

CONSULTATION ON THE STANDARD OF FOSTER CARE

1. Does the new Standard sufficiently reflect the knowledge, understanding and skills required by foster carers?

YES

Please provide comments

The 19 sections of the proposed Standard, if delivered effectively and in sufficient depth, should provide the core knowledge and skills required by today's foster carers. The Standard's explicit focus on children's rights, managing social media and the internet, contact between the child and their family, and the stages of child development are, among others, warmly welcomed. As is the positive, practical orientation of the Standard's learning indicators. This is a Standard clearly focused on ensuring all foster carers are equipped to respond constructively to frequently encountered situations, keeping the child's needs for stability, nurture and adaptive care firmly at the centre of their practice. Compassion and commitment to the child are essential components to being a good foster carer, but they are not enough on their own. The increasingly complex nature of children's social care requires significant knowledge and skill among foster carers, from navigating the legal scaffolding built up to support and protect child and carer, to responding to the needs of children who have experienced serious, often sustained, trauma. The proposed Standard represents a major step forward in clarifying the scale and seriousness of the task, and our associated expectations of carers.

Building on the strong foundations set out in the proposed standard, various sections (in particular section 15, 'Promoting positive behaviours [...]') would benefit from an increased focus on the impact of trauma, facilitating foster carers understanding that complex behaviour is often a response to ongoing distress and / or environmental factors (including the actions, words, behaviour of foster carers themselves). In this vein, all sections would benefit from more emphasis on 'reflective practice', providing foster carers with the skills to examine and assess their own actions, with a view to adapting their approach and methods to best suit the needs of the child. The section on 'Managing conflict and crisis' (or other relevant section) could be enhanced with specific detail on managing placement breakdowns, again with an element focused on reflection and assessment, carers using these very difficult instances as opportunities to constructively critique their own practice and actions.

It may also be helpful to include more explicit reference, in appropriate sections, to the challenge of managing children's competing needs. This could be nuanced further by exploring the dynamic between looked after children and the foster carers own children, between different looked after children in the same sibling group (and living in the same foster care household), and between looked after children from different biological families. This will tie in with sections of the Standard which are focused on supporting foster carers to

create safe, nurturing environments for all the children in their care, sensitive to individual needs.

In reference to 'risk', the Standard takes a predominately (although not exclusively) negative tone towards it. The focus of most text is on 'managing' or 'minimising' risks which may cause the child harm. While these comments are often totally appropriate, it may be helpful to balance them with more explicit acknowledgement that taking risks is a natural and necessary part of a child's development. Carers need to support and facilitate a child's risk taking, providing appropriate opportunities and encouragement for children to try new things, establish relationships, and learn from experiences.

Reflecting on recent legislative changes, the Standard should also be updated to include more material on: (a) continuing care, including exploration of what it means practically for child and carer, and consideration of the issues which may need to be managed by carers when households are made up of looked after children and care leavers (with different levels of individual autonomy, etc.); and (b) participation in the Children's Hearing and court system, including material on the 'relevant person' status, permanence planning and the Permanence Order. There are also aspects of Additional Support for Learning and legislation and health policy which foster carers, and the children in their care, may benefit from understanding in detail.

Taken together these small changes would strengthen the Standard, which, as a welcome innovation in the sector, has the potential to be an important driver of improvement in securing positive outcomes for children. Assuming implementation is properly managed, and delivery of learning appropriately quality assured, the Standard should provide carers across Scotland with a consistent vocabulary and core knowledge base, facilitating their participation in assessment and planning for children at all levels. The Standard should also help carers respond positively and constructively to the challenging situations which are commonplace, wherever possible using these opportunities for growth and the strengthening of relationships, rather than causes for instability. The Standard also provides a basis for articulating the expectations of what a foster carer needs to be able to do at different stages of their own development, enabling agencies to more easily identify skills gaps and the necessary support. However, as noted above in the opening paragraph, this is a Standard designed for today's foster carers. Tomorrow's may need something a little different. We encourage the Scottish Government to set out clearly, as part of the implementation plan which will accompany the Standard, the process by which the Standard's contents will be regularly reviewed and updated.

[The online consultation form's free-text boxes do not allow for footnotes, but we would be happy to provide details of the literature and sources on which all our answers are based.]

2. After introduction of the Standard, how long do you think foster carers will need to achieve learning based on the Standard?

One year / Two to three years / **Three to five years** / More than five years

Please give reasons

We believe three to five years is a realistic timeframe in which to expect all foster carers in Scotland to have achieved the relevant knowledge and skill levels set out in the Standard, and for that learning to have been assessed appropriately. However, the question “[...] how long do you think foster carers will need to achieve learning based on the Standard” is ambiguous, and it is likely that different consultation respondents will interpret it differently. For instance, if the question is understood as “how long will it take for an individual foster carer to achieve the Standard’s relevant learning level”, the answer could be anything from a few months (or none) to a few years. It will differ from carer to carer, reflecting differences in their experience, access to learning opportunities and support, their own learning speed, etc. In contrast, if the question’s “achieve learning” is interpreted to mean that a carer’s learning must have been assessed and approved independently, then the answer is likely to favour a longer time frame, in view of the practical aspects which need to be worked through, with observation of the carer’s practice, etc. Indeed, if the question relates to achievement of a formal ‘qualification’ (as the preamble to the question suggests) then the answer is likely to be different again, contingent largely on the resources made available to facilitate implementation (e.g. the number of assessors available) and the methods of assessment (e.g. observation, RPL, etc.).

At CELCIS, we have interpreted the question to be “how long would it take, from the introduction of the Standard, for the sector to create the structures necessary to enable all foster carers to achieve (whatever the form of assessment) the relevant learning levels?” In response to this, on the basis of our experience supporting the residential care workforce to achieve SCQF Level 7, and facilitating implementation of legislation, adaptation and improvement across the children’s sector, we believe it should take between three to five years. As noted in the paragraph above, the timeframe would depend significantly on the additional resources made available to drive this reform. A reform which will require each fostering agency to change the way it provides learning and development to foster carers, and in some cases, demand a significant increase in the resources allocated to the tasks of carer preparation and assessment.

On an individual foster carer basis, we expect fostering agencies to identify a personalised time-frame for achievement of the Standard, tied closely to the carer’s formal review and approval time-table. In line with the Foster Care Review’s final report, initial approval as a foster carer should be contingent on achieving the ‘pre-approval’ Standard level (learning assessed as part of the wider assessment of an individual’s suitability to be carer). Renewal of a foster carers approval at the end of their first year should be contingent on their achieving the ‘post-approval’ Standard level; evidence of this attainment should be part of the materials reviewed by the Fostering Panel. For all other foster carers, an initial, personalised time-frame of one to two years should be developed, within which the carer will be supported to evidence their continued understanding and development on all the

Standard's indicators (including, if the option is chosen by Scottish Government, attainment of the new qualification). As has been shown with similar agendas in residential and the early years' workforce, there will be anxiety among carers whatever timeframe is chosen. But if the Standard's implementation is planned and resourced properly, carers anxiety is likely to shift, as they, and the children in their care, begin to see and experience the benefits of this new approach.

Moreover, we believe any regulation, policy or guidance which accompanies the Standard should be clear that fostering agencies, rather than foster carers themselves, are directly responsible for securing the learning and skill development opportunities necessary to meet the Standards. All fostering agencies must understand that they, as the assessors and employers of foster carers, will themselves be assessed on the basis of how well they support foster carers to attain and maintain the Standard. It will also be agencies who should be accountable where a working foster carer is found not to have attained the relevant standard of learning and skills.

Our estimate of three to five years (for all foster carers to have achieved the relevant learning) takes into account a possible increase in foster carer retirements (as re-approval requirements and thresholds increase) and necessary shifts in agency structures (to accommodate the delivery and assessment of the new Standard). The transition to the new system is likely to be handled more quickly by the independent sector, reflecting their relative size, flexibility and, in some cases, extensive learning and qualification requirements for their cares. But in planning for the Standard's implementation, the weight of focus must be on how local authorities, the main providers of foster care in Scotland, will be supported to make the transition, with our timeframe reflecting a realistic assessment of how long it will take them to adapt existing systems in current financial conditions, and in the context of multiple, complex programmes of change (e.g. health and social care integration, child protection improvement, extension of aftercare, kinship care assistance, etc.).

Moreover, if the approach chosen to implement the Standard involves independent, external assessment of some form (an approach we would support), it will create a significant demand for professionals equipped with the necessary skills. But this is a much diminished part of the social care workforce, with some local authorities no longer maintaining dedicated learning and development teams. Combined with the recent additional demands for assessors created by the new level 9 requirements for the Residential Care sector this is an issue which will need careful consideration.

As these various issues highlight, the impact of the Standard, and the timeframe over which it can be achieved for all carers, will be largely dependent on its implementation. The Standard must be accompanied by a clear, concise delivery plan, setting out the resourcing, responsibilities, dates, risk, etc. We would also recommend that the delivery plan is based on the Active Implementation Frameworks, acknowledging the need for continuous engagement, scrutiny and support throughout the whole implementation process. CELCIS would be delighted to provide what assistance we could in this area, such as in the development and design of the Standard's implementation / delivery plan.

On a final note, some parts of the consultation imply that a qualification is one possible option in the future, but in other parts implies that a qualification is planned (such as the

preamble text to this consultation question). As this issue is a source of anxiety for many carers, and one with significant implications for how the Standard will be implemented, it is important that clarity (about the Scottish Government's intentions) is provided as soon as possible.

3. What supports, for example accessibility (digital learning, evening classes), joint training and the role of the supervising social worker, might be most helpful for foster carers to achieve the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills set out in the Standard?

We welcome the draft Standard's clear focus on the support which must be built into the delivery and attainment of the Standard. The range of support required by foster carers will depend, to a significant extent, on the process of 'assessment' adopted for the Standard, but the draft Standard reflect this well, noting many useful ideas and approaches. Every agency delivering the Standard will need to prepare a package of these supports, with various options available to meet the different learning needs and approaches of different foster carers.

In our answers above we have highlighted the importance of reflection, providing opportunities for foster carers to constructively critique their own practice. Spaces for foster carers to learn together, and from each other, are also critical, building networks of support that have benefit beyond learning and personal development. It would also be advantageous for foster carers to be part of mixed-professional learning; the Standard's foundations in National Occupational Standards and the Common Core of Skills and Competencies should help facilitate this cross-discipline engagement (particularly if a qualification route is adopted). At a child level, fostering agencies and local authorities should also explore the learning and development potential of the team-around-the-child, and the benefits which might be accrued if aspects of the Standard or Common Core (such as people's understanding of 'attachment') were discussed within this group.

The Standard, set out as it is over the three levels, also offers valuable opportunities for foster carers to become trainers themselves, leading the learning of other, less experienced, foster carers, or supporting groups such as kinship carers. The educational and professional development literature is rich with evidence of the positive impact supporting others has on your own learning; through 'teaching' we can often 'learn' more (both knowledge and skills).

Utilising the teaching, facilitation and support skills of foster carers themselves can extend to coaching and mentoring too. The literature on effective implementation makes clear the critical role of coaching and mentoring, in achieving and sustaining change in practice. Experienced foster carers provide an extremely valuable source of support and guidance for other foster carers, and it would benefit the Standard if this was built into the delivery. However, the need for coaching and mentoring extends beyond foster carers; those delivering and assessing the Standard should have access to it as well. Indeed, this may provide part of the answer to the quality assurance question, with experienced learning and development providers and assessors providing oversight and feedback to others.

The Standard already notes the value of observing foster carers practice. In addition to home visits, various sections of the Standard would lend themselves well to video-assisted observation and feedback, enabling individual or groups of foster carers to review their actions and identify areas for adaptation and improvement. Similarly, scenario-based learning (i.e. role play), when planned and managed well, offers foster carers and assessors useful ways to demonstrate and evaluate learning and skills.



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4. Do you think the implementation of the Standard for Foster Care will result in less favourable treatment for particular groups?

YES / **NO** / NOT SURE

Implementation of the Standard does not have to mean less favourable treatment, but this question is important because there is always a risk, if individual's needs are not into account, that some benefit less than others. For example, full and detailed consideration must be given to the different learning styles (and attitudes) of foster carers, taking into account differences in people's enthusiasm for / discomfort with group learning, written work, etc. There may also be issues about access to, and/or confidence with, technology. It is important in the final preparation of the content Standard, and the delivery of it, that no assumptions are made about x or y technology being available to carers. There may also be issues for foster carers who undertake their role as a couple; consideration should be given to managing any impact of undertaking formal learning on relationships within the fostering household. Also, clarity will need to be given to the requirements expected of the partner of the 'main carer'; to what extent will these individuals need to meet the Standard?

Where foster carers have disabilities (due to either medical reasons or age) then agencies must also put in place appropriate support to help them achieve the Standard. And finally, thought needs to be given to how foster carers who are currently taking a break, perhaps due to pregnancy or maternity, are not disadvantaged as result of the Standard's implementation (i.e. returning from their break to discover that, although an experienced carer, they are not entitled to provide care until they can evidence attainment of the Standard). Accompanying guidance for implementation must address such questions.

5. Does the proposal to implement the Standard for Foster Care promote equal opportunities?

To an extent, yes. The standard should help reinforce the notion that to be a foster carer you need to be a compassionate, caring person, possessed of certain skills and knowledge (as defined by the standard) and able to provide a safe, nurturing home (along with the other specific parameters about the home which ages of children demand). An individual's sexual orientation, age, religion, etc. are immaterial if you can meet these (albeit appropriately demanding) criteria.