



making foster care work for every fostered child and every foster family



Status and Authority

Policy and Recommendations

October 2009

the fostering network
the voice of foster care



Together for Change

Paper 1: Status and Authority

This paper is one in a series of four¹ and focuses on the need for the **status and authority** of foster carers within the children's workforce to be recognised and supported. In order for children to live a full family life foster carers must be regarded as partners in the team around the child and they must be granted greater decision making powers on everyday issues, with a presumption that they can make decisions regarding the children they foster.

The paper concludes with recommendations to government, public authorities², fostering services and foster carers.

¹ The other three are *Learning and Development*, *Support and Pay* available at www.fostering.net/together-for-change

² Throughout this document the term 'public authorities' refers to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, and Health and Social Services Trusts in Northern Ireland. While public authorities and fostering services are often the same they are not always which is why we have separated out recommendations for fostering services regardless of whether they are public authority or not.

Introduction

Just over 51,000 children and young people are in foster care in the UK on any given day. Of these, some remain in care for single short periods of time, others may come in and out of care, some will be adopted or made subject to other permanent legal orders, and others remain in foster care until they move into adulthood. The children and young people coming into foster care today have very particular needs that require skilled, individual attention from their foster carers, who are responsible for them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year for as long as they are with them.

Children and young people value their foster carers and many feel that foster care gives them a unique opportunity to experience a stable family life, and a place in which they are able to grow, achieve their potential and approach adulthood with confidence.

Together for Change

The Fostering Network's vision is of a society in which all children in and leaving foster care are able to live with a foster family who can help them achieve their potential, listen to them, value them, keep them safe and look after them for as long as they need. We want a society that values the important role of foster carers by recognising their status, giving them the authority they require, meeting their learning, development and support needs and ensuring they are properly remunerated.

In order for this to be achieved, the Fostering Network has long argued that the role of the foster carer must be seen as a professional one. It requires skill, knowledge, expertise, self awareness, commitment, the ability to work as part of a team, to maintain standards, and to provide a high quality, effective service to children and young people who most need it. It also requires the ability to deliver a highly personalised service, one that can often lead to foster carers and their families forming lasting relationships with the children they care for. In all of this, foster carers are key partners in the team that work together to secure the best possible outcomes for a child in care.

Fostering is highly regulated, and has the protection of children at its heart. There is no equivalent role with which to compare it in that it encompasses both 'work' and 'family' in ways that no other profession does.³ Being a foster carer means incorporating a professional approach to the task of caring for, or parenting, a child or young person.

The Fostering Network is recommending a national registration scheme for foster carers that would both promote and help to underpin the changes and developments that need to occur in foster care and which are articulated in *Together for Change*. National registration would help to confirm expectations on foster carers, raise standards, set qualification standards, oversee a learning and development framework, assist with the movement of foster carers and the safeguarding of children.

³ Kirton D *Step Forward? Step Back? – The Professionalisation of Foster Care* (2007)

Together for Change: Status and authority

Together for Change is the Fostering Network's campaign to bring about the changes that must be made to give children and young people in foster care the opportunities they deserve.

Paper 1: Status and authority

Foster carers often have a major impact on the life of a child in care, yet often they have the least authority and cannot make the everyday decisions that will allow a child to live a full family life.

Introduction

Despite the increased expectations on foster carers, it is clear that we have some way to go until foster carers are recognised and regarded as colleagues of equal standing by their fellow workers in the children's workforce, working together to support children and young people to fulfil their potential.

Feedback to the Fostering Network from foster carers about how they are treated by their colleagues includes cases where foster carers state that they have not been consulted about children moving on; that they are not always and certainly not as a matter of course informed of when reviews are about to take place; of finding other members of the team turning up at their house without any prior warning that a meeting was taking place; that because of 'confidentiality' they are not getting vitally important information that will help them in their fostering task; and that contact arrangements do not take into consideration the potential impact these might have on the fostering family or other children in placement, and the child's relationship with everyone in the household.

Children and young people in foster care regularly complain that because of the lack of clarity about who makes decisions on their behalf they cannot lead a full family life⁴. The failure to give foster carers power to make everyday routine decisions on behalf of children in their care impacts on the child's capacity to go on school trips, and in some cases can affect things as diverse as haircuts and access to medical treatment.

On the one hand we are placing children with foster carers because we want them to be safe and to be able to grow and thrive; on the other we are saying that foster carers cannot take decisions that will allow children to live a full family life. The longer a child or young person is in placement, the more there is a need for foster carers to have greater levels of authority that are clearly articulated, agreed and formally noted.

The need for public authorities to delegate more responsibility to foster carers has been recognised by the governments in Northern Ireland and England. In both countries the Fostering Network has been awarded funding to consult with stakeholders and develop a toolkit to encourage and facilitate public authorities to delegate more responsibility to foster carers. In Northern Ireland the Fostering Network has also recommended *how* authority will be delegated.

⁴ This is clearly laid out in *Improving Foster Care: Delegated Authority* produced by the Fostering Network, Northern Ireland, 2009 as well as in feedback received by the Fostering Network through other projects and services.

Together for Change: Status and authority

It is foster carers who make the biggest difference to the everyday lives of children in care. How they are treated and recognised for their contribution is key to giving children in care a full family life.

The case for status and authority

1 Recognition, representation and registration

- 1.1 Foster carers are far too often *not* regarded as fellow professionals by their colleagues⁵. This lack of recognition and respect for the role affects their ability to make an impact on the lives of the children and young people they foster.
- 1.2 In England foster carers are recognised as part of the children's workforce; they are included in the footprint of a sector skills council and in some cases are represented on corporate parenting boards and other corporate parenting groups.
- 1.3 In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales the status of foster carers is less clear. They are not always regarded as members of the workforce and they do not come under the footprint of a sector skills council. As a consequence they may not be included in workforce planning and may fall in between planning arrangements for the workforce and those arrangements that cover volunteers.
- 1.4 Even with the recognition in England, foster carers throughout the UK believe that they are not always perceived as equal partners in the team around the child. This is mirrored in the lack of clarity and some ambiguity in the child care profession about whether foster carers should indeed have the status of skilled practitioner or fellow professional, despite the increased expectations on them. This view is inevitably reflected in the way that foster carers are treated by those with whom they work, but is totally unacceptable.
- 1.5 Failure to recognise the status of foster carers has a negative impact on their ability to care for a child. For example, there are too many incidents of foster carers not being consulted about children moving on even when they have been looking after them for months and in some cases, years. This denies the fact that the foster carer is almost inevitably the individual who knows the most about the child, as well as ignoring the relationship between the foster carer, their family and the child and demonstrates a lack of respect and understanding of the contribution that they make to the life of the child in their care.
- 1.6 Too frequently we hear that children's social workers do not value or fully understand the roles and responsibilities of foster carers. This may arise from the failure of social work training to cover foster care in any detail, and/or the lack of further induction and training on foster care for newly qualified social workers.
- 1.7 Currently, foster carers are not amongst the group of childcare workers who are required to be registered. However, they are required to be assessed and

⁵ This includes those in the education, health, and probation services

approved, are subject to annual reviews and can have their approval terminated if deemed not to be meeting defined standards of care.

- 1.8 Registration with an approved and national body such as the General Social Care Council in England, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the Care Council for Wales (CCW), and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council would enhance the status and standing of foster carers. It would also offer a number of other benefits including:
- putting foster carers on equal footing with other staff subject to registration
 - offering a safety net, as it should ensure that information about a foster carer who has previously fostered is always passed on to any new fostering service
 - providing a mechanism to improve the portability of approval for foster carers thereby avoiding experienced foster carers having to be completely reassessed if they move to a new fostering service
 - providing an appeal mechanism for foster carers who are or feel they are unfairly de registered ⁶
 - emphasising the requirement on foster carers to act in children's best interests and giving them the confidence to do this.
- 1.9 Termination of approval by a fostering service provider currently encompasses foster carers who resign because they move house and foster carers whose approval is terminated because they are considered unsuitable. There is no distinction between foster carers who lose their approval because of questions about their competence and foster carers who simply move on.
- 1.10 The establishment of the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) in England ⁷ is a welcome development and provides a framework for foster carers to have decisions reviewed.
- 1.11 The Welsh Assembly Government is consulting on an Independent Review Mechanism on similar lines to that which has been established in England and is planning on introducing one in 2010. However, there are no independent review or appeal mechanisms in Scotland or Northern Ireland.

2 Decision making/delegated responsibility

The reluctance of public authorities⁸ to delegate decision-making powers to foster carers has the following effects:

⁶ The Independent Review Mechanism, recently introduced in England and soon to be introduced in Wales is most welcome and the Fostering Network supports its introduction. However it is not an appeal mechanism.

⁷ The IRM was introduced in England in 2009

⁸ The term 'public authorities' encompasses local authorities and HSSTs in Northern Ireland

- First and most importantly it leaves children and young people disadvantaged, as decision making is often delayed and children in care are made to feel different and often miss out on activities and opportunities as a consequence of bureaucratic delay.
- Children cannot experience a full family life if their foster carers are unable to make many of the day-to-day decisions that a parent would make.
- Foster carers who feel undervalued and disempowered by not being allowed to make everyday decisions are less likely to take charge of championing the child in their care, and supporting their overall development.
- Foster carers are left having to manage the immediate consequences of any decision taken by those outside of the fostering home, and may have to deal with angry and frustrated children. This can affect the relationship and endanger fostering placements, leading to instability and further moves.

- 2.1 It is an area of great concern to children that there is often a lack of clarity about where the authority for making day to day decisions that affect their life lies. This can lead to unacceptable delays in decision making and young people missing out on opportunities as a consequence.
- 2.2 While there is a great degree of variation around the decisions different fostering services will allow a foster carer to make, in general there is a culture that is both highly bureaucratic and risk-averse that makes it very difficult for children to take part in everyday activities available to other children. At present, amongst other things, most foster carers are not able to sign consent forms for activities and trips for the child in their care, nor allowed to sign for minor medical procedures.⁹
- 2.3 Some social workers struggle to reconcile the rights of the parents, the foster carers and the child when considering where authority should be delegated. The views of children on what decisions should be taken by their foster carers are not always sought nor are their views always taken into account.
- 2.4 In 2009, the Children and Young People Select Committee noted that 'local authorities need more persuasion and reassurance to delegate responsibility for everyday decisions to carers who know a child well, so that their life in care can be 'normalised' as much as possible'.¹⁰
- 2.5 When in 2004 the then Department of Health in England and the Welsh Assembly Government produced 'Guidance on the delegation of decisions on 'overnight

⁹ Other areas where foster carers cannot give permissions may include: school photos, signing for a buss pass, media activity, meeting with school staff.

¹⁰ *Looked-after Children: Select Committee, Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2008-09*

stays' for looked after children',¹¹ this significantly transformed local authority practice. The guidance reduced poor practice within public authorities that was preventing children in care from staying overnight with their friends who had not been CRB checked and minimised discrepancies in practice between authorities.

- 2.6 Over time practice has reverted and many children in care report that their public authority requires police checks before agreeing to overnight stays. This suggests that clear guidance from Government requiring public authorities to delegate as much authority as possible to foster carers - taking into account the needs and wishes of children - may have a significant impact on practice but will need to be supported by longer term systemic changes.
- 2.7 For all children and young people placed with foster carers in Scotland, the LAC (Scotland) Regulations 2009 specify that the child's plan must include arrangements for involving foster carers and the child in decision-making. With the introduction of Permanence Orders in Scotland, there is the opportunity to have all decision making (with the exception of residence) delegated to a foster carer in respect of a named child.

Information sharing

- 3.1 When there are instances of information being unavailable or withheld this can be very damaging to the foster family and the child in their care as the circumstances that led to the two Essex Judgments revealed.¹²
- 3.2 However, despite these judgements and the requirements on public authorities to give foster carers the information they need, the Fostering Network's survey¹³ showed that just over 50 per cent of foster carers had had a child placed with them for whom they were not given all the information they needed to care for them safely; 33 per cent said that they needed more information about their child's medical requirements; 48 per cent of foster families believed that information was lacking on the child's history of abuse; and 68 per cent said they needed more information about the child's general behaviour. 40 per cent of foster carers stated that they did not receive sufficient information about the child's previous placements.
- 3.3 The reasons for foster carers not receiving information may include frequent changes in social worker resulting in key information being missed; a reluctance

¹¹ Local Authority Circular (2004) 4 and *Guidance on the delegation of decisions on overnight stays' for Looked After Children* Welsh Assembly Government Nov 04 (statutory guidance) In 2009 both the Scottish National Government and the Northern Ireland Government followed suit.

¹² In 1998 the Court of Appeal allowed the children of foster carers to sue Essex County Council after they were sexually abused by a fostered child. In 2000 the House of Lords ruled that the foster carers could also sue the council for the emotional damage they suffered because they had unintentionally exposed their children to abuse. Essex County Council had failed to provide the foster carers with vital information about the child placed in their care.

¹³ Support Survey, the Fostering Network 2009

to share all the 'bad 'information for fear that the foster carers will not agree to the placement; a deliberate withholding of information; a misunderstanding of confidentiality and data protection leading to vital information not being shared; and, probably most significantly, a failure to see the foster carer as a full and key member of the team of professionals around the child.

4 Policy development

- 4.1 Foster carers report that it is a common occurrence that policy is developed and implemented locally without due consultation or their involvement, leaving them feeling excluded and that their views are disregarded.
- 4.2 There is a lack of clarity generally about who should be represented on corporate parenting boards/Community Planning Partnerships¹⁴ in England and Scotland, or equivalent bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland, and there is currently no requirement that foster carers be represented.
- 4.3 There appears to be no or very little understanding amongst councillors and others about the contribution that foster carers make to the corporate parenting role.
- 4.4 Consequently, foster carers are rarely represented on these bodies and their understanding and experience of children in care and of local fostering provision are not represented locally and are not therefore influencing local development. This is a missed opportunity.
- 4.5 Where foster carers *are* represented, there is no consistency in how they achieve that representation, so that in some cases they are nominated by officers and in others nominated by foster carers.
- 4.6 Foster carers are in a unique position as they are both receivers of services from the public authority and also partners in delivering services. They are also not employees of the public authority and for all these reasons are likely to be of particular value to corporate parenting boards and equivalent bodies.

5 Practice

- 5.1 Every child in care is required to have a Care Plan which details their needs as well as a Placement Agreement which includes confirmation of contact with the birth family and the levels of responsibility foster carers have for day-to-day decision making.

¹⁴ The Scottish Government, *These Are Our Bairns: A Guide for Community Planning Partnerships on Being A Good Corporate Parent, 2008*

- 5.2 Foster carers report that their views are not always, and certainly not as a matter of course, taken into account in care planning and reviews. There are occasions when foster carers are not invited to or are excluded from a meeting of 'professionals' even when the meeting is about a child they are looking after.
- 5.3 A Fostering Network survey¹⁵ found that in the past three years 45 per cent of foster carers did not have all the information they needed about the Care Plan and 50 per cent felt that they did not know enough about the child's family and friends. Given that foster carers are required to manage contact arrangements on a regular basis, failure to provide information on family and friends is both putting children at risk and putting foster carers and their families under strain.
- 5.4 Foster carers have a key role to play in facilitating, sometimes supervising, and always supporting children with the consequences of contact. Too often however, contact arrangements do not take into consideration the impact these might have on the fostering family and the child's relationship with them as their foster carers. This again can affect the stability of a placement.

6 Allegations

- 6.1 The Fostering Network continues to hear from too many foster carers who experience poor practice following an allegation and from those who suffer from the absence of a robust system that protects their rights while ensuring allegations are properly and fully investigated within reasonable timescales.
- 6.2 There is a failure on the part of many fostering services to provide a transparent framework for dealing with allegations that is in line with that available to other professions.
- 6.3 In contrast to arrangements in place for other members of the childcare workforce, there are no required timescales for the investigation of allegations and foster carers can be prevented from fostering for many months and sometimes over a year, even in situations where a police investigation has long been completed.
- 6.4 In Scotland and Northern Ireland foster carers are not entitled to independent support as a matter of course. In England and Wales, where foster carers are entitled to independent support, there is a lack of clarity about what this means in practice.
- 6.5 As a result, foster carers and members of their household are often unclear about their rights when undergoing an investigation into an allegation and often are left in limbo for months on end, with huge negative impact on them and their family.

¹⁵ Support Survey, 2009

- 6.6 There have been a number of initiatives across the UK to improve the management of investigations. The English Government commissioned the Fostering Network to produce training materials and an information booklet for foster carers. Foster carers are also covered by the guidance in *Working Together*¹⁶ on investigating allegations against members of the children's workforce.
- 6.7 The Scottish Government commissioned the Fostering Network Scotland to develop a national protocol to improve the management of allegations against foster carers.¹⁷ The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSSPSNI) have recently commissioned the Fostering Network to develop guidance on managing investigations against foster carers.

Conclusion

Foster carers are increasingly required to perform a highly professional role within a professional foster care service. It is essential that their contribution to improving outcomes for children in care is appropriately recognised, their status respected and their levels of authority clear and defined so that they can give children in their care a full experience of family life, safeguard them and help them grow and reach their potential.

In order for this to happen, cultures have to change and all members of the team surrounding the child need to take responsibility for implementing that change. Some of this activity will be driven by governments, others by fostering services and yet others by foster carers.

Changing the status and authority of foster carers has minimal or no costs attached. Treating a foster carer as an equal in decision making costs nothing, but the ramifications can be widespread and the benefits enormous. Seeking out the views of a foster carer who has had a child placed with them for many years to ensure their involvement in plans for moving on, is common sense and has no cost attached to it. Ensuring that children's plans specify the levels of delegated authority not only provides clarity to foster carers and the fostered children, but makes it possible for foster carers to provide children with a full experience of family life, and relieves social workers of having to manage cumbersome bureaucratic processes. There is no cost attached to this either.

The ultimate beneficiaries of cultural change will be the children and young people who are cared for by foster carers who are valued and regarded as partners in the team surrounding the child, and who are providing them with a full family life.

¹⁶ Working Together 2006

¹⁷ This Guidance has been submitted to the Scottish Government and the Fostering Network is awaiting confirmation on how the Government intends to proceed.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

Achieving cultural change regarding the status of foster carers as key members of the team of skilled child care practitioners who are responsible for transforming outcomes for children in care requires clear statements of intent from the national governments, public authorities and fostering services.

Cultural change is hard to bring about and will only happen if it is led from the top. Governments and policy makers must take every relevant opportunity to clearly state that foster carers are key partners in the team of skilled practitioners focussed on planning for and caring for a child in care. But statements of intent on their own will not achieve change. Actions too are required and the following recommendations should be implemented:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS

1.1 Recognition, representation and registration

- 1.1.1 Governments must take the lead in achieving cultural change. In the guidance and standards that are currently being revised, developed or implemented throughout the UK, it is essential that the role and status of foster carers is consistently emphasised throughout and subject to inspection.
- 1.1.2 The governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should reflect the situation as it is currently in England and confirm foster carers as full members of the children's workforce. They should ensure that they come under the footprint of the appropriate sector skills council and that public authorities are required to always include foster carers in their workforce development plans.
- 1.1.3 The registration of foster carers with an approved and national body such as the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in England, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the Care Council for Wales (CCW), and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) will enhance the status and standing of foster carers in the public mind and should be seen as a key part of a strategy to transform foster care and the outcomes of children in foster care. In addition registration will help to drive up standards and help bring about cultural change, transforming foster care and the outcomes of children in foster care.

1.2 Decision making/delegated authority

- 1.2.1 Governments in England, Wales and Scotland should issue guidance that encourages a presumption in favour of delegating decision making to foster carers, as far as is practicable and possible in each case. This will give children in care the opportunity to live a full family life.

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- 1.2.2 The Government in Northern Ireland should take forward the proposal submitted to them to give greater decision making powers to foster carers.
- 1.2.3 Guidance, including care planning guidance, must require that the level of delegated decision making, in each case, is based on individual circumstances and takes into account the needs and views of the child.
- 1.2.4 Governments must ensure that adherence to the guidance becomes part of the inspection process.

1.3 Information sharing

- 1.3.1 Governments must emphasise the requirement on public authorities to ensure foster carers have all the information they need in order to safeguard the child, their own family and to help them reach their potential.¹⁸

1.4 Policy and practice

- 1.4.1 Governments must ensure that there is clear guidance about who should be represented on corporate parenting boards/community planning partnerships, or similar bodies, including a requirement to include a foster carer.
- 1.4.2 Governments must ensure that inspections seek the views of foster carers and meet with representatives of any local foster carer association or foster carer forum that exists.
- 1.4.3 Governments must introduce a requirement that public authorities consult with foster carers on developments and changes in services.

1.5 Allegations

- 1.5.1 Governments must issue guidance and set standards on how allegations against foster carers must be handled. They should ensure that public authorities and fostering services are inspected against these standards.
- 1.5.2 Governments must set statutory time-scales for investigations and the performance of fostering services needs to be monitored against these timescales.
- 1.5.3 Governments must issue guidance which more clearly defines the provision of independent support. Inspection agencies need to ensure that in their inspections they satisfy themselves that the provision of independent support is adequate.

¹⁸ Baroness Delyth Morgan wrote to local authorities in England on 24 September 2009 reminding them of their responsibilities to ensure foster carers have the information they need.

- 1.5.4 Governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales must set up an independent system to review decisions about prospective foster carers and existing foster carers whose approval has been terminated or whose conditions of approval varied. Procedures need to be transparent and accessible.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Achieving cultural change

Public authorities must ensure that foster carers are seen as key partners in the team of skilled child care practitioners focused on planning for, and caring for, a child in care by producing clear statements to this effect that are understood by the local child care workforce.

2.1 Recognition and representation

- 2.1.1 Foster carers must be included equally with other child care workers as public authority workforce plans are developed and implemented.
- 2.1.2 Public authorities must take steps to ensure that foster carers are recognised as key members of the team of child care professionals and must ensure foster carers are routinely invited as a matter of course to all planning meetings concerning a child in their care.

2.2 Decision making/delegated authority

- 2.2.1 Public authorities must ensure that the best interests of the child determine all decisions relating to delegated authority.
- 2.2.2 Public authorities must work with foster carers to develop a clear framework for delegating authority to foster carers, ensuring that they are empowered to make day to day decisions over the lives of the children they care for, and that they are supported to be able to take these decisions
- 2.2.3 Training must be available to social workers to help them balance the rights of parents, foster carers and children in care when delegating authority whilst recognising that the best interest of the child must be paramount in all decisions.

2.3 Information sharing

- 2.3.1 Public authorities must ensure that foster carers are always provided with full information in order that they can care safely for the child and help them to achieve their potential.
- 2.3.2 Foster carers will not always want or need to see the child's file but they should be able to access it upon request.

2.4 Policy

- 2.4.1 Public authorities must ensure that councillors understand, value and appreciate the role of foster carers in improving the lives of children in care.
- 2.4.2 Public authorities must ensure that there is a clear process for ensuring representation of foster carers on corporate parenting boards or other similar bodies.
- 2.4.3 Public authorities must ensure that the views of foster carers are included/ consulted in any developments that affect children in care in their area.
- 2.4.4 Public authorities must consult with foster carers on developments and changes in their services and demonstrate the impact of the consultation on the developments.

2.5 Practice

- 2.5.1 Reviews of looked after children should be used as an opportunity to consider whether more responsibility could be delegated to the foster carer of the child concerned.
- 2.5.2 In England and Wales, Independent Reviewing Officers must be required to satisfy themselves that foster carers have been given full information about the child and that decision making has been delegated to the foster carer as far as this is possible and practical, taking into account the wishes and feelings of the child.

2.6 Allegations

- 2.6.1 Public authorities should ensure that the policies and practice regarding the handling of allegations across the workforce are consistently implemented.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTERING SERVICES¹⁹

Achieving cultural change

Following clear statements of intent from the national governments and public authorities regarding the importance of the role of foster carers in transforming outcomes for children in care, fostering services should establish mechanisms to consult with and involve foster carers in working to achieve this cultural change.

This cultural shift will require both leadership from line managers and training of front line staff to improve understanding about the key issues in fostering to ensure foster carers are treated, at all times, with parity of esteem as a skilled child care practitioner.

3.1 Recognition and representation

- 3.1.1 Where corporate parenting boards exist, fostering services must work with foster care associations and foster carers to agree representation, ensure that

¹⁹ Local Authority/HSSTs and Independent Fostering Provider

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they are included in formal service planning mechanisms and facilitate foster carers' communications with elected members about their work.

- 3.1.2 Fostering services must ensure that foster carers are included in all relevant meetings, involved in decision making, and are enabled to contribute to the child's care plan and file.
- 3.1.3 Fostering services must recognise foster carers as the person within the team who, by living with the child on a daily basis, usually knows them best of all the professionals involved and must consult with them accordingly.

3.2 Decision making/delegated authority

- 3.2.1 Fostering services must seek and reflect the views of children in care about what should be delegated to their foster carers.
- 3.2.2 Foster carers' professional approach to their work should be valued and encouraged. Social workers must fully explain their decision making to them, particularly where they conflict with the foster carers' own thinking.
- 3.2.3 Foster carers must receive written confirmation of the parameters of their role regarding delegated authority in order to promote the most positive outcomes for children and young people. These need to be discussed, negotiated and made explicit in a written agreement for each child.
- 3.2.4 Fostering services must provide clarity with parents, children and foster carers about the issue of balancing parental and children's rights and the degree of delegated authority sought and given. This should be clarified at looked after children reviews and included in a leaflet to be given to parents. The minutes of looked after children reviews should record all decisions on delegated authority.
- 3.2.5 Fostering services must ensure that foster carers are provided with appropriate support when making decisions.
- 3.2.6 A transparent mechanism for resolving disputes when there is conflict between the social worker and foster carer must be established and communicated with foster carers.

3.3 Information sharing

- 3.3.1 Fostering services must ensure that where information is available it is shared with foster carers, and that the rights of the parent, the child and the foster carer are balanced accordingly and reflected in the care plans.
- 3.3.2 Fostering services must ensure that when children move on, information is shared with the new fostering family.

3.4 Policy and practice

- 3.4.1 Fostering services must ensure that the full range of foster carers in their service is consulted with on any developments that affect them and the fostering service and that their views, ideas and concerns are listened to.
- 3.4.2 Fostering services must establish mechanisms for ensuring that the voice of foster carers is heard and listened to on relevant policy through providing development and support for the establishment of foster care associations or other relevant groupings.
- 3.4.3 The views of, and impact on, foster carers must always be taken into account when decisions about contact are being made.

3.5 Allegations

- 3.5.1 Fostering services should continue to pay fees to foster carers who are effectively suspended and prevented from working as a foster carer during an allegation. In addition fostering services should pay a proportion of the allowance to cover ongoing costs such as insurance, utility bills and rent or mortgage. Payments should continue until the investigation is completed and the foster carer is able to resume work, or their approval is terminated.
- 3.5.2 Fostering services must make sure that they have a transparent framework for dealing with allegations that is in line with that available to other professions in the locality.
- 3.5.3 Fostering services must ensure that the timescales for the investigation of allegations are adhered to.
- 3.5.4 Fostering services must ensure that foster carers and their families are provided with independent support as a matter of course, and must ensure that appropriate provision is available at the point of need.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTER CARERS

Achieving cultural change

Achieving cultural change regarding the importance of the role of foster carers in transforming outcomes for children in care requires that foster carers see themselves as key partners in the team of skilled child care practitioners focussed on planning for, and caring for, a child in care, and representing that child's interests. In order for that to happen, the following needs to take place:

4.1 Recognition and representation

Together for Change: Status and authority

4.1.1 Foster carers need to work as key partners in the team surrounding the child demonstrating an understanding of the contribution of others and recognising the responsibility that comes with having a professional status.

4.1.2 Foster carers must meet required standards with regard to learning and development, recording and reporting, and should manage their behaviour in line with good practice .

4.1.3 Foster carers must ensure that the child's views are heard in all aspects of planning and delivery of service that affect them and that they represent the child's interests at all times.

4.2 Decision making/delegated authority

4.2.1 Foster carers must ensure that they understand their areas of delegated responsibility and seek support in making decisions where necessary.

4.3 Information sharing

4.3.1 Foster carers must ensure that they have all the information they need in order to care safely for a child and ensure the safety of their own family. Where it is difficult to obtain information they should ask to see child's file, or request that their supervising social worker sees it.

4.4 Policy and practice

4.4.1 Foster carers should contribute to the development of codes of practice that establish the core expectations and requirements on foster carers locally, that will underpin and reinforce their professional status.

4.4.2 Where possible, foster carers should get involved in their local foster care association or other foster carer group so that they are able to exert influence on how services develop locally.

4.5 Allegations

4.5.1 Foster carers must ensure that they understand the local process for dealing with allegations at the outset, and if there is not a process in place they should work with their fostering service to establish this

4.5.2 Foster carers should make sure they have legal protection insurance even when they have finished their fostering career.