



NATIONAL FOSTERING STOCKTAKE

GMB SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE



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GMB EVIDENCE FOR THE NATIONAL FOSTERING STOCKTAKE

The Government has launched the National Fostering Stocktake to assess the current state of foster care in England and consider how the prospects of children in care may be improved as a result of changes to fostering.

The GMB surveyed its foster carer members about their concerns. GMB represents a variety of foster carers who look after children of all ages - long term, short term, additional needs, disabilities, respite, kinship carers, special guardians, supported boarding and lodgings, emergency - local authority and agency appointed.

There is a crisis in fostering due to existing foster carers resigning and local authorities being unable to recruit new foster carers. Foster carers enter the profession to help some of the most vulnerable children in society. They stay in the profession for these children. They do not stay for the financial rewards or relationships built with the fostering team.

The whole fostering system needs a major overhaul if the issue of recruitment and retention is to be addressed effectively and for the best possible outcomes for children to be achieved.

The aim of this report is to highlight our members issues and concerns regarding the current fostering system and how this impacts on the children they care for, as well as to put forward their recommendations.

Outlined through are concerns and thoughts given by GMB members who currently foster.

“THE WHOLE FOSTERING SYSTEM NEEDS A MAJOR OVERHAUL IF THE ISSUE OF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IS TO BE ADDRESSED EFFECTIVELY AND FOR THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN TO BE ACHIEVED.”

GMB RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) A national register of foster carers with national standards and terms of fostering would allow for much easier sharing of resources. This could include foster carers being able to foster for more than one local authority or independent fostering agency, helping meet the demand for foster carers to meet the needs of the children coming into care. Local areas could also share training providers. All of this would be a lot more cost efficient than the current fostering system which requires each local authority or independent fostering agency to advertise for and recruit their own foster carers and train and skill them. Sharing resources in this way means each child has access to the best foster carer for them, based on their individual needs and not based on money and luck in a postcode lottery.
- (2) Foster carers should be classified as professionals with access to full working rights including annual leave (where respite can be suitably arranged), sick pay, pensions, skills payments and fees and access to trade union representation.
- (3) Foster carers and children would benefit from greater standardisation of working practices across local authorities.
- (4) Greater cross-authority work should be encouraged and limits on foster carers working with just one authority should be reviewed, especially in the case of neighbouring authorities.
- (5) Potential foster carers should be given access to full, high quality training in preparation for the role, with honest information given at the recruitment stage - with involvement of existing foster carers. Foster carers should have on-going access to training and support, with a focus on training more specialist carers so that children with additional or special needs can be appropriately placed.
- (6) Relationships between the fostering team - foster carers, local authorities or agencies and social workers - need to be strengthened, invested in and better supported.
- (7) Foster carers have the best interests of children at heart and in mind. To achieve the best possible outcomes for children, foster carers need to be treated as an equal part of the fostering team with delegated authority being encouraged and supported. Children can grow up outside of societal norms if local authorities and independent fostering agencies continue to insist that foster carers treat children differently to how they would treat their birth children. If difficult behaviour goes unchallenged and foster carers are left unsupported in these cases, this will continue to have detrimental effects on children.
- (8) Where appropriate and when possible children must be included in the decision making process.
- (9) Placements must be suitably matched in terms of geography (between schools and contact), culture, gender, birth children, needs and / or language - with full information about the children shared with foster carers, regardless of whether they are placed in the long or short term.
- (10) Communications between all relevant parties needs to be more collaborative, understanding, without fear of 'blacklisting' style practices. Successful models of communication and partnership working between the fostering teams should be shared as best practice.
- (11) Fostering needs to be financially viable. The profession of a foster carer is a 24 hours a day 7 days a week role. Children who present more challenging behaviour come with hidden costs which are not

always recognised. Costs such as property wear and tear, loss and theft, damage, activities, mileage and contact costs. The prospect of no income security is why foster carers leave and is also a major reason as to why new foster carers are prevented from entering the profession. Stability of income, fairness and national standards will lead to better recruitment and retention of foster carers who will be able to offer homes to the most vulnerable children in our society. Addressing the issues foster carers face regarding tax should be addressed – raising the tax disregard and exempting foster carers from the bedroom tax would assist in more foster carers being able to stay in the profession. Access to an employer contribution pension scheme should also be a priority as many foster carers who have fostered for many years have never been able to access this.

- (12) Expenses and retainers to be paid when no child in placement with the foster carer to enable experienced and skilled foster carers to stay in the profession.
- (13) The costs of adapting homes should not fall to the foster carers. Local authorities should be adequately funded to assist with adapting homes for children with disabilities.
- (14) The use of costly independent fostering agencies results in huge amounts of money leaving local authorities. Money that should be spent on children is spent elsewhere. If local authorities managed their in house foster carers better and treat them with more respect and professionalism, they would be better able to recruit and retain them. This in turn could save local authorities great financial expense which can be invested into the children in their care.
- (15) It is essential that fostering receives much needed resources. Lots of decisions about children's care come down to money and what can be afforded, rather than what is best for the child. Children with complex or therapeutic needs should not have to be placed with independent fostering agencies due to the extra expense of providing for their needs. Treatments should not be refused or delayed due to costs. This negatively affects the recovery of children and impacts on their future relationships.
- (16) Increasing demands on foster carers and social workers in a variety of forms such as paper work, increasing rules and procedures, results in them not being able to offer as much time as to children in care. Current procedures should be reviewed and examples of best practice shared and encouraged.
- (17) Greater consideration and understanding of the needs of the foster carers families are essential to increasing the chance of providing a successful, stable long term placement.

HOW CAN THE FOSTERING SYSTEM BE IMPROVED TO ACHIEVE AMBITIOUS OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN?

Resources:

It is essential that more resources are invested into the fostering system in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for children. The needs of children in care should be prioritised over saving money.

Year on year austerity measures have resulted in local authorities struggling financially to meet the demands of the current fostering system. More children, with more complex needs are coming into care and without sufficient financial, physical and emotional support these children are being failed. Cuts to local authority budgets have resulted in less members of the fostering team. Social workers unable to cope with the increasing demands of their workloads has directly impacted on the support available to foster carers. This directly impacts on children in care as placements breakdown and foster carers leave the profession. Local authorities are left with a shortage of foster carers and unable to recruit more. Experienced foster carers leave the profession with a feeling that they have no choice but to resign as they can no longer offer the level of support they want to the children in their care. Ultimately, it is the children who suffer.

Recognition:

Increased demands on foster carers also has had a negative impact on children in care. Some foster carers have reported to us that they feel they are given unachievable goals with little support and some feel they are being set up to fail. Foster carers need to be regarded as the professionals they are. Treat as an equal part of the fostering team who can influence and support the children in their care, both inside and outside of the fostering home.

National Standards:

GMB believes that in order for the best possible outcomes for children to be achieved there needs to be a greater sharing of resources right across the whole system of fostering. This would include national standards and terms of fostering, as well as equal access to support and training. It should not be a postcode lottery. All children deserve the opportunity to be placed with foster carers who are trained and supported to a high standard. Most importantly, they deserve to be placed with the most appropriate foster carer for them, not placed with the only available foster carer in the area. A national register of foster carers would enable local authorities to pool resources and allow foster carers to operate within more than one local authority. This would work best amongst neighbouring authorities and would ensure a child is placed with the best foster carer for them whilst at the same time not being placed too far away from home.

“IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT MORE RESOURCES ARE INVESTED INTO THE FOSTERING SYSTEM IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN.”

HOW CAN THE STATUS, ROLE AND FUNCTION OF A FOSTER CARER BE IMPROVED IN RELATION TO OTHER PROFESSIONALS AND WORKING AS PART OF A TEAM WORKING WITH A CHILD IN CARE?

Recognition:

Recognising foster carers as professionals and an equal part of the fostering team is key. Foster carers open their homes to care for the most vulnerable children in society. Every child has their own individual needs which the foster carer has to adapt to and find a way to care for, they are expected to treat them as if they were their own child, but at the same time under strict rules and procedures determined by local authorities and social workers, with little discretion to act otherwise. Foster carers are often excluded from important meetings to discuss the needs of the child, whether this be within the authority or regarding school or contact arrangements. Delegated authority was introduced in 2013 and has proven to have positive effects for the child when it works. It is not occurring regularly enough in some areas. Our foster carers report to us that where this is not allowed to happen it is a daily reminder to the child that they are different, which has a negative effect on their outcomes. Delegated authority is vital and empowers all parties.

Foster carers welcome children into their homes, living with them and being the main constant person in the child's life and yet when it comes to discussing what is best for the child, they are excluded from important decisions and their concerns and suggestions are often ignored.

The role of a foster carer has evolved and become more challenging over time, more so in recent years with the number of children coming into care with more complex needs, the government needs to recognise this. Many foster carers were actively encouraged by authorities to give up other paid employment

in order to be available for children 24 hours a day. Most foster carers find it difficult to find other paid employment which is flexible enough to fit around the needs of children. Whether this be to attend meetings with social workers and authorities, taking children to school and picking them up from school, taking children to contact visits and meetings with other professionals. Yet, foster carers are often made to feel guilty for asking about money or referring to their role as a job. The role of a foster carer for many has become a job as it is the main income that comes into their home. Foster carers need sufficient payments in order to pay for the very homes that these children are cared for in.

There was a general consensus amongst our foster carers that they love the opportunity to provide this vital role to children who need them most. However, they are often overwhelmed by the lack of support and little recognition for what they do from the foster team. Foster carers often report to us how they feel completely undervalued and not respected as professionals and an equal part of the team.

Support:

Some foster carers have been made to feel worthless and of no value, with little thanks given. Often, our foster carers report to us that they feel undermined and taken for granted. This negative attitude towards foster carers directly impacts on the children they care for as they feel they are forced out of the profession and give up being a foster carer.

Support from the fostering team has declined. Rather than dealing with requests for support, foster carers report to us that they are often blamed for mismanagement of a problem and penalised if something goes wrong.

There is an increased feeling of 'us against them'. This ultimately impacts on the children. Foster carers should have the confidence to raise particular issues and concerns with the fostering team, safe in the knowledge that their needs will be met and without fear of repercussions. Foster carers always have the best interests of the children they care for at heart and it is essential that fostering teams provide the necessary support. Failure to provide adequate support results in children not getting the need and support they need, placement breakdowns, foster carers resigning or facing panel hearings with threats of de-registration.

Many foster carers report to us that they would feel more supported if they had employment rights and were entitled to trade union representation. Often foster carers receive little support when things go wrong and feel isolated. Although most local authorities provide access to Fostering Network and Foster Talk, a trade union is able to offer something additional to foster carers who choose to join individually. They should be entitled to trade union representation the same as every other worker.

Many foster carers report to us that local authorities make cuts to their allowances, payments and retainers and they are being forced out of the profession. The GMB believes that all foster carers should receive a retainer when there is no child in placement with them. This gives them income security to pay their bills and keep the home which houses the children. This time can be used efficiently to redecorate or prepare the home in time for the next placement, ensure that placements are accepted in the best interests of the child and not based on financial reasons. Necessary training can also be carried out during this time.

Security:

Many foster carers were encouraged to give up alternative paid employment to become foster carers. Although most local authorities now insist that they can have paid employment elsewhere they still need to be available at all times for the children in their care. This could be for contact visits, school journeys and emergency meetings with other professionals. This therefore means the practicalities of being able to foster and work elsewhere are very difficult and in some cases impossible.

WHICH IS THE BEST TYPE OF FOSTER CARE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE?

The GMB represents all types of foster carer. The best type of foster carer depends on the individual needs of each individual child. Therefore it is essential that there are a variety of foster carer types.

Long term care would suit most children who will be deemed to be staying in care. However, short term foster carers are needed to allow time for appropriate matching and identifying long term needs effectively. More time and planning at this stage means the placement is less likely to fail.

It is essential that there are sufficient respite and emergency foster carers to meet the needs of children coming into care unexpectedly, or to allow rest for existing foster carers who may have birth children they need to spend time with or who are facing particularly challenging placements. Respite is essential to allow for rest and recuperation for both foster carer and child and is fundamental in preventing unplanned placement breakdowns.

There also needs to be more specialist foster carers to meet the increasing needs of children coming into care with disabilities or more complex needs. Local authorities need to be in a position to recruit more specialist carers to meet these needs rather than relying so heavily on more expensive independent fostering agencies.

“THE BEST TYPE OF FOSTER CARER DEPENDS ON THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL CHILD.”

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS CAN BE MADE TO FOSTERING PROVISIONS, DELIVERY AND REGULATIONS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND PROVIDE VALUE FOR MONEY?

Support:

Many foster carers report to us that they feel the support from fostering teams has declined. This can be linked with cuts to local authorities budgets which directly impacts on the financial, physical and emotional support which can be given to foster carers.

Placement Stability:

Correct and appropriate matching prior to placements is essential. Local authorities who are desperate to place children may make the error of placing a child in not the best placement. Foster carers report to the GMB that they have in the past felt pressurised into taking children that were not suitable for their homes, whether this is due to birth children and other family members living in the home, not sufficient knowledge or experience to meet the individual child's needs, geographical reasons, cultural or language reasons. Foster carers genuine concerns about placement suitability should be seriously listened to and considered. A foster carer should not be deemed awkward or to be unreasonably refusing a placement. They should be given the confidence to express their concerns and not to be pressurised. A foster carer is aware of what they can offer a child.

The individual child's needs should come first and if a foster carer is not able to offer them what they need this should be considered. Failure to do so ultimately leads to placement breakdowns or a child missing out on the crucial support that they need. More disruption in the child's life benefits no one. There needs to be a balance struck between what a foster carer can offer and how a local authority can support a foster carer in being more confident in accepting a variety of placements.

Foster carers tell us that they believe increased placement stability will come if they are allowed to treat the children in their care as their own. If there are not any specific care issues they should be allowed to use their discretion as they would with their own birth children regarding sleep overs, day trips and other events without the need for all the paperwork and the child being made to feel different. As mentioned earlier, where appropriate, delegated authority is essential.

Independent Fostering Agencies:

There is an increasing reliance on independent fostering agencies as local authorities are unable recruit foster carers. Currently independent fostering agencies provide essential services due to the shortage of foster carers. However, this results in increased outgoings for local authorities who have to pay more per child than what they would if children were placed with local authority foster carers.

Some foster carers have also reported to us that they have left local authorities to go to agencies or are strongly considering this. They feel that the agencies are able to offer the support they once got from local authorities. This is completely cost inefficient for local authorities as they have to pay higher fees to agencies. This is money which should be invested into their local authority fostering system, foster carers and most importantly children.

Finances:

Many foster carers report to us that they struggle to be reimbursed speedily for expenses resulting from caring for a child. Whether it be clothing, mileage, home adaptations. Also, children's holiday or special occasion allowances. Delays in expenses directly impacts on the children in care, leaving the foster carer short of money to spend on extras. Some foster carers also report to us that they are made to feel guilty when asking for reimbursements and allowances, almost as if they should not be. Most foster carers already spend their own money on children but there should never be an expectation that they do this, as the reality is not all foster carers can afford to do it. This drives people out of fostering, again adding to the crisis in recruitment and retention of foster carers. Delaying expenses has a negative impact on children in care.

Staying Put:

Many foster carers consider the staying put initiative to be a positive one, especially for the child. It provides security and stability for a child. However, there has been criticism of it.

Presumptions should not be made that a foster carer will, or can, automatically participate. Some foster carers have reported to us that they have felt pressurised into this and life is made difficult for them if they refuse. With little information given about the practicalities of how this would actually work foster carers are nervous and sometimes unable to commit. Single foster carers with single capacity are not able to offer this as financially it would be impossible. They would be required to give up the room they have available for the child as well as their income.

Once a foster carer signs up to staying put they are no longer considered to be a foster carer, therefore losing the support from the fostering team as well as other fostering terms. All this at the same time as being expected to follow the old rules of fostering.

WHAT WORKS BEST WITHIN FOSTERING SETTINGS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PLACED?

Recognition:

Our foster carers reported to us that there were several things which worked best within the fostering setting in the best interests of the children they care for. Most importantly is that each child is considered as an individual and therefore what may work and suit one child, will not necessarily work and suit another child. This needs to be recognised and foster carers should not be considered as a failure if something does not work. There is a big fear culture within the fostering system with many foster Carers reporting to us that they live in fear of threats of de-registration if they don't do exactly what they are told, even if they have genuine beliefs or knowledge that something is not right for a particular child in their care. It is essential that the expertise and experience of foster carers is recognised and respected and that they are made to feel they can raise issues without fear of repercussions and they are listened to.

Communication:

Communication is also key. This needs to be more collaborative between all parties. There should be a consistent message from all the team, not dependent upon which team manager or social worker is appointed. Different messages lead to different outcomes and experiences for foster carers and their children. Foster carers report to us a fear of bullying, intimidation and blacklisting if they raise concerns. It is essential that it is recognised that foster carers have the child's best interests at heart and they should be encouraged to speak out and not discouraged.

Where communication is working well, this should be shared. The GMB has assisted with this and finds it has been successful in building relationships with all parts of the team and other foster carers.

Foster Carers Associations:

Where there is an active local foster carers association or network, this is always reported as being of fundamental value to foster carers. Some local foster carer associations work better than others in the support they are able to offer to their foster carers. It is fundamental that the local authority supports this network to run effectively by working with them to enable full communication with all foster carers in the authority. It is essential that committee members on these associations are invited to and are able to attend and participate in all council meetings that discuss fostering. They should be given resources and financial support to assist them in communicating with and supporting each other.

Foster carers tell us that other foster carers are vital in their support. They can discuss issues with children and share ideas on how to deal with particular problems and meet children's specific needs.

The GMB has been able to assist foster carer associations in meeting with associations in other areas. Our foster carers strive for improvements in their authorities so that the children they care for are getting the best outcomes possible. Encouraging foster carers to meet and network with each other enables the sharing of best practice ideas which should lead to improvements for all parties.

HOW CAN CHILDREN / YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE BE IMPROVED WHEN ENTERING CARE AND TRANSITIONING BETWEEN PLACEMENTS AND LEAVING CARE?

A rehabilitation package, similar to adoption, prior and post placements.

Potential foster carers should be given access to full, high quality training in preparation for the role, with honest information given at the recruitment stage, with the involvement of existing foster carers. If foster carers are given unrealistic expectations about fostering it is more likely that placements will breakdown and they will leave the profession. This benefits no one. Not the foster carer, not the local authority who has invested time and money in the foster carer and certainly not the children, who face placement breakdowns when things go wrong.

Exit interviews should take place with foster carers who leave, resign or retire. They should be encouraged to feedback honestly on their experiences so that the local authority can learn from any mistakes made or make further improvements where things were working well and enable sharing of best practice.

Children should also be listened to before, during and after placements to ensure their needs and concerns are also being met.

“POTENTIAL FOSTER CARERS SHOULD BE GIVEN ACCESS TO FULL, HIGH QUALITY TRAINING IN PREPARATION FOR THE ROLE.”

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Tim Roache, GMB General Secretary
GMB, 22 Stephenson Way, London NW1
2HD
020 7391 6700 info@gmb.org.uk



UNIONLINE
YOUR TRADE UNION LAW FIRM
0300 333 0303
www.unionline.co.uk