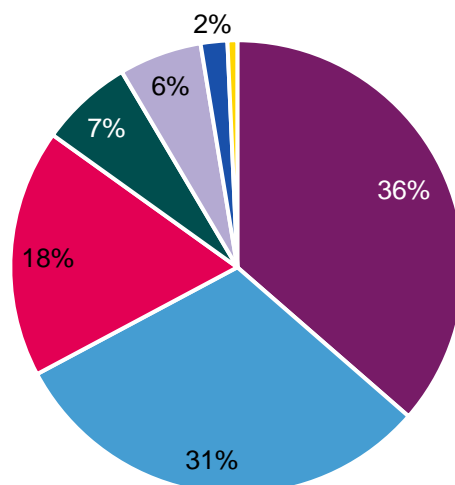
“It is also important to have diversity among foster carers, to best place children and young people in a home which best suits their needs. Increasing the numbers of foster carers will increase the home options that a child can be placed in.” – Foster carer who strongly agreed

Foster carers also mentioned that if the general public were more aware of the different aspects of the fostering role (i.e. early help, short breaks/respite, supporting the fostering community) and how they could support fostering, this may help provide stability for children overall.

“There are people who could offer [short breaks], back up care, a holiday home, transport, a great many things, with so many more people being involved in the fostering community then that brings a much brighter hope for the future for the children and placements families.” – Foster carer who agreed

We also asked foster carers how far they agreed that foster carer recruitment should be prioritised by the Government.

How far do you agree that this recommendation should be prioritised?



- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not sure
- No answer

244 foster carers left comments in response to this question telling us what they think about the recruitment of foster carers being prioritised. The themes were very similar to the answers provided above, centring on the need to recruit high quality foster carers and retain new and current foster carers. The need to recruit more social workers was also mentioned by foster carers.

“It is indisputable that more foster carers are needed and this should be prioritised but first there is a need to look at training, support networks and resilience.” – Foster carer who agreed

“Again, the issue is not around recruitment, but how foster carers are treated once they are approved. There is little meaningful support and this only impacts the child.” – Foster carer who neither agreed nor disagreed

Fostering services’ views

While there was some local variation, the overall consensus from the fostering services we consulted with is that they are struggling to recruit foster carers. Fostering services shared that both enquiries and the quality of applications have dropped. This is causing issues across the board, as one staff member manager put it:

“People spend too much time searching for placements for children due to lack of vacancies and trying to find creative solutions where none can be found. The number of exemptions are rising, and allegations are in part due to placing too much pressure on foster carers.” – Fostering service staff member

Of the fostering service staff members we consulted with, many agreed with foster carers that retention needs to be given equal, if not more, focus.

“As retention is such a key issue this should be looked at before recruitment because if we attract new people in now we won’t be able to retain them.” – Fostering service staff member

“A high percentage of foster carers resign after two years, that needs to be looked at. Retention is just as important as recruiting. Ultimately, it is expensive for people to leave that quickly” – Fostering service staff member

Some staff members expressed that there needs to be a change in the way we support foster carers financially, to both recruit and retain foster carers. The absence of financial support for foster carers was also mentioned as lacking in the Review’s final report.

“Only those people on benefits or who are comfortably off can afford to foster so we cannot attract many ‘ordinary’ people who need to pay bills from their fostering payments.” – Fostering service staff member

“9,000 carers is an aspirational target but we need to pay foster carers well to do the job that they do otherwise a glossy new campaign will achieve nothing.” – Fostering service staff member

Others shared that they believe external pressures such as the rise in the cost of living, a lack of affordable housing and less people having spare bedrooms is adding to the difficulties in recruiting foster carers.

Some practitioners felt that the Government should fund a national advertisement campaign that signposts locally, is sensitive, child-focussed, takes into consideration that the fostering role is

incredibly complex and not everyone can do it, showcases the difference foster care makes to children and young people and outlines the support available to foster carers.

When consulting with independent agencies, they felt unsure if the Government's plans would include them or how they would fit into any plans to bolster foster care recruitment.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network fully supports the recommendation to recruit 9,000 more foster carers over the next three years but believe that this should go further. The Fostering Network estimates that 8,100 new foster families need to be recruited this year alone to ensure children truly have a choice about where they want to live and the right homes are available in the right place, at the right time.

This aim needs to be approached sensitively and in collaboration with the sector, foster carers, fostering services and care experienced people. Any new recruitment campaign must have children at the heart and be focused on meeting their needs. The Government should consider targeted recruitment approaches for specific types of foster care, for example, long-term foster care or foster carers who can take sibling groups. Most importantly, the Government must be equally focused on retention when implementing this recommendation otherwise efforts made to recruit more foster carers will be lost.

To retain foster carers who have relationships with children and the skills required to meet all of their needs, foster carers need to have allowances that cover the full cost of looking after a child, be remunerated for their time and skills, have access to support and sufficient training. The Government needs to provide further funding to local authorities in order to provide this.

On top of funding, the Government should help change the perception of foster care such that the role is valued within society, foster carers are respected and valued for the vital contributions they make supporting children to reach their full potentials and that they are treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child. This could be achieved through a high-profile awareness raising campaign, developed carefully, with sector input.

Feeling undervalued is something foster carers tell us time and time again. In January 2022 we published a report on [the status of foster carers](#) which explores this topic in detail and demonstrates the impact foster carer's feelings of low status has on retention and the care provided to children. The report includes a number of solutions that could happen at a national level to help improve the status of foster carers. We were pleased that some of these were recommended by the review, including:

- regulations around delegating authority to foster carers that follow child focused policy and practice
- investment in innovative models of delivering foster care, including Mockingbird, available to all foster families across the UK.

We would also like to see the following:

- A national register of foster carers (see page 32 for further information)
- A learning and development framework for foster carers covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development for foster carers (see page 12 for further information)
- Fully costed and funded foster care, such that national minimum allowances in each country of the UK cover the full cost of raising a child to a good standard of living and foster carers receive

regular fee payments reflective of their time, skills and expertise paid 52 weeks of the year (see pages 28 and 29 for further information).

The Government should learn from examples of practice across the country where fostering services have excellent relationships with their foster carers, are successfully retaining them and attracting new people in.

The primary reason for the majority of children entering care in England is as a result of abuse or neglect, and entering care in itself is a traumatic experience.² The children foster carers look after need to have access to support to help them recover from any previous trauma they may have experienced and achieve their best outcomes. The Government should invest in children's mental health services to ensure all children in care who require mental health support can receive timely support. To supplement statutory mental health services for care experienced children, the Government should also consider the introduction of funds modelled on the Adoption Support Fund in England to make therapeutic services available for children and young people in foster care. Making this support more widely available for children in foster care will also help alleviate the pressure on foster carers and avoid burnout.

Wrap around support through enquiries and approvals

The Review recommends that, to improve the current conversion rate of prospective foster carers who express an interest, the recommended national recruitment programme should provide a high level of support to people going through the application process.

Fostering services' views

Fostering service staff members supported the call for wrap around support for prospective foster carers through the enquiry and approval process and felt that this would help convert more enquiries into approvals. Many services shared that they already invest in wrap around support, offering buddy ups with current foster carers, meeting foster carers after panel and hosting information events, for example. For those that already offer wrap around support, fostering services shared that it allows them to get a good sense of the enquirer/applicant and a better understanding of their motivations. It was noted that it can also help tailor support and training to the prospective carers needs as the pressure on finding foster care placements sometimes results in newly approved carers "not being protected in the way we'd like", as one staff member put it. Other services felt that they cannot always offer wrap around support because of capacity.

Some fostering service staff members commented that the Training, Skills and Development Standards (TSDS) need to be developed to be more meaningful and include training in therapeutic parenting to develop the necessary skills in looking after children with complex needs and trauma. This need is supported by the findings of our State of the Nation 2021 survey where three of the top five learning and development gaps identified by foster carers related to caring for children with complex trauma. Foster carers stated that they required more training on mental and physical health needs (including developmental disabilities); trauma, attachment and therapeutic parenting; and understanding behaviour.³

² Department for Education (2021) [Children looked after in England including adoptions](#)

³ The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Main Report](#) p.21

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network supports this recommendation and believes that it will help fostering services translate more enquiries into approvals. The Government will need to provide support such that all fostering services have sufficient capacity in order to achieve this. The Government should produce guidance which includes evidence-based methods for services to apply.

Children and young people coming into the care system have a diverse range of needs which are increasingly complex, likely including trauma. There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers to meet these needs, which in turn suggests a significant learning and development need to ensure foster carers have the knowledge and skills required. The Government should review the TSDS for foster carers to better equip them for the complex role they are undertaking and help improve retention. New standards must include mandatory training on trauma awareness, attachment and providing therapeutic care.

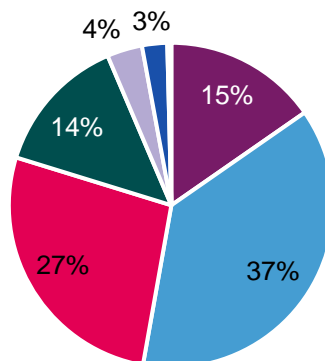
In order for foster carers to help the children they foster stay safe and achieve their potential, it is essential that they continue to develop their skills and knowledge throughout their fostering career, and that opportunities for accessing learning and development are made available by fostering services. The training on offer must be relevant and suited to their needs and the needs of children living with them. The Fostering Network strongly believes that a learning and development framework for foster carers, such as that in Wales, should be implemented in England, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development.

Family networks

The Review recommends that local authorities should identify important adults (e.g. family, friends, teachers etc.) that are already known to a child and may be willing to foster.

Foster carers' views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



■ Strongly agree

■ Disagree

■ No answer

■ Agree

■ Strongly disagree

■ Neither agree nor disagree

■ Not sure

227 foster carers shared their thoughts on this recommendation. The general consensus from the comments was that placing children with people they know and trust is beneficial. However, foster carers also shared that, in order for these placements to be successful, family and friends carers need to have a good awareness of the role, not feel like they 'have to' and have sufficient emotional and financial support and training.

“As long as the important adult has the means (emotionally, financially, therapeutically and correct training and support).” – Foster carer who agreed

“The conditions need to be right for somebody to foster, not just because they know the child and feel pressured into looking after that child.” – Foster carer who disagreed

Foster carers also stated the importance of listening to children when making such decisions.

“The child needs to have their voices heard more in relation to this recommendation.” – Foster carer who agreed

Many foster carers felt that family group decision making already happened when a child entered care, with the exception of including teachers.

Overall foster carers were less supportive of teachers being foster carers as they felt they would not have enough time and it could put a strain on the existing relationship with the child.

“Teachers have enough on their plates. And fostering is a full time job. We don't want to lose teachers to fostering as that just creates another problem elsewhere.” – Foster carer who agreed

Fostering services' views

Discussion with fostering services on the topic of making the most of family networks centred around the recommendation to ensure families get the financial and practical support they need to care for children without having to register as foster carers.

Fostering services were interested in the idea of moving kinship care away from foster care but wanted more information about how this would work in practice. Staff explained how kinship care is different to foster care and how this can lead to difficulties. For example, a kinship carer's relationships with the child may lead to different reactions to behaviours and different skills may be required to mediate between different family members. For example:

“If a grandparent is looking after their grandchild who has experienced trauma at the hand of their child, they will have a different reaction when dealing with this or engaging with training.” – Fostering service staff member

Some agreed that kinship care should be outside of foster care. They stated that kinship carers often don't want to be foster carers and that fostering regulations interfere with family life, including kinship carers having to write notes on their family members. Some fostering services shared that kinship foster carers already get treated differently to non-related foster carers regarding training and assessment. Service managers shared that they sometimes have to apply a great amount of flexibility to foster carer assessment processes to approve a kinship carer.

“Approving kinship foster carers can sometimes be like fitting square pegs into round holes” – Fostering service staff member

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network is clear that children in foster care have the right to expect the same standards of care, whether living with recruited or connected foster carers.

We recognise the issues raised in the Review (and reflected by our members above) which highlight areas where the current system is not working for kinship carers and for fostering services. We support the overall emphasis within the Review on better support for families to remain together and see The Fostering Network's [Step Up, Step Down](#) programme as one way to help achieve this. We also recognise the differences between kinship and foster care and believe there is merit in further exploring the implications of the family networks recommendation in full consultation with the fostering sector, kinship and foster carers, fostering services and care experienced people.

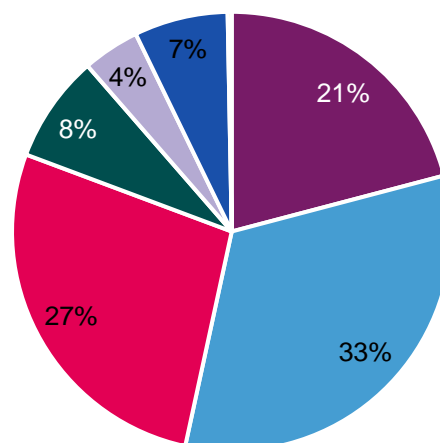
Children should always be consulted with about where they want to live and have a choice. The needs of the child should drive the level of support offered to their carers, regardless of the status of their carers or the placement.

Mockingbird

The Review recommends that all local authorities should develop a model of foster carer support based on the principles of Mockingbird.

Foster carers' views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- No answer
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Not sure

We asked foster carers for their views on the recommendation that all local authorities should develop a model of foster carer support based on the principles of Mockingbird.

Of the foster carers that responded to the question, 205 provided comments. 81 per cent of foster carers were positive (54 per cent) or neutral (27 per cent) about the recommendation (some will have no experience of Mockingbird) and those that are already involved in Mockingbird shared how supportive the model was for themselves and the children they care for.

“I am part of a Mockingbird hub. I often turn to them for support when needed. Usually on a weekend when social workers are not available.” - Foster carer who agreed

Foster carers made it clear that to ensure the support models are effective, the scheme would need more funding to recruit the right type of foster carer to take on the hub carer role, as well as extra support for services setting up constellations. This would include proper training and pay that matched the skills and experience needed by foster carers to take on the role of the hub carer.

“The foster carers at the centre of the constellation need to be well trained, articulate, available and not afraid to stand up to the local authority. They will need to be on an enhanced pay scale to recruit and retain them.” - Foster carer who agreed

“I believe this is a really positive step forward in helping reduce disruptions, retain carers and increase support for carers and children. However there needs to be resources and support for LAs to set up Hubs. My LA runs the scheme but seems to struggle to find enough carers to be at the centre of the hub so cannot include all carers in the model.” - Supported lodgings host who strongly agrees

Foster carers did recognise that support models as such are not a ‘one size fits all’ and there needs to be a choice of whether you want to be involved. Some foster carers stated that they have developed a support model such as this on their own with friends and other foster carers. Foster carers who support children with complex needs also identified that models such as these do not always work for the children they care for.

There was an issue with how foster carers understood this question and it is clear from the comments that some respondents misunderstood the concept of ‘extended family’ to mean the child’s extended birth family.

“Having a strong network for the child/children is so important. Having close connections with family, loved ones and friends is vital for the wellbeing of the child.” - Foster carer who agreed

Therefore, there is a risk that some of the respondents misunderstood the question, however, overall, it was clear that foster carers felt there is a need for a strong network of support for themselves and the children they care for.

“Enabling and nurturing appropriate relationships is one of the most beneficial things you can do to enable a child to thrive.” - Foster carer who strongly agreed

Fostering services’ views

When discussing this recommendation with fostering services, they shared similar views to foster carers. Overall, services were positive about this recommendation. Many shared their previous experiences of families signing up to be foster carers, but then struggling due to the lack of a support network; Mockingbird is invaluable at providing a support network to foster carers and increasing retention. The main concern services shared was that the recommendation didn’t explicitly say it had to be the exact Mockingbird model, and this could lead to the model and levels of support being diluted by LA and IFP services.

There was discussion around the need to recruit more foster carers for this to be implemented effectively. One service reported using the principles, but not having the foster carer capacity for constellations and hub carers. This was echoed by smaller agencies who also shared that they do not have the capacity to implement the model fully. Similarly, services discussed how the success of the model depends on recruiting the right person as the hub carer, meaning there needs to be financial support to recruit and train the right person for the role.

Services also pointed out, as did foster carers, that foster carers need choice over whether they want to be involved in the model. Some were worried, for example, if foster carers who had fostered for many years were forced to become part of a constellation, that this would push them to retire. Therefore, the need for constellations to remain optional and to have significant levels of support on offer was emphasised strongly.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network supports this recommendation and strongly believes that The Mockingbird Family Model should be made available in every local authority area in England.

Mockingbird is an award-winning programme that delivers sustainable foster care structured around the support and relationships of an extended family and is well evidenced to show increased wellbeing and outcomes for looked after children and young people and the foster carers that support them. The model aims to nurture the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

“Mockingbird is a place where you can belong. Mockingbird is a place where you will make new friends that you will have for life really.” – young person, age 15

Mockingbird has been [independently evaluated](#) and is evidenced to tackle many of the current issues in the care system. Evidence shows the model creates better outcomes including placement stability and reducing the number of placement breakdowns and entries into residential care, improved sibling connections, family relationships and cultural identity. It also has a positive impact on foster carers, increasing rates of foster carer recruitment and retention, makes better use of available placements and foster carers report feelings of improved status as part of the team around the child.

The model has compelling evidence even before considering the financial benefits Mockingbird provides. Once established, Mockingbird is self-sustaining, with each £1 invested in the programme leading to a saving of 99 pence. Mockingbird provides significant cost savings for the care system, with an estimated £3.4million estimated costs avoided between May 2018 and March 2021. Mockingbird's scalable integrated constellation model can also be utilised in kinship care, special guardianship, adoption and to transition children from residential care to family support.

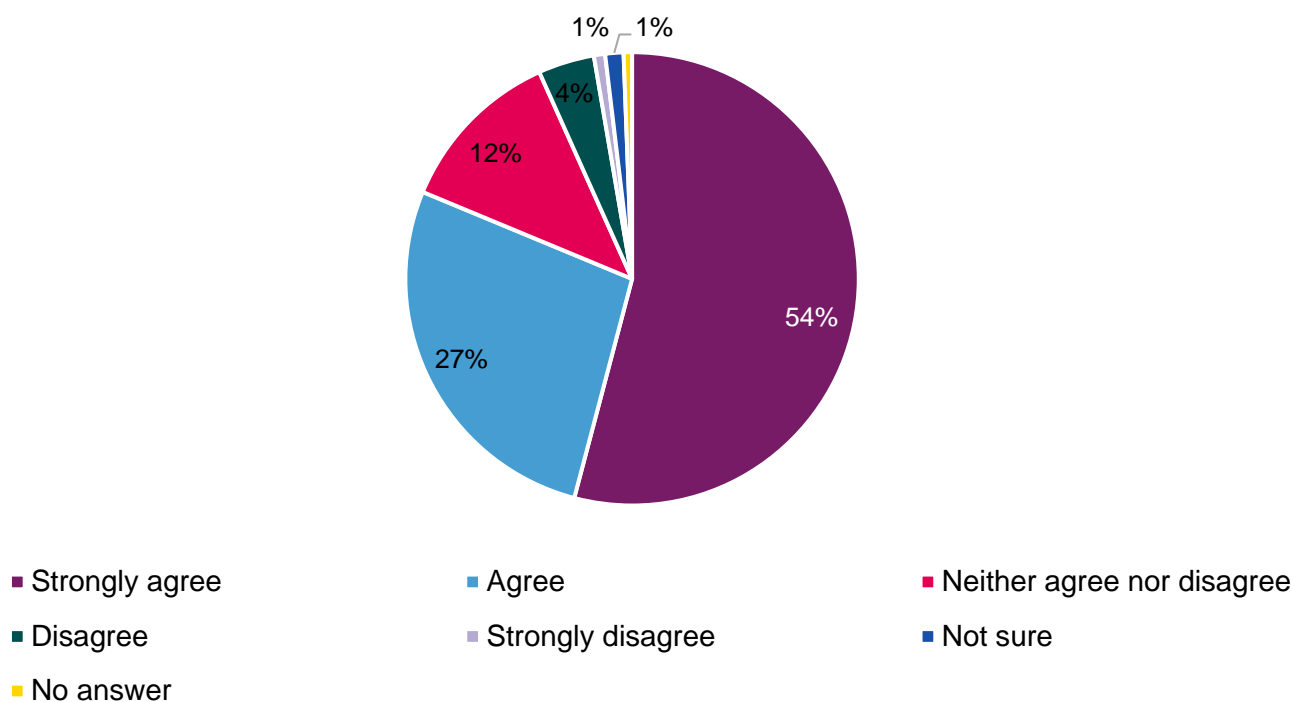
We share the concerns highlighted by services around the use of open language to allow other alternative support models to Mockingbird to be implemented. Mockingbird is the only manualised programme of its kind available currently in the UK. Some fostering services have established approaches which draw on elements of Mockingbird, but without fidelity to the Mockingbird Programme, there is no evidence that they will achieve the same outcomes. There is a significant risk that support models will be diluted and not be able to produce the positive impact Mockingbird has on improving wellbeing and outcomes for both looked after children and foster carers. We strongly believe that the Mockingbird Family Model should be made available in every local authority area in England, recognising the element of choice for foster carers and allowing them to have the option of being part of the support model (as is the case currently).

Delegated authority by default

The Review recommends that foster carers should be given delegated authority by default, to take decisions which affect the day to day lives of children in their care.

Foster carers' views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



Over 80 per cent of respondents felt that giving foster carers delegated authority by default would improve the outcomes for children looked after. The consensus was overwhelmingly supportive of this recommendation, recognising that this would help them in their role as foster carers, would be beneficial to the children they look after and overall reduce the workload of social workers.

Foster carers shared with us their frustrations in having to ask for permissions for the day-to-day care of the child, despite feeling that they often knew the child best and having created a bond from caring for them 24/7. There were also comments on how foster carers are often not trusted to make judgements on what's best for the child and should be allowed a 'seat at the table' when decisions are being made.

"Being a foster carer is hard enough without having to chase social workers for permission for day-to-day things." – Foster carer who strongly agreed

"They ask us to treat the children as our own but they make it near impossible, there are lots of ways we can't treat them as we would our own." – Foster carer who strongly agreed

There were some points raised around delegated authority needing to be based on the 'readiness' of foster carers, for example new carers or short-term carers who have less experience or do not know the child as well. Some foster carers also felt that checks would need to be completed ahead of assigning delegated authority to ensure foster carers are working in the child's best interest.

“Foster carers are best placed to know and understand the needs of their child, but it would be dependent on their relationship.” – Foster carer who agreed

Some foster carers also felt that more cultural awareness training might be needed to make sure this aspect of children’s identities is protected.

“Default delegated authority will certainly reduce 'waiting times' for permission to go ahead with everyday care. My only reluctance is that foster carers who are unaware of the cultural or social norms their placements come from may inadvertently overstep a sensitive mark. More comprehensive placement request forms will certainly be needed.” – Foster carer who agreed

Foster carers also shared their concerns around having more responsibility for decisions towards the child granted by delegated authority. Foster carers felt that this may lead to repercussions for foster carers if they are not protected legally or by unions.

“More fault will be put back to [foster carers] when things go wrong” – Foster carer who disagreed

“Day to day decisions yes. We have delegated authority and it works well but I wouldn't want to see it extended to pass responsibility onto carers with no legal or union cover which should really be a LA responsibility.” – Foster carer who agreed

Some foster carers also raised concerns around the impact of full delegated authority on the relationships they have with children’s birth families.

Overall, this recommendation was heavily supported by foster carers who felt that it would improve outcomes for children looked after, but also aid their abilities to undertake their role successfully.

Fostering services’ views

Overall, fostering services in discussions were positive about this recommendation and most services felt that currently delegated authority is not happening by default. Services reported that the main issues currently with delegated authority are:

- delegated authority is often not clearly identified within the service;
- it is not based on clear agreements; and,
- there is no consistency between services.

Services identified that delegated authority as it stands creates a power imbalance between foster carers and social workers. Services felt that it can often be dependent on the relationship foster carers have with social workers, or the social worker themselves. Some social workers were identified as being more informed than others, either not having delegated authority at the forefront of their minds, simply having a gap in knowledge, or not having the information required to allow delegated authority to happen. Therefore, many felt that currently delegated authority is agreed on a case-by-case basis for each foster carer, their local authority and the social worker.

Some services shared that they already give foster carers delegated authority by default, explaining that due to the strong level of communication between all parties and it being discussed consistently within meetings, it has allowed for less paperwork and positive experiences for all involved.

There were strong feelings about how this recommendation should be implemented, with detail being absolutely essential to establish what decisions will be included to allow for more clarity and consistency across services. Services discussed how families and foster carers need to be included

in the discussions when decisions are being made so that everyone is supporting the child's experience of living with foster carers, but some recognised that this may be difficult when the parents are involved.

Many also emphasised the need for delegated authority agreements to be live documents that are revisited regularly enough within services to account for changes; for example a change of social worker, a change of circumstances in the household or the child getting older.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network strongly agrees with the recommendation to give foster carers delegated authority by default. In order for children in care to have the best possible experience, foster carers should be empowered to take appropriate and timely decisions about the children in their care. Day-to-day decisions should include things such as:

- routine medical visits and treatments
- overnight stays
- holidays within the country
- visiting friends
- organised activities/clubs
- haircuts
- school day trips
- meeting with school staff
- school photographs
- sex education
- mobile phones.

We know from our State of the Nation surveys and in discussions with our members that too many foster carers report that they are not always given the appropriate authority to make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care, despite regulations across the UK being in place. Foster carers tell us they often feel like they have the least authority in the team supporting the child. There is a huge lack of consistency in what decisions a foster carer can and cannot make.

The ultimate impact of this is on the child who may be treated differently to the rest of the family and their peers, hindering them from being able to participate in family, school or social activities. We should be striving to enable children who are raised by foster carers to have the same opportunities whenever possible.

We believe that foster carers should be empowered, trusted and have the authority to make day-to-day decisions on behalf of children. All members of the team around the child should have a shared and clear understanding of the decisions that foster carers can and cannot make, explaining why and how this aligns with care planning. We recognise that this should be tailored to each child and be dependent on the relationship with them. Any decisions that cannot be made by the foster carer must be dealt with appropriate action by social workers and responded to in a timely manner to achieve the best outcome for the child.

Regulations around delegating authority to foster carers should follow child-focused policy and practice, similar to that introduced [in Wales](#), whereby decisions foster carers have the authority to make are formally agreed and communicated clearly at the outset of the placement and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care.

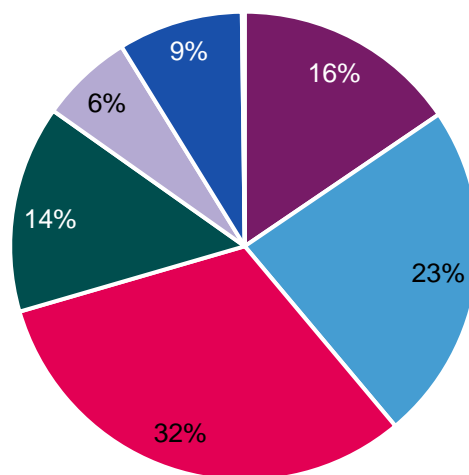
Allowing foster carers to be involved in decision-making can provide validation that their skills and knowledge are valued, will aid better communication and, ultimately, better the care and outcomes for the child as the team around them will be working coherently with their best interests at heart.

Independent advocacy

The Review recommends that independent, opt-out, high quality advocacy for children in care and in proceedings should replace the existing Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Regulation 44 Visitor roles. The Review proposes that the Children’s Commissioner for England should oversee these advocacy services, with the powers to refer children’s complaints and concerns to the court.

Foster carer’s views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



- Strongly agree
- Disagree
- No answer
- Agree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Not sure

Foster carers found this recommendation one of the most challenging to decide on, with views being split on whether independent advocacy should replace existing IRO and Regulation 44 visitor roles. Foster carers views were mainly based on their own previous experiences or their child’s experiences of working with IROs and advocates, therefore being dependent on each individual IRO.

“The IRO gets to know the family well and acts in the child’s best wishes pulling the social workers into line when needed. This level of structure needs to remain to support the families and needs to be at a local level not through government.” – Foster carer who strongly disagreed

Of those that had positive experiences with IROs, they felt they offered a unique expertise, can help move things forward in the child’s best interest and provide a constant in children’s lives.

“I find IROs very good for advocating a child’s wishes” – Foster carer who agreed

“The only positive I have about our experience is our IRO is incredible he makes everything all the stress manageable and I think he really does care” – Kinship carer who disagreed

Of those who had negative experiences of working with IROs, the main issue was they felt they are not truly independent, as they work for the local authority. This meant they were supportive of a different advocacy option for children.

“IRO is not independent so is contained by the local authority or agency they work for rather than be the child's advocate” – Foster carer who agreed

Some foster carers agreed with the idea to have advocates for looked after children, but felt that removing the IRO role to achieve this would be counterproductive.

“I like the idea of opt-out advocacy for the children. It seems a shame to sacrifice the IRO role to fund it, as the IRO is often effective at removing road-blocks within the local authority.” – Foster carer who agreed

“Yes children need strong advocates to support their wishes and feelings and ensure decisions are made in their best interests. Removing IROs however is one of the worst decision we have heard about.” – Foster carer who strongly disagreed

Overall, many foster carers recognised the vital importance of having a trusted adult in the child’s life who can advocate for them.

“Children do need proper independent reviews, as a carer I often feel like a lots been said but nothing has been done, the children feel this and lose trust in adults, the care system and often life” - Foster carer who agreed

“A good independent advocate would be able to interpret a child's behaviours and words to assist the team around the child.” – Foster carer who strongly agreed

Fostering services’ views

Services also had mixed views on whether the IRO role should be replaced. Of those that were in support of IROs, they felt they were often the most consistent person in a child’s life, offered an independent safeguard for the child, were able to question decisions and were a good point of contact for foster carers who they could escalate concerns when there is no response from the social worker or team manager. Services who were positive about IROs also felt unsatisfied with the explanation given in the report as to why they should be removed, feeling that IROs were born out of failings in the system so felt cautious about their removal. IFP staff tended to be more positive about IROs, recognising their ability to be a point of contact between themselves and LAs, as well as when there are new social workers, as they felt IROs know what the LA responsibilities are.

Even though services were positive about IROs, many recognised that the role could be more independent. However, they shared concerns around moving the role externally, with the risk that an external person would not be able to make things happen in the same way an IRO can with their ability to influence from ‘within’ the LA. They also discussed how it was all dependent on how confident the IRO was in challenging the LA in decisions, reflecting foster carers views. Advocates were also discussed as having less authority than IROs, for example not becoming involved in legal matters if a child wants to change their name.

Fostering staff members who felt that IROs should be removed, shared that the main reason was due to their lack of independence. Staff felt that IROs need more 'teeth' so they can make recommendations that can't be ignored and discussed how the current power structure around IROs was one of the main reasons they couldn't be independent. This led them to suggest that moving IROs out of the local authority would allow for this independence. Another issue raised was the caseloads of IROs, with some having caseloads of 70 children, meaning they do not have the time or resource to be able to provide the role effectively.

When discussing the implementation of this recommendation, services highlighted concerns with the Review's proposals. They discussed the recommended 35 cases per advocate for a wage of £22,000, which many felt would not lead to successful recruitment. They also raised concerns around how LAs would find people to fill the new advocate roles if IROs were disbanded.

Staff also shared their concerns around the 'opt-out' nature of the new role and questioned how this would be safeguarded. Many shared their concerns that allowing it to be 'opt-out' means it can be taken away from children who have experienced trauma and may push people away as a result.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network support the principles behind this recommendation. We strongly agree that we must strengthen how children's voices can be heard within the care system and ensure that children have trusted adult relationships whom they can turn to, who can offer a constant and supportive relationship, having their best interests at heart. We are supportive of additional advocacy for children in care.

However, we have some reservations, as do our members involved in day-to-day practice, around the removal of the IRO role. To ensure this recommendation doesn't have unintended consequences, it is important that a proper consultation process is undertaken before the Government decides whether to take this forward. We would call on the Government to look carefully at the statutory functions undertaken by IROs and Section 44 Visitors, as well as the relationships those fulfilling these roles establish with children, to explore the potential negative impact removal of these roles could have on children in care and the foster carers who support them.

Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs)

The Review recommends that the recruitment and training of foster carers, must be moved into new Regional Care Cooperatives.

Fostering services' views

Fostering services had lots of questions about this recommendation as there was not a great deal of detail about how it would work within the report. There was a clear message that if this proposal is taken forward it must build on learning from the Regional Adoption Agencies, both in terms of what works and what doesn't. Some held the view that the Regional Adoption Agencies are not actually fulfilling their aims and have been very expensive and time-consuming to establish.

Services emphasised the fact that fostering is more complicated than adoption, with many functions which should be retained at a local level (e.g. matching, recruitment) and a clear priority to keep children within their local communities.

Services felt that there were some functions that could benefit from greater focus and investment at a regional level to improve efficiency and reduce duplication (e.g. some training/development, marketing) but had mixed views about whether these would require structural change. Some areas are already working together in this way and there is no real barrier to greater co-operation across regions if there is capacity in the system to enable this.

There were questions about how IFPs would fit into the RCC model.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network does not support this recommendation. We are concerned that there would be significant risks in taking forward such large-scale organisational change when the children's social care system is under such severe pressure, within the context of a cost of living crisis and economic uncertainty.

The Fostering Network firmly believes that fostering is and should remain a local activity to ensure children can remain in their local communities connected to family, friends and familiar daily routines.

We support the view expressed by our members that there is an urgent need to support fostering at a local level by ensuring the appropriate funding and the right structures at a regional and national level, but we do not think this requires the introduction of RCCs.

The Government should consult foster carers and fostering services to determine at which level functions should sit, based on where they are most accountable, effective and bring most innovation to children's social care so children reach their full potential. The starting point for fostering should be the establishment of a national leadership board to provide visible leadership and oversight for the sector and ensure a coordinated, collaborative and strategic approach to support and drive improvements at a regional and local level.

We believe resources should be focussed on the areas of change most likely to impact positively on children's outcomes.

New standards and Ofsted framework

The Review recommends that new and ambitious care standards, applicable across all homes for children, should be introduced. It also recommends that Ofsted's powers should be extended to and that Ofsted should create a new frameworks for inspection.

Fostering services views

This was not the main focus of discussion for fostering services who chose to discuss the recommendations above in greater depth, however amongst those services who did discuss it, there was broad support for the following recommendations:

- A National Children's Social Care Framework should set the objectives and outcomes for children's social care.
- Ofsted inspection should be reformed to increase transparency in how judgements are made, ensure inspection applies a rounded understanding of being "child focussed" and to ensure inspection supports the proposed reforms.

The key points made were that the principles set out in the review were supported by fostering services but that when the National Children's Social Care Framework is developed, it must involve those who have expertise and 'on the ground' experience to ensure the framework is well informed, as opposed to a 'top-down' approach which may miss vital areas that should be included. This would risk driving perverse incentives and alienating the sector if the framework is 'done to' them rather than developed in partnership with them.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network supports the proposed National Children's Social Care Framework and a more transparent Ofsted framework. We would emphasise the point made by our members about the involvement of key stakeholders in the development of the Framework, so it builds and improves on what is already in place and avoids the mistakes of the past.

We would like to see the new Framework focussed on children's outcomes. [The National Audit Office in 2014](#) concluded in the looked after children report that the Department for Education could not demonstrate that it is meeting its objectives for children in foster care and residential care. The report stated that the DfE did not have indicators by which it measures the effectiveness of the care system. It is currently unclear how we measure outcomes for children and young people in care. We would welcome a more robust and fit for purpose accountability framework centred on outcomes for children and stability. We support the proposal that the voice of children and young people should be part of the review process.

In support of the child outcome measures we would like to see measures which we know will support those outcomes. For example, national standards for training and development of foster carers, foster carer pay and allowances and a clear commitment to foster carers as an equal member in the team around the child. The development of a new Framework would also provide the opportunity to fill some of the gaps in data.

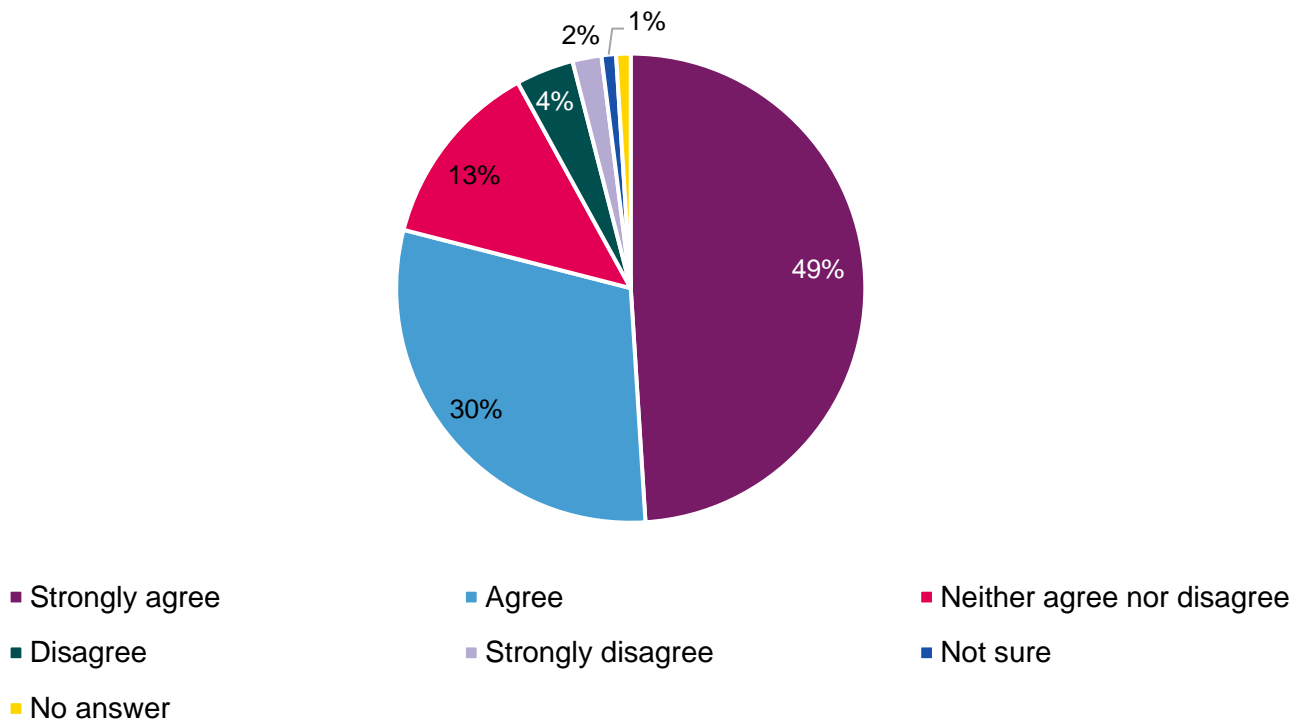
The idea of following a similar process to NICE guidelines in developing practice guidance has some merits. However, it depends on having a strong evidence base and investment in research in the field of children's social care (which is significantly less well funded than health research). We would welcome exploration of this idea alongside a funded national research strategy.

Staying Put

The Review recommends that Staying Put should be a legal entitlement and extended to age 23 with an 'opt-out' rather than 'opt-in' expectation.

Foster carers' views

Do you think this recommendation is likely to improve outcomes for children looked after?



Foster carers were supportive of this recommendation, believing that children should be able to stay in their foster homes for as long as they need.

However, there were strong opinions about the policy that respondents believe must change before extending Staying Put. Many foster carers reported that they would not be able to enter into a Staying Put arrangement or would not do it again as the financial support was not good enough.

“This offers more stability for the child, but also the foster carer should be paid a wage for taking on this responsibility. I think sometimes carers let the child go at 18 as they can't afford to lose the wage.” – Foster carer

“As a single carer of teenagers with only one room it breaks my heart to move them on because financially I have no option.” – Foster carer

In relation to the 'opt-out' aspect of the recommendation, some foster carers felt that this would not work as Staying Put has to be an agreement between the young person and the foster carer.

“I like the idea of an extended age however I see no difference between an opt in or opt out system. Either way the two parties involved need to be in agreement so what's the point or difference?” – Foster carer

Fostering services' views

Fostering services were supportive of the principle of extending Staying Put to 23, particularly for those people with SEND whose development may not match their age. However they were concerned about the knock-on impact of the loss of capacity.

Finances were also raised as a huge issue. Despite the fact that a young person's needs do not change once they turn 18, the financial support for foster carers usually drops significantly for a Staying Put arrangement. Foster carers may not be able to afford looking after a young person until the age of 23.

The Fostering Network's view

The Fostering Network support's the Review's proposal to extend Staying Put to the age of 23. We also agree with the Review's view that providing a Staying Put arrangement to young people in care should be assumed by default, with foster carers given the option to 'opt out' if they are unable to provide it.

However, there are still a number of issues with the implementation of the Staying Put duties that have resulted in variability in policy, practice and participation at a local level. There is still a range of cultural, financial and logistical obstacles getting in the way of realising the full potential of this policy.

One of the primary concerns for post-18 arrangements is funding and finances. Since the inception of the scheme, all key stakeholders have highlighted that funding is inadequate and that this is the root cause of many of the implementation issues. Foster carers entering onto the scheme experience a loss of income from fostering when entering a Staying Put arrangement. Unlike for foster care, there are no minimum post-18 allowances and levels vary greatly by local authority and many fostering services reduce the allowance given to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that the shortfall is made up from the young person claiming housing benefits.

Other implementation issues include continued approval as a foster carer. There is uncertainty among fostering services to recommend continued 'suitability to foster' for carers who do not have space/capacity to offer fostering placements in addition to post-18 arrangements. Foster carers are often left in a position of having to seek re-approval when the young person leaves the post-18 care arrangement; this is a lengthy process which is both unnecessary and costly and can result in foster carers prematurely leaving the workforce.

As part of the process of extending the Staying Put scheme, the Government should carry out a full review of how Staying Put has been implemented. The Government should also ensure that Staying Put is properly costed and then fully funded.

What was missing from the Review's final report

The Fostering Network felt that there were a number of issues within foster care that the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England's final report did not address including:

- a national register of foster carers
- allegations
- allowances
- fee payments

- foster carer retention
- improving working/resourcing in the wider sector (e.g. CAMHS, education, etc.)
- short breaks/respite
- social worker recruitment and retention
- the employment status for foster carers.

This list was informed by evidence gathered through our State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 survey. In our survey on the Care Review, we asked foster carers to choose as many topics as they liked from this list that they thought were missing from the final report. They could also add any additional areas they felt were missing.



'Other' options included:

- foster carers calling for more mandatory training on trauma and attachment for foster carers, social workers and the wider team around the child
- providing more support for children in care including with their education
- treating foster carers with respect and as professionals
- pensions and paid holidays.

Employment status

The most popular response (70 per cent of foster carers) to “what is missing,” was employment status.

“A number of young families would foster but it’s not a job that can support a mortgage or loan application so people financially cannot commit. It needs but be a proper recognised form of employment.” – Foster care

“Recruitment will always elude a Government who refuses to formally recognise the employment status of foster carers - there is no real incentive for people to become carers when the allowances do not cover the costs of supporting children with extensive needs.” – Foster carer

Foster carers in the UK have a unique role within the children’s sector; they are the only members who work with children in their own homes, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and welcome them into their own families. Some are paid for the work that they do, others are not. All are supervised, work within a tight regulatory framework and are expected to undertake training and ongoing professional development. And yet they currently have ambiguous employment status. Most are considered self-employed for tax purposes at least, but unlike other self-employed people, they don’t enjoy the freedom of being able to work with lots of different organisations, as they can only register with one fostering service at a time (apart from in Scotland).

The Education Committee stated in their [report on the fostering inquiry](#) in December 2017 that they found it ‘unsatisfactory that foster carers are subject to the responsibilities of self-employment status without the benefits,’ and their recommendation was that ‘the Government must state whether self-employment is the appropriate employment status for foster carers’.

This call for clarity was reiterated by Lord Justice Underhill in the [Court of Appeal ruling on unions for foster carers](#) in 2021 who said, “the Government may wish at least to consider whether it would make sense for it to consider seeking now to introduce bespoke legislative provision for the position of foster carers, which would either preserve the present exclusion or provide for rights appropriate to their very unusual role,”

The Government needs to take forward the Education Select Committee’s recommendation to look at what is the most appropriate employment status for foster carers.

Allowances

No foster carer should be out of pocket as a result of caring for a child on behalf of the state. However, we know that this is not the case and foster carers are having to make up the significant shortfall in allowances. 67 per cent of foster carers felt that allowances were missing from the Review’s final report.

Our State of the Nation’s Foster Care 2021 report showed that over a third of foster carers in England do not feel their current allowance levels meet the costs of looking after a child. This was in 2021, before inflation rates have risen dramatically, yet allowances have not matched. This is having a detrimental impact on foster carers as allowances are falling significantly below what is needed to meet the needs of children in foster care.

We are hearing from foster carers through our member helplines and forums that foster carers are having to use their own income, use their savings, downsize the family home due to mortgage

repayments, take out loans and even having to resort to food banks to provide for the children in their care. This is not acceptable and is having a detrimental impact on foster carers and the children they care for at a time when foster carer recruitment and retention is at crisis and there is the highest number of children in care since records began.

“There is no real incentive for people to become carers when the allowances do not cover the costs of supporting children with extensive needs.” – Foster carer

Even putting the significant increases in inflation to one side, we know that national minimum allowance levels set by the Government are based on near 30 year out of date research. Therefore, we strongly believe the Government should undertake a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances, using up to date evidence, to ensure that foster carers are given sufficient payment that values their unique and critical expertise and skillset and to ensure allowances truly covers the full costs of looking after a child in foster care.

We also believe a national minimum allowance should be introduced for Staying Put arrangements with such an allowance being set using up to date evidence to ensure it is sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person.

We are currently working on a paper to detail what we believe should be the new level of allowances, that are based on up-to-date evidence and recognises that allowances should fully cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care. We will be sharing them with you once we have published.

We also survey local authorities every year to ensure they are paying at or above the national minimum allowance level. You can read our [reports for 2022-23 here](#). This year, we found that eight local authorities are paying below the national minimum allowance for at least one age group. We also saw a significant increase in local authorities freezing their allowances this year – in total 37 local authorities have frozen their allowances in at least one age group.

Retention

The Fostering Network, along with foster carers and fostering services, believe that improving foster carer retention is vital and just as important as recruitment. Foster carers with knowledge and experience are required in the workforce to support children to thrive, newer foster carers as they develop their own skills and the fostering service in their retention and recruitment efforts.

The need to do more to retain foster carers was mentioned many times by respondents throughout the survey. Foster carers shared that any attempts to recruit more foster carers would fail if retention is not given equal focus (see recruitment section for more details). Foster carers also shared that having better support (see Mockingbird, short breaks/respice sections for more details); all foster carers receiving training on the impact of trauma and attachment; increasing allowances and fees (see allowances and fees sections for more details); and, being respected and valued for the work that they do (see recruitment section for more details) would all help towards improving foster carer retention. The Fostering Network agrees that improving all of this will help retain foster carers.

Fees

Foster carers provide specialist round-the-clock care, ensuring that children are nurtured and loved, yet not all foster carers receive an income from this role to support themselves (otherwise known as a fee payment). 59 per cent of foster carer respondents felt that pay was an area that was missing from the Review's final report.

There is no minimum recommended fee for foster carers nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services. Our State of the Nation 2021 survey found that even when foster carers do receive a fee, the majority receive far below the national living wage per calendar month for a 40-hour week, despite many foster carers not combining fostering with other work. Foster carers are the only professional group working with children which is unpaid or underpaid.

“Foster carers already are the lowest paid of all workers in the UK, the foster carer fee (wage) per child is £135.80 per week for $135.8/24/7 = 0.81\text{p/h}$. That's 81p per hour. Disgraceful.” – Foster carer

Additionally, most foster carers only receive a fee payment when they have a child in foster care living with them and therefore do not have a stable income from fostering. If all foster carers received regular fee payments, regardless of whether a child was placed with them or not, they would be provided with a stable income. This in turn would play an important role in the recruitment of new foster carers, the retention of good foster carers and be a recognition of how their skills and expertise are of value to their fostering service. Without pay, the demographic pool of foster carers will be inevitably limited to those who can afford to foster without fee payments or minimal fee payments.

“A recruitment programme isn't going to really make much difference. A realistic salary for foster carers is much more likely to work. I struggle as a single foster carer and my Agency gave us a 2% pay rise this year which comes nowhere near the rise in food costs, rent, and electricity and gas, not to mention petrol.” – Foster carer

If fostering services are able to recruit the number of foster carers they need with the skills that are required to be able to transform children's lives, levels of pay must be set that are comparable with others in the children's workforce.

The Fostering Network believes foster carers should, at the very least, receive regular fee payments in line with the national living wage for a 40-hour week, which recognises their time, skills and expertise regardless of whether they are currently caring for a child.

Short breaks/respice

The Fostering Network believes all foster carers should have a support network of known trusted adults who can offer natural short breaks for children and support to foster carers. Foster carers may need regular breaks to support them in their role, and often it is these breaks which help maintain placements when they are particularly demanding. 52 per cent of foster carers who responded to our survey felt that short breaks/respice was missing from the Review's final report.

Support networks for foster carers can come in two forms. The first being the formal support foster carers receive at an organisational level, including from social workers and out of hours support services, and the second being informal support they receive from their family, friends and peers. Both are crucial and can make a big difference to the lived experience and outcomes for the children they care for and plays a key role in the stability and success of placements.

Services should set out the expectation of support networks for short breaks/respice at the recruitment stage and include any assessment of these identified support networks as an integral part of the fostering process. Where foster carers do not have a pre-existing support network available, the fostering service should ensure they can access one.

However, we know from our State of the Nation 2021 survey, that fostering services when asked to rate the support they provide to their foster carers, had peer support opportunities and the provision of

short breaks as two out of the three main areas needed for improvement. [The Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\) report](#) into the children's social care market also found that one of the key reasons for foster carers leaving the workforce, was due not receiving enough short break/respice provision.

Effective placement planning and good practice should therefore involve clear discussion by all parties around the involvement of any informal care and support, including the nature, frequency and length of time such support is required. Agreements should be written into the placement plan and considered as part of the decision making process to ensure that a child's needs are appropriately met as well as the support needs of the foster carer.

Social worker recruitment and retention

52 per cent of foster carers who responded to our survey felt that the recruitment and retention of social workers was missing from the Review's final report. Our members tell us that many of the difficulties they face can be caused by or exacerbated by a high turnover of social workers, social worker vacancies or high caseloads of social workers who are in post. This is particularly true with regard to children's social workers.

The Fostering Network supports the view of BASW that there should be a much more effective national retention and recruitment strategy for social workers, attracting and supporting a bigger and motivated pool of applicants to study and train to achieve this.

Improving/resourcing the wider sector e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

Foster carers provide children with stability and security and can offer what for some children will be their first positive experience of family life. Stable foster care can help to improve children's mental wellbeing and educational outcomes. Yet, the findings of our most recent State of the Nation's Foster Care survey once again highlight that for a growing number of children in care, the state is failing in its responsibility to support the relationships and meet the health, education and cultural needs of children in foster care across the UK. Foster carers cannot plug these gaps. [Our children's unmet needs report](#) focusses on five specific areas of need which our members tell us are the most concerning. These are:

- Mental health
- Education
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
- Relationships with birth family
- Culture, language and religion.

Our report contains recommendations about access to wider services for children in foster care as well as recommendations about learning and development to support foster carers to meet children's needs. The Fostering Network calls on the Government to implement these recommendations across all five areas of need.

Taking mental health as an example, children with care experience are much more likely than their peers to have experienced abuse, trauma and neglect. Indeed, coming into care, regardless of the circumstances, is a traumatic event for any child. This means that children and young people with care experience are more likely to experience poor mental health.

As well as having a higher prevalence of poor mental health, children and young people with care experience are more likely to find accessing mental health support difficult. This is for a range of reasons, including perceived stigmatisation and a lack of understanding of care experience and foster care among the professionals that support children. As one child explains:

“There is not many people who can help [with my childhood trauma and severe PTSD] and it takes a very long time to get funding or for my foster [carers] to be listened to by professionals.” – Boy, aged 10, living in foster care in England⁴

We also hear from our members that some children are caught in the cycle of not being able to be assessed until they are in a ‘stable placement’, when mental health treatment at the point of need could in fact help improve stability in their current placement. Some children also have to restart their CAMHS referral when they move placement, especially when the move is between different areas. Foster carers’ responses to our State of the Nation survey show that many feel the children in their care are not always receiving meaningful support for their mental health.

The Governments should invest in children’s mental health services to ensure all children in care who require mental health support can receive timely support. To supplement statutory mental health services for care experienced children, the Government should also consider the introduction of funds modelled on the Adoption Support Fund in England to make therapeutic services available for children and young people in foster care.

Every local authority/trust should have a mental health lead for children in and leaving care. This lead should have local oversight over the mental health of children and young people with care experience, promoting good wellbeing and offering consistent and transparent support such that their mental health outcomes are comparable to their peers. Mental health practitioners (e.g., mental health nurses or counselling services) should be available to all children through their school. Practitioners should have knowledge and understanding of the impact of trauma and the specific needs of children and young people with care experience. Governments should introduce a care experienced children and young people’s impact assessment for all statutory guidance related to health to ensure policies are trauma-informed and coherent.

The other areas covered in the report also require support from other parts of the system, not just children’s social care, to make sure children in foster care have their needs met.

A national register of foster carers

47 per cent of foster carer respondents felt that a recommendation to introduce a national register of foster carers was missing from the Review’s final report.

“Foster carers should be registered and regulated by one body so they can work with both IFAs and local authorities. Children should not have to wait in the system as long as they do and carers should not have to wait a long time between placements when so many children require a safe, secure loving home.” – Foster carer

“It’s bizarre that there is no register of foster carers.” – Foster carer

The Fostering Network believe that a national register of foster carers is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions through allowing increased portability

⁴ Children’s Commissioner for England (2021) [The Big Ask, The Big Answer](#)

of the workforce, creating greater public recognition of the role and increasing public protection by having a central list of all who meet, and continue to meet, the requirements of being an approved foster carer, as well as those who were deemed unsuitable to foster. Improving foster carers' terms and conditions will also lead to better care and outcomes for children as foster carers will feel more supported, valued and confident in their roles.

To be clear, we are not talking about placement matching or fostering recruitment registers, both of which we believe are local activities and are best carried out by local authorities and fostering services.

There are a number of ways in which a register could be set up and delivered, with a range of activities in or out of its remit. The Fostering Network's preferred model is that of a centrally held list of all approved foster carers, with registration renewed each year by the fostering service. This means that assessment and review of foster carers would still be carried out locally by fostering services according to a set of national criteria and accredited training. Read our full position [here](#).

Allegations

It is vitally important that all allegations are investigated and that children are listened to, but the uncertainty and lack of support that many foster carers experience during the process can and should be avoided. Allegations are the second most common reason why foster carers call our helplines asking for advice around fostering.

It is disappointing that, despite allegations being raised as a key issue by foster carers in consultation with the Review, as evidenced in the Review's [Adult Engagement Summary](#), the topic was missing from the final report. In addition, the previous review into fostering, Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers' fostering stocktake report, [Foster Care in England](#), also did not support the suggestion from the fostering community that allegations were a key issue for foster carers and felt the only action that was needed was for local authorities to follow existing guidance and for carers to be reassured that they would be supported through the process.

44 per cent of foster carer respondents felt that allegations were an area that was missing from the Review's final report.

"I worry most days about allegations and I have seen the devastating effects of allegations on fellow foster carers. The way they were treated was inhumane." – Foster carer

"That [the Review] said nothing about reforming the allegations process was a disgrace." – Foster carer

In April we published a report exploring foster carers' experiences of allegations in detail using evidence from our State of the Nation 2021 survey. [The report](#) found that allegations can have a huge negative impact on fostering households including children in care, the foster carer and the foster carer's birth children and wider family. It also found that some foster carers receive inadequate support when experiencing an allegation and that timescales are not adhered to, damaging foster carer's relationships with their fostering service. This contributes to a number of foster carers leaving fostering immediately and others reducing their capacity to foster as they do not wish to look after other children.

The report also found that allegations have a significant impact on the likelihood of foster carers recommending fostering to those who might be considering it. Thus, improving allegations support for foster carers could also support the Review's recommendation on recruitment.

The intention of current guidance covering allegations in foster care is to enable children to feel safe and ensure their healthy development, while also minimising stress when concerns are raised about the welfare and safety of a child by ensuring foster carers are supported and informed as much as possible. The data from our State of the Nation 2021 survey suggests that current practice is far from achieving this intention. The gap between policy and practice must be closed to ensure we retain safe and loving homes for children in foster care. The right information and support must be in place for foster carers so those safe and loving homes are robust enough to withstand the allegation process should they have to face it.

Conclusion

The Fostering Network is clear that the Government must take the opportunity of this 'once in a generation' focus on children's social care to implement all those recommendations set out in the Review which will improve the outcomes of children and young people and enable them to thrive. Foster carers are part of the solution to the challenges that the children's social care system faces. But foster carers are being hit hard by the cost of living crisis, exacerbating the recruitment and retention crisis we were already experiencing. The Government must take the status of foster carers seriously, provide the funding that is needed to meet the needs of children and value foster carers as a key part of the team around the child so they can continue to transform children's lives and to encourage others to do the same.

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