

Supplementary written evidence submitted by the GMB Union

Thank you for giving GMB and our foster carer members the opportunity to present evidence in person on Wednesday 1st March 2017. In addition to the written evidence already submitted, please see below further information for consideration by the committee.

National Register of Foster Carers

1. A national register of foster carers is fundamental if the fostering system is to become more efficient and cost effective. Currently, foster carers are only able to provide fostering services to one local authority or Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The reality of this system means that local authorities are increasingly relying on the services of IFAs to care for children they are responsible for. Local authorities are currently unable to meet the needs of the children coming into care with their existing foster carers. However, there may be suitable available foster carers in neighbouring local authorities who the child could be matched with.
2. A national register would encourage cross-authority work allowing foster carers to work with more than one local authority, especially neighbouring local authorities.
3. Placements would be more suitably matched in terms of geography, culture, gender, birth children, needs, language. Appropriately matched placements prevent unplanned breakdowns and lead to more stability for the child.
4. Greater consistency in services and terms offered by local authorities to foster carers would help retain foster carers in the profession and prevent an increased reliance on IFAs. The fostering service should be about what the child needs and not based on what the local authority can afford.
5. Resources could be put into a national retention and recruitment campaign, with the assistance of existing foster carers, to attract foster carers rather than each local authority having to source their own local and costly adverts and events.
6. A national register would be able to address the huge inconsistencies between terms and allowances offered to foster carers. The profession of foster carer is a 24 hour a day role and responsibility. However, with no employment rights or access to minimum rates of pay, currently their levels of pay are determined by local authorities already facing major financial difficulties. More investment needs to be given into the fostering system. The fairest way would be to do this nationally and ensure that every foster carer receives a minimum level, equal and fair allowance.

National Training

7. Currently each local authority is responsible for the training of its own foster carers. A national and standardised training route would lead to consistencies in the quality of foster carer. A child in the care system should have access to a foster carer who is fully trained and skilled to meet their individual needs. A foster carer should have access to high quality training at times and locations accessible to them. Training should be provided with meeting the needs of the child at its core. A national approach to this would be more effective and cost efficient rather than it being provided based on what a local authority can afford. To do otherwise results in children in the poorest areas not being placed with foster carers trained and skilled to the same level as foster carers in more affluent areas - a postcode lottery.

Retention

8. Retention of existing foster carers must be a key priority. Highly skilled, trained and experienced foster carers are leaving the profession as they become disillusioned with the fostering system and the service being offered to them and the children.
9. Recruitment of foster carers is important but is also very costly. This process is pointless if existing foster carers are not staying.

Professionalisation of Foster Carers

10. It is essential that foster carers are given the professional recognition they deserve. Foster carers are already professionals. They are already working at a professional level. The expectation is that they are trained to a professional level. Foster Carers have taken over many roles and responsibilities from other professionals as the role of a foster carer has developed. One example is that they are now increasingly required to work closely with birth families.
11. A recurring issue our members raise with us regarding the lack of respect they feel they are afforded by the other public sector professionals they work alongside. They consistently feel like they are not listened to or treated as an equal part of the fostering team. Foster carers know the children's needs better than anyone else within the service and yet their opinions are not taken seriously and they are even excluded from important meetings regarding the children.

Tax Issues

12. Tax issues are a major concern for existing foster carers.
13. The disregard in tax has not been raised for 10 years.
14. It is also now a requirement that the children's allowances are disclosed on the foster carers tax return. This therefore may take them over the threshold and means they pay tax on that allowance, which is money that is not theirs.
15. If the weekly tax disregard was increased and the children's allowances not included then foster carers would not go over the tax threshold.
16. Bedroom tax has also proven to be an issue for foster carers in social housing. In between placement a foster carer becomes eligible to pay the bedroom tax. Foster carers should be exempt entirely from this tax. The London Borough of Hillingdon has already done this.
17. A consideration should also be given to exempting foster carers from Council tax entirely. The London Borough of Southwark has also done this to aid their recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Pensions

18. Many foster carers will not be entitled to full pension rights. They are eligible to claim home responsibility benefit but this is not widely known about and is difficult to claim. It also cannot be backdated. Foster Carers should automatically be eligible for this.
19. Consideration should be given to enabling foster carers to access the employer contribution pension schemes.

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