

4th December 2017

Why should children in care be discriminated against in the number of hours of childcare they can access?

GMB Foster Carers visit Parliament to campaign against this discriminatory policy.

GMB Foster Carers attended a round table discussion in Parliament on 28th November 2017 to discuss the discriminatory policy which excludes children in care from the same access to childcare as children who aren't in care.

The government very publicly announced that they were offering 30 hours of free childcare to under 5's who's parents were in employment. What they didn't publicly announce was that foster children would only be entitled to 15 hours. Nor have they explained why. This unfair policy currently discriminates against 3,030 3-4 years olds currently in care.

Tracy Brabin MP, Shadow Early Years Minister is campaigning for this unfair and discriminatory policy to be changed to enable foster carers to access the same amount of childcare for the children in their care, as all other parents are entitled to access.

At the round table discussion were GMB member foster carers who were directly affected by this unfair policy. They were given the opportunity to have their voices heard, and the voices of the children in their care. As representatives on their local foster carer associations they were also able to feed into the discussion the experiences of other foster carers and kinship carers in their area who they support. Also, at the round table discussion and in complete agreement with everything our foster carers said were MPs, Fostering Network and other fostering charities and organisations.

"A decision has been made about children in care that directly affects them and is unequal to other children. We want to know who made this decision, how and why? Discrimination is not accepted in this country. That should apply to children in care too."
(Keith Fielding, Kirklees)

Kinship carers are also affected. These are family carers who take responsibility for the children in their family, often with lesser support than ordinary foster carers. The children in their care often remain in the childcare they're in, at a cost to the Carer. "These carers also often don't receive any payments for caring for the child, receiving only maintenance money. Sometimes the child's childcare access is the only stable thing they've got in their life's. It should not be seen as respite for carers, it is crucial for the child's stimulation and interaction with others." (Marie Proctor, Leeds)

The government's agenda is clear. They want foster carers to go out to work and combine fostering with employment. However, the practicalities of this are almost impossible for many foster carers and kinship carers. Meeting the needs of individual children does not fit in with employment elsewhere. Required attendance at meetings and needing to be available for the child at all times does not always sound attractive to prospective employers. "Firstly, being a foster carer is a full time role. Whether you want to call it a job or a vocation. Secondly, if the government seriously wants foster carers to gain additional paid employment they need to ensure employers are offering fostering friendly policies, including paid time off for fostering duties. Thirdly, it should be local authorities leading the way on this and introducing fostering friendly policies to enable their own employees to consider becoming foster carers." (Rachel Harrison, GMB)

Children coming into care often have very complex needs and carers are expected to provide a much higher quality of care and in some instances accommodation. This all comes at a cost, usually at the foster carers expense.

One of the reasons given as to why foster carers should not be able to access 30 hours free childcare is that the child in care would be best off at home with their carers. The majority of foster carers would not necessarily disagree with this. Each child needs to be treated as an individual and an assessment and care plan of their needs should always include a discussion between foster carers, the foster carers social workers and the child's social worker as to what childcare arrangements may be appropriate and necessary. This will vary greatly from child to child. However, the point to be made is, that they should have equal access to what's available to children not in care. There could be a situation where a child is receiving 30 hours childcare before being taken into care and then once in care this has to reduce to 15 hours. Or it could be the case that a child in care lives in a fostering home with the carers birth child of a similar age. The birth child is able to access 30 hours and the child in care can only go for half of the time. Why is that fair? What message does that give to the child? "Would you say to a foster child 'you can only go to school for half a day because your in care, whereas if you weren't in care you could go for the full day?' No you wouldn't. So why is it acceptable in this case?" (Keith Fielding, Kirklees)

"Most placement disruption meetings held are as a result of lack of support. Providing access to equal childcare would increase the level of support available to foster carers and kinship carers, thus helping to maintain placements. " (Marie Proctor, Leeds)

Representatives from St Christopher's, a fostering support service, spoke of the current crisis in the retention and recruitment of foster carers. The children coming into care have much more complex needs and require access to more support. They spoke of there being no excuse for this discriminatory policy.

Representatives from Action for Children were also in attendance at the Roundtable discussion and fully supportive of our foster carers. They spoke of the policy being short sighted and more cost inefficient in the long term.

Representatives from the Association of Adoption and Fostering slammed this inexplicable decision by government. They spoke of the crucial part that childcare can play in a child's developmental recovery, their socialisation skills and integration with other children. This is a policy to save money only, the decision to exclude children in care serves no other purpose.

Vikki Swain from Fostering Network explained that the reason it had been implemented in this format was due to the government's misunderstanding of foster carers allowances. Child care costs are not included in allowances received by foster carers and government ministers failed to recognise this. The legislation will need to be unpicked and unfortunately this is not a priority whilst Brexit is ongoing. Fostering network are campaigning for it to be changed and have produced a standard letter for affected foster carers to send to their local MP asking for their support. You can access the letter at <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/access-free-childcare#action>

Thelma Walker MP is also supporting the campaign and is on the Education Select Committee Inquiry into Fostering. She will ensure that this issue is also raised as a part of their inquiry.

GMB thanks Tracy Brabin MP for launching this campaign and we call on the government to amend this extremely discriminatory policy. Every child should be treated equally, whether or not they are in care, whether or not they will access the full entitlement to childcare. We urge all foster carers to contact their local MP and ask them to support the campaign. We urge all local authorities to back this campaign.

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