

Written evidence submitted by The Fostering Network

The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services: Response from The Fostering Network, September 2020

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people, and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Introduction

We welcome the Education Select Committee's further consultation with the sector about the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services. Our previous consultation response, submitted in July, is available on [The Fostering Network's website](#). Our rapid response survey about [fostered children's experiences of education during the pandemic](#) provides a strong evidence base about what support is needed, what was not consistent nationally during school closures earlier this year, and what worked well for children in foster care whilst schools were closed.

In response to the terms of reference for this current consultation, we would like to re-emphasise the importance of:

- critical worker status for foster carers;
- the financial support of foster carers; and
- the capacity of children's services and what is needed for contingency planning to ensure resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergencies.

1. Critical worker status

In recognition of the fact that foster carers are caring for some of our most vulnerable children during this time of crisis – maintaining relationships, providing stable family homes and keeping children safe – we think the essential work that they do on the frontline of social care should be recognised.

The Government's definition of critical social care workers states that it 'includes but is not limited to... social workers, care workers, and other frontline social care staff including volunteers; and, the support and specialist staff required to maintain the UK's social care sector.' As such, we believe foster carers fall within this Government definition and should be classed as social care workers and therefore critical workers during a pandemic.

The Department for Education's position throughout the coronavirus pandemic has been that foster carers were not critical workers but that certain concessions had been

made for foster carers. While we welcome the concessions made for foster carers that make them eligible for personal protective equipment and testing, we believe it is essential that foster carers are given critical worker status to unlock the full range of entitlements provided to critical workers, for example, priority access to supermarkets during a lockdown.

Recommendation:

- Foster carers should be considered as critical workers during a pandemic as they are frontline social care workers.

2. The financial support of foster carers

During the lockdown period The Fostering Network received queries from foster carers concerned about their fostering finances during the Covid-19 crisis. The queries fell into three groups:

- those foster carers with coronavirus who temporarily can no longer care for their fostered child(ren);
- those who have to shield because they are in the very vulnerable category and have therefore been unable to take on new placements; and
- respite foster carers who are unable to offer respite placements as a result of the social distancing requirements.

Foster carers fell through the cracks of support from the beginning of the crisis when the original furloughing offers for the employed and self-employed were announced. Foster carers are only classified as self-employed for tax and national insurances purposes, many use Qualifying Care Relief and the majority of foster carers have no taxable profit from their self-employment.

The Fostering Network therefore believes that foster carers who are temporarily unable to work due to the impact of coronavirus (see categories above), or any other pandemic, should be paid a retainer by their fostering service to ensure consistency of financial support. We believe fostering services should be able to draw down from a central government fund to pay for these retainers. We believe this additional support should be covered by central government funding and, along with other sector organisations, raised the issue with the Minister for Children and Families, Vicky Ford MP, in [an open letter in April](#).

In England, the Minister confirmed that funding for foster carers will come from the £3.2 billion allocated to local authorities. This money has been given directly to local authorities to assist those most affected by Covid-19, and it is the fostering service's responsibility to ensure no foster families are disadvantaged during this time. In correspondence with the Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Children's Services, they expressed concern that this fund will only cover a fraction of the costs incurred by local authorities in their effort to keep communities safe and that difficult decisions will have to be made in terms of prioritising how this funding is used.

Currently, work to model the demand and capacity of services to meet increased need is happening at a local and national level. The fostering sector recognises the need to build capacity in the foster care system over the coming months and fostering services are working hard to recruit and approve new foster carers. It is vitally important to support foster carers, including financially, to ensure we retain the expertise and skills of the existing workforce.

Recommendations:

- Foster carers who cannot foster temporarily due to Covid-19 should be paid a retainer for the whole period of time that they are without a placement. This will help protect the capacity of the sector and ensure that no family is left without an income due to coronavirus.
- Fostering should be appropriately resourced to ensure all foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time, skills and expertise. This is an essential step in retaining and recruiting foster carers.

3. Capacity of and contingency planning for the resilience of the children's social care sector

Recent data published by the Department for Education reported that the total number of children who have started to be looked after between 27 April and 23 August was around 15 per cent lower than the same period over the past three years¹. The majority of referrals to children's social services come from the police, followed by schools and then health services². Therefore, it is predicted that now children have returned to school and routine health appointments are resuming, referrals will go up and there will be an increased demand for all different types of looked after children's provisions.

Given that 72 per cent of all children looked after in England live with foster families, we can expect the demand for foster placements specifically to be particularly high. In addition, families that rely on short-break foster carers will need this support when more widespread movement between homes is advised again.

Recruitment activity will need to ensure the right kinds of foster families are recruited to match the needs of the local looked after children population. It is also equally important to focus on the retention of foster carers to maintain the foster carer population.

Pandemics, such as the one we are currently experiencing, may happen again and it is important that the Government and children's sector are properly prepared should this occur. All decision makers must learn robustly from the impact of the current crisis and ensure that safeguarding standards and people's wellbeing and health needs are maintained as paramount should another national emergency occur.

¹ Department for Education [Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 8](#) September 2020

² Department for Education [Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019 England](#) 31 October 2019

Fostering services should consult with their staff, including foster carers, and fostered children to find out what they think worked well, what they would like to continue and areas that needed improvement in respect to the crisis and post-crisis. This will be particularly important as restrictions are being re-instated at a national level and increasingly larger areas of England move into local lockdowns.

Recommendations:

- All fostering services should pay a retainer to any foster carer who cannot work temporarily due to a pandemic to keep foster placements open and aid retention.
- Fostering services should consult with their staff, including foster carers, and children in foster care, to review their performance throughout the crisis and ensure that foster families are properly supported and communicated with in the instance of any future local lockdowns or national emergencies.

Conclusion

With local lockdowns persisting and infection rates rising, it is important that the above recommendations are put in place by Government to ensure that foster carers are recognised for their essential work, looking after some of society's most vulnerable children.

It is more important than ever that foster carers are involved in discussion and decision making about the child. They will be best positioned to identify the child's needs, wishes and feelings, which may have changed during the lockdown period. Children's and their foster carer's needs should be re-assessed regularly as the situation continues to change.

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