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The
Fostering
Network

This is My Home: Growing up in Foster Care

NYAS and The Fostering Network



This is My Home

May 2024

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NYAS and The Fostering Network are calling on the UK and Welsh Governments to:

- 01** Pay allowances, fees and benefits consistently across England and Wales so foster carers and children in care do not face a postcode lottery.
- 02** Extend the offer of 'Staying Put' and 'When I'm Ready' until the age of 25 for all care leavers.
- 03** Increase the number of foster carers to reduce the number of children being placed miles from home.
- 04** Introduce legislation on delegated authority so it follows child-focused policy and practice, and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care from the outset of the placement.
- 05** Introduce an opt-out offer of independent advocacy to make sure all children in foster care have their voices heard.
- 06** Invest in early intervention services to reduce the number of children who need to enter care.



Introduction

This is the second report in NYAS' (National Youth Advocacy Service) research series 'This is My Home'. This series spotlights conversations with care-experienced children and young people to shine a light on the experiences of growing up in different types of care across England and Wales.

This report, produced in collaboration with The Fostering Network, focuses on the lived experiences of children and young people who have grown up in foster care.



What is foster care?

Foster care is the most common type of care in England and Wales.

In 2023, 4,955 children (69%) lived in foster care in Wales.¹

In 2023, 57,020 children (68%) lived in foster care in England.²

Foster care is a type of care where children and young people live in a family home with another family, who have been formally approved to look after children, when they can no longer live with their birth family. There are lots of reasons why people are sometimes not able to live with their birth families, for example when their parents are unwell or facing challenges.

Local authorities can directly recruit foster carers to look after children or young people in their local area. Fostering agencies can also recruit foster carers for local authorities, but are run by either privately-owned organisations, charities, or other not-for-profit agencies. This is known as the fostering service, and this service will give the foster carer support and training.

Children may be in foster care for a short time or a longer period; some people stay in foster care until they are 18, or beyond. It will depend on each young person's circumstances and what is best for them.



What can foster care look like?³

Long term care



A long-term home for children or young people who cannot return to live with their birth parents but are not going to be adopted or live in another type of care. They will live with their foster family until adulthood.

Short term care



A short-term home for a child or young person while a long-term plan for where they live next is decided upon by their social work team.

Kinship foster care



A care arrangement for children or young people to live with a family member or close friend when they can no longer live with their birth parents.

Emergency foster care



A short-term home for children or young people in emergency situations. This type of care is usually unplanned and is only for a couple of nights.

Short break foster care



A short-term and temporary stay for children or young people for a few nights, like a sleepover. Short break foster carers should already be known to the child or young person and have a good relationship with them.

Fostering for adoption



A fostering arrangement for babies or young children who are going to be adopted. Foster families will need to be approved by local authorities to adopt.

Therapeutic care



A type of specialist care for children or young people with complex needs.

Remand foster care



A type of care for children or young people who are on remand from court.

What is it like entering foster care?

Care Planning

Social workers should work with children, their family, and their foster carers to create a care plan that outlines children's needs, wishes and feelings, and what needs to happen next to help them when they live in foster care.

Delegated Authority

Foster carers have 'delegated authority', which means that they can make choices about things that impact the day-to-day lives of the children living with them. This could be small things such as what meals they give them or what activities they do, or bigger things such as health and education choices. The type of delegated authority foster carers have depends on why a child comes into care and how long they will stay in care. In all situations, foster carers should speak to the child about decisions they are making and make choices that are best for them.

Assessment

A social worker will talk to a child and their parents (if appropriate) separately to understand what their family life is like, what their needs are and whether their home is the best place for them to live at that time.

Entering Care

Social workers might decide it is best for a child to live somewhere else. This could be with foster carers, other family members (kinship care) or in a residential home. If it is decided that the child will move to foster care, they should get a chance to meet their new foster carers. Foster carers may ask questions to get to know them better, such as what they enjoy doing and what foods they like. It is also important that children get to see where they will be living so they can feel safe and comfortable.

Advocacy

In England and Wales, children and young people have a statutory right to an advocate. Advocates can help children and young people to have their voices heard in decisions being made about them.

In Wales, as soon as a child or young person enters care they are entitled to an active offer of advocacy to make sure they are aware of their statutory rights. Advocacy is also provided for parents who need care and support in Wales.



What is it like leaving foster care?

The leaving care age is 18 in England and Wales, but young people can choose to leave care when they turn 16 years old. Young people can receive support from local authorities as care leavers until they are 25 years old.

Pathway planning starts when young people turn 16 years old, and this is a process that young people should complete with either their social worker or personal adviser. A good pathway plan should help prepare the young person for leaving care and outline what support will be available for them. It must include plans for health, education, training and development, contact with family, and finances. Pathway plans must be reviewed at ages 21 or 25 for support to continue.⁴

There are schemes in England and Wales that can help young people continue living with their foster carers after they turn 18 years old if they wish to. In England, this is called the 'Staying Put' scheme and in Wales, the 'When I am Ready' scheme.

Staying Put (England)	<p>Young people in England can continue living with their foster carers until they turn 21 years old. Any young person who is 16 or 17 years old and has lived in local authority care for at least 13 weeks from the age of 14 can access 'Staying Put'.</p> <p>In England, care leavers can access the 'Setting Up Home Allowance' grant of up to £3,000 which can be used to help buy essential household items or put towards deposits.⁴</p>
When I'm Ready (Wales)	<p>'When I'm Ready' gives all young people living in foster care in Wales the right to stay with their foster carers up to the age of 21, or up to age 25 if they are in education or training.⁵</p> <p>In Wales, care leavers involved in the Welsh Government's basic income pilot trial are provided with £1,280 every month for two years after their 18th birthday. The basic income can be used to buy essential household items or pay bills.⁶</p>

Who are the children living in foster care?

Age: In England, 43% of children living in foster care are 10-15 years old, 40% are under 10 years and 17% are over 16 years old.⁷ In Wales, 23% of children were under 1 years old, 21% were 1-4 years old, 21% were 5-9 years old, 29% were 10-15 years old, and 6% were over 16 years old.⁸

Gender: In England, 54% of children in foster care are male and 46% are female.² In Wales 51% of children were male, 48% were female, and 0.3% were non-binary.⁸

Ethnicity: Children from ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented in the care system. In England, 22% of children in care belong to mixed race, Black or Asian ethnic groups but make up 17% of the total population.² In Wales, mixed race, Black or Asian ethnic groups make up 8% of children in care and 14% of the children in foster care but only 5% of the population of Wales.⁹

Stability: In England, children in foster care are less likely to experience high placement instability (three or more homes per year) compared to children living in other types of care.² In Wales 20% of children in foster care experienced two or more placement moves in the year.¹⁰

Educational attainment: Children in foster care can have higher educational attainment than children living in different types of care. Long term and stable foster care placements from a young age can have a positive impact on a child's educational outcomes.¹¹

Health: 25% of foster carers in the UK have reported looking after at least one child who is in receipt of mental health support. 13% of foster carers in the UK have reported looking after a child who has suspected Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder.¹²

Post 18 foster care: 61% of care leavers in England who were eligible for the 'Staying Put' scheme continued to live with fosters after the age of 18.² In Wales, out of 710 young people leaving care, 180 entered When I'm Ready arrangements in 2023.¹³

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum: Foster carers in England look after 38% of unaccompanied children seeking asylum.² In Wales, 260 unaccompanied children seeking asylum are currently in care.¹⁴



Which adults support children in foster care?



Foster carers: Foster carers are the main carers for children in foster care. Foster carers should care for and listen to children to help them have happy experiences of care. There may be other young people in the home, for example the birth children of foster carers or other children who they have fostered or adopted.

Advocates: All care-experienced children and young people have a statutory right to an advocate in England and Wales. Advocates help children and young people to understand their rights and have their voices heard and listened to when decisions are being made about them.



Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs): IROs oversee review meetings for children living in foster care. Their role is to make sure a child's care plan is meeting their needs and listening to their views, wishes and feelings. IROs will also make sure all other professionals in a child's life are doing their best to support children in foster care.

Personal Advisors: Personal advisers work with care leavers to help them prepare for their transition out of care and into adulthood. When children and young people turn 18 they start working with personal advisers instead of social workers. Personal advisers will work with a care leaver until they turn 25, helping with pathway plans and identifying what support they might need.



Which adults support children in foster care?



Social Workers: Social workers protect, help and support children and young people living in care. Children and foster carers will be given their own individual social worker during the foster care process. During the first week of a child or young person moving into foster care, their social worker should visit them. After this, social workers should visit children and young people at least every six weeks. Children can ask to see their social worker whenever they want to.



Social workers must; do what is best for the child or young person and encourage others to do what is best for them; respect their privacy; take action if they are worried about their safety; be honest and trustworthy; keep records of their work and communicate well.



Team Around the Child: The team around the child are all the people who work together to help children in different areas of their life to make sure they're happy, healthy, and safe.



Short Break Carers: Short break carers look after children in foster care for a short time, sometimes just for a night or a week. Short break foster carers should already be known to the child or young person and have a good relationship with them.



What are the challenges facing foster care?

Recruitment and Retention

One of the biggest challenges facing foster care right now is that there are not enough foster carers in England or Wales. This means that children and young people are sometimes not being matched with the foster carers who can best meet their needs - these may be cultural, religious, physical, or other types of needs.

It also means that sometimes children and young people are being placed with foster carers outside of their local area, even if this is not what is best for them. This can mean that the child or young person must move schools and activity clubs and be away from the people who are important to them.



Moving a child away from their support circles or into homes which do not meet their needs can negatively impact their relationships with their foster carers and lead to them having to move to another home. This instability can be upsetting for young people and impact how they build relationships with future carers. Having more foster carers across England and Wales would mean that children and young people have the best chance of being moved into homes that best meet their needs.

Financial Support for Foster Carers



Fostering services are responsible for giving financial support to foster carers so they can meet the needs of children and young people, and make sure they have positive childhood experiences. All foster carers should receive a weekly fostering allowance from their fostering service when they have a child living with them. This is designed to cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care such as food, clothing, toiletries, travel, and anything else.

What are the challenges facing foster care?

National Minimum Allowance

The UK and Welsh Government can set their own national minimum or recommended allowance for foster carers according to the age and needs of a child. Fostering services should pay foster carers at least this amount to make sure they have enough financial support to provide for each child or young person in their care. Often fostering services may not follow the national minimum allowance rates.

The Fostering Network research showed that in 2023

32%

of local authorities in England were not paying the correct amount to foster carers in line with the National Minimum Allowance bands.¹⁵

Because there is no set rate, there is no consistency in how much money foster carers receive. Sometimes, the difference can be **over £10,000 per year**.

This results in significant inequality in how foster carers support and care for children and young people.

When foster families are provided with enough financial support, they can provide more for children and young people. This positively impacts a child's wellbeing, rights, experiences, and access to opportunities.

The Fostering Network's State of the Nation survey found that only

61%

of foster carers said their allowances cover the cost of fostering.¹⁵



What are the challenges facing foster care?

Post 18 Foster Care

In England and Wales, there is no national minimum allowance for post-18 foster carers. In some cases, young people in post-18 arrangements contribute to the household using income from their jobs, educational allowances, or housing benefits. The Fostering Network's 2023 allowance report revealed that:

- In England, 27 local authorities said that the young person contributions range from £10-140 per week.¹⁵
- In Wales, two local authorities said the young person contributions range from £15-20 per week.¹⁵

Post-18 foster care provides young people with stability and consistency as they transition out of care and already face a reduction in support services.

Fostering services and local authorities should do everything possible to make sure all young people have an equal opportunity to stay living with their foster carers after they turn 18 if they wish to. No young person should miss out on this opportunity because their carer cannot afford it.



What is it like growing up in foster care?

NYAS and The Fostering Network spoke to 10 young people across England and Wales to find out what it was like for them to grow up in foster care. We also used the experience and knowledge from our advisory groups, made up of young people with lived experiences of care, and ongoing work with care-experienced children and young people to support and inform our findings.

Entering foster care

Nearly all the young people we spoke to were not told what foster care was or how long they would be living in foster care when they were first taken into care. Many young people recalled similar stories of a social worker arriving at their home unexpectedly. Young people were then asked to pack an overnight bag and then taken to a new home with little to no explanation.

“The day I went into care, I was just told to pack an overnight bag with the essentials. I was six and just told I was going to live with people I didn’t know. I ended up living with them for nearly 10 years.”

Some young people thought they were only staying away for a few weeks and were not told that their move would be permanent. This made it more difficult for them to build relationships with their foster carers and settle in, as they did not know how long they would be staying with them for.

“I was only 9 and I came home from school one night, I was playing with my cousins and then social services arrived. The next thing I knew I was being taken on a ‘trip’ somewhere, but my mum wasn’t coming with me.”



What is it like growing up in foster care?

Other young people told us that they were never told why they had been placed into care, and this negatively impacted their perceptions of foster care and their foster carers. Two young people told us they only found this information out once they were older and had left care and on reflection, knowing this information earlier may have improved their time spent in foster care.

“It would have really helped if someone just tried to explain what was happening in a child-friendly way. I think it would have put our minds at ease and stopped us from shutting down.”

All the young people we spoke to believed that if they had been provided with more information and support when they first entered care, then their early experiences of foster care could have been improved. Several young people recommended that social services must thoroughly explain to children what happens when they are being taken into care, even if they are very young.



Relationship with foster carers

Although the young people we spoke to had mixed experiences of living in foster care, there was a shared opinion that in most cases, foster care is greatly beneficial and a positive type of care for children because of its similarities to a family environment.

“My foster dad is like home to me. He is what you’d call a ‘normal’ parent, and he’s always treated me like his own child. I got lucky.”

What is it like growing up in foster care?

Young people seemed to have better experiences of foster care when their foster carers created a strong family environment and treated the young people “no differently” to how parents would treat biological children. Young people who reported these positive experiences appeared to have fewer breakdowns in relationships with foster carers and remained living with them for longer, compared to those who did not have these experiences.

“I was lucky. They’ve treated me like how they treated their own children, and I’ve had all the same experiences growing up.”

“I had one amazing home. They didn’t treat me any differently to their own children. I had the best birthdays and Christmases.”

Some young people found that having a good relationship with their foster carers meant it was easy to talk to them if they were upset or experiencing mental health challenges. One young person recalled that their foster parents were patient and would “always come down to my level” and this meant they could always talk to them if something was wrong. Another young person said that their foster parents “never gave up on me” and they can still go to them for support now, despite no longer living with them.



What is it like growing up in foster care?

The young people who experienced relationship breakdowns with their foster carers all recalled similar stories of not feeling 'liked' or 'welcomed' by their foster carers, and believed their carers were "only fostering for financial benefits". Although young people acknowledged that fostering is a paid role, it was strongly viewed that this should not be the main motivation for becoming a foster carer. One young person said that the financial focus "reinforced that we were children in care and another statistic".

"My foster carer didn't understand, she wasn't in it for the right reasons, and I think she was more bothered about the money."

"My foster carers truly cared and wanted to make a difference. They were never in it for the money."

Other young people told us that they believed relationship breakdowns with their foster carers was because their foster carers were never provided with enough training or information on how to support children who had experienced trauma and the impact this has on behaviour. Young people said that their foster carers often struggled with understanding and managing their behaviours, and this ultimately led to a breakdown in relationships. This appeared to be more common as children got older and entered their teenage years.



What is it like growing up in foster care?

“I wasn’t being treated like a child who had experienced lots of trauma in their childhood... they didn’t understand it.”

Some young people believed that if their foster carers had been provided with more training or support, their relationships could have been strengthened and this may have reduced the number of times they had to move homes. There was also a shared view that it was just as important for foster carers to have stable support networks as it was for children.

“Foster carers have their own life and problems to manage as well. There should be more support available for them, because they can’t support children properly unless they have support.”

Respite care was spoken about positively by all the young people who had experienced it. All the young people had strong relationships with their respite carers and enjoyed going to stay with them. Overall, respite care was seen to be just as important for children in foster care as it is for foster carers.

“I adored my respite carers and the time I spent with them, I got so lucky.”



What is it like growing up in foster care?

Positive memories of foster care

Every young person was able to share positive memories of their time in foster care. These memories included: going on holidays, days out, celebrating birthdays and religious holidays, receiving presents from their carers, or spending time together as a family. Some young people also recalled having strong relationships with other children in their foster carers' family, such as siblings, or cousins, and had positive memories of spending time with them when they were younger.

“The family I lived with had biological children and I was really lucky that they were all so accepting and treated me like another biological sibling.”

Some young people told us they were able to attend youth clubs or activity days that were organised for children in foster care to meet each other. Young people spoke positively about these groups as it helped them to make friendships with other children who had similar experiences to them. It was recommended by some of the young people that there should be more of these groups to help children in foster care build “long lasting and meaningful friendships”.



Working with other professionals

All the young people we spoke to reported having multiple social workers throughout their childhood, and this negatively impacted their experiences of foster care. Young people told us that these continuous changes contributed to miscommunication between themselves, their foster carers, and other services, which ultimately strained relationships at home.

What is it like growing up in foster care?

“I had so many different social workers and communication was never consistent. One time a social worker hadn’t read my file before meeting me and ended up saying something that triggered my mental health.”

Some young people gave examples of times when their own social worker and their foster carers’ social worker had not communicated, which led to relationship breakdowns as the young person was being told different information than their foster carers. This was also a common issue for young people who lived in foster care with their siblings but had different social workers.

“My foster carers social workers never communicated with my own social workers, so they never really aligned on anything. Sometimes this caused arguments at home because we’d all get told different things.”



Trying to access mental health support whilst growing up was a challenge for most of the young people we spoke to. Some young people explained that they were often referred to their GPs rather than specialised services, such as CAMHs, to support complex mental health needs. Another young person told us that it was not until they reached university that they could access mental health support.

Some young people told us they found it difficult to speak to their foster carers or social workers about how they were feeling, as they did not want to say something that was going to upset or offend them. Similarly in review meetings, young people felt that sometimes they could not share their views if their foster carers or social workers were present. In times where young people were able to share their views, they felt these were often ignored or not listened to by professionals.

What is it like growing up in foster care?

Access to advocacy

Only one young person we spoke to recalled being offered advocacy while living in foster care, despite this being something all care-experienced children are legally entitled to and Wales having an active offer of advocacy. Some young people told us that their foster carers acted as advocates for them, but even they found it challenging as adults to be listened to by social services.

“My foster parents really advocated for me and tried to get me support. They still do today even though I no longer live with them.”

All young people strongly believed that had they been offered an advocate, their experiences of foster care and relationships with foster carers could have been improved. Every young person told us that children in any type of care must be told how to access an advocate to make sure their views, wishes and feelings are heard.

“I was never listened to; I wish I had an advocate. All children in foster care should be able to have an advocate.”



What is it like growing up in foster care?

Post 18 care

There was a shared opinion that for children living in care, there is often an expectation for them to move out much quicker than their non-care experienced peers. A few young people referenced that 25 is the average age to move out in the UK, but children who have experienced care and face more challenges as they enter adulthood are often expected to move out several years before this.

“My friends get to stay living at home with their parents after they turn 18 and it’s normal, but for children in care we’re expected to move out as soon as we turn 18, sometimes on our actual birthday. It just adds to the trauma of everything”.



Schemes such as ‘Staying Put’ (England) and ‘When I’m Ready’ (Wales), which provide a pathway for care leavers to continue living with foster carers after turning 18, were spoken about positively, as they took away some of the pressure for young people to move out. One young person told us that the ‘When I’m Ready’ scheme had been incredibly helpful for them as it meant they had time to properly consider their ‘next steps’.

“[When I’m Ready] is so worth it because it meant I could stay at home after I turned 18. It has meant my mental health hasn’t declined and I’ve had support around me.”

What is it like growing up in foster care?

The 'When I'm Ready' scheme in Wales seemed to be more accessible for care leavers in comparison to the 'Staying Put' scheme in England. Many of the young people we spoke to in England had been unable to use the 'Staying Put' scheme or believed that care leavers cannot benefit from the 'Staying Put' scheme in England, as currently there is not enough awareness around accessing it.

"I don't think there is enough information about these schemes for young people. It's so beneficial and a healthy option but young people just don't know about it."

It was recommended by all young people that social services should promote these schemes more as an option for young people living in foster care, rather than moving them into supported accommodation as soon as they turn 18.



What does the future of foster care look like?

England: Stable Homes Built on Love' Strategy

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was launched in 2022 and set out key recommendations for improving the care system for children in England.¹⁶ The UK Government responded to this review in 2023 with the 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' Strategy. In the Strategy,¹⁷ the UK Government pledged £200 million of funding until 2025 to implement key commitments to improve fostering:

- A wider focus on recruitment and retention.
- Providing foster carers with delegated authority by default to make day-to-day decisions for the children in their care.
- Extending the 'Staying Put' to the age of 23.
- Mockingbird constellations – Mockingbird is a programme delivered by The Fostering Network to nurture relationships between children, young people and foster families, supporting them to build a resilient and caring community of six to ten satellite families called a constellation. This constellation is structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides.

In December 2023, the UK Government announced another £8.5 million for fostering, bringing the total funding for fostering for 2023-25 to £36 million.



What does the future of foster care look like?

Wales – Radical reform of services for care-experienced children, young people and care leavers

The Welsh Government has committed to reforming services for care-experienced children, young people and care leavers. In 2023, the Children, Young People and Education Committee reviewed the Welsh's Government progress into this reform and made recommendations on what should happen. In their response, the Welsh Government committed to:

- Reviewing the 'When I'm Ready' scheme.
- Exploring the creation of a register for foster carers to improve recruitment.¹⁸

In 2021, a new body was created called Foster Wales which bought all 22 Local Authorities to work together as one collaborative network. This means that there should be more consistency in training, support and finances for foster carers across Wales and improved outcomes for young people in foster care.



Recommendations and summary

We asked young people what they wanted to see the UK and Welsh Governments doing to improve the experiences of children living in foster care. They told us that they want to see:

- 01** Improved recruitment approaches to increase the number of foster carers and make sure those recruited are the best people to look after children.
- 02** Improved ongoing support and training for foster carers.
- 03** More information about foster carers provided to children and young people before they move into a home and wherever possible, opportunities for children and young people to choose, meet with and learn about their foster carers before going to live with them.
- 04** Improved awareness and accessibility of post-18 fostering arrangements such as 'Staying Put' and 'When I'm Ready' so no one is financially worse off and all young people who want to benefit from these can.
- 05** An opt-out offer of independent advocacy for all children in care to make sure all children in foster care have their voices heard.
- 06** Short break foster care only provided by people who are known to the children to enable them to sustain a trusting and supportive relationship with them.

NYAS and The Fostering Network are calling on the UK and Welsh Governments to:

- 01** Pay allowances, fees and benefits consistently across England and Wales so foster carers and children in care do not face a postcode lottery.
- 02** Extend the offer of 'Staying Put' and 'When I'm Ready' until the age of 25 for all care leavers.
- 03** Increase the number of foster carers to reduce the number of children being placed miles from home.
- 04** Introduce legislation on delegated authority so it follows child-focused policy and practice, and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care from the outset of the placement.
- 05** Introduce an opt-out offer of independent advocacy to make sure all children in foster care have their voices heard.
- 06** Invest in early intervention services to reduce the number of children who need to enter care.

Recommendations and summary

Most of the young people we spoke to believed that when fostering is seen as a whole family approach and there is enough support available, it can provide children with a safe, happy, and healthy home. Some young people referred to foster care as 'one of the most positive parts of the care system'. They believed that the UK and Welsh Government should look at what works well in foster care and learn from this to improve other types of care and services for care-experienced children and young people.

It is important to remember that there is no 'best' or 'worst' type of care. **What matters most is finding the home which is best for each child.**



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18. [Department for Education \(2023\) 'Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love Government Consultation Response'](#).
19. [Welsh Government \(2023\) 'Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Children, Young People and Education Committee report entitled "If not now, then when? Radical reform for care-experienced children and young people"'](#).

NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) is a leading children's rights charity, supporting and empowering care-experienced children, young people and adults in vulnerable situations across England and Wales. NYAS is the largest provider of independent advocacy services across England and Wales supports over 10,000 children, young people and adults on an annual basis through the provisioning of services.

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of children and young people who are fostered to make foster care the very best it can be.

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