

How does the National Fostering Stocktake match up to GMB's Recommendations?

The GMB submitted evidence into the National Fostering Stocktake being conducted by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers on behalf of our foster carer members. The full report of our evidence can be read at http://www.gmbyorkshire.org.uk/foster_carers We made 17 recommendations in our evidence and below is a summary of how the Stocktake Report matched up to what our members called for.

1. A national register of foster carers with national standards and terms of fostering. This would enable the sharing of resources, cross authority and agency fostering. This would assist in ensuring the child gets the best foster carer for them, based on their individual needs and not based on money and luck in a postcode lottery.

This recommendation was also supported by Fostering Network, Foster Talk, some local authorities and many foster carers. The report agrees with this recommendation and specifically states "We see great merit in the proposal and urge the Department for Education to evaluate costs and advantages...We believe the answer is a single national register of carers." However, the Association of Directors of Children's Services remains cautious and critical, just as they were when I raised this at the hearing for the Education Committee Inquiry into Fostering early in 2017. However, systems similar to this are already in operation. Link Maker is a good example of how it could work and already is in the area of adoption. I spoke with the Chief Executive of Link Maker Andy Leary-May, who gave me lots of details about the system and its capabilities to confirm what we were calling for was achievable.

The report concluded that if there was not to be a national register of foster carers, then at the very least there should be the introduction of a Vacancy Management System.

2. Foster carers should be classified as professionals with full working rights, including access to paid annual leave, respite, sick pay, pensions, skills payments, fees and trade union representation.

The reports findings on this recommendation is quite shocking and therefore I will quote their entire recommendation. "We are clear it is unrealistic to believe that foster carers, however competent they are, indeed, even if they happen to hold professional qualifications, can play an equal part alongside necessarily dispassionate social work

professionals, in determining what is best for a child in care. Frankly, often the last thing we need is for foster carers to be dispassionate. We need them to get emotionally involved, we want them to be subjective, we want them to fiercely advocate for the child or children in their care. Because that is what parents do. Foster carers are not professionals. But - and this is crucial - they must be treated professionally.” They have recognised that foster carers should be emotionally involved, and treated as professionals, but not actually be regarded as professionals. What does this even mean? Some foster carers have said to me that they find this actually quite an insult.

The report also adds further insult to injury by stating that they do not consider foster carers pay, including tax and benefits to be inadequate.

With regards employment status they state that this would radically and negatively affect the heart of fostering and they urge the government to resist the change.

There was a total failure to mention pensions at all which is very disappointing as this is a big issue for many of our foster carer members.

There was also no mention of access to trade union representation.

3. Greater standardisation of working practices across local authorities.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

4. Greater cross-authority working.

The report makes little reference to this recommendation except regarding commissioning and marketing, which is not relevant to our recommendation.

5. Access to full, high quality training provided to foster carers at the start of their career and throughout.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

6. Relationships within the fostering team need to be strengthened, invested in and better supported.

This is one of the main areas of concern for our members. It is therefore disappointing that there was very little reference to it in the report. The report does call for fostering services to ‘consider’ the introduction of structured peer support. There is also recognition that some local authorities are already doing this well and also that not all local authorities will have the financial capabilities to implement ‘mockingbird’ systems. Peer support is always beneficial to foster carers and is very rarely an area which our members report concerns to us about currently.

7. Foster carers to be treated as an equal part of the fostering team with delegated authority.

The report refers to The Children Act 1989: Fostering Services, Vol 4: Statutory Guidance on Fostering Services for Looked after Children (Department for Education July 2015) as being the key document dealing with children's views. They criticise it as not consistently promoting the important role foster carers play and does not list them as people who must be involved in reviews. "We do not believe it is reasonably practicable for carers to be asked to parent a child, whilst simultaneously preventing them from making minor decisions." Despite this, the report does not recommend that the guidance is updated. They instead recommend that the Department for Education remind all local authorities that the default position should be that foster carers are involved in reviews and are only excluded in exceptional circumstances.

8. Children should be included in the decision making process where appropriate.

The report states: "We reject misconceived, if well meant, suggestions that, for example, children should be able to choose their fostering placement. But the significance of these decisions to the child cannot, be underestimated, and they must be a part of that process whenever practicable."

9. Placements must be suitably matched with full information about the children shared with foster carers, regardless of whether short or long term placements.

The report recognises several things regarding this recommendation. One is that there is much scope for involving foster carers in decisions about matching. Another is that there is often short notice of placements with very little information being provided and a quick decision being required. The report states how it is important that critical issues and risks are identified and brought to the attention of the foster carer who will be responsible for managing them. The report recommends that local authorities need to monitor the quality of their referral information to the foster carer, without also demonising the child by over emphasising the negative aspects of a their background.

10. Communications between all parties within the fostering team need to be more collaborative, understanding and without fear of 'blacklisting'.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation and specifically the fear of 'blacklisting', although communications have been briefly mentioned in the areas discussing delegated authority and professionalisation of the role.

11. Fostering needs to be financially viable taking into consideration the 24/7 role, hidden costs of fostering and income security.

The report recognised that it is often difficult for foster carers to combine fostering with other paid work. However, they appear to have completely misunderstood the varying payment systems being used by local authorities and agencies. The report actually states that "taking allowances and fees together, some carers will receive a not insubstantial amount." Complete failure here to understand that allowances are the children's money

and not the foster carers. Also, that these allowances do not often cover the expenses incurred for looking after the child in many cases. They made no recommendation to increase the national minimum allowances. The report goes further to say “we do not believe current payments to carers - when considered in the context of HMRC’s helpful tax and benefit arrangements - are inadequate.” This is despite the fact that the tax disregard has not been increased for many years. Also, in many cases foster carers who pay up front for furniture, other items or modifications to their homes are penalised when reimbursed by their local authorities as this is considered to be an income and therefore goes against their tax disregard. It is also confusing as to why the report says they understand why some new foster carers and those who care for young children do not receive any fees. Why this is justifiable or understandable they fail to say.

Once again, there was a complete failure to acknowledge the lack of pensions available to foster carers.

12. Expenses and retainers to be paid.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

13. Costs for adapting homes should not fall to foster carers. Local authorities should be adequately funded to assist with this.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

14. Local authorities should invest in their own in-house foster carers rather than rely on costly Independent Fostering Agencies.

The GMB would always support fostering services being completely in-house. However, we also recognise the important role that IFA’s now play. The needs of the child should always take priority, being placed with the right foster carer for them, irrelevant of whether in-house or IFA, and irrelevant of cost. Many of our foster carers who work for IFA’s speak very highly of the support they receive, compared with complaints about the lack of support within many local authorities. This was a point also recognised within the Stocktake report. Hopefully, local authorities will take note and look at what support they are offering their foster carers.

15. Fostering needs more resources. Too many decisions are being made with cost as priority.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

16. Fostering procedures and rules to be reviewed with examples of best practice shared.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

17. Greater consideration and understanding of the needs of the foster carers family members and birth children.

The report makes no reference to this recommendation.

Other concerns resulting from the report are their recommendations to dispense with the role of Independent Reviewing Officers and no changes to the Department for Education Guidance surrounding allegations. It also calls for a review on the cost effectiveness and value for money of fostering panels. It is hoped that this review also considers the impact these panels have on foster carers, facing sometimes up to 15 people, many of whom have not read your submitted paperwork and without trade union representation.

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