

Briefing for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and in Northern Ireland we have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 20 years to influence and shape policy and practice at every level. Our views are informed by our members. We have approximately 55,000 members across Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland from 37,000 households.

The Fostering Network is funded through membership fees, a small amount of core funding from Department of Health, charitable giving and grants/contracts for services from the Health and Social Care Board and Big Lottery. Currently, The Fostering Network has all approved foster carers and kinship foster carers in membership from all five Health and Social Care trusts and also from the four not-for-profit fostering agencies who operate here, they are Barnardo's, Action for Children, Foster Care Associates and Kindercare. In total, our membership in Northern Ireland includes 2791 fostering households, many of which are two carer households, therefore we engage with more than 4000 foster carers regularly.

What we do

The Fostering Network provides membership services to all members, this includes access to a local, independent advice and information helpline as well as a Legal Insurance service with access to solicitors and legal representation. Members also receive magazines, e-news, discounts on some goods and services, including our award-winning Mockingbird programme. In England, where fostering regulations require provision of access to tailored support for foster carers, we have an Independent Support Service and Practice Support team. These services are spot purchased from The Fostering Network by local authorities for their foster carers and are greatly valued. There is no similar provision here although there is a need for it.

We seek to influence policy and practice to improve outcomes for children in foster care. We do this through engagement with elected representatives, policy makers, academics, professional bodies and practitioners. We have limited resources to do this and therefore focus on a number of key priorities;

- Improved regulatory framework
- Working to raise awareness of foster care within the general public through activities such as Foster Care Fortnight which focuses on recruitment of foster carers.
- Raising the status of foster carers as a core element of children's services.
- Improving educational outcomes.

We run Fostering Attainment and Achievement and Step Up, Step Down, both are described in more detail below.

Regrettably, our kinship support service for kinship families, had to be stood down recently as our Children in Need funding was not renewed. This service was considered effective and fundable but the demands on Children in Need funds as a result of Covid, resulted in our funding coming to an end.

Fostering in Northern Ireland

Foster and Kinship foster carers look after 80% of all children who are looked after in Northern Ireland. Foster care has long been the preferred option for children who cannot be cared for by their birth parents.

Our economic impact assessment report and recent responses to FOIs show that costs of foster care are approximately £25000 per annum per child while the cost of having a child in a residential placement is almost ten times that.

Foster care provides safe, stable and caring homes for children and young people. It is key to delivery of two of the fundamental building blocks in *A Life Deserved (2021)*: a better in-care offer and a skilled and supportive workforce.

Current issues include:

- **Increase in the number of children coming into the care system.** [Official statistics](#) show at 31 March 2021, 3,530 children and young people were in care in Northern Ireland. This was the highest number recorded since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen an increase of almost 6%, this has placed pressure on the system.
- **Increase in number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).** Some of the rise in the number of children coming into care is due to an increase in UASC. These children will have likely experienced extremely traumatic situations are unlikely to speak English and as such will require skilled and experienced foster carers.
- **Fewer people coming forward to be foster carers.** The rise in the numbers of children requiring care has not been matched by investment in the development of foster care. This is not sustainable and the recruitment and retention of foster carers is now a significant issue. The Fostering Network estimates that we need to recruit 261 foster carers in Northern Ireland in 22/23 if we are to meet the needs of children currently in care and those who will become looked after this year.
- **Rise in kinship care.** There has been a recent emphasis on kinship care, which means the child is placed with a relative, friend or other person with a prior connection with the child. It is however essential to note that the needs and circumstances of each child are unique and that a kinship care placement is not suitable for every child, so there will always be a place for non-kinship foster carers and the system must be able to accommodate both.
- **Crisis in social work.** A backlog in cases during the pandemic and high levels of turnover and vacancy rates mean that there may be children who have suffered abuse or neglect during the pandemic, only recently being identified. Vacancy rates and high turnover also impact on the social work support provided to children when they come into care. Foster carers tell us they are not getting the support they need from social workers, with a lack of understanding of the role of foster care compounding the impact of the staffing issues.
- **Cost of living crisis.** The latest [Joseph Rowntree Foundation report](#) on poverty in Northern Ireland suggests that the gains made in improved living standards may be lost and that children are already the group most affected by poverty. Changes in the economic conditions of family life alone – without any other factors – [impact on rates of abuse and neglect](#). This may mean we see even more children entering the care system. In addition, our State of the Nation's Foster Care survey found that a third of foster carers reported that their allowance was not sufficient to meet the needs of the child in their care.

There have been welcome developments recently. The fostering community welcome the Children and Adoption Bill, with those members who responded to our consultation showing almost unanimous support for the fostering provisions included. Most of the comments from our members were concerned with ensuring effective implementation and, in some areas, a plea for the government to go further. For example, by establishing long-term foster care as a form of permanency, increasing stability for children and young people in long-term foster care and a national register of foster carers to improve safeguarding, consistency and standards.

However, change is slow - Foster Placement regulations have been in draft form for seven years now. We would like to see these published for consultation as soon as possible. If implemented, the regulations would make a substantive and qualitative difference to the experience and delivery of foster care, with standards introduced for the first time.

Another change to the landscape this month was the restructure of the Health and Social Care Board with some sections now under the Public Health Agency and others under the Department of Health. We have some concerns about what this will mean for the oversight of tier 4 services, including Looked After Children.

How The Fostering Network can support the Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The Fostering Network has significant and well-established expertise in fostering in Northern Ireland. We are the leading fostering charity and currently all foster carers and fostering services here are members of The Fostering Network. We have worked closely with the government and other key stakeholders (such as academics and others in the third sector) over many years to improve fostering and to ensure that the voice of foster carers is heard. We consult regularly with foster carers and our team are experienced in co-production.

As a UK wide charity we also have experience of supporting independent care reviews in both Scotland and England, ensuring that the voice of foster carers was heard by both review teams, arranging visits and focus groups and discussing policy and practice solutions. We would be delighted to work constructively alongside the review team for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in the same way, sharing our experience of fostering at all levels.

The Fostering Network leads the largest independent survey of foster carers, the [State of the Nation's Foster Care](#). In 2021 we were pleased to receive responses from 3,352 foster carers across the UK, representing four per cent of fostering households in Northern Ireland. At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents across the UK were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around nine per cent of all children living in foster care in the UK. We will share relevant findings with the review team, who may welcome sight of our published reports to date.

We worked with Queen's University Belfast to survey foster carers during the pandemic in 2020, to understand the impact that covid-19 and related restrictions were having on their lives, to ensure we could tailor our support accordingly and inform government about changes required to enable foster carers to support children effectively.

We are pleased to see the voice of children and families will be central to the review. We welcome the commitment to consult parents and carers and note that there is a suggested thematic group to discuss fostering and adoption issues. There are a number of issues which are indeed common to both fostering and adoption but it should also be noted that 80% of children in care in Northern Ireland are living with foster carers and a number of significant systemic fostering issues (not relevant to adoption) will also require dedicated attention.

The Fostering Network is convening an advisory group of foster carers to meet throughout the duration of the review, to respond to the review and to share their experiences. We will provide the secretariat for this group who will be available to meet the review team when appropriate. We can also arrange broader focus groups on specific topics or to share foster care experiences, as required by the review team.

As the review gets started, there are four areas we would like to draw to your attention at the outset. The first is the emerging evidence from our Step Up, Step Down project (SUSD), currently being piloted in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which contributes to the *Delivering Together* agenda by using the unique skills of foster carers to keep families on the edge of care together. The second is our well established Fostering Attainment and Achievement service which we rapidly adapted during the pandemic, providing much needed support to children and foster carers during lockdown. The third is the Mockingbird

programme; now operating in 62 fostering services across the UK, with clear evidence of increased stability for children as well as improved foster carer retention.

The fourth area we would ask the review to consider is a whole systems approach to the fostering system. We think there is a real opportunity for radical reform, so the government can take forward leadership on the issues outlined above; understand the issues that have blocked progress for many years and unblock them so future generations of children in the care system can thrive.

Step Up, Step Down

Step Up, Step Down is a support care model that has been operational in Northern Ireland since April 2016, using foster carers' unique skills and expertise to support children and families on the edge of care to stay together and create stable family relationships.

The programme gives parents the support of a foster carer who can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children. The model provides support over a 12–15-month period and aims to build parents confidence, self-efficacy and resilience, enabling them to address key issues in the home. As foster carers do not hold statutory responsibility for family outcomes, they are able to build trusting relationships with families and provide wraparound support that is trauma-informed and focused on autonomy and dignity for the families.

To date, Step Up, Step Down has supported 73 families, comprising of 96 adults and 151 children. Of these children:

- Twenty-three children were prevented from moving into care, where the status was pre-proceedings, and a care placement was being immediately sought
- Twenty-seven children were removed from the Child Protection Register. Of these children, two of these were moved to less severe categories, where care admission was being seriously considered and three were supported through SUSD to move home from residential care.
- Only eleven children in total moved into care, four of which were SUSD supported kinship placements and one short term.

As well as reducing the amount of children coming into care, other outcomes include reduced levels of family support required, families being more connected with informal community supports, increased school attendance and engagement, parental employment or studies increased, and life skills increased such as learning to drive, metalwork and basic DIY.

Step Up Step Down provides a programme of holistic and needs led support, with the family support foster carer meeting regularly with parents in a mentoring role, alongside providing short breaks. Parents are therefore provided with the capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity; creating safe, stable family relationships; connecting families to their communities and increasing the capacity of families to learn and grow together.

A cost-saving analysis of Step Up, Step Down model found a direct saving to government/statutory sectors of every £1 spent, £1.50 is saved. This is a conservative view and does not take into account more long-term factors such as health and justice. The model is also cost effective, keeping one child out of residential care, at a cost of £258,000 per annum, funds the whole programme.

We believe this model supports the ambitions set out in the Review of Children's Social Care Services and has the potential to transform the lives of families on the edge of care and should be made available much more widely across Northern Ireland.

Fostering Attainment and Achievement

The Fostering Network delivers Fostering Attainment and Achievement (FAA) on behalf of the Health and Social Care Board. This service, previously known as Fostering Achievement, has been delivered by The Fostering Network since 2006 and works with foster carers as "first educators". Through this scheme, we

provide tailored resources to individual children to assist in their education. These include provision of one-to-one tuition to more than 600 children annually, IT equipment for approximately 500 children as well as extra-curricular activities in creative arts, sport etc. This is a flexible, responsive service which recognises the foster carers' role in respect of children and their education, which is highly regarded and has continued positive outcomes for children.

In addition, we provide a summer programme which last year included the equivalent of 22 weeks of activities for more than 200 children which focuses on personal growth, developing resilience and creativity. FAA also enables us to support foster and kinship foster carers through advice, information, training, master classes on a range of education related issues. We have ten staff who provide this service and the majority of the annual £1.4million is used for provision of educational resources and activities and staff costs to deliver the assessment of need and delivery of activities.

The education of children in care continues to be an issue and there is a body of research which shows that family support for and engagement in education is key. With the majority of children in care in foster care we believe the role of foster carers as first educators is key and that there is potential to do more in this area.

Mockingbird Programme

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

Mockingbird is a global, award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, delivering sustainable foster care structured around support and relationships in a model best understood as replicating the stability and love of an extended family. The model has been delivered in the UK since 2015 and now has 84 Mockingbird constellations, primarily in England but also in Wales and Scotland.

Each constellation consists of six to ten satellite families, with a hub home carer and a liaison worker providing peer support, guidance, learning and development, social activities and sleepovers. Hub home carers are experienced foster carers who fulfil the role often undertaken by grandparents in an extended family. The model aims to nurture the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

Types of placements within constellations can vary, primarily being foster care, but it is a scalable integrated constellation model for fostering, kinship care, special guardianship, and adoption, and to transition children from residential care to family support. At the heart of Mockingbird is improving the experience of children and young people, and to achieve this, Mockingbird encourages services to include the views, wishes and aspirations of young people in the development and delivery of Mockingbird constellations.

Evidence shows that Mockingbird improves the wellbeing for looked after children and young people and better outcomes including; placement stability; sibling connections; family relationships and cultural identity. Between May 2018 and March 2021, 299 placement breakdowns have been prevented, as well as the prevention of 5 entries in residential care.

Mockingbird also increases rates of foster carer recruitment and retention, makes better use of available placements and foster carers report improved status as part of the team around the child - 10% of foster carers would have resigned and 18.5% of placements would have broken down had they not been supported by the Mockingbird programme.

The evidence is compelling even before considering finances, which demonstrates that once established, Mockingbird is self-sustaining, with each £1 invested in the programme there is a saving of 99 pence. Therefore, Mockingbird provides significant cost savings for the care system, with an estimated £3.4million estimated costs avoided between May 2018 and March 2021.

Over the years poor outcomes for children and young people in care and variability in the quality of support offered to foster carers have regularly been documented. Mockingbird addresses these key challenges within children's social care that impact the experiences and outcomes for children, young people and foster carers and we strongly believe Mockingbird should be available in trusts across Northern Ireland.

Radical reform of foster care

The review terms of reference talk about the overhaul and modernisation that the Adoption and Children Bill will bring to the system for children in care. The Fostering Network certainly welcomes the majority of the provisions in the Bill as set out in our [consultation response](#), however, more fundamental systems change is needed if we are to see a truly modernised fostering system which rises to the challenge of the issues set out above.

The 2013 Review of Statutory Fostering Services by the [Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority](#) (RQIA) identified a range of issues in Northern Ireland foster care including: support for relationships; social work support; recruitment and retention; foster care allowances; delegated authority; placement stability; increasing levels of complex needs; the role of IFPs; kinship care and the need for fostering regulations and standards. The report set out a range of recommendations. Nearly ten years later all these longstanding issues remain and many have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The review concluded that "Changes need to be made to transform foster care from a volunteer-based service to a modern, highly stable, child-centred service that places foster carers at the centre of the professional team." The Fostering network supports this conclusion, yet we are still as far from realising this change as we were in 2013.

For example, our UK wide State of the Nation survey and the consultations we have conducted in Northern Ireland show the need for a radical overhaul of the systems of support and remuneration for foster carers, due to the direct impact the treatment of foster carers has on the outcomes of children in the care system. It may be useful to consider the work done in Wales over recent years under the Improving Outcomes for Children Programme which took place 2016-2021. The Welsh Government set up a Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) to improve outcomes for children looked after to oversee a number of workstreams and this group established the National Fostering Framework (NFF) steering group. Both boards in Wales ended in March 2021 and MAG has published a [legacy report](#). We would like to see a similar level of commitment to fostering in Northern Ireland once the Independent Review is complete, to ensure the conclusions and recommendations result in work streams and action plans and finally start to move fostering forward in Northern Ireland.

The review offers a real opportunity to focus on fundamental change to improve outcomes for children in care and foster carers are well placed to deliver that change if we establish a system which harnesses their skills and commitment, rather than placing barriers in their way.

We look forward to working with the review team and the Department to take forward this much needed programme of change.

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