

Summary of the Caring for our Children Report

The Fostering Network Scotland, funded by the Scottish Executive

Part one: The foster carers' perspective

Executive Summary

Most foster carers are proud of their role and find the responsibilities both rewarding and satisfying. They enjoy the challenges of each new child and consider fostering has had a positive impact on their family. Nevertheless, the challenges on foster carers are increasing with the complexity of needs of children looked after, and accommodated. Whilst the age profile of children needing to be fostered is getting lower, there is no evidence to suggest their needs are less complicated. In order to recover from their early traumas, many children looked after, and accommodated need the time, patience and skilled care of these foster carers.

The challenges of fostering are evidenced in the levels of stress experienced by foster carers, the incidents and injuries they receive and in the allegations they face in the course of their daily work. Foster carers need good individual social work support, group support and 24-hour back up. There is considerable commitment on the part of fostering services to the provision of these types of support. However, there is a need to improve the availability of respite care to give foster carers and their families a break from these responsibilities.

Foster carers are retaining their commitment to fostering for longer and caring for more children. The service is responsive to the changing needs of children and one result of the shortage of foster carers is that some of the most experienced and competent foster carers have high numbers of fostered children in their care. Where there are multiple fostered children in placement there is a need for vigilance to ensure that the quality of each individual child's care is not being affected by the demands of the other fostered children within the family. There is a need to reduce the pressure on these foster carers and to ensure that they have access to support and respite breaks.

Increasingly, the complexity of issues of children in foster care need the involvement of specialists and foster carers are required to work alongside other professionals to maintain these children in their home, school and community. There is a need to increase the skills of foster carers, teachers, psychologists and mental health professionals in working together to improve the outcomes for children looked after and accommodated.

There is substantial dissatisfaction that the allowances that foster carers receive to meet the costs of caring for the child do not adequately cover these costs, and there is a need for a fundamental review of the current level of allowances paid to foster carers. Access to fees is limited, and for those who do receive a fee the level does not allow the majority of foster carers to leave paid employment outside their home. The level of fee means that few people are attracted from other professional posts. The educational profile of foster carers is low, and there is limited availability of accredited training, which would be required to raise the status and professional skills of foster carers.

This survey has identified the need to develop a national recruitment strategy in order to reduce the numbers of multiple placements of fostered children, increase the availability of respite care, address the increasing age profile within the service and increase the diversity of ethnic background of carers.

From the perspective of foster carers, the performance of fostering services in respect of the National Care Standards is mixed. The commitment to supporting foster carers, through link workers, group support and 24-hour back up is encouraging. However, foster carers are not given all the essential information they need, and there is a need to improve access to training and to address the logistical problems that prevent some carers' participation. Differences are evident in retention levels of fostering agencies and these differences need to be understood and best practice disseminated. Most significantly, there are two important areas of shortfall in standards, namely the length of time taken to complete new applications from foster carers and the levels of allowances for foster carers. Both of these areas need urgent attention to maintain the flow of new applicants into fostering and retain the commitment of the existing workforce.

The majority of children looked after are cared for by foster carers who play a pivotal role in the children's recovery from early trauma, regaining of confidence and future development. There is a need for further investment in the service to ensure that it continues to develop the skills and capacity to respond to the challenges of the 21st century and produce good outcomes for children.

Areas for action

In order to build on the strengths and experience of the existing foster carers action is required in the following areas:

- Reduce the stress levels experienced by foster carers.
- Increase the availability of respite care.
- Improve the allowances for the costs of caring for fostered children.
- Increase the development of skills and training for foster carers.
- Address the need for realistic fees for skills to enable more foster carers to be solely employed at home.
- Increase the training opportunities of foster carers to enable them to promote the educational attainment of fostered children.
- Reduce the disparity in service standards in recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- Develop a national recruitment strategy to meet the future needs of children looked after.

Key findings

Profile of the needs of children in foster care

- The complexity of needs of children is extending the range of skills required by foster carers and the types of support they need if children are to benefit from the close

relationships offered by foster carers.

- The complexity of the needs of children in foster care requires their foster carers to work closely with a range of specialists and other professionals.
- While it is encouraging to note that 94 per cent of children looked after have a named social worker, only 70 per cent have realistic and achievable care plans, and 17 per cent do not have these reviewed within the required 6 monthly intervals.
- There is a need to improve access to specialist psychological and psychiatric services for children while they are being looked after and to improve the advice and support available to foster carers.
- A substantial element of the work of foster carers involves maintaining links with birth families, through facilitating contact and supporting the child. This means that carers need skills in working with adults as well as children.

Profile of foster carers

- There is a low level of educational attainment of foster carers before fostering, with 41 per cent of foster carers without any qualification. Only 11 per cent have gained further qualifications since becoming foster carers: this needs to improve significantly if children are to receive educationally-rich experiences while in foster care.
- Training for foster carers needs to be universally available and accessible to all carers across the country, and further consideration needs to be given to the design and dissemination of foster carer training to address the logistical reasons for non-participation.
- Current programmes for training need to be accredited to improve the qualifications and professionalisation of this workforce.
- The allowances and fees for fostering are such that many foster carers are also employed outside the home as they indicate that the allowances and fees are insufficient to replace an income.
- Where there are two registered foster carers in the home, 50 per cent of both carers are in employment outside the home, and where there is an identified primary or sole carer just over 27 per cent are in employment.
- Until the fostering allowances reflect the real costs of caring for children, and fostering fees reward foster carers adequately for their time, skills and experience, there will be a need for many foster carers to obtain additional employment outside the home.
- A significant proportion, 9 per cent, of foster carers have no other income source than their fostering allowances and the implications of this for children who are placed with such foster carers is that the fostering allowance is supporting the whole household income.
- The extent to which current allowances fall short of the real costs of care is a matter that requires urgent attention and fundamental review. The variations in discretionary payments add further confusion and create further inequities in the service.
- In order to develop a professionally trained foster carer workforce, there is a need to reward the development of skills through fees for foster carers. Currently, 58 per cent of foster carers receive no fees for fostering.
- The high morale of foster carers, and the fact that 92 per cent are proud of their role as a foster carer, should be promoted to recruit new foster carers to this satisfying,

challenging and rewarding work.

- However, there remain a number of challenges in fostering, and 10 per cent of foster carers experience incidents and suffer injuries as a result of their work. These need to be systematically recorded if they are to be reduced and foster carers are to be appropriately trained and equipped to deal with their responsibilities.
- There is also a need to review the number of allegations and complaints in foster care, where 31 per cent of foster carers report they have had an allegation or complaint made against them. There is a need to agree protocols for handling allegations in order to reduce their potential adverse impact on the fostering service and on the stability of placements for children.

Changes in the foster care service

- There are changes in the average length of time each foster carer remains in service, from 7 years in 1999 to 9.3 years in 2004, along with an increase in the number of children cared for by each foster carer, from 18 to an average of 22 children.
- The numbers of children in each foster home indicate that 49 per cent of foster carers have three or more fostered children.
- There is a greater capacity being obtained from the fostering service and there is a need to understand how this is affecting the quality and availability of care for individual children.
- There is an increase to 8 per cent in the number of placements provided by the voluntary and independent sector in Scotland.
- There is great variation in performance of different agencies in their retention of foster carers, and the factors that influence best practice in these areas need to be identified and disseminated.

Recruitment

- The majority of children looked after come from the large city areas, while only 20 per cent of foster carers are located in these areas. There needs to be continuing recruitment initiatives within the large cities to prevent the current dislocation of children from their families, schools and communities when they are looked after.
- The age profile of foster carers has increased, with only 12 per cent of foster carers under 40 years of age. Fewer young foster carers are being recruited, which needs to be addressed in future recruitment to prevent a shortfall in the fostering service within the next 10 years.
- It is of concern that only 20 per cent of applications were completed within 6 months.
- The profile of children in foster care in Scotland is culturally more diverse than the foster carers, with 2.5 per cent of children from an ethnic background other than British while only 0.6 per cent of the foster carers are from other cultures and communities.

Meeting the National Care Standards

- Preparation training for foster carers is available for 94 per cent of new applicants and there is a high level of performance on the National Care Standards for assessing and approving applications in all areas, except the timescales for completion of applications. Only 20 per cent of new foster carer applications were completed within the 6 month

requirement.

- Written agreements are not in place for 33 per cent of new foster carers and, although 65 per cent of all foster carers report having a Handbook from their fostering service, there are significant gaps in information on child protection, complaints and insurance details.
- Link workers are available to support 99 per cent of foster carers, and group support and 24 hour back up is available in 90 per cent of cases. Training is available to 79 per cent of foster carers and respite care to 63 per cent of placements.
- The most widespread area of dissatisfaction with foster carers is in relation to allowances and fees, with 63 per cent of foster carers expressing dissatisfaction with their fees. Foster carers' concerns have been longstanding and are increasing. This survey indicates a need for a fundamental review of allowances and fees rather than incremental increases, if the inequities and anomalies within the current arrangements are to be addressed.

Part two: The fostering agencies' perspective

Executive Summary

Fostering services play a vital role in the care system in Scotland. More than two thirds of all children who are separated from their families are looked after by foster carers, and there has been a steady increase in the number of fostering households. This survey of fostering agencies identifies the strengths of the service and the challenges which must be addressed if the system is to meet the future needs of children.

This report surveys the range of services provided by fostering agencies and is the first comparative survey of fostering agencies in Scotland to be undertaken since the recent development of independent fostering agencies. It identifies trends and notes differences between the local authority, voluntary and independent sectors in their responsibilities, performance and the services they provide to foster carers.

Fostering services have responded effectively to the increasing demands made upon them and, since 2000, fostering services have accommodated 13 per cent more looked after children. However, these demands are growing and all local authorities report shortages of foster placements, both in the range of resources they require and in actual numbers of children waiting for placement.

Traditionally, local authorities are the major providers of fostering services and the voluntary sector has made a small but significant contribution to the development of fostering services in the last thirty years. In this survey, the local authorities continue to provide 91 per cent of all foster placements, the voluntary sector provide 6 per cent and the independent fostering agencies provide 3 per cent. Placements recruited by the voluntary and independent sector fostering services are purchased by the local authorities.

This survey identifies a net growth in the population of foster carers of 7 per cent in the year 2003-04. While there has been an overall increase in new recruits of 12 per cent, the voluntary sector and independent fostering agencies contributed 23 per cent of all new placements in this period. There is also evidence of increased retention of foster

carers by most agencies, with only 5 per cent of foster carers leaving their fostering agency.

Despite the growth in fostering placements, the failure to keep pace with demand not only results in placement shortages but also in there being insufficient foster carers to offer choice of placement for children on admission to care. Another consequence is an increasing number of multiple placements, to the extent that 50 per cent of all fostering households have three or more fostered children.

It is preferable for children to be placed close to their home and community in most instances but the shortage of placements, and the increase in purchased placements, has also resulted in an increase in the number of children placed beyond the geographical boundaries of their responsible local authority, or placed with other fostering agencies. This survey identified that 30 per cent of all children placed in foster care are placed out of their authority or with other agencies. There are indications that these placements are more complex and that there are some problems in accessing some of the social work, education and mental health support these children need. A number of local authority fostering managers who participated in this survey expressed concern about the impact of having to purchase placements. This has created financial pressures for their authorities, which they fear may detract from their ability to provide good quality foster care.

The workload of local authority fostering teams is almost double that of teams in the voluntary and independent sectors, with a ratio of one worker to 10 foster carers in local authority fostering teams, compared to one to five in the voluntary and independent sectors. Local authority fostering teams have serious staff shortages, with an average of 19 per cent of positions vacant; this is higher than the 12 per cent reported in children's services across Scotland, and contrasts markedly to fostering teams in the voluntary and independent sector who report 3 per cent of positions vacant in their fostering teams. Local authority fostering managers report that, as a result of this staffing shortfall, they prioritise support to existing placements and they have little spare capacity to undertake new assessments or to deliver training.

There is widespread commitment by all fostering agencies to providing support to foster carers through the appointment of link workers. There are, however, differences between the sectors in other important aspects of support to foster carers. The level of allowances and fees paid to foster carers in local authority fostering services is less than that available to foster carers in the voluntary and independent sector fostering services. Local authority foster carers also have less access to accredited training and respite breaks than other foster carers.

Preparation and post-approval training for foster carers is available in 70 per cent of fostering agencies, but this training is not accredited. It is reported that only 4 per cent of foster carers are currently undertaking accredited training. Concern about the low level of educational attainment of the fostering workforce has heightened awareness of the need for a national training strategy if the ambition to build a professional fostering service is to be realised.

There are gaps in the planning and co-ordination of fostering services at both local and national level and, as the pattern of placement provision is changing rapidly, there is a need for improved strategic planning. This report identifies the need for further investment to build on the strengths of the service to enable it to meet the growing demands of children requiring foster care in Scotland.

Key findings

This survey of fostering agencies identified that in the year 2003-04:

- There were 261 new foster carers recruited to fostering, adding an additional 12 per cent to the overall population of 2,161 foster carers.
- The number of foster carers who gave up fostering was 111, representing 5 per cent of the overall population of foster carers.
- The result of the above two statistics was a net increase of 7 per cent in the overall numbers of foster carers in Scotland.
- Local authorities are the major providers of the fostering services, with 91 per cent of all the fostering households in Scotland supported by local authority fostering teams.
- Local authority fostering teams support almost double the number of fostering households per worker than their colleagues in the voluntary and independent sector fostering services.
- Local authority fostering services have lower staffing levels and higher staff vacancies than fostering services in the voluntary and independent sectors.
- The vacancy level of fostering workers in local authority fostering teams is 19 per cent, which is higher than the 12 per cent reported in other children's social care staff.
- Patterns of recruitment and retention of foster carers vary significantly between the local authority, voluntary and independent sector and also between individual local authorities.
- The voluntary and independent sectors have demonstrated greater success in attracting new fostering resources than most local authority fostering services and now contribute 9 per cent of all placements.
- There are variations in the level of allowances and the availability of fees between the sectors, with 33 per cent of fostering agencies paying allowances above the basic rate and 33 per cent having no fees available to foster carers.
- All but one local authority fostering manager reported financial constraints on their fostering services. Contributory causes were reported as including increased demands for placements, increased allowances and fees and the costs of purchasing placements.
- There is 100 per cent commitment by all fostering agencies to the appointment of link workers to provide individual support to every fostering household.
- Foster carers in voluntary and independent sector fostering agencies have higher allowances and fees, greater access to accredited training and more frequent respite breaks than foster carers in local authority fostering services.
- The number of children who are fostered beyond the geographical boundaries of their responsible local authority, or with fostering agencies other than their responsible local authority, has increased to 30 per cent of all placements.

- There are gaps in planning and service reviews by fostering agencies, with half the fostering agencies not undertaking regular service reviews.
- Foster carers are involved in consultations about the fostering service in 80 per cent of fostering agencies.

Areas for action, as recommended by the Fostering Network

In order to increase the availability of foster carers and improve the outcomes for children and the quality of their experience in foster care, the following actions are recommended:

- Invest in a national recruitment strategy to increase the overall number of foster carers in Scotland.
- Improve the conditions of service of foster carers in order to attract more people to fostering as a positive alternative to other employment.
- Improve the level of fostering allowances for the costs of caring for fostered children to a more realistic level.
- Increase the availability of fees to all foster carers.
- Improve the remuneration and conditions of service to reduce the staffing and management shortages in local authority fostering services.
- Review the levels of financial support to local authorities for expenditure on children services.
- Increase the staffing in Children and Families teams to increase the availability of social workers to provide good support to children in foster care.
- Increase the availability of accredited training for all foster carers.
- Introduce national reporting of statistical data on fostering to improve the strategic planning of fostering services across Scotland.
- Develop protocols to support the placement of children living beyond their responsible local authority and to improve the planning and co-ordination of resource-sharing between fostering agencies.
- Share best practice initiatives between fostering agencies for the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- Create a Centre of Excellence to spearhead the training for foster carers, specialist fostering workers, fostering managers and Children and Families teams.

Part three: The training needs of the foster care service in Scotland

Executive Summary

Some of the most vulnerable children in our society are looked after by foster carers, yet these carers remain one of the least recognised parts of our social care workforce. This report identifies the training deficits within the fostering service and makes proposals to equip this workforce to meet the future needs of children looked after in Scotland. The analysis of training needs of foster carers reveals some key issues:

- Many foster carers have a low educational profile.
- There is a backlog of foster carers who have had limited access to training.
- There is a lack of accessible, accredited training for foster carers.

While 23 per cent of foster carers have gained vocational qualifications since taking up fostering, many experienced foster carers have no qualifications and would benefit from having their experience and skills recognised. Due to foster carers' key role in improving the educational performance of children looked after their educational profile (with over 40 per cent of foster carers having no qualification on leaving school) is a matter of concern.

Pre-approval training is universally available to prepare new applicants for the responsibilities of becoming a foster carer. The provision of post-approval training is less widespread and there is a need to change the content and methods of delivery of post-approval training to make it more accessible and to introduce opportunities for accreditation. While training has been provided over many years by some fostering services, it is not consistently available and has not always enabled foster carers to achieve awards or qualifications. The greatest challenge, however, is engaging the majority of existing foster carers who require access to learning opportunities to have their knowledge updated and their skills recognised.

There are very real constraints on many fostering services that reduce their ability to dedicate time and resources to training of foster carers. The operational demands of the service, and the shortages of specialist fostering workers, are identified by fostering managers as limiting their ability to deliver training. They consider that the training needs of the service cannot be met without a clear strategy, additional resources and dedicated training staff.

This report outlines the need for more foster carers to become trained, skilled and competent in their role and proposes extending the framework for post-approval training for foster carers. It also identifies the need for the professional development of specialist fostering workers and specific management training for fostering managers. Such investments are needed to create a culture for learning and development within fostering services in order to equip the service to meet the needs of children in the 21st century.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report has outlined the learning and development needs of foster carers and the foster care workforce, and indicates the need for a comprehensive training strategy. While there is a universal commitment to pre-approval training for all foster carers, training is not consistently provided post-approval, and there are no clear expectations of continued practice development. There is a need to address the shortfall in training within the foster care service and to create pathways for career development in fostering through advanced skills training. The report recommends increasing the availability of vocational training awards and developing the potential for experienced foster carers to undertake roles as assessors and trainers, thereby increasing the training capacity within the fostering service.

In order to meet the deficit in training within the foster care workforce, there is a need for much greater flexibility in the approaches to training, the materials and methods of delivery to increase

the opportunities for foster carers to participate in training. The focus of training must also meet with the aspirations of foster carers and give them the confidence and recognition they need to take their place within the child care workforce.

A culture of learning and development within the foster care workforce will also require a commitment to training and leadership for specialist fostering workers and fostering managers. The development of such training will equip them with additional skills and increase the likely success of the whole strategy.

The Fostering Network is the leading UK organisation representing all those involved, personally and professionally, in foster care. It has considerable knowledge, skills and experience of developing the skills of foster carers. All 32 local authority fostering agencies, and all voluntary and independent fostering agencies, in Scotland are members of the Fostering Network. Bringing together the findings reported in parts 1 and 2 of *Caring for our Children*, and the consultations with key stakeholders in fostering services and training in Scotland, the Fostering Network makes the following recommendations:

- Training of foster carers should build on the existing stages of pre- and post-approval, and training should be available to all foster carers.
- All future foster carer training should identify underpinning knowledge and be linked to national frameworks for accreditation and awards.
- A range of initiatives is developed to address the training needs of existing foster carers.
- Advanced training for experienced foster carers should be developed.
- A wider range of training options and methods is introduced to increase access and availability of accredited training to all foster carers.
- Post-qualification awards are developed for specialist fostering workers.
- Management training is available to managers in foster care services.

It is recognised that such initiatives will require additional resources and it is recommended that a comprehensive strategy of training and investment is required to create the trained, skilled and competent fostering workforce to meet the challenges in the years ahead.