

Written evidence submitted by the Martin James Foundation

Evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services, on behalf of the Martin James Foundation.

Dr Justin Rogers, Mark Furnival, Rebecca Wright, Steve Stockley and Ian Thomas  
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### **Introduction**

The Martin James Foundation is an International charity working across the world to develop and provide high quality foster care and family support services. Internationally we are supporting governments and partners in several countries to set up pilot foster care services, strengthen family-based care and support further development of national child protection services. Within the foundation we have not for profit affiliates called Key Assets that are providing support and foster care to vulnerable children and families. These services are operating in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan. In the United Kingdom the foundation's affiliate FosterTalk has provided high quality independent support to foster carers and their families throughout the UK since 2007. FosterTalk delivers Fosterline the independent advice and support helpline for the Department for Education. FISS provides face to face support to foster carers during the investigation of an allegation or serious complaint. F.I.S.S. is Foster Carers Independent Support Service providing independent support for foster carers facing allegations or investigations into standards of care under National Minimum Standards 22.12. FosterTalk have submitted a detailed response to this inquiry, which is wholly supported by the Martin James Foundation. This submission is not intended to duplicate their good work but supplement it with a specific focus on the impact that Covid-19 has had on the mental health of fostering households.

### **Foster Carer Survey**

This submission will provide a summary of findings from an online survey that MJF conducted through FosterTalk's members. The survey was intended as a quick response and aimed to explore issues relating to mental health in foster care. The survey was opened for one week from May 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 29<sup>th</sup>. It was completed by a total of 406 participants. Participants were recruited through an email to the FosterTalk membership that outlined the survey's aim to explore the issue of mental health in foster care. Consent was obtained through the terms and conditions of the FosterTalk membership. It was an anonymous online survey and it was open to the members discretion if they wanted to participate and there were no incentives offered for respondents. We used Google forms to collect data and Google sheets to collate the data. The survey included a combination of closed questions, Likert scaled questions and open questions for the opportunity to provide additional

comments. The main findings from this survey are outlined below and this is followed by a section highlighting considerations for policy and practice.

### **Context mental health and UK foster care**

In a time where a pandemic has cut short so many lives and affected the social and economic wellbeing of many more, it is understandable that people's mental health is being impacted upon. [Kousoulis et al \(2020\)](#) argue that the mental health impact of this pandemic will last much longer than the impact it has had on the population's physical health. A recent survey from [Young Minds](#) highlighted the impact that the covid 19 pandemic is having on young people's mental health, with 83% of the young people they surveyed who had pre-existing mental health needs reporting challenges and a deterioration in their emotional wellbeing.

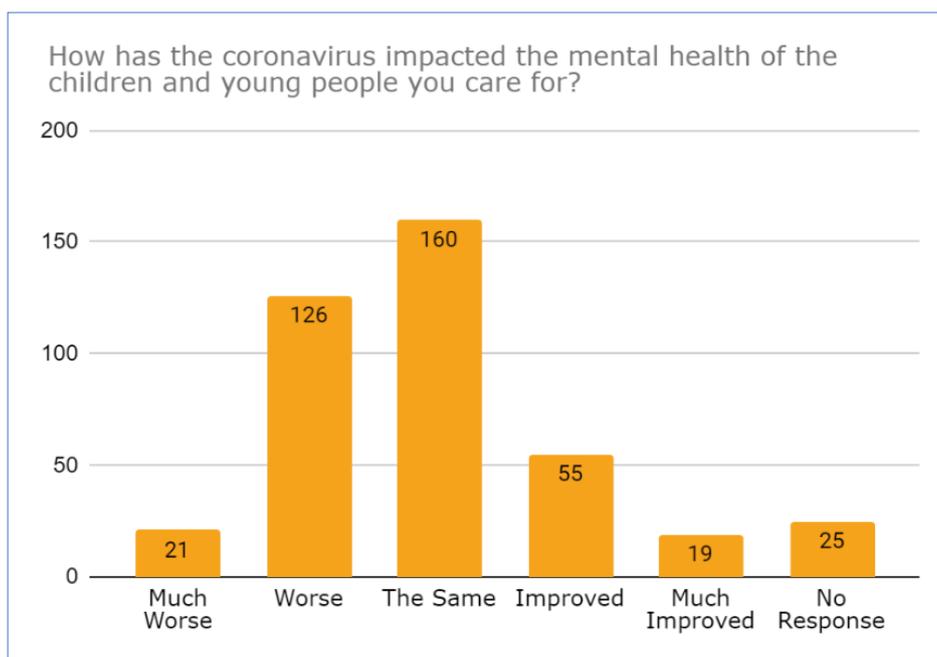
It has been well documented that as a group, children and young people in public care have poorer mental health than the rest of the population. [NHS statistics](#) from 2002 suggest that 45% of children in public care have a mental health condition and that this is compared to 13% of their peers who are not in public care. It is therefore important as we experience a global pandemic and the existential threat it poses to our health and wellbeing to understand the needs of children and young people in public care so we can best support them.

### **1) Survey Findings**

The survey focused on the following key areas; a) Children and young people's mental health, anxiety and Worries; b) Access to mental health support before and during covid; c) The impact of lockdown on children and young people's behaviour; d) The impact of lockdown on the foster carers mental health.

#### **a) Children and Young People's Mental Health, Anxiety and Worries**

- 52.9% (n215) of the carers reported that the children and young people they care for were already experiencing difficulties with their mental health prior to the pandemic.
- Overall, 60.8% (n247) of the carers reported that the children and young people were worried and anxious about the virus.
- Over a third of the carers reported a deterioration in the children and young people's mental health with reports that 36.2% (n147) of children and young people's mental health had deteriorated and was worse or much worse.



The following quotations from three different foster carers highlight how this presents in their households.

- *He had nightmares about monster germs under his bed.... upset over the trivial things.*
- *They are now very clingy can't bear me talking to anyone, even on phone.*
- *The lockdown seems to have stimulated traumatic memories from their past, causing nightmares and periodic low mood/anxiety*

It is also important to highlight that 18% of carers reported the children they cared for were coping well during the crisis and the absence of pressures such as school resulted in happy children with improved mental health.

*Although this has been stressful, it's been great for the kids as they have been home 24/7, no contact and no school... we have been able to therapeutically parent and meet the needs they missed...*

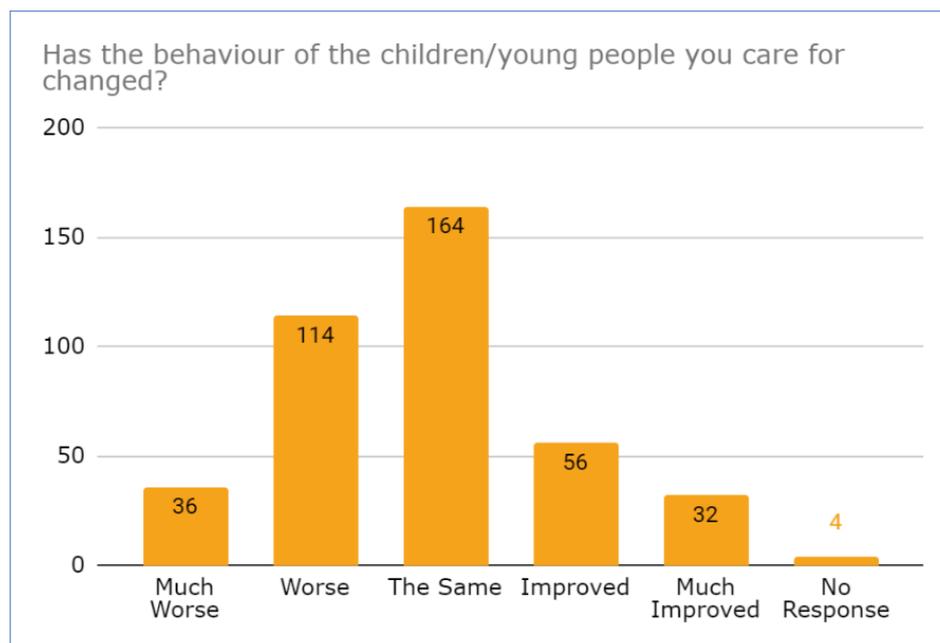
### b) Access to mental health support before and during covid

33.7% (n137) of the carers reported that the children they were caring for were receiving ongoing support for their mental health prior to the crisis. Almost half of these carers, 44.5% (n61) reported that the children and young people's mental health support services were stopped because of the pandemic. Accordingly, there seems to be an almost 50/50 chance as to whether mental health support continued, and this is reflected in the following two quotations.

- *It was difficult to get mental health support before and almost impossible during the outbreak, thank god for our supervising social worker at the agency.*
- *We have had tremendous help and support throughout from his Child Adolescent Mental Health Service worker.*

### c) The impact of lockdown on children and young people's behaviour

Data shows that carers also perceive that the behaviour of the children and young people has become more challenging. 36.9% (n150) of the carers reported that behaviour had become worse or much worse.



The following quotations from two respondents highlight their thoughts on the factors within lockdown that impacted on behaviour.

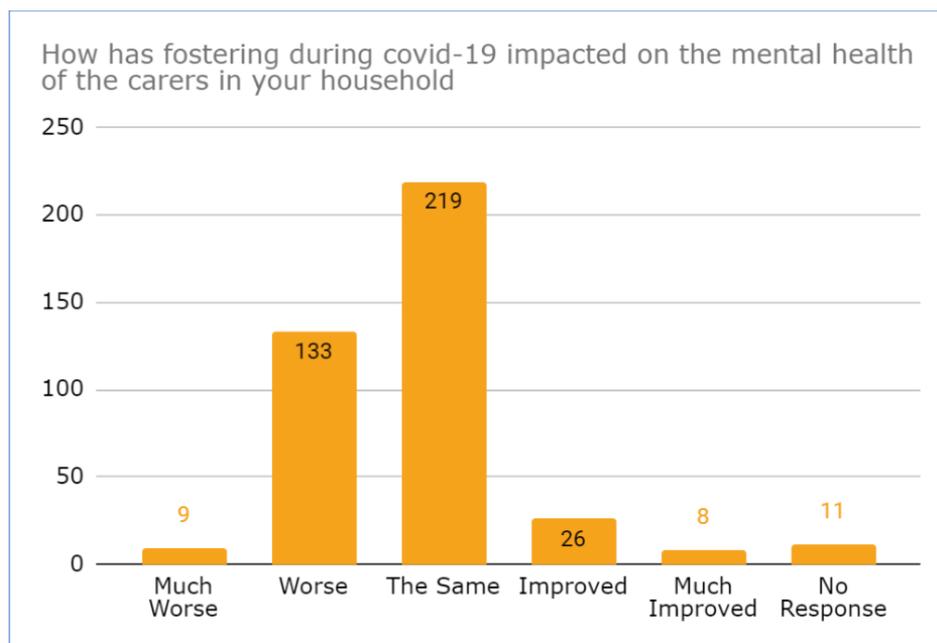
- *The disruption to routine, schooling and separation from friendship groups have been the most destabilising factors for our children, causing some unravelling of developmental progress made since they came into care and thus resulting in some regressive tendencies as regards behaviour.*
- *The behaviour of the child has really had a big impact on not seeing his friends, lack of nursery also lack of social interaction with others has been the biggest concern for him*

It is also important to highlight that 21.6% (n88) of the carers felt there was an improvement in the children and young people's behaviour, reporting behaviour was improved or much improved. The following quotations from carers provides their view on why that is the case.

- *Our young lady was struggling with school, contacts and bullying, with going into lockdown it has given her the chance to find space with no pressure/ anxiety*
- *Being able to work with her one to one with no conflicting outside world helped her put her own thoughts into place.*
- *From carers I have spoken to, it seems that many young people in foster care have felt a relief from the regular pressures of life. Most looked after children seem to have found lockdown very comfortable. There has been an improvement in the bonding of the family unit.*

#### **d) The impact of lockdown on the foster carers mental health**

The majority of the carers (53% n219) reported their mental health was unchanged. However, data reveals that over one third (34.7% n141) of these respondents felt that fostering during the covid-19 crisis has impacted negatively on their mental health.



The following statements form the carers highlight how it has impacted on them.

- *'Looking after my mental & emotional well-being has become incredibly difficult as there is literally no physical or emotional escape from the confines of this lockdown or meeting the increasingly challenging needs of the foster children.'*
- *Looking after three emotional children with no break, no let-up is such hard work.*
- *Having emergency placements, stressed us out at first, waiting 14 days to see if they had the virus or had passed it onto us. Having to kit them out as they came with what they were wearing only. Limited budget and only limited access to shops to meet their needs. Access to funding was slow due to process slowing down.*
- *I wouldn't say my mental health is worse, but I'm more tired. Everything is on edge quite a lot of the time – the way I describe it is like living in a test tube!*
- *I think the focus has been on how are the kids dealing with the situation, not the carers. Carers have worked 24/7 and are expected to homeschool whereas other parents have been told to take it easy. As carers we have felt a lot of pressure and there has not been information directly to carers about carers.*

### **Summary of Key Findings**

We acknowledge this survey is limited in scale and scope. However, these responses from 406 carers offer valuable insights into the unfolding experience of fostering during a global pandemic.

- The findings show 60% of the carers felt that children they looked after were worried and anxious about the virus.
- 36% of the carers felt the mental health of the young people they cared for had been negatively impacted by covid-19 crisis.
- It is important to acknowledge that some carers (21.6% n88) reported an improvement in behaviour and mental health for some children and young people. The open questions suggest this is due to the security of being at home and having time to build relationships without the pressure of school and contact.
- For children and young people who were receiving mental health support prior to the crisis the carers reported the continuity of provision was erratic, with 45% having their support suspended.
- For the foster carers, a third of them (34.7% n141) reported that the experience of fostering during covid-19 impacted on their mental health.
- The responses to the open questions suggest that for some carers factors such as the intense nature of being in lockdown 24/7 and a reduction in available support such as respite care contributed to their stress levels and this may have impacted on their mental health.

### **Recommendations**

With the mental health impacts of this pandemic likely to outlast the physical health impacts it is important that support services are fit for purpose. Children and young people in public care are vulnerable to mental health challenges so it is vital their needs are considered in covid-19 recovery plans. It is also important that the contribution of foster carers during this pandemic is recognised as they have supported often vulnerable and traumatised children through the most difficult of times. The five recommendations below highlight the need to ensure mental health services for looked after children are built back better and that we care for our foster carers so they are able to provide the best support and care.

**Recommendations**

1. Ensure that children and young people who have experienced disruption to their mental health support can urgently access the help they need (if it is still required).
2. Undertake research to understand the reasons why support services were disrupted and learn the lessons so that we are best prepared in the event of any future lockdowns.
3. With the added stresses of covid-19 there is a need to ensure we build back better and provide comprehensive mental health support to children and young people in care as they are often vulnerable to mental health challenges because of previous experiences of trauma.
4. It is important that fostering services urgently assess the wellbeing of their carers, to identify support needs and make plans for carers to have space for self-care. Carers need to be rested and supported so they can offer the nurturing and supportive care that children who are looked after need.
5. It would be significant if the government considered ways to recognise the contribution foster carers have made to the protection and welfare of our children during this pandemic. For example, the designation of key worker status for foster carers would promote this and also support them in their role

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