

The logo for The Fostering Network, consisting of the text "The Fostering Network" in white, stacked vertically, on an orange square background.

The
Fostering
Network

The title of the report, "State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report", displayed in white text on a dark blue rectangular background. The background is part of a larger graphic design featuring several overlapping colored rectangles in teal, purple, yellow, red, and blue on a white grid.

State of the
Nation's Foster Care
2021 Report



This report provides a unique insight into fostering in the UK at a time of unprecedented change. Foster carers and fostering services have spoken with one voice about what must improve to ensure that all children and young people in need of foster care are placed with a foster family who is able to provide what they need to thrive.

Foster carers have told us they choose to foster because they want to make a difference to the lives of children but find it increasingly difficult to do so without the tools they need or the status that their role requires.

We must tackle this in order to recruit and retain foster carers who can meet the needs of the children they care for. We have been saying this for many years and the situation is now becoming critical, with the gap between the needs of children and the number of foster carers with the skills to meet those needs growing wider than ever.

The time to make foster care the best it can be is now. We call on all involved in fostering to work with us to implement the report's recommendations in all four countries of the UK, so that we don't fail our young people, and all children are given the best experience of foster care by foster carers who are recognised, respected and valued.

Thank you to all the foster carers and fostering services for completing the survey and supporting children and young people. Together, we are the voice of foster care.

Kevin Williams
Chief Executive, The Fostering Network
December 2021



This report gives us a powerful insight into fostering families, their needs and challenges. It comes at what is a time of huge flux in our everyday lives, with the language of society at present moving towards how we can build back better. This survey of foster families give us a chance to move forward towards necessary positive change.

Two of the strong themes within the survey: stability and normality, strike at the core of what good fostering could and should look like. The closer the fostering family gets to feeling like a loving, caring family environment, keeping the system clunking (far) away in the background, the better outcomes for people with care experience will be, of course. But also as important, foster families will be able to get on with the important part, supporting and loving each other.

As long as the systems and processes groan and remain inflexible to basic needs, such as young people being able to stay in a foster home past 18, when for the vast majority of the population it is seamless, fostering will be held back. Foster families need the same supports and trust, regardless of the age of the young people.

Adam Bennett
Founder, ProjectChange and
care experienced

December 2021



About the survey

Children may enter the care system for a number of reasons, for example, because of family disruption caused by illness or a bereavement, abuse, neglect, they are seeking asylum or they have highly complex health and care needs.

Roughly three-quarters of the 97,000 children looked after away from home and family in the UK are being cared for by foster families. Foster families provide children in care with the opportunity to thrive in a family setting and offer them a loving and stable environment, often into adulthood. This means that improving outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care.

Every three years we conduct the State of the Nation's Foster Care survey to produce a reliable insight into fostering in the UK; to identify areas of good practice and understand where improvements are needed. This is the fourth time we have conducted this survey and, for the first time, we also surveyed our fostering service members.

As the largest independent survey of foster carers, we were pleased to receive responses from 3,352 foster carers, representing six per cent of fostering households in England, four per cent in Northern Ireland, eight per cent in Scotland and seven per cent in Wales. At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around nine per cent of all children living in foster care in the UK. We also received 99 fostering service responses, which represents around 19 per cent of the total fostering service providers in the UK. By surveying our fostering service members, we have enriched our evidence base, offering a perspective from those who provide services, enabling us to gain a deeper insight into the challenges within the system and how they impact on the overall service.

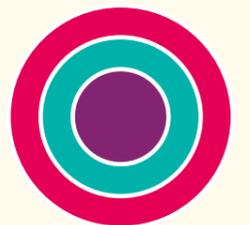
Our 2021 surveys included questions on how well foster carers and fostering services believe children's needs are currently being met by the system, as well as key practice and workforce issues such as support, recruitment and capacity in the sector. The Fostering Network will use the findings of this report to influence the foster care agenda and create change by bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers.

This key findings report is the first of a series of publications using the survey data. Over the next few months, we will publish three thematic reports focusing on foster carer status, children in care's unmet needs, and allegations. They will be available on our [website](https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21)¹ in 2022.

¹ www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21

How this report is structured

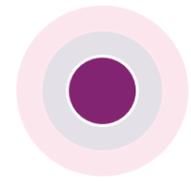
We have grouped our findings into three main areas of focus, represented in the following graphic. Each section will be labelled to show which area we are focusing on.



Children and young people

Foster carers

The fostering system



Focus on children and young people

This section follows the pathway of a child from the initial matching process through to post-18 arrangements. It also explores what happens when placements end and how children in care are supported around maintaining relationships and transitioning from care.

Matching in foster care (foster carers survey only)

Finding the right foster family for a child is vitally important to help them achieve good outcomes. Ensuring sufficient, child-centred and up-to-date information about the child is shared with the prospective foster family is something foster carers tell us is essential; as is the sharing of relevant and appropriate information about the foster family with the child. When this is done in a timely fashion it increases the chance of the match being successful.

Planned transitions for children in care which focus on meeting the child's needs can provide reassurance and help children to settle and start to build relationships, as well as develop a sense of belonging. Good matching of a child's needs with a foster carer's skills and expertise, alongside child-centred transition planning that always has the child's best interests at heart, is central to good decision making.

All children and young people in need of foster care should be placed with a foster family who is able to understand what that particular child needs to thrive, build relationships, learn and develop while supporting them to navigate life's challenges. If it is decided that the permanency plan for a child is to be in long-term foster care, then the matching process is critical to ensure the child can thrive.

Key findings:

- Of the **37 per cent** of foster carer respondents who had been involved in the matching process in the last two years, only half (**53 per cent**) felt they received sufficient information about the child. This contrasts with the vast majority of fostering service respondents (**86 out of 99 services**) who said that they always or usually share sufficient information with foster carers about the child.
- **86 per cent** of foster carers stated that their most recent match (within the last two years) had been positive.



53%
of foster carers felt they received sufficient information about the child.

Sometimes children are moved in an emergency and sometimes in a planned way. Matching should take place wherever possible and robust matching should always take place when the move is planned.



42%
of foster carers reported that children were able to visit before moving in.

“
Well matched, supported carers achieve excellent outcomes for children in care.

Fostering service respondent

”

Recommendations for children's placing authorities:

1. Foster carers must always be given all the appropriate information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe. Information sharing is a prerequisite of good fostering practice.
2. Children should be placed with a foster family that they have, at the very least, had the opportunity to meet before moving in.

Recommendations for governments:

3. Governments should introduce information sharing standards for children's placing authorities, to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching. Governments should consult with foster carers about what level of information they feel is appropriate to enable them to care for children.
4. The matching process for long-term foster care should be reviewed and clarified.

Long-term foster care (foster carers survey only)

Fostering is not a single entity. There are many different types of foster care, including short-term foster care, where the plan may be for children to return to their birth family or, if the young person is pregnant or has a baby, they may be in a parent and child placement which offers both the parent and child tailored support. For children in long-term foster care, it should mean that the child will remain living with a specific foster family until reaching adulthood or leaving care.

Long-term foster care is unique in that it provides children with permanence while remaining in the care system. It offers children who are unable to return home a protective and nurturing environment on a long-term basis in a family setting, where they can remain in contact with their birth family, and are afforded entitlements to therapeutic services, access to social work support (as well as for their foster carer), and care leaver entitlements.

Our survey findings show that, for a high proportion of children in long-term foster care, this is recorded in their care plans. We now need to ensure that children in long-term foster care have the same stability and legal protections as those in other forms of permanence, for instance under adoption and special guardianship orders.



72%

of foster carers were caring for a child that they expected to remain with them on a long-term basis.

Key findings:

- **72 per cent** of the foster carer respondents were caring for a child that they expected to remain with them on a long-term basis. For **82 per cent** of the children cared for by these respondents, foster carers were aware that this was recorded in the care plan.
- **Over two-thirds** (67 per cent) of foster carers looking after a child in long-term foster care rated the social work support they receive as sufficient or very sufficient.
- **16 per cent** of foster carers stated that they are currently caring for a child who they think should be under a long-term foster care arrangement but is currently not. This was highest in Scotland at **23 per cent**.

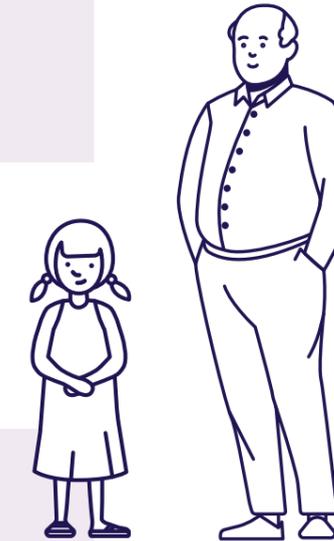


12%

of foster carers who expected a child to stay with them on a long-term basis were not confident that stability would be maintained.

16%

of foster carers stated that they are currently caring for a child who they think should be under a long-term foster care arrangement.



“ I love how well the children in my care are doing since coming to mine on a long-term basis. ”

Foster carer respondent

”

Recommendation for governments:

5. Governments should review the approach and processes involved in long-term foster care to ensure children in these types of placements are afforded similar protections and stability to other forms of permanence.

Stability (foster carers survey only)

Sometimes children need to move to different homes depending on their needs and care plans. These moves may be for positive reasons, for example to secure a better match and improve outcomes for children. In some instances, placement changes for children are unavoidable and sometimes they take place in emergency situations.

An unplanned ending is defined as a placement which ended against the child's care plan. The child may move on in a planned way or in an emergency, the key question to consider is 'was it intended for the placement to end when it did?' Understanding more about when children's placements end in an unplanned way enables services to develop and introduce ways to limit them.

We know that too many looked after children are experiencing **multiple moves**² which can result in them changing school and moving away from family and friends. The impact this has on children's attachments and development can be significant. Children who experience multiple moves while in care experience **poorer outcomes**³ in their education, mental health and ability to make and maintain trusted adult relationships.

All decisions to move children should be in the best interest of the child. Our survey findings indicate that independent scrutiny over placement decisions is not being routinely applied, therefore it cannot be evidenced whether all moves are in the best interest of the child.

50%
of foster carers had experienced one or more placement endings in the past two years.

Over a third
of foster carers stated that the last planned move for a child they cared for was not preceded by a child's care planning review.



39%
of foster carers were not given the opportunity to feed into the referral information for the child's next care arrangement.

Key findings:

The following findings are based on the last two years.

- Foster carers stated that the most common reason for unplanned endings was at their request (**41 per cent**).
- This was echoed by fostering services. **64 out of 99 services** stated that the most common reason for unplanned endings was at the foster carer's request.
- We need to explore further the reasons why this might be occurring, such as the support provided to foster families, the matching process undertaken and the impact this has on children and young people.
- Of those foster carers who had experienced a planned ending:
 - 57 per cent of foster carers in Northern Ireland, 38 per cent in England, 29 per cent in Wales and 16 per cent in Scotland (averaging **over a third** of foster carers across the UK) stated that the last planned move for a child they cared for was not preceded by a child's care planning review.
 - **Nearly one in five** foster carers (19 per cent) were not involved in the end of placement review.
- We asked foster carers if they believe decisions to move children were in the child's best interests: **9 per cent** said always, **78 per cent** said usually/sometimes and **13 per cent** said rarely/never.
- Where foster carers felt that the decision to move a child was not in the child's best interest, they felt this was due to the:
 - cost of placements;
 - lack of support given to foster carers; and
 - lack of the right foster carers with the skills and expertise to meet children's needs/poor initial matching.

Recommendations for children's placing authorities:

6. When a child moves on from a placement, the former foster carer should have the opportunity to contribute to the referral information to support a smooth transition for the child.
7. Foster carers should be empowered and confident to have an ongoing dialogue with social workers about the stability of placements. They should also be confident that action will be taken to avoid placement breakdown following any concerns raised.

Recommendation for governments, appropriate regulatory bodies and children's placing authorities:

8. Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered and shared to ensure lessons can be learnt and fed into individual and wider practice learning. Governments should explore options for capturing data on why children moved care arrangements.

² Children's Commissioner's Office. Stability Index 2020. Available from: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/cco-stability-index-2020.pdf

³ Baginsky, M. The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review for the Department of Education 2017. Available from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/629383/The_fostering_system_in_England_evidence_review.pdf

Relationships for children in care (both surveys)

The building of warm and positive relationships is at the heart of good fostering and social work practice. Foster carers play a key role in maintaining, developing, nurturing and supporting children's relationships with their families.

The care system could do far more to maintain and strengthen children's relationships with adults important to them, or other children including their siblings. For children who experience adversity early in life, developing secure relationships is even more important to support healthy development and to recover from past trauma.

Children and young people who move within and out of the care system should be enabled and supported to maintain relationships with their former foster families and other people who are significant to them. The **Keep Connected Principles**⁴, developed by The Fostering Network in consultation with the fostering sector, highlight the importance of these relationships and how they can be supported.

Local authorities in Scotland now have a legal duty to protect sibling or sibling-like relationships for children in care. We will monitor the impact this new law has on relationships for children in care as well as their foster carers.

We need to see a culture shift from a system focused on immediate need to the nurturing of life-long relationships, acknowledging that young people's needs may change throughout their life course and offering them support and love well into adulthood.

Key findings:

- The top three reasons provided by foster carers for not keeping in contact with children, even when it was in the child's best interest, were:
 - I was not able/allowed to maintain contact.
 - The child did not want to maintain contact.
 - Adopters did not want us to maintain contact.
- We asked services what they do, where appropriate, to promote children's relationships with their former foster carers:
 - **68 services** discuss ongoing relationships, including with foster carers, at transition planning meetings
 - **24 services** provide training to foster carers on maintaining contact with children after they move on
 - **23 services** provide paid leave/a retainer so that foster carers can support children as they move out of their home, without foster carers losing their income from not having another child come and live with them for a period of time.

36%
of foster carers always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered.

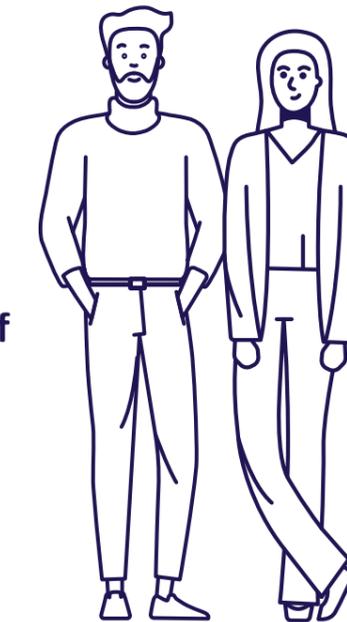


40%
of foster carers felt not supported at all to keep in touch with children they have previously fostered.

“
When you are denied the right to see your fostered children it's like a death. You grieve for years never knowing how they are doing, if they are well or even what they look like. It's the one thing that would stop me fostering.

Foster carer respondent

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Recommendation for government:

9. Practice guidance should be produced to support children and young people to remain in contact with their former foster families, when in their best interest, and to support foster families to maintain relationships with the children they have previously looked after as they move on.

Post-18 arrangements (both surveys)

In each country of the UK, there are schemes in place that enable young people to remain living with their former foster carers until they are 21 (or older in certain circumstances). These arrangements give young people more time to live within a family environment, allowing them longer to develop and prepare for independent living. In England this scheme is called Staying Put; in Northern Ireland, Going the Extra Mile Scheme (GEMS); in Scotland, Continuing Care; and in Wales, When I am Ready.

Despite widespread acceptance that post-18 arrangements (which can be accessed when a child is 16) are in young people's best interests, inconsistent implementation has resulted in variability in local policy and practice and up-take has not increased across the UK since our last survey in 2018.

In these post-18 arrangements, children's placing authorities are legally required to provide advice, assistance and support to the care leaver and their carer. Yet, there are funding issues which result in former foster carers experiencing a reduction in financial support which, in turn, can have a detrimental effect on uptake of the schemes. Our findings show a high proportion of former foster carers experiencing a drop in financial support when supporting young people to 21.

Young people in these arrangements are no longer considered looked after. If the foster carer has no other children in foster care living with them, their fostering service may remove their approval status meaning foster carers can no longer foster unless they complete the approval process again (which can take many months). Our survey findings show that some fostering services are not ensuring that their foster carers maintain their approval, even when it is their intention to return to fostering. This, and the drop in financial support, are likely to be key barriers to more young people entering post-18 arrangements.

In Northern Ireland, GEMS is available only to young people who are in some form of education, employment or training, yet those not in education, training or employment may have greater need for it. We believe all young people leaving foster care should be offered the same support.

Key findings:

- **14 per cent** of foster carers had cared for an eligible young person who had not remained with them in a post-18 arrangement.
- The three most common reasons why young people did not remain in post-18 arrangements were:
 - The young person wanted to move on,
 - The foster carer could not afford to continue to care for the young person due to a drop in financial support.
 - There was a lack of support from the child's social worker.
- **21 per cent** of foster carer respondents had supported a post-18 arrangement. Of these:
 - **11 per cent** had lost their approval when entering the arrangement.
 - **29 per cent** said they received no extra training or support.
 - **74 per cent** said they experienced a drop in income as a result. Foster carers in England and Wales were more likely to report a drop in income.

- **57 out of 99 fostering services** stated that foster carers maintain their approval if they plan to return to fostering.
- We asked fostering services what would improve these schemes. They said:
 - The schemes need to be properly funded so young people's placing authorities can continue to provide the practical and financial support both the young people and foster families need.
 - There should be clear and up-to-date national guidance and standards to manage the expectations and responsibilities of all parties involved.



“**Very few carers offer [Staying Put] due to the financial issues, so unless they have another bedroom and can continue to foster, most do not offer Staying Put. Young people's needs do not stop just because they are 18 and carers should be able to continue and receive the same pay.**”

Fostering service respondent

Recommendations for governments:

- 10.** Governments should carry out a full cross-departmental review of how post-18 arrangements have been implemented. This should involve young people and all key stakeholders and include:
- how the schemes have been funded
 - clarity of responsibility
 - the status of arrangements
 - the training provided to foster carers and staff
 - what policies are currently in place, and
 - when the schemes are discussed in the care planning process.

- 11.** National minimum allowances should be introduced across the UK for post-18 arrangements, with such an allowance being sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person. Former foster carers should receive a fee payment when in these arrangements to recognise their skills and expertise. This will enable young people to have the best start to their adult lives.

Recommendation for fostering services:

- 12.** Fostering services should ensure foster carers maintain their approval during a post-18 arrangement if their plan is to return to fostering.



Focus on foster carers

When a child is looked after they have many people involved in their care. Foster carers are key members of that team, providing care to children every day and holding a unique and valuable skillset. It has long been the position of The Fostering Network that this integral role should be afforded the same respect, support and recognition as other professionals involved in the child's life.

Foster carers must be recognised as a key member in the team around the child and as part of the social care workforce. In acknowledging this, foster carers views and insights in relation to the children they look after should be listened to and they should be given the sufficient support, payment and learning and development reflective of their critical role and skillset.

The following section explores foster carer's terms and conditions, including the learning and development and financial, emotional and practical support foster carers receive to continue to provide the best possible care to children.

The recommendations focus on how foster carers' terms and conditions can be improved to reflect and recognise that they are valued members of the team around the child, have vital roles and are central to ensuring the best possible outcomes for the children they care for.



There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering, the allowance and the fee.

Allowances (both surveys)

The allowance is designed to cover the full costs of caring for a child. While allowances vary between fostering services, all foster carers looking after a child on behalf of the state in the UK receive an allowance.

National minimum allowances are established in England, Northern Ireland and Wales respectively. It is disappointing to report that there are still fostering services that provide less than the national minimum in **England**⁵. We continue to campaign for all fostering families to receive at least the national minimum allowance for each child in their care.

There is currently no recommended national minimum allowance for foster carers in Scotland, although the Scottish Government is currently considering its introduction.

National minimum allowances in all countries of the UK should be truly reflective of the costs of caring for a child or young person. No foster carer should be out of pocket as a result of caring for a child on behalf of the state.



Key findings:

- Of those who do not feel the allowances meet the costs of looking after a child, **49 per cent** stated that more one-off payments for exceptional expenses e.g. for driving lessons, laptops and furniture would help.

Over a third of foster carers said that their allowances do not meet the full cost of looking after a child.

All services

in Scotland who responded agreed with the introduction of a national minimum allowance.

Recommendations for governments:

13. Governments across the UK should undertake a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances set in their respective countries using up to date evidence to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
14. The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a national minimum allowance for foster carers.

Recommendation for fostering services:

15. Fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.

Fees (both surveys)

The second component to foster carers' income from fostering is a fee, which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. There is no statutory requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services and not all foster carers receive a fee. The survey findings show that of those foster carers who do receive a fee, the majority receive far below the National Living Wage (NLW) per calendar month, despite many foster carers not combining fostering with other work.

Key findings:

- **63 per cent** of foster carers who responded stated that they receive a fee payment. This has risen by six per cent since our 2016 survey.
- Almost all services agreed that foster carers should receive a fee payment.
- **61 per cent** of foster carers who responded do not combine fostering with other work.
- The NLW 2021/22 in the UK is £8.91 per hour. If working a typical 40-hour week, this equates to £1544.40 per calendar month. Just **nine per cent** of foster carers reported receiving more than the NLW per calendar month. This remains the same from when we last surveyed in 2018.



I didn't go into [fostering] to earn a living, I did it to help young people but for what we have or do and give up in our lives we're worth more.

Foster carer respondent



Recommendation for governments:

16. Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers, 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. The amount foster carers should receive needs to be reviewed in conversation with foster carers.

Recommendation for fostering services:

17. Foster carers should receive regular fee payments which recognise their time, skills and expertise and the role they agree to undertake as a foster carer.

Retainers (both surveys)

If all foster carers received regular fee payments, regardless of caring for a child in foster care, then they would not need retainer payments. Regular fee payments would provide foster carers with a stable income and be an important recognition of how their skills and expertise are of value to their fostering service.

Retainer payments are designed to ensure that fostering households are not financially worse off in between having children stay with them. Retainer payments are important to retain good and experienced foster families and ensure each match between a child and a foster family is right for all involved and not swayed by a family's financial circumstances. They also could enable a foster family to play an important part in helping a child settle into their next care arrangement.

Key findings:

- **70 per cent** of foster carers stated that they do not receive any retainer payments in between fostering. **15 per cent** did not know whether they get paid retainer payments.
- Of the **15 per cent** of foster carers who stated they do receive retainer payments:
 - **31 per cent** were not sure how long they receive them for
 - **27 per cent** received them for 1-4 weeks
 - **22 per cent** for 5-8 weeks
 - **10 per cent** for 9-12 weeks
 - **10 per cent** for more than 13 weeks/indefinitely.
- **Nearly half** of fostering services said they do not pay retainer payments and **around a quarter** stated that retainers were given on a case-by-case basis.

70%

of foster carers stated that they do not receive any retainer payments in between fostering.

Recommendations for fostering services:

18. Until the introduction of regular fee payments for foster carers, all foster carers should receive retainer payments in between caring for children, to support good matching, maintain a skilled foster care workforce and ensure that foster carers feel valued for the work they do.
19. Fostering services should have a clear policy around what retainer payments are available and for how long the support will be provided.

Support (both surveys)

Foster carers provide children with 24/7 care within their own homes. It is an immensely rewarding role, but it can often be challenging and complex. Foster carers are therefore provided with support via their fostering service and from other professionals involved in the team around the child.

Foster carers may be provided with various forms of support. They may need assistance and advice outside of office hours from someone who understands their situation; the foster carer and the child may need short breaks (also known as 'respite' or sleepovers) to support the placement; or they may seek advice and information from fellow foster carers, known as peer support.

The formal support foster carers receive at an organisational level, including from social workers and out of hours support services, and the informal support they receive from their family, friends and peers is crucial and can make a big difference to the lived experience and outcomes for the children they care for. We believe that strong support for foster carers plays a key role in the stability and success of placements.

The following section focuses on the support provided to foster carers. A forthcoming report (part of the State of the Nation 2021 series) will focus on the support provided to children in foster care.

Good practice model for improving foster carer support

Mockingbird is an innovative model of delivering sustainable foster care led by The Fostering Network in the UK. The model is structured around the support and relationships of an extended family and nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families, supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

There are approaching 90 Mockingbird constellations across the UK at the time of writing, with more constellations launching throughout the year. These constellations support nearly 3,000 children, young people and adults.

207 Mockingbird carers completed the State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 survey. The majority were from English local authorities (94 per cent). Mockingbird carers rated the peer support they receive as higher than other foster carers, with **87 per cent** of Mockingbird carers stating this was excellent or good.

Having the hub carer to speak to has been fantastic as they can relate to issues on a different level... The meet ups with the other carers in the constellation help build a community and stops us being as isolated. We've also been gaining more experience too as we have also been able to provide sleepovers for other children in the constellation.

Foster carer respondent involved in Mockingbird

It's a highly rewarding job although much harder than we ever expected.

Foster carer respondent

Recommendation for governments:

20. Governments should fund, implement and evaluate new models of delivering foster care that better support children and young people and those who care for them.

Recommendations for fostering services:

21. Support for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.

22. All services should have a mental health and well-being support offer for foster carers, the foster carer's family and the children they look after.

Key findings:

We asked foster carers to rate the support they receive from the following:



- We asked fostering services to rate the support they provide to their foster carers. The three areas where most improvement was needed was: mental health and well-being support, peer support opportunities and the provision of short breaks.

Learning and development (both surveys)

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.

Yet, apart from in Wales, there are no national learning and development frameworks for foster carers that could address this. This means the provision of learning and development for foster carers is not standardised in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The training gaps highlighted by both foster carers and fostering services are a clear indication of the specialised nature of the foster carer role.

71%

of foster carers rated the quality of the learning and development offer from their fostering service as excellent or good.

Key findings:

- **53 per cent** of foster carers stated that they like online learning and development and **53 per cent stated** that they would like a mixture of online and in-person learning and development in the future.
- **70 out of 99** fostering services agreed or strongly agreed that there should be standard accredited learning and development for assessing and approving foster carers.
- **66 out of 99** fostering services agreed or strongly agreed that there should be a standard accredited framework for the learning and development of foster carers following their approval.
- The areas where fostering services were unable to offer learning and development were similar to the gaps identified by the foster carers: trauma informed practice, therapeutic parenting, resilience and some face-to-face learning and development such as first aid and de-escalation.

Foster carers who have an agreed learning and development plan for the next 12 months



The top five learning and development gaps identified by foster carers were:

1. Mental and physical health needs (including developmental disabilities)
2. Allegations
3. Trauma, attachment and therapeutic parenting
4. Understanding behaviour
5. Looking after teenagers



Recommendation for governments:

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

Recommendations for fostering services:

24. All foster carers should have an agreed annual learning and development plan that addresses both the standard and specialised learning and development required to meet the needs of the children they care for or might care for in the future.

25. Foster carers should be empowered to request further and specialist learning and development they feel they require to encourage children in their care to thrive, and be able to access funds to fulfil their learning and development needs.

Focus on the fostering system

This year, in addition to surveying foster carers, we also surveyed our fostering service members to provide a more holistic understanding of the issues and barriers faced by the fostering sector. We received responses from 99 fostering services which represents approximately one in five fostering services across the UK.

The findings in this section, from the fostering services' survey only, provide an insight into the challenges faced by fostering services in their efforts to ensure continuous improvements for children in care.



For some children there are the right carers at the right time and for others, it's more of a lottery.

Fostering service respondent



Sufficiency planning

Recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of committed, competent foster carers, with the skills, capacity, motivation, resilience and support to provide children with nurturing and loving family environments in which they can thrive is a continual challenge for local authorities, trusts and independent fostering services.

In 2017 an **evidence review of fostering**⁶ showed that the biggest issue in the sector is how to secure the future recruitment and retention of enough high-quality foster carers. Four years on and our findings suggest that little has changed. With the number of children in care in the UK continuing to rise, ensuring there are sufficient numbers of foster carers who are skilled and knowledgeable is even more pressing.

Children's placing authorities should plan at a local level to ensure that children are in the right home for them, getting the right educational input and access to therapeutic services and health care. These plans may be referred to as sufficiency plans. Sufficiency plans are a legal requirement of placing authorities in England but not elsewhere in the UK.

We believe sufficiency plans could be closer scrutinised at a local, regional and national level to determine the types of care placements required to meet the needs of all children and to inform targeted recruitment programmes.

Key findings:

- We asked local authorities what would help improve their sufficiency planning. They said:
 - improving the data available
 - improving multi-agency/stakeholder working
 - more placement availability and better recruitment strategies
 - reduce the number of children entering care
 - national oversight.
- We asked fostering services how involved their service is in local/regional sufficiency planning for the looked after children population:
 - **20 services** were always involved
 - **28 services** usually involved
 - **26 services** sometimes involved
 - **11 services** rarely involved and
 - **3 services** never involved.
- Local authorities/trusts were more likely to be involved than independent providers.

Recommendation for children's placing authorities:

26. Placing authorities must work with all fostering providers to conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform recruitment strategies.

Recommendations for governments:

27. Key government departments should play a greater role in sufficiency planning in terms of providing the tools, guidance and training for children's placing authorities to create meaningful and live statements that drive commissioning and recruitment planning.

28. Statutory guidance on the sufficiency duty of children's placing authorities should be introduced in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and updated in England. This should include good practice examples and a national toolkit for commissioning foster care provision in the independent sector.

29. Governments should play a role in national workforce planning and development.

⁶ Baginsky, M. The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review for the Department of Education 2017. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/629383/The_fostering_system_in_England_evidence_review.pdf

Recruitment

No child in foster care is currently without somewhere to live, but the home in which they are living may not be the best match for their particular needs. The pressures within the system, and the lack of availability of foster families, results in some children living a long way from family, friends and school or being separated from their siblings.

In an ideal world, all recruitment would be targeted and based on children's needs, with all fostering services working together to identify what type of carers are needed and where. Our evidence indicates that this is not the reality and that the right match is not always available to all children. Instead, we see the children's social care **market failing**⁷, with a shortage of appropriate places and high prices, which contribute to poor outcomes for children and placing authorities.

The key to successful foster care lies in recruiting, training, supporting and retaining good foster carers. When foster carers are not treated well or respected properly, the stability, experience and outcomes for looked after children are potentially eroded. The more high-quality foster carers there are, the more likely it is that a child or young person coming into care in need of a foster family will be placed with the best possible foster carers for them at the first time of asking. Foster carers who are exhausted or feeling undervalued and under supported are much less likely to recommend fostering to others and are more likely to end their fostering careers prematurely.

Key findings:

- Fostering service respondents had recruited a total of 1,498 new households between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. **57 per cent** of those recruited were aged 45 or over and around **10 per cent** had transferred from another fostering service.
- All but six services reported having a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their local population. The highest areas of need were for teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disabilities and parent and child placements.
- We asked fostering services what they think prevents suitable applicants from enquiring to foster. They said:
 - People are put off by the process.
 - There is a lack of regular or guaranteed income (fee payment).
 - People are put off by myths around fostering.
 - People do not have a spare bedroom.

All but six services reported having a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their local population.

⁷ Competition and Markets Authority. Children's social care market study interim report. October 2021. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-interim-report>

Recommendation for national and regional decision makers:

30. Decision makers should learn from models and approaches from across the UK, including exploring the use of regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment to increase effectiveness, enable shared practice and reduce duplication in advertising and other resources.

Recommendations for governments:

31. Governments should introduce a national register of foster carers which, amongst other things, would improve the portability of the workforce, provide a standardisation of pre- and post-approval learning and development and drive up standards.

32. Governments should review their focus on fostering and ensure they have structures in place at a national, regional and local level to provide leadership, collaboration and a shared strategy to address issues such as sufficiency and drive improvements in performance of the fostering sector.

Recommendation for fostering services:

33. Fostering services should consider tailored and collaborative recruitment strategies to recruit specifically to meet the needs of children locally; including providing homes for as long as children need and where they are able to maintain relationships with their siblings and wider friends and family when in the child's best interest.

- We asked fostering services what they think would improve the assessment and approval process of foster carers. Key themes included:
 - wider support and awareness from partner agencies (health and criminal record checks etc.) about the need for information to avoid delays in the recruitment process
 - better transfer processes for people who have already been approved to foster
 - more staff to complete assessments in a timely manner
 - general awareness raising of the role of a foster carer involving open and transparent conversation to ensure appropriate applicants have clearer expectations
 - better pre-approval training and for this to happen before assessment or during assessment.

More advice needs to be given on problems that may be encountered [in fostering]. These tend to be glossed over somewhat as carers are urgently needed but to be sustained, carers need to know the whole picture.

Foster carer respondent

Retention

Retaining enough high-quality foster carers is equally as important as recruiting the right foster families. There are resources available to help services improve their retention of a highly skilled and experienced workforce such as the **exit interview toolkit**⁸ which helps fostering services capture the reasons why foster carers leave their service, to inform retention and recruitment strategies, and the **Foster Carers' Charter**⁹ which outlines the responsibility of all those involved in fostering.

For the retention and continued recruitment of a foster care workforce which meets the needs of all children in care, it is essential to recognise that foster carers have their own area of expertise, skills and tasks in the team around the child which need to be valued. They also require holistic and continuous support to prevent burn out and to continue to provide the best care to children. We believe that by ensuring all of these things, foster carer turnover could be reduced.



Making carers feel valued and supported is the most effective thing in retaining carers.

Fostering service respondent



Retirement was also reported as a reason for foster carers leaving the workforce.

Fostering services stated that the most important change needed to retain more foster carers would be improving the support they offer.

Key findings:

- We asked fostering services what they believe is the most effective thing they do which helps to retain foster carers. They said:
 - the support provided by social workers
 - valuing the contribution foster carers make to a child's life and having good relationships with the team around the child
 - providing fee payments and sufficient allowances to cover the cost of looking after a child
 - learning and development opportunities.
- We also asked fostering services what they believe they could do to improve retention they said they could provide:
 - better support including access to psychological support/therapy, out of hours support and having better relationships between social workers and foster carers
 - better pay
 - consistency of social workers.
- Retirement was mentioned by **nine services** as a key reason why foster carers are leaving the workforce.
- We asked fostering services in what ways they consult with foster carers in the planning and improvement of their fostering service:
 - **67 services** run surveys.
 - **56 services** lead groups with foster carers.
 - **39 services** ask identified foster carer representatives.
 - **37 services** attend groups led by foster carers including foster care associations.
- **70 services** stated that they always offer an exit interview when a foster carer leaves their service.

Recommendation for fostering services:

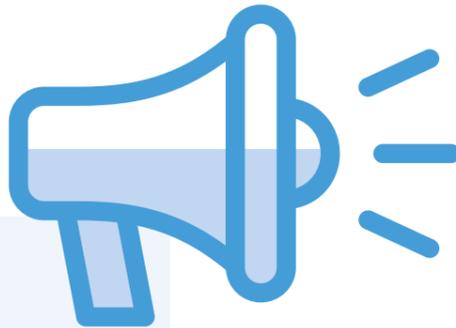
34. All fostering services should actively engage with, consult and listen to their foster carers to ensure continuous service improvements and the retention of high quality and experienced foster carers.

⁸ The Fostering Network's Foster Carer Exit Interview Toolkit. Available from: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/recruitment-and-retention/foster-carer-exit-interview-toolkit>

⁹ The Fostering Network's Foster Carers' Charter. Available from: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/19-16349tfnchartera4singlepages.pdf>

Views and attitudes (both surveys)

Foster care is a rewarding and sometimes challenging role which operates within a complex regulatory environment. It is imperative that the care system is robust and meets children's current as well as emerging needs in the future. The respondents to our surveys provided useful insights into understanding why people foster, what motivates them to care and how long they plan to continue to foster.



54%
of carers would recommend fostering.

Key findings:

- **46 per cent** of foster carers said that they will continue to foster as long as they are able. This is a five per cent increase from 2018.
- We asked foster carers what makes them continue to foster and gave a list of reasons from which they could choose as many or as few as they liked. These reasons differed slightly from previous surveys, however, the top three reasons have remained consistent since 2016:
 - I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care – **76 per cent**.
 - I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family – **61 per cent**.
 - I enjoy working with the children – **59 per cent**.
- We asked foster carers if they would recommend fostering to others considering it
 - **54 per cent** said yes
 - **32 per cent** said maybe
 - **12 per cent** said no
 - **2 per cent** preferred not to say.

“

You can make such a difference to a child's life by giving them a safe secure setting with simple and consistent boundaries. Seeing them develop and experience the new things they have never had the opportunity to do is worth the challenges.

Foster carer respondent

”



46%
of foster carers say they will continue for 'as long as I am able'.

What makes you continue to foster?

- I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care.
- I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family.
- I enjoy working with the children.

Improving foster care (both surveys)

Foster carers are best placed to tell us about how foster care is working for the children they look after and highlighting the areas that need to be improved. Fostering services can also provide an important insight about what obstacles they face when trying to provide the best possible care to children and support for foster families.

We therefore asked both carers and services to think about the people, places and processes involved in fostering and tell us about one main thing they think currently works well, does not work well and what they would like to see changed to make foster care better.

Both foster carers and fostering services

agree that improving the status of foster carers in the team around the child is the number one thing that will change fostering for the better.

What works well in fostering?

Foster carers said:	Fostering services said:
1. The support they receive from their supervising social worker, fostering team/ agency and peers.	1. The support provided to foster carers by their agency or supervising social worker.
2. Having a good relationship with social workers who are accessible, communicate effectively and always do what is best for the child.	2. When good working relationships are established in the team around the child.
3. When foster care allows children to stay together and provides them with a loving home and stability.	3. Children are provided with a loving, stable family environment in which they can thrive.



What does not currently work well in fostering?

Foster carers said:	Fostering services said:
1. Instability in social workers for children and poor relationships with children's social workers, whereby foster carers do not feel sufficiently communicated with and undervalued.	1. Some children experience poor matching due to insufficient numbers of foster carers to meet children's needs.
2. Lack of support in relation to allegations, for the child and for foster carer's own mental health and wellbeing.	2. Poor matching in turn impacts stability for children within their foster families which is further compounded by the quality of referral information provided by children's teams and high social worker turnover.
3. Poor communication from social workers, between social workers and between departments within the child's placing authority.	3. The tendering and commissioning process and poor partnership working between placing authorities and independent providers.

What one thing would you like changed to make foster care better?

Foster carers said:	Fostering services said:
1. Foster carers to be treated as equal in the team around the child and for this to be achieved through listening to their views, including them in meetings about the child in their care and equal rights and pay.	1. Improve the status of the foster carer by valuing the role, providing better pay and increasing understanding of the role of the foster carer and its importance.
2. For children to be better communicated with by social workers about their care and for them to be involved in decision making to improve support provided.	2. Improve matching by providing better referral information, having sufficiency to meet all children's needs and ensuring that all decisions are child-led.
3. Consistency in social work support for children.	3. Better use of existing funding as well as additional funds in commissioning and planning of care for children to ensure that all decisions are child-led and not financially driven.

The coronavirus pandemic (both surveys)

The pandemic has impacted on all parts of society, including foster care. Foster carers and all those working around them continued their critical work to keep some of society's most vulnerable children safe during unprecedented times.

With the sudden lockdown, foster carers gained many additional responsibilities overnight. They became home educators, supervised virtual contact arrangements with birth families in their own home and facilitated virtual social work visits in addition to their daily fostering duties.

Practice had to change dramatically, having an impact on all involved. It is important that we learn from this change about what worked well for fostering and what did not work so well.

Half of services have struggled to meet recruitment targets.

Practice changed and foster carers assumed additional roles:

- **66 per cent** of foster carer respondents supervised contact with birth family (also known as family time) throughout the pandemic compared to only **27 per cent** who usually supervised contact with birth family before the pandemic.

The pandemic had a varied impact on children's and foster carers' mental health and wellbeing:

- **Nearly half** (46 per cent) of foster carer respondents stated their own mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated slightly or significantly.
- **Four in ten** services said placements overall had been more stable, **three in ten** said experiences had varied considerably, **two in ten** experienced no overall change and **one in ten** said placements overall had been less stable.

44% of foster carers reported a deterioration in the mental health and wellbeing of at least one child in their care

25% reported a positive impact of the pandemic for the mental health and wellbeing of at least one child

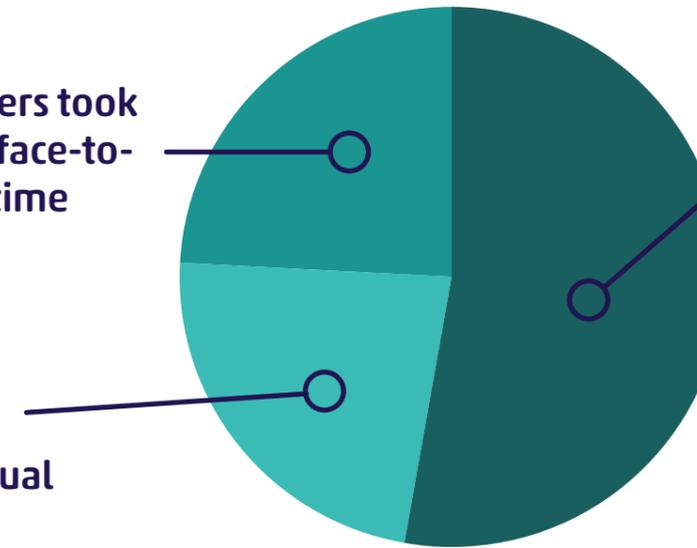


23%

of foster carers took part in only face-to-face family time

24%

only did virtual family time



53%

experienced a combination of virtual and face-to-face family time

Examples of innovative practice during the pandemic:

- Meetings became virtual and this seemed to work well for some foster families.
- Social workers arranged outdoor walking meetings with foster carers and children.
- There was effective and open partnership working between fostering services, children's services and local voluntary organisations to provide support to foster families.

Recommendation for local and national decision makers:

35. We urge all governments and decision makers to build on the partnerships and new models of practice which have developed since March 2020, to re-evaluate how we support our most vulnerable and to invest in innovative practices which ensure the very best outcomes for children in care.

Recommendation for fostering services:

36. Fostering services should engage with their foster carers to understand what they need to support their mental health and how these needs are going to be met. Learning can be taken from other sectors such as the support offered to adult social care workers following the pandemic.

About the data

Both the foster carers' and fostering services' surveys were open for nearly 10 weeks from 5 May until 11 July 2021 and hosted online via Smart Survey.

Foster carers' survey

The foster carers' survey was promoted via our website, magazine and through social media and emails.

A total of 3,352 foster carers from across the UK responded to our 2021 State of the Nation survey, maintaining it as the largest UK-wide survey of foster carers. The survey was distributed during the pandemic, representing a good response rate.

While most respondents were from England, there was a strong response from other nations, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all returning more respondents than would be expected for the proportion of the UK population living in those nations and the distribution of fostering households across those countries.

Both surveys were analysed with the help of voluntary analysts taking part in the Ministry of Justice's Analytical Volunteer Programme. We are very grateful for all their support throughout the research process.

About the foster carer respondents:

- **72 per cent** of respondents foster for a local authority/health and social care trust. The remainder fostered for independent providers. This is higher than the actual proportion of local authority carers in the UK which is approximately two-thirds of all carers.
- **42 per cent** currently had one child in foster care living with them, **28 per cent** had two.
- At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around **nine per cent** of all children living in foster care in the UK.
- **Seven per cent** were approved family and friends/kinship foster carers. This is significantly lower than the actual proportion of family and friends foster carers across the UK.
- **75 per cent** foster with their partner or other adult.
- **Seven per cent** had been fostering for less than a year, **31 per cent** for one-five years, **26 per cent** six-ten years, **26 per cent** 11-20 years and **10 per cent** more than 21 years.
- **Around a third** had other children not in foster care living in their household.
- Since 2019 there has been an increase, from **42 to 50 per cent**, of foster carers aged between 55 and 74, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of carers aged below 54. This continues a trend from our 2014 survey indicating that the foster carer workforce is getting older.

Fostering services' survey

The fostering services' survey was open to fostering service members of The Fostering Network only. The link to participate was sent via email directly to the registered managers or someone of an equivalent position with the knowledge to answer the questions. Participation was encouraged by using our practice support team's and country offices' contacts to promote the survey.

A total of 99 services completed the survey. This represents one-fifth of the total fostering service providers across the UK.

About the fostering services respondents:

- **75 services** were based in England, **two** in Northern Ireland, **12** in Scotland and **10** in Wales.
- The total number of fostering households approved by the fostering service respondents was 13,540 which represents around **25 per cent** of the total fostering households in the UK.
- 42 of the people who responded on behalf of the fostering service were registered managers, 26 were fostering service managers, 13 team managers and the remainder had various other job roles.

Demographic information about the foster carer respondents:

- **83 per cent** of respondents were female.
- **57 per cent** of respondents were Christian and **37 per cent** had no religion.
- **87 per cent** of respondents were white British.
- **88 per cent** of respondents were heterosexual, **four per cent** of respondents were gay or lesbian and **two per cent** bisexual.
- **Five per cent** of respondents stated they had a disability.

57 services
were independent
providers

42
were local
authorities/trusts





About The Fostering Network

As the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation, we are the essential network for fostering and we bring together everyone who is involved in the lives of children in foster care. 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.

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Registered office 87 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA

Registered charity in England and Wales 280852 and in Scotland SC039338

Registered in England and Wales as a limited company no. 1507277

VAT Registration 231 6335 90

