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2024 Allegations Impact Report

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FOREWORD

Foreword by Sarah Anderson, Founder FosterWiki

Foster care is currently facing a crisis, with the most recent government statistics revealing a third consecutive year of declining foster carer numbers. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for decisive action to avert further detrimental effects on the children and young people in care.

A major key factor contributing to the crisis is the allegations system, which has far reaching and catastrophic consequences. While prioritising child protection is undeniably essential, it is equally crucial to address the systemic issues within the allegation's framework. Without reform, this system will continue to undermine the integrity of foster care and have devastating consequences for both carers and children.

Over the past decade, approximately 30,000 foster carers have been subjected to a process that lacks external, independent oversight, accountability, or adequate protection for the carers themselves. As a result, this system is vulnerable to misuse and abuse. Intended to safeguard children, it is frequently misused, leading to significant and far-reaching consequences for the foster care system, particularly in terms of recruitment and retention.

We must address the dystopian power that allegations hold over all foster carers, not only those directly affected, one that creates a climate of fear that subtly but profoundly undermines the integrity of the entire fostering system.

Originally meant to protect children, the allegations process is now used by many fostering services to control carers, suppress whistleblowing, and prevent carers from transferring to other agencies. This atmosphere of intimidation drives many foster carers away, and the resulting shortage of dedicated carers puts vulnerable children at even greater risk.

The fostering sector already faces significant challenges in attracting new carers, and a prevailing culture of fear only exacerbates the issue. Traditionally, word of mouth has been a valuable recruitment tool, helping to bring new carers into the system. However, many current carers now actively discourage others, sharing accounts of a system they feel neither respects nor supports them.

Prospective carers hear these negative experiences, leading them to hesitate or withdraw entirely from the process. Moreover, the impact of allegations is felt widely, not only by foster carers themselves but also by birth children, extended family members, and support carers connected to fostering households, both directly and indirectly. These firsthand accounts and the sector's growing reputation problem severely undermine recruitment efforts, as the lived experiences of carers often overshadow the positive messages promoted in recruitment campaigns.

The sector already struggles to attract new carers, and this culture of fear makes the situation even worse. Traditionally, word-of-mouth has been a powerful recruitment tool in fostering. However, as carers now actively discourage others, describing a system that fails to respect or support them, potential carers hear these negative accounts and hesitate. This growing reputation problem directly undermines recruitment efforts, as the firsthand experiences of carers overshadow any positive messaging in recruitment campaigns.

In response to the recruitment crisis, the new government has pledged additional millions to foster carer recruitment, building on the approximately £36 million allocated by the previous government. While this investment is welcomed, it fails to address the critical issue of why carers leave the system and the underlying reasons for stagnated recruitment. Government statistics indicate that over 30% of new foster carers are de-registered within 12-18 months, often for the same reasons outlined in this report. If these root causes are not addressed, we risk becoming trapped in a cycle of failure.

Many might say "Why haven't we heard about these issues before?" Media narratives often highlight the rewards of fostering while avoiding systemic problems, typically presenting perspectives of carers selected by fostering agencies or charities rather than independent voices. Consequently, the struggles of the broader fostering community go unspoken, as carers fear the repercussions of speaking out. The allegations system provides a powerful deterrent to open discussion about the system's flaws.

Comparisons have been drawn by many to the Post Office scandal, with many warning that only when the full scale of these issues is finally revealed will we understand the systemic failures and the need for substantial reform. If the system were healthy, the silence of carers might not seem problematic. But as the sector faces a crisis from years of neglect, the need for reform is urgent. Despite significant recruitment spending, the foster carer population has barely grown, falling far short of the Social Market Foundation's estimated 25,000 additional carers needed. More troubling, the outcomes for children in care remain poor and show little improvement.

The foster care system is at a crossroads, and meaningful reform is essential. Listening to and respecting the carer's voice is crucial to rebuilding trust and stability. By focusing on retaining experienced carers and fostering a culture of respect, the government and fostering agencies have an opportunity to create a system where carers and children alike can thrive. Only through genuine reform can the foster care sector provide the nurturing homes every child deserves.

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INTRODUCTION

When examining the impact of allegations within the foster care sector, the focus is often limited to the details and handling of individual cases or the preliminary data submitted by local authorities and fostering agencies, often presenting only a surface-level view that may overlook deeper, systemic issues.

This report aims to demonstrate how far-reaching the consequences are of allegations system across the entire fostering system. Allegations are not isolated events; they are a system that ripple through the sector, creating fractures that weaken the foundation of foster care. The effects are profound, affecting not only individual carers but all carers, and ultimately the stability and outcomes for the vulnerable children and young people in our care.

The impact and issues are many, complex and nuanced, and cannot be underestimated or ignored if meaningful, far reaching and permeant change is the genuine goal. We will attempt to address these in this paper.

While recognising the positive aspects of foster caring is important, the sector has traditionally downplayed negative feedback, often attributing it to 'a few unhappy carers.' However, data from the Independent Foster Carer's Survey indicates that this perspective is inaccurate and that concerns are more widespread than previously acknowledged. This issue is particularly evident in the context of allegations, where foster carers are frequently presumed guilty to some extent, even if they have done nothing, leading to a dismissal of their perspectives, concerns, and frustrations as biased or defensive.

However, with approximately 3,000 allegations against foster carers each year, many of whom entered the profession with no prior history of harm and often a strong commitment to child welfare, such presumptions are untenable and warrant a more balanced, evidence-based approach. While we recognise that the Department of Education's primary role is to shape and influence policy rather than culture, it is important to acknowledge that policy plays a crucial role in shaping culture through its interpretation and implementation.

Therefore, we must find a way to ensure that policy decisions positively influence the culture and behavioural patterns of providers. This is essential to addressing the problems with the allegations system, which significantly impact the lives of foster carers, consequently retention, recruitment and ultimately, the lives and outcomes of the children in our care.

To effectively address the issues surrounding allegations in the fostering system, it is essential to tackle the underlying challenges and to honestly recognise and acknowledge the significant overall impact allegations have on the fostering sector. This requires a multifaceted approach, which may include policy reforms, statutory legislation, cultural change, independent oversight mechanisms, and engaging in thorough, transparent consultations with an often-reluctant sector.

There must be a recognition of the existing power imbalances, the potential for policy misuse, and the current lack of oversight and accountability. Without these measures, the system remains vulnerable to unilateral actions by providers, leaving foster carers powerless to influence or challenge decisions that directly impact their lives and the children in their care.

Some may contend that it is more acceptable to risk the attrition of foster carers than to scrutinise these issues. However, this perspective is part of the problem and neglects the critical role foster carers play in the system; without their involvement, the inquiries into these recommendations become moot.

The pervasive and often obscured ramifications of the allegations system are exerting a profoundly detrimental impact on the viability of foster care, ultimately jeopardising the welfare of the very children it is designed to protect. We have an equal responsibility to prevent the misuse of child protection principles as we do to uphold them. Child protection is of paramount importance, yet the current use of the allegations system for a wide range of issues dilutes its primary purpose, the genuine protection of children.

It is evident that superficial modifications or 'tweaks' to existing policies will not address the underlying issues, which extend well beyond concerns such as 'timescales,' 'carer support,' or 'remuneration during allegations.'

Moreover, despite these systemic challenges, a significant proportion of agencies and local authorities receive ratings of 'outstanding' or 'good' from Ofsted. This situation compels us to critically assess the true state of the system and question the validity of these assessments, which can then function as a mechanism to shield these agencies from necessary change or accountability for the serious issues that often remain concealed from public view.

The broader, largely unaddressed and more urgent issue at hand is the systemic use of the allegations process, which effectively controls and maintains the foster care workforce within a climate of fear. This report examines the extensive and far-reaching consequences of this dynamic.

"Such a significant number of allegations are unfounded or unsubstantiated, often driven by inappropriate agendas. These prolonged investigations, based on false reports, consume valuable time, resources, and funding. As a result, the focus on genuine cases of harm may be compromised. The critical question is how many children in real danger are being overlooked while the system is occupied with addressing unfounded claims?"
[Allegations case worker]

"With no independent oversight or accountability fostering can feel like the proverbial 'wild west', where anything goes, and often does. The problem is these days that word gets around so quickly, we have been trying to encourage more fellow professionals to use their transferable skills to foster, however being used to professional settings and environments they take one look at fostering and run for the hills, not because of the children, but because of the system, allegations, the culture, and the narrative of being a 'foster carer'.

There are solutions, but it needs a bold new directive, driven at the governmental level."

[Foster carer, previously in NHS child and adolescent mental health.]

"Alarmingly, a large percentage of these allegations have nothing to do with actual harm to a child and we have uncovered widespread abuse of the system. Allegations are weaponised to silence carers, remove them, settle personal vendettas, conceal poor practices, or retaliate against those who speak out about children being mistreated. This unchecked power, with no accountability or oversight, is being misused far beyond what anyone could have imagined. We aren't exaggerating when we say this is the next Post Office-style scandal."

[Foster carer, 22yrs experience]

Please note: Foster carers' feedback from the 2024 Independent Foster Carers' Survey has been included to provide authenticity. While we have highlighted select comments, there are approximately 50 responses available for each question within the survey, with an additional 450-600 comments per question accessible upon request.

We acknowledge that the survey encompasses foster carers from across all four nations of the UK, as well as from both Local Authorities (LA) and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). However, the responses from foster carers have been found to be relatively consistent across these groups.

I. Foster carers unjustly penalised

The current system places foster carers in an untenable position where they can never be truly exonerated. The outcomes of investigations into allegations are limited to three possibilities: guilty, unsubstantiated, or unfounded. Notably absent are options for 'not guilty,' 'false,' or 'malicious' claims.

Moreover, these allegations, regardless of their validity, remain permanently on a foster carer's record, perpetuating a "no smoke without fire" stigma. This can significantly hinder their ability to transfer to another agency and affect their work in other sectors, damaging lives.

Even when no further action is taken, foster carers are often subjected to additional training or changes in their approval status, despite being innocent of any wrongdoing. They may also be required to undergo a review by a panel six months later to reassess their suitability, regardless of the baselessness of the original allegation.

This whole approach unfairly penalises foster carers, they can never be innocent of the allegations once the process is initiated regardless of whether the allegations are baseless or completely false.

The process foster carers face often resembles a 'guilty until proven guilty' scenario. From the outset, they are treated as though the allegations against them are presumed valid, placing them in a position where they must struggle to prove their innocence, rather than being given a fair and impartial opportunity to defend themselves.

Foster carers lack the opportunity to defend themselves, present factual evidence, or challenge the reports generated against them. Typically, a one-sided report is compiled for the panel by the individuals making the allegations, and the foster carer may be fortunate to have even a single document containing their evidence or rebuttals appended to the back of this report; all too often, such evidence is excluded entirely.

Foster carers, if not initially aware, quickly come to understand that in the event of an allegation, they hold little power and risk losing everything, most painfully, the children in their care. This awareness permeates the fostering community, creating a pervasive climate of fear that extends beyond individual allegations to a continual dread of them. Such a climate suppresses the voices of carers, creating a controlled and silenced workforce that ultimately undermines retention, hampers recruitment, and adversely impacts outcomes for children.

2. The Impact of the Allegations System on Children in Care

The allegations system exerts a profound and pervasive influence on children and young people in care, shaping both their immediate experiences and long-term outcomes. This report will examine in detail how the effects of allegations impact the entirety of the foster care system, creating repercussions that ultimately affect the well-being of children. Many children in care experience instability as a result of being repeatedly relocated within the system, which contributes to the persistently poor outcomes they often face upon leaving care.

The effects of the allegations system on children in care can be both direct and indirect. While child protection and safeguarding are essential, evidence shows that children sometimes suffer as a result of the allegations process, especially in cases where allegations are unfounded or reflect a misuse of the system rather than genuine safeguarding concerns. When this occurs, children may face disruptive consequences, including being removed from long-term placements with foster families they have bonded with, often losing contact with individuals they consider family members.

Beyond direct disruptions, the allegations system also has an indirect impact by creating a climate of fear among foster carers. This environment can hinder carers' ability to fully support and advocate for children, limiting their capacity to act as effective champions for the young people in their care.

"It is highly important that when considering the impact of Allegations and Standard of Care Investigations that we consider how this affects the children and young people in care.

In cases where the allegations system is misused, the consequences for children in care can be particularly severe. Children are sometimes moved from stable, long-term placements due to allegations that are ultimately unfounded. Misuse of the system can occur for various reasons, including when carers raise legitimate complaints, attempt to transfer to a different agency, or engage in whistleblowing. Additionally, some agencies or authorities may use allegations to justify moving children to less costly placements or to retain control over placements, regardless of the child's best interests.

These types of "manufactured" allegations disrupt children's lives, removing them from secure and trusted environments where they have developed strong emotional bonds. As a result, children are used as pawns within a system meant to protect them, suffering emotional and psychological harm as they are relocated without clear justification. This misuse not only destabilises the children's experience in care but also erodes trust in the system, creating an environment that values administrative or financial priorities over the well-being of vulnerable young people, and uses the allegation system as a vehicle to do this.

Those children who are making these statements to other professionals that lead to these enquiries, in many instances the Children and Young Persons in the care system make these claims unaware of the reality of how this could affect them, and their ability to remain with Foster Carers where they have built really sound attachments.

These comments can be said in moments of retaliation or anger and in the heat of the moment, and, are to them, often more of a passing comment but are then taken out of context by the professionals around the child leading to more serious situations. The consequence of this often ends up with the child/children in care being removed from the Foster Carer, completely against the children's wishes and frequently without the opportunity to say goodbye to their Foster Carers, who are to all intents and purposes family, and whilst all children must be listened to and child protection is so important, all children in non-care settings will frequently say the kind of thing that leads to allegations against foster carers.

This action can cause untold emotional harm to the child who again has a feeling of abandonment and isolation which they may well have experienced on a number of occasions in the past and adds to existing trauma.

In addition, without having further contact the Foster Carers are unaware of what the child is being told leaving the child confused, bitter and angry. Whilst this is not always the case, it is vitally important to listen to the voice of the child or its advocate in these instances and ensure that thorough independent and evidenced investigations are conducted with the wishes of the child at its core."

[Chris Offler, Senior Case Manager, National Union of Professional Foster Carers']

3. Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)

Whilst we do not believe unfounded allegations should be retained on a foster carer's record, similarly they should not be reported to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). Every year, thousands of well-intentioned individuals, many of whom are parents or professionals already working with children, come forward to become foster carers. However, in an instant, these individuals, who have led lives without any prior issues, can find themselves the subject of an allegation.

Even if the allegation is unfounded, it remains on their record indefinitely and is now, more often than not, reported to the DBS, potentially damaging their reputation and future opportunities.

This practice is unjust and has needlessly ruined the lives of many individuals who simply stepped up to make a positive difference. We must recognise that the rise of social media, WhatsApp, and other forms of viral communication can quickly spread information, deterring individuals, particularly those from professional backgrounds with valuable transferable skills, from pursuing foster care roles. This has a detrimental impact on both the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

4. Data supplied by local authorities and agencies

The data provided by local authorities and agencies does not, in our experience, accurately reflect the underlying reality. According to government statistics, 65% of allegations involve claims of 'harm to a child.'

It is important to note that these allegations originate from social workers reporting what a child has said rather than directly from the children themselves, asserting that harm has occurred without substantial evidence beyond 'what a child said to me'.

The 2024 FosterWiki Independent Foster Carer's Survey revealed that nearly half of respondents reported that their fostering providers either do not comply with the law and national minimum standards or only do so inconsistently. This raises serious concerns about the reliability of allegations made by these providers. If 50% of fostering providers, and those within their organisations, operate with a disregard for legal and regulatory frameworks, it is reasonable to question the validity and integrity of allegations made and of the data put forward.

There is no independent psychological assessment of the child, no independent witnesses and the accounts provided are often inconsistent, with details of the alleged incidents frequently changing. The reliance on unverified allegations, which may sometimes be driven by personal grievances, retaliation, or agendas to silence or remove foster carers, is significant and for obvious reasons will not appear in the allegation data supplied by local authorities and agencies.

We want to emphasise that we are not suggesting that children's statements should be disregarded or that child protection efforts should be diminished in any way. However, we must consider what may be overlooked amidst the noise of false allegations, and how many genuine cases of harm might be missed as a result.

Whilst child protection is of utmost importance, it is equally critical to address the misuse of allegations and misleading data to ensure that children who have genuinely been harmed receive the protection they need.

While there is certainly a great deal of good practice in the field, it is concerning to note the frequency of substandard practices when it comes to allegations against foster carers. This issue appears to be largely due to a lack of independent oversight and accountability, which allows poor practices to persist without question or consequence.

Although the issue is undeniably complex, the solutions do not have to be. However, any reforms must be approached with honesty, transparency, and rigour to achieve meaningful improvements.

5. Reducing Avoidable Allegations and Standards of Care Investigations

Many allegations and Standards of Care (SOC) investigations could be avoided. A significant issue within the current system is that numerous allegations and investigations stem from substandard practices, insufficient knowledge, and a lack of understanding of the National Minimum Standards and statutory regulations governing the role of foster carers.

This highlights a broader issue of inadequate or incomplete education and training for both new and experienced foster carers. When surveyed about their awareness of the National Minimum Standards and statutory regulations, many foster carers expressed similar concerns. It raises the question: how can we expect foster carers to meet required standards when they are not adequately informed about what those standards are?

"We have never been given any information on national minimal standards or fostering regulations.

Presumably, we should have access to this."

[Foster carer]

"Not sure what the minimum Standards are"

[Foster carer]

"I'm relatively new so don't understand everything yet, but in my experience so far things are not as thorough as they should be which is concerning."

[Foster carer]

6. Support Concerns

Support for foster carers facing allegations is a complex and far-reaching issue, it is also not a new issue. A key underlying concern for foster carers is that they are classified as self-employed, a status that is unique when compared to others in children's services. However, unlike self-employed individuals in other professions, foster carers are subjected to disciplinary procedures, and they do so in a 'self-employed' context, without the employment law protections afforded others who are subject to disciplinary procedures. Without these protections, foster carers are placed in a precarious position where disciplinary hearing.

Without these protections, foster carers are placed in a precarious position where disciplinary hearings and investigations can resemble a 'kangaroo court.' The absence of a 'not guilty' outcome in these proceedings often results in a situation where foster carers are considered 'guilty', even when they have done nothing wrong.

Foster carer support organisations: Their role in the context of allegations

Foster carers who face disciplinary actions find themselves in a situation where they have no real power to challenge the process, regardless of its fairness or accuracy. Even when there is incorrect or insufficient evidence, the process often feels predetermined, with the outcome already decided. Efforts to challenge or present counterevidence are frequently met with additional allegations to ensure the original claim sticks.

This process is not only disempowering but leaves foster carers feeling angry, powerless, and victimised. It creates a sense of control and oppression, rather than support, which ultimately harms both the carers and the children in their care.

This problem is further aggravated by the nature of the support provided to foster carers during allegations. According to the National Minimum Standards 22.12, this support is supposed to be 'independent of the fostering service.' However, in practice, it rarely is.

It is important to recognise that the primary support organisations contracted by fostering providers are not truly independent. Their contractual obligations to the provider create a conflict of interest, undermining their ability to offer impartial and unbiased support to foster carers. This lack of independent support further compromises the fairness and integrity of the process for those facing allegations.

Issues with FosterTalk and Fostering Network

- **Lack of Independence:** Both FosterTalk and Fostering Network are contracted by fostering providers and are therefore obligated to adhere to these contracts. This relationship inherently limits their independence and ability to advocate effectively for foster carers.

- **Limitations in Representation:** These organisations do not offer full representation for foster carers. Their scope of work does not include defending foster carers, conducting thorough casework, collating facts and evidence, challenging inaccurate reports, or presenting an independent case to panels.
- **Support Worker Constraints:** Support workers within these organisations are often social workers funded by the providers, limiting their role to that of a Mackenzie Friend. They are unable to speak on behalf of foster carers during meetings or challenge any decisions or processes.
- These organisations position themselves as mediators, claiming they 'don't take sides' and instead provide emotional support to foster carers during allegations. However, this role is inherently flawed. At this stage, foster carers are not participating in a mediation process; they are responding to disciplinary action and attempting to defend themselves. However, they are often left in a position where they cannot effectively advocate for their own case. The imbalance of power and lack of proper representation leaves them vulnerable, as they face a system that does not allow them to fully present their side or challenge the accusations in a meaningful way.
- These organisations that focus on 'taking foster carers through the process' and offering 'emotional' support may inadvertently perpetuate a system that disempowers carers. In cases where carers face allegations they strongly contest, this 'emotional support' becomes insufficient and even counterproductive. What foster carers require is robust advocacy and a fair, transparent process, not simply coping mechanisms because of what they are being subjected to and having to navigate an unjust system.

Moreover, the need for emotional support highlights a more systemic issue: why should foster carers require such support when the distress stems from the actions of their own employer? The issue is not only the allegations themselves but also how these allegations are handled. The process, often marked by a lack of fairness and accountability, exacerbates feelings of powerlessness and frustration, creating an environment that many foster carers find dystopian and fundamentally unjust.

"It is not unusual to find that local authorities and agencies are quite happy to use random people from support agencies but when the union want to get involved with their member workers cases there are questions as to why. Compulsory Training must be given to registered managers and heads of service so that they are informed that a trade union can legally get involved in its members work problems and that the Fostering National Minimum Standards allows for this, to prevent the union having to take these organisations before a Judge to explain this to them at great expense to the public purse."

[Robin Findlay, General Secretary, National Union of Professional Foster Carers (NUPFC)]

Fosterline

This service, operated by The Fostering Network and funded by the Government, raises important questions regarding its efficacy. The responses provided by Fosterline are largely consistent with those available through direct communication with The Fostering Network or Foster Talk. Considering that all local authorities are committed to providing support services for their foster carers and typically fund one or the other, it is essential to question the necessity of this service, which appears to duplicate existing resources without adequately addressing the underlying challenges faced by foster carers.

"LA gives no options, and expected to use Foster Talk, which they pay for and are not independent."

[Foster carer]

"The only choice they gave us was the fostering network."

[Foster carer]

"I wouldn't trust a paid-for-LA support service."

[Foster carer]

"We have the Fostering network that isn't independent."

[Foster carer]

"They want you to use someone they pay. How can you expect to be represented impartially? Not exactly going to bite the hand that feeds them are they."

[Foster carer]

"We joined the union and although we have membership of the foster network, I would not approach them as paid for by LA so not independent at all."

[Foster carer]

"It's not support and don't feel it would cover me in the event of an allegation."

[Foster carer]

Access to union representation

Only 16% of foster carers in the Independent Foster Carers Survey stated that they had been informed of their choice to join their own union.

It is important to note here that foster carers do now have access to the kind of representation taken for granted by others in children's services and beyond, in the form of their own certified union. The survey found providers continue to give foster carers the impression they have to use the support services contracted by the provider.

In some cases, foster carers are actively discouraged or even threatened when they seek support from their union, often being told it's 'not allowed'. Those who do raise the issue frequently face intimidation and victimisation. Ironically, the very individuals who enforce these actions often have full access to their own unions during disciplinary hearings and would expect no less. This raises the question of why they would deny foster carers the same protections they readily expect for themselves.

"The head of the agency stated that there is no need to join the Union as Fostering Network provided everything we need in the event of an allegation." [Foster carer]

"We have access to the union but would not feel happy using it, wouldn't trust that we wouldn't be penalised for it." [Foster carer]

"We stopped talking about the union, it got a very frosty response from fostering. I have not been able to join as I had to be careful, and they would have been suspicious asking for my file to get the needed paperwork to join." [Foster carer]

"We have a foster carers association run by the carers themselves, but the committee is not approachable. They have also breached confidentiality, and I wouldn't turn to most of them for help." [Foster carer]

"Foster carers need access to 'trusted' and independent support. I don't trust The Fostering Network (my provider's chosen support). I want to choose my own support."

[Foster carer]

"Our LA does not recognise the union." [Foster carer]

"The union is not spoken about, and other foster carers are fearful to talk about it one Foster Care Association chair said it is not appropriate to have a union." [Foster carer]

"Joining the union, it was the best thing I did. I wish I was with them when I was being bullied and not fostering network." [Foster carer]

"We recently joined NUPFC. I asked my agency for our fostering agreement as needed it to join and it took them 6 months to give me an updated one." [Foster carer]

"I know the union exists because of FosterWiki." [Foster carer]

"I am a member of NUPFC. I sourced myself." [Foster carer]

"I have asked the IFA to promote the NUPFC but they have done nothing." [Foster carer]

"I have had to seek my own support." [Foster carer]

* Comments from The Independent Foster Carer's Survey 2024

7. Fostering Panel

The 2017 independent review of the fostering system by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers recommended that the government assess the effectiveness, cost, and value of fostering panels.

Despite this, fostering panels remain deeply entrenched within the sector.

"A thorough assessment and consultation with the sector and with carers about the effectiveness, cost, and value for money of fostering panels and we urge the Department for Education to commission such an assessment." [Sir Martin Narey/Mark Owers 2017]

To strengthen safeguarding and integrity in the foster care system, it is essential to critically evaluate the efficacy and objectivity of fostering panels, as well as to address inherent conflicts of interest within current practices. Despite assertions of independence, fostering panels are neither impartial nor free from bias, as panel members are selected, compensated, and ultimately controlled by the fostering service or agency that they serve.

Fostering panels are directly involved in reviewing allegations against foster carers, with final reports submitted to them by the fostering provider, the same entity often responsible for raising the allegations. While foster carers may submit a brief written response, it is uncertain whether this is even included with the official report, let alone examined thoroughly. The fostering provider's recommendations are typically established before the panel meeting, and panels rarely diverge from these predetermined conclusions.

Panel members often have no prior knowledge of the foster carer in question yet are asked to reach a decision within a short session, typically around 45 minutes, based almost exclusively on the report submitted by those with whom they are professionally affiliated. In the rare instance that a panel reaches an alternative conclusion, its determination is simply a 'recommendation' forwarded to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The ADM, typically closely aligned with the team making the allegations, frequently overrides the panel's input, rendering its role largely symbolic.

The impartiality of panel decisions is further compromised by a tendency to uncritically accept social workers' perspectives as definitive. Sometimes panel members are equated to a 'jury', however, unlike a jury in a court of law, panel members lack both the legal training and the accountability necessary for such high-stakes decisions, a practice that risks poor decision making and worsens systemic shortcomings.

To improve outcomes for both children and foster carers, fostering panels must be replaced with more rigorous, transparent structures that ensure independence and accountability.

Without these reforms, the foster care sector will continue to face challenges in recruitment, retention, and the overall well-being of children in care.

8. Complaints Procedures

It is frequently suggested that foster carers dissatisfied with outcomes or decisions have access to a formal complaints' procedure. These come in the form of the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM), internal complaints procedures and the Ombudsman.

Moreover, the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is operated by CoramBAAF on behalf of the government. CoramBAAF, a membership organisation for local authorities and independent fostering agencies, oversees the IRM through Coram Children's Legal Centre, which advocates for children's rights in the UK. This arrangement raises questions about the IRM's independence and potential conflicts of interest.

The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) has consistently proven to be ineffective, rarely deviating from social workers' reports or panel decisions. Even in cases where the IRM does challenge the outcome, its recommendations hold little weight, as the final decision ultimately rests with back with the agency's own decision maker, rendering the IRM largely powerless.

Internal complaints are equally ineffectual. Firstly, many foster carers are acutely aware that filing an internal complaint often triggers the risk of an allegation being made against them, rather than receiving a constructive response or any acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the fostering provider.

Secondly, there are numerous accounts of carers enduring complaints procedures that span years, during which they encounter repeated delays, dismissals, and minimal recognition of any fault. Even when there is some acknowledgment of wrongdoings, it is typically framed in a way that ensures no real accountability for the fostering provider or its staff, often reduced to vague statements such as "lessons have been learned going forward."

The internal complaints process is largely ineffective for foster carers, primarily because it involves the fostering service investigating itself. The Ombudsman, in most instances, tends to side with the local authority or agency, accepting their accounts over those of foster carers and failing to recognise the potential for fabrication. Even when the Ombudsman upholds a complaint, there are rarely meaningful consequences for the fostering provider, leaving the system largely unchanged and fostering carers with little recourse.

"Investigatory power must be totally independent of the agency. Current processes of redress are completely unfit for purpose - complaints processes are controlled by the council including 'pseudo-independent' stage 2 and 3 ('independent' investigator is selected and paid by council).

Ombudsman rejects 80% of complaints, even if they have merit. Ofsted does not investigate individual cases. Complainants can only go to court (if they can afford it) after completing all these processes which can take a long time and are extremely stressful and traumatic.

There is absolutely no support for this trauma. Support must be genuinely independent, and legal cover for civil claims against providers for abusing power must be provided by The Fostering Network, FosterTalk and Fosterline etc.

The child's 'right to personal information' must not be abused by providers to withhold information, cover up failings, or curtail carers human rights to fairness, and freedom from inhuman treatment or discrimination."

[Foster carer and Senior Paediatrician, Safeguarding and Child Protection lead]

9. Surveys and Foster Carer Engagement

The current allegations process and the pervasive climate of fear it facilitates significantly inhibit foster carers from providing candid responses in in-house surveys or those administered by third-party organisations affiliated with and contracted by their agencies or local authorities. Foster carers often perceive these surveys as being aligned with organisational interests rather than genuinely reflective of their experiences or concerns.

While many in-house surveys are labelled as 'anonymous', foster carers frequently doubt the validity of this claim. Surveys are typically distributed and returned via personal email accounts, and there is a prevalent belief among carers that responses, particularly critical ones, are neither private nor impartial. This scepticism is reinforced by feedback they receive in supervision sessions, where it becomes evident that their responses, if not favourable, have been 'noted'. In many cases, these surveys do not even make an effort to assure respondents of anonymity, further eroding trust.

The consequences of this mistrust are profound. Local authorities and agencies often perpetuate a narrative of contentment among foster carers through their surveys, a perception further compounded by Ofsted ratings that frequently overlook foster carers' input. When foster carers are consulted, they are often a selective group, leading to a misleadingly positive view.

As a result, many foster carers feel too intimidated to voice concerns regarding inadequate support or poor practices, even in feedback forms associated with training sessions. These forms are often completed on-site, in the presence of those delivering the training, or similarly tracked through email, again diminishing the likelihood of honest responses and constructive feedback.

In contrast, the FosterWiki Independent Foster Carers' Survey, conducted without access to carers' emails and despite most local authorities and agencies declining to share it, revealed a vastly different perspective. With 2,500 respondents and over 14,500 written responses, this survey captured a more accurate and unfiltered view of the foster care landscape. It provided a platform for thousands of foster carers, previously hesitant to share their experiences, to speak openly and constructively. The high level of engagement underscores the need for surveys that foster carers perceive as truly independent, reflecting a trust that is currently lacking in the official feedback mechanisms.

While there are certainly positive aspects within foster care, and we don't seek to minimise those, and positive feedback is as important, the sector has historically shown a tendency to present foster caring in a narrowly favourable light, often minimising or disregarding challenges. To achieve meaningful improvements in foster care, retain and recruit dedicated carers, and enhance outcomes for children, it is essential to recognise these challenges and address them with the seriousness they warrant.

10. The true impact of allegations on the fabric of foster care

The true impact of allegations on foster care should not be underestimated; it extends far beyond the approximately 3,000 foster carers directly affected each year, it affects the entire workforce.

In our Independent Survey of 2500 foster carers, an overwhelming majority (82%) of respondents reported the fear of allegations affects their fostering role in some way.

Foster carers recognise that an allegation made against them could result in significant and immediate consequences, including the loss of their fostering role, the children in their care, the removal of their own children, their livelihoods, and the potential to pursue future employment in any capacity.

What we can see from this is that foster carers are not actually just affected by having an allegation made against them, their everyday fostering lives are affected and influenced by the fear of allegations.

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the broader implications stemming from the current climate of fear within foster care. It explores how the allegations system not only perpetuates this environment but also generates far-reaching negative consequences across the entire foster care sector.

Drawing on data and insights from the 2024 Independent Foster Carers' Survey, this examination highlights the system's pervasive impact on carers, children, and the overall efficacy of foster care provision. For more detailed survey findings, refer to: <https://fosterwiki.com/2024-independent-foster-carers-survey-results/>

- **Impact on advocacy** – 41% of respondents stated that the fear of allegations prevents them from adequately advocating for their children. This fear hinders foster carers from advocating assertively for their children's needs or expressing concerns, potentially compromising the quality of care and support provided to foster children.
- **Lack of confidence in the allegations process** – 85% of respondents do not feel confident that allegations are carried out in a fair, just, and balanced way. The overwhelming perception among foster carers that allegations are handled in an unfair, unjust, or biased manner points to systemic issues that extend beyond policy implementation or procedural inconsistencies. This sentiment reflects deeper concerns regarding the fundamental lack of independence in the process, where social workers appear to exercise unchecked authority, potentially allowing the system to be misused for purposes other than those intended. The limited rights afforded to

foster carers within this framework raise significant ethical questions and call into question the overall integrity and efficacy of the allegations system.

"Too much opinion rather than fact, I takes too long to investigate. If they want to punish you, you are finished." [Foster Carer]

"Never (fair, just, balanced) and the process frequently takes over a year. No support and kept in the dark." [Foster Carer]

"No way. Protect themselves. And keep us in a box." [Foster Carer]

"In my case, I was told that I had nothing to worry about and that everyone at the meeting had agreed I had done nothing wrong. When I received the paperwork... it said that the allegation was substantiated." [Foster Carer]

"Not at all. You don't even get to find out what the allegations are!! Then they turn up at your house mobbanded. Then there is zero proof and zero evidence but it still remains on your record." [Foster Carer]

"After 9 years we had our first allegation and felt gaslighted, undervalued and it nearly destroyed our faith, so we moved back to the agency we started with from the LA. Can't defend ourselves from allegations from unknown persons or comments as social workers hide behind confidentiality, you are kept in the dark right until you're pulled into a meeting." [Foster Carer]

"No written disclosure of the process at the start. No recommendation to speak to union. False claims of support from Fostering Network given by Agency." [Foster Carer]

"No right of appeal against LADO decision. No chance to speak to LADO during an investigation." [Foster Carer]

"Never! Very long process and as carers we are never a priority." [Foster Carer]

- **Compliance with standards** – Nearly half (48%) of respondents reported that their providers do not, or only sometimes, comply with the law and national minimum standards.

This issue is directly correlated with allegations and significantly influences their occurrence in various ways. Non-compliance with statutory regulations and National Minimum Standards (NMS) contributes to the prevalence of allegations. Additionally, the misuse of the allegations system creates a climate of fear among foster carers, deterring them from reporting instances of non-compliance with legal and regulatory standards. As a result, this environment undermines accountability and adherence to established laws and standards.

"They make things up to suit themselves. We live in fear all the time." [Foster Carer]

"It is always the child or young person who is believed, and the foster carer is being punished, I understand that some allegations may be true, but it is a horrible process for those who are innocent." [Foster Carer]

"With an IFA they are just as concerned with their cash flow coming in as well as their carers. Covered up for some and made up for others." [Foster Carer]

"I had an allegation that was unfounded, and I was backed up by the child and his CAMHS therapist at the time, but the LA tried to use this against me years later." [Foster Carer]

"Don't understand why it's basically guilty until proven innocent. Scandalous." [Foster Carer]

"They are harmful and ruin people's life I know many carers who leave after allegations because of the way it was handled and the lack of support given."

[Foster Carer]

"How can it be when it is a one-sided investigation, they decide what their Lado sees hears then they decide what sanctions you must follow. If complaints, the ombudsman and the ability to take the local authorities to court worked we would not have a load of postmaster's lives destroyed. If foster systems were working, we would not have a shortage of foster care. The allegation process is not used to safeguard children, it is used to abuse foster cares and move unprepared teenagers into independent living." [Foster Carer]

"Even though I work for an Ofsted 'Outstanding' authority there are many examples of them not following NMS or stat regs, but there seems to be no oversight, and Ofsted doesn't hear about it." [Foster Carer]

"I constantly have to remind our LA of their statutory obligations from SSW and up the chain of command. I also believe they are failing in not ensuring all their foster carers are aware of what the National Minimum Standards are." [Foster Carer]

"We have never been given any information on national minimal standards or fostering regulations. Presumably, we should have access to this." [Foster Carer]

"Who is meant to ensure compliance with these standards and regulations? And how would we as foster carers go about CHALLENGING any possible non-compliance? Where is there a plain English version of such standards and regulations for ALL stakeholders to see and easily understand?" [Foster Carer]

"Does not adhere to fostering regulations, timescales for supervision or reviews." [Foster Carer]

"Not when it suits them - no supervision notes, no supervision, long gaps between visits. Delayed annual fostering approval so many are not actually approved annually. Only had about 6 annual reviews in 11 years. we have to adhere to NMS when it suits them." [Foster Carer]

"My agency was found not to follow NMS for dealing with allegations and internal investigations." [Foster Carer]

"No, social workers create their own standards." [Foster Carer]

"They only follow when it suits them." [Foster Carer]

"The council is unable to explain clearly and trying to cover their mistakes. I personally feel even senior managers for fostering team and the children's services in the council don't understand fully the NMS and regulations, and/or ignore the NMS and guidelines." [Foster Carer]

"I'm relatively new so don't understand everything yet but in my experience so far things are not as thorough as they should be which is concerning. Social workers have long had their own personal practices and only record what works for them." [Foster Carer]

"They regularly falsify records to look efficient. I have been left with no support whatsoever on a case and dealt with a lot myself." [Foster Carer]

Concerns about professionals – 50% had to report a concern or complaint about professionals within their fostering services in the last year, however 50% of foster carers expressed a desire to raise concerns but felt unable to do so.

This highlights issues with professionalism, competence, or conduct within the fostering system, with a huge part of this data being around allegations. Alarming, one of the most common triggers for such allegations is the act of raising a concern or filing a complaint, whether formal or informal. This situation is deeply problematic for several reasons. Firstly, using allegations as a tool for retaliation, silencing, or punishment constitutes gross misconduct. Secondly, if foster carers are discouraged from addressing issues, reporting poor practices, or advocating for themselves and the children in their care, it raises serious questions about the safety and well-being of those children.

"I am very reluctant to raise issues for fear of retaliation." [Foster Carer]

"Absolutely nothing was done to them, we were dragged into a standards of care meeting." [Foster Carer]

"Made a complaint against a manager she then made my life hell for almost a year by bullying ways lying about what she said and a complaint against me which were all lies and terrible treatment of us unbelievable that this is able to go on." [Foster Carer]

"Yes and I ended up with a false allegation I was able to prove did not happen via data access requests." [Foster Carer]

"Somehow it comes back on us every time." [Foster Carer]

"Fear of repercussions like the last time." [Foster Carer]

"But if you bring a complaint. You will have an allegation or standards of care come against you." [Foster Carer]

"It's scary because you know that if they don't like what you're saying or raising awareness about then you could have a negative review or complaint made about you or the children moved." [Foster Carer]

"I've raised many concerns, and formal complaints. Mostly regards children's services. Would have liked to. Should of but not worth the grief it would cause me or the child." [Foster Carer]

"No point just causes problems for ourselves." [Foster Carer]

"I can't make a concern or complaint because soon after I have previously complained I had a so-called allegation for 18 months. Lesson learnt." [Foster Carer]

"I raised concerns about the behaviour of a CSW and an SSW it turned out to be a nightmare. All of a sudden, there were complaints in our annual report (from 6 months ago) and we had to fight to have these removed." [Foster Carer]

"Fear of repercussions like the last time." [Foster Carer]

"We have been penalised in the past for speaking out, we haven't done it this time." [Foster Carer]

"Service manager bullying and gaslighting." [Foster Carer]

"From experience, carers who do put in complaints then tend to be over scrutinised and feel as if they are under a microscope." [Foster Carer]

"Making a complaint can make you feel like a target for managers on the children's team." [Foster Carer]

"Felt fearful they would take the children or as when I once raised a complaint the relationship with social worker became terrible." [Foster Carer]

"Frankly? David only beat Goliath once in history, that's as polite as I can say it." [Foster Carer]

"I think twice now about raising a concern as the blowback would result in me being bullied by social workers." [Foster Carer]

"Not unable but see no point as concerns of bad practice held against us." [Foster Carer]

"I wouldn't want to for fear of getting standards of care complaint." [Foster Carer]

"When challenged this I was immediately downgraded." [Foster Carer]

"The LA and other agencies don't accept their wrongdoing, professional misconduct and not disclose the documents to the carers with the reason that the carers don't have parental rights. It is very difficult to challenge. Furthermore, even the LA and social workers admit their 'mistakes', nothing happens to them. The SWE also support the social workers and did not consider to suspend them although social workers can suspend a foster carers without an evidence. There is no accountability for the LA, social workers, LADO and they know it." [Foster Carer]

- **Impact on advocacy** – 41% of respondents stated that the fear of allegations prevents them from adequately advocating for their children. This fear hinders foster carers from advocating assertively for their children's needs or expressing concerns, potentially compromising the quality of care and support provided to foster children.

"There are so many things I would like to say to advocate for my young people but whilst I'm not afraid I am reluctant to do it because it's my career and I would not want my integrity destroyed with false allegations."

[Foster Carer]

- **Lack of information** - 80% indicated that they are not always given available information about their child at the start of the placement.

Not only does this lack of communication hinder foster carer's ability to provide tailored and effective care, it is a common source of allegations, allegations that could have been avoided if foster carers were availed with all the information about a child, often allegations are made when placements begin to breakdown, or due to unknown behavioural issues beyond the skill level of the foster carer, also this can result in bad matching, where the foster carers did not have all the information to make an informed choice.

"Often found important information withheld and very often the child arrives before the information."

[Foster Carer]

"We had a placement alongside another young person who was extremely risky to kids this was left out of all discussions and paperwork until it was unfortunately too late, and incidents had occurred." [Foster Carer]

"No, we were not. There generally isn't ever enough background on the children... There are occasions when not all information is shared as it might affect your decisions for talking placements." [Foster Carer]

"We hardly knew anything and the LASW had not shared important info that we later discovered." [Foster Carer]

"Still waiting on reports from over a year ago." [Foster Carer]

"Only information given is what they think will make you take placement. They do not inform you of risks, so you know what dangers to look out for. When it goes wrong it's your fault." [Foster Carer]

"Definitely not. Not told about previous significant violent attacks on carers." [Foster Carer]

"No but then when a new foster carer takes a child for the first time and all these things aren't explained, told what you can/can't have access to." [Foster Carer]

"The placement form is never complete. Sadly, it is a sales pitch usually trying to find a suitable placement." [Foster Carer]

"I was given a child only to find out a week later the child needed inhalers and wasn't told this." [Foster Carer]

"They didn't even get his name or date of birth correct, and virtually no background info." [Foster Carer]

"Always intentionally withheld vital information so more likely to take a child. It's common practice." [Foster Carer]

- **Inadequate care plans** - 54% of respondents stated that their children's care plans are not always sufficiently up-to-date, followed, or effective.

The quality and effectiveness of care planning processes has a direct correlation with allegations, and usually if things go wrong the blame is apportioned to the carers, particularly around delegated authority. When delegated authority is not implemented or updated correctly by the provider and social workers, the lack of communication or support may lead foster carers to make decisions beyond their powers resulting in an allegation or standard of care complaint.

This is another area where allegations could be mitigated through improved and up-to-date Placement Plans and Care Plans. Additionally, foster carers may find themselves facing allegations or investigations into standards of care through no fault of their own.

"Only changed intermittently or if OFSTED are in." [Foster Carer]

"Not sure, never seen them." [Foster Carer]

"We always ensure this is done and will call meetings when needed to be updated of course this is often met with a sour tone." [Foster Carer]

"As a respite carer the "carer to carer" forms are often inadequate to give me a full picture of the child."
[Foster Carer]

"Child been in placement with us since June 23 and no new care plan issued. No medical record books we have requested they be updated but nothing has been done."[Foster Carer]

"Every six months at the LAC reviews we will challenge them if they are behind with anything." [Foster Carer]

"I have found that I need to chase this."[Foster Carer]

"They are up to date, but they aren't effective or followed." [Foster Carer]

"Up to date but never followed." [Foster Carer]

"They currently relate to about 4 placements ago. (the 1st time they moved on)." [Foster Carer]

"His EHCP contains a lot of information from years ago and is supposed to be newly updated but had the wrong ethnicity! Wrong address and no current information about his learning needs at all." [Foster Carer]

"The only current info is the name of the school with no contact info. His mother's mobile number is given as mine! So potentially GDPR/ safeguarding risk as she has threatened to kidnap him from school so was not allowed to know details. But the transport company called her thinking it was me!" [Foster Carer]

"Only some sections are updated the rest are the same every year and don't match what's now." [Foster Carer]

"Has taken months to get the care plans adapted." [Foster Carer]

"Haven't seen one for a while." [Foster Carer]

"Information about who is important to the child is out of date or wrong." [Foster Carer]

"Child's parents' assessment is incomplete & needs to be redone. A big failure with LA & a procession of social workers on long-term sick or leaving. Promises are made but rarely come to fruition." [Foster Carer]

"Current LAC review almost 6 months overdue." [Foster Carer]

"Often timescales are out. Not effective." [Foster Carer]

"Current placement care plan delayed due to CSW not doing the work in time. They are a tick box exercise. Most SW are not well enough trained in report writing." [Foster Carer]

"Child SW changes her mind as she goes along." [Foster Carer]

"No one follows the care plan unless it suits their own agenda." [Foster Carer]

"Been waiting 2 years for care plan because SW keep leaving. No pathway plan, not up to date (2 years old) EHCP." [Foster Carer]

- **Social worker turnover** – 71% of children in foster care had more than one social worker or periods with no social worker allocated in the past year. This turnover can disrupt continuity of care, hinder rapport-building, and undermine the effectiveness of support and interventions provided to foster children. This can result in social workers having limited knowledge of the children under their care and, due to heavy caseloads, often being unable to stay current with the children's information and progress.

If the relationship between the social worker and the child is strained or deteriorates, or if foster carers raise concerns about the level of support provided to the child, there is a high risk that allegations may be used as a primary means of silencing or responding to these concerns.

Many foster carers become aware of this dynamic and may feel powerless to challenge decisions or effectively advocate for their child, ultimately having a negative impact on the well-being of the children in their care.

"Turnover of SW is why too much then they all do and say different things." [Foster Carer]

"Three SWs in six months and two changes of team due to SW shortage." [Foster Carer]

"Period without allocated social worker. Plus 3 changes in social worker." [Foster Carer]

"Happens all the time very disruptive to the child and the carer." [Foster Carer]

"Early 2023 6 SWs in a short space of time." [Foster Carer]

"There is absolutely no continuity for us, or the person supported." [Foster Carer]

"In six years our youngest has had six. he's just now been allocated a new social worker after just beginning to build the trust with him. Everything goes back to square one now building trust." [Foster Carer]

"Our eldest has had seven with the latest since May last year." [Foster Carer]

"They have known 10 SWs in 9 years. 5 CSWs, 5 SSWs all wanting to be their best friend with promises of staying." [Foster Carer]

"During an adoption transition we had 4 in three months. Generally, children over two years never had one longer than 6 months." [Foster Carer]

"4 social workers in 4 years." [Foster Carer]

"Went two years without one, a young child I had in placement had four different ones in the 1st two years." [Foster Carer]

"One of my children is on their 5th social worker within a year." [Foster Carer]

"3 within a year." [Foster Carer]

"This one is funny. There are always changes!" [Foster Carer]

"4 in 1 year, one didn't even make contact or knew who he was when I called them." [Foster Carer]

"3 LASWs & 2 IROs in a year for one of ours." [Foster Carer]

"Children had 6 SW in 1 year." [Foster Carer]

"3 social workers in 7 months." [Foster Carer]

"3 different social workers within the past year." [Foster Carer]

"3 moving on to number 4." [Foster Carer]

"3 children in placement I- has had 3 SW in 2023 2- has had 3 SW in 2023 3- has had 4 SW in 2023." [Foster Carer]

- **Transitions without consideration** - 54% of respondents indicated that children's transitions were orchestrated without regard for the entirety of the fostering household, often neglecting to prioritise the child's needs.

Allegations commonly arise when foster carers challenge processes or raise concerns about transitions, adoptions, or the quality of these transitions, particularly in cases of fostering to adoption. Modern research emphasises the importance of attachment and maintaining lifelong connections for a child's mental health.

One frequent issue occurs when children are moved and completely cut off from foster carers who, for many years, have served as parental figures. In adoption cases, this often happens when adoptive parents initially agree to maintain contact but then seek to sever all ties after the adoption either under the misguided belief that the child needs time to 'settle' or because their own need is to create a new family dynamic without outside influence.

In many such situations, false allegations or standards of care are used by social services to discredit or silence foster carers, facilitating the cessation of all contact between the child and their former carers. This normalised and regular practice creates systemic barriers to

maintaining important connections, which negatively impacts the emotional well-being, future stability, and continuity of support for the child.

Here is the experience of a foster carer from London (name and contact details available):

"We have been foster carers for many years, specialising in fostering children who go on to adoption. Noah came into our lives at just one week old, with a short and tragic backdrop, he spent the first and most formative three years of his life with us, we were in effect his de-facto mummy and daddy.

We dedicated our time to working with Noah to prepare him for his transition to having a new family, we were happy with the knowledge that the children's services we worked for had finally modernised their approach to adoption and embraced the UEA model <https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk>. We were to find out however it was mere lip service. As Noah commenced his adoption journey there were multiple changes in social workers, management and adoption teams. The Family Finders did not consult us once. We advocated hard for Noah knowing none of this was in his best interests.

Then suddenly with no warning, there was an unexpected change in the transition plan. We were not consulted and given the changes we now understood why – we had become too vocal about Noah's needs, wishes and feelings, too outspoken about his rights and our concerns, too forceful in our advocating for him, we had to be stopped.

The new plan implemented was archaic, dystopian and a cliff edge for the child, a sudden severing of his secure base, no longer would Noah have the chance to hug or connect with the people who had bought him up and spent the first three formative years of his life nurturing, loving and holding him.

Four weeks later our suspicions were confirmed when we discovered a series of false information, untruths and standards of care/allegations were threatened, we were being hurriedly silenced once and for all, were discredited and disempowered. As it turns out it was not us who were punished, not us who suffered, it was Noah.

We could not advocate for him for fear of an allegation, and the threat of it affecting our DBS's, we might never work again."

Based on a true story, foster carers remain anonymous, and name changed.

*'Noah's Campaign' - Launched in Parliament in November 2023
<https://fosterwiki.com/prevent-broken-attachments/> [Foster Carer]*

- **Unaddressed mental health needs** - 60% of foster carer respondents reported that children in their care have mental health needs that go unaddressed.

This lack of support profoundly affects placements and the well-being and stability of foster children, as well as on retention and placement stability for foster carers. This area is particularly prone to allegations, as the behavioural challenges stemming from unaddressed mental health needs, coupled with insufficient support and a lack of trauma-informed education for foster carers and fostering providers, create significant risks. Without proper training and understanding of their role, foster carers may handle behavioural incidents in less effective ways, often leading to allegations against them. This highlights a critical gap in both the support systems and the preparation provided to foster carers and fostering services.

Similarly, when a child's trauma is left unaddressed, and the foster carer's own mental health is affected, reaching out for help is more likely to result in allegations and the removal of the child, rather than the provision of needed support.

- **Lack of effective working relationships** - 62% of respondents indicated that they do not always have an effective working relationship with their children's social worker.

This highlights communication barriers, lack of trust, or other challenges in the collaborative efforts between foster carers and social workers, potentially hindering the quality of support and care provided to foster children, it is also another allegation hotspot, specifically if foster carers question the quality of support given to a child by their social worker, or challenges any decision made. In this instance allegations are implemented as a silencing mechanism, also to deflect complaints or raising issues of bad practice.

"I don't get answers from emails etc, and they fail to show up without informing me." [Foster Carer]

"She forgets things, she constantly asks advice of others to do her job, and I am always asking the same things." [Foster Carer]

"We have had some really active social workers for the children but also some that never respond turn up or stick to the agreed things discussed in meetings." [Foster Carer]

"Two different children's social workers. Both are difficult working relationships." [Foster Carer]

"Our current SW is by far the best we've ever had. Sadly, the bar isn't Very high." [Foster Carer]

"No trust due to inaccurate reports." [Foster Carer]

"They only communicate before reviews or when it suits them." [Foster Carer]

"I hardly saw them but when I did all was ok in all but one who was terrible. As long as I do not challenge them or disagree." [Foster Carer]

"She does not know him but says she knows him so well. She does not visit every 6 weeks, more like 8-9 weeks. Told him she would take him out but hasn't. Says she will come to CAMHS appts but never has and then doesn't even let me know why not." [Foster Carer]

"We have had to fight to be treated -what we feel is respectfully-especially when it comes to our home."
[Foster Carer]

"Communication is very poor SW goes off regularly without saying she isn't very quick with doing paperwork or completing actions." [Foster Carer]

"Untrustworthy." [Foster Carer]

"Part-time doesn't cut it for me." [Foster Carer]

"Has only been to my house once since placement started in November 2013." [Foster Carer]

"Unfair biased comments, I do their job in most cases." [Foster Carer]

- **Insufficient out-of-hours support** - 77% of respondents reported that out of hours support for foster carers is insufficient, especially during holidays and weekends.

This lack of support during crucial times can exacerbate stress and strain on foster carers, potentially impacting the quality of care provided to foster children and subsequently leading to allegations.

The support organisations commissioned by fostering services, which foster carers are often told are the only ones available to them, are unavailable during weekends, bank holidays, Christmas, and Easter. This lack of access during critical times leaves carers without essential support when they may need it most. However, it is important to note that many foster carers have expressed a need for more meaningful support, particularly outside of regular working hours. Rather than simply being redirected to the same closed services they work for or to a helpline staffed by individuals lacking relevant experience, carers require access to knowledgeable and responsive support tailored to the challenges they face.

"Terrible. I wouldn't even call them unless it was to put an accident or something on log. Asking for information is futile." [Foster Carer]

"There isn't any support during these times." [Foster Carer]

"Don't always answer the phone. And no one would come out." [Foster Carer]

"They don't know the young person or you as a carer it's hopeless." [Foster Carer]

"Not at all. They often don't answer." [Foster Carer]

"It takes hours to get a response from out of hours only to be told they will email SW in the morning." [Foster Carer]

"Not at all, all you do is call and you get them to record it then nothing!" [Foster Carer]

"Christmas break is extremely hard to get a hold of anyone." [Foster Carer]

"Once a number of years ago contacted out-of-hours SW on Easter Saturday. It was late Monday afternoon before we got any support. We were in crisis. There isn't any support other than talking to someone if and that's a big if they answer in the first place." [Foster Carer]

"We have had calls unanswered in very precarious situations when we have had to call 999 in the face of extreme violence, and the out-of-hours phone not being answered." [Foster Carer]

"Last Easter we had a very challenging time with our child. There was no one who knew him to offer any support or help for days at a time." [Foster Carer]

"One time in an emergency there was no answer." [Foster Carer]

"What support?!!" [Foster Carer]

"Non-existent." [Foster Carer]

"Out-of-hours service is totally not fit for purpose, no help at all, no advice whatsoever, takes ages to respond and then just record your call." [Foster Carer]

"A voice over the phone is appreciated, but the difficulty in getting hands-on support is frustrating." [Foster Carer]

"Last time I rang duty they were 40 miles away! Waste of time other than to tick a box. No help at all." [Foster Carer]

"We have only ever called out of hours once - it was a weekend evening. Spoke to someone who said we'd get a call back. It never came." [Foster Carer]

"We have 24-hour support within (xx) fostering, however, I feel sometimes the SWs on the out-of-hours team lack knowledge in their role." [Foster Carer]

"It's appalling. They forget we are working 24/7 365 days a year and it's the most stressful time that there is no one to speak to. I rang 5 different numbers/people on a weekend and weekdays in the festive period and not one answered." [Foster Carer]

"There is none at all of the hardest times for these children and young people!" [Foster Carer]

"Many times, I've not been able to get in touch with someone when needed." [Foster Carer]

"I don't believe out-of-hours is sufficient at most times!" [Foster Carer]

- **Supervision challenges** - 63% of respondents had more than one supervising social worker in the last two years. A further 30% say they did not receive mandatory 6 weekly supervision sessions, 50% of foster carers did not receive a copy of their supervision notes to sign off, and 33% said it was not easy to openly discuss their fostering role with their social worker.

Inadequate supervision can hinder foster carer's ability to address challenges and access support, potentially impacting the quality of care provided, and equally therefore find themselves with an allegation as a result.

Another crucial factor for foster carers in allegations is if they have no record of their supervision session, or access to those records they are unable to produce the evidence they need to counter allegations.

- **Training and access to information provided before their approval:** 84% did not find the training and access to information provided before their approval to be completely adequate in preparing them for their fostering role. A further 54% of foster carers do not find the training provided to be of a high enough quality or relevance to enhance their effectiveness in their role and provide optimal care.

When we don't educate foster carers in every aspect of their role, we are automatically creating a precarious working environment for them, leaving them vulnerable to allegations and standards of care investigations through no fault of their own.

This is a huge source of allegations and contributor to retention problems. If foster carers are unaware of their role, if they are not educated in the trauma experienced by our children and young people and how to manage it then things will soon go wrong, and inevitably when things go wrong, on any level, the carer will be under investigation, be it an allegation or a standard of care.

"We have never been given any information on national minimal standards or fostering regulations. Presumably, we should have access to this." [Foster Carer]

"Not sure what the minimum Standards are." [Foster Carer]

"Rubbish. I've learnt more off the internet." [Foster Carer]

"Absolutely no training on the complications of working with birth parents." [Foster Carer]

"Lots missing, but the main part that was skipped over was understanding ACEs and our responses to that trauma." [Foster Carer]

"Training did not fully cover emotional intelligence and support structures." [Foster Carer]

"I first joined a fostering company; it was for teenagers. We were trained to a very high standard, but they disbanded so we moved to the LA that was attached to it. That's when our troubles started." [Foster Carer]

"No one said the allegation policy would be used to abuse foster carers. Or every time a teenager disagreed with you that would be an allegation. Or that the panel are allowed to discriminate against someone with disabilities." [Foster Carer]

"Nobody can be fully prepared for fostering regardless of how much training and information is given. Every day is a learning day." [Foster Carer]

"We did not know lots of things we have discovered over the time we have fostered." [Foster Carer]

"Very little training or info beforehand. Didn't hear from the IFA at all throughout the 5 months form F. We then fostered 5 children in respite over the 1st 6 weeks and didn't hear from a SW once in that time." [Foster Carer]

"Reality is very different." [Foster Carer]

"Fed a false story and not given realistic expectations of what to or not to expect. Sold to us and peaches and cream when actually it's the complete opposite." [Foster Carer]

"When I changed to LA, I had been fostering for 13 years but found the skills to foster didn't go into allegations at all, the trainer told me she didn't want to frighten people off." [Foster Carer]

"A lot was beefed up to sound good and not truthful." [Foster Carer]

"Could have been more honest." [Foster Carer]

"I have been better informed using forums etc." [Foster Carer]

"I think the information and training for new carers is diabolical and does not help them face what can happen." [Foster Carer]

"Little choice. The training is very repetitive. Many trainings are cancelled." [Foster Carer]

"It's irrelevant. Boring and very repetitive." [Foster Carer]

"No relevant. Not accredited. Not trauma related." [Foster Carer]

"Sometimes it can be too informal to be useful." [Foster Carer]

"Not always relevant to be honest and very repetitive (same courses now as there were 15 years ago)." [Foster Carer]

"Some training is just ticking a box but does not add to our knowledge." [Foster Carer]

"Often it is the social workers doing the training which is not that good as I am more qualified than them." [Foster Carer]

"There is an issue where training is delivered by someone who is not an expert in that particular field but has instead been trained to deliver a piece of training." [Foster Carer]

"Online or in person. Irrelevant and therefore we don't do it." [Foster Carer]

"Don't have a trainer no bespoke training for fostering." [Foster Carer]

"Some of it is outsourced & designed/delivered by people with no real knowledge of fostering." [Foster Carer]

"We do the training and raise concerns as a result of the training but are shut down/ ignored so it's rather pointless." [Foster Carer]

"More flexibility around the time of delivery is needed." [Foster Carer]

- **Support and Mental Health** - The data indicate 78% of foster carers report that their mental health has suffered because of their fostering role.

Allegations, the fear of them, impact significantly on a foster carer's mental health. With 56% of respondents have chosen not to seek support for their mental health challenges due to fear it could damage their role as a foster carer. This fear of stigma or repercussions underscores the need for de-stigmatising mental health issues within the fostering community and providing safe spaces for foster carers to seek help without judgment or consequences.

The role of a foster carer inherently places individuals at elevated risk for secondary traumatic stress disorder, compassion fatigue, burnout, depression, anxiety, and related mental health challenges. When foster carers, as is often the case, lack the confidence or support to seek help, these issues do not simply dissipate; instead, they persist and potentially worsen.

Consequently, foster carers may find themselves managing the complex needs of traumatised children while grappling with their own unmet mental health needs, an untenable situation that undermines the quality of care provided and fails to support the well-being of carers themselves. This dynamic not only hinders optimal outcomes for children in care but also raises serious concerns regarding the overall sustainability and health of the foster care workforce.

"It's not the children that cause my mental health to suffer, it's the system, and none more so than when I went through an allegation after I stupidly made a complaint about the children's social worker who was failing my child so badly and only bothered to see her once in 6 months. She went for me, and I was completely powerless, the whole thing was affected my mental health so badly, I honestly thought I was going to have a breakdown, I was crying every night, they ganged up on me like a pack and destroyed me, and I consider myself strong.

Well, this is my last child even though I have many years fostering left in me, I'll see them through because I owe them that, then I'm resigning. How can anyone think it's ok to treat another human being like that, and moreover how on earth do they get away with it?" [Local Authority foster carer]

- **Factors Contributing to Foster Carer Resignation and Retention Challenges**

Our survey, consistent with previous findings, revealed that the primary reasons foster carers resign or consider resignation stem from issues with the system rather than challenges with the children in their care. Key factors include feeling undervalued and unrecognised, burnout, lack of respite, and the emotional toll of fostering. Additionally, concerns about inadequate support, negative experiences with fostering services and social workers, and, in some cases, bullying, were prominent.

Foster carers also highlighted financial instability, the precarious nature of their employment, and the associated vulnerabilities as significant issues. The impact of fostering on their birth children and extended families, as well as the emotional strain of severed contact with fostered children, were frequently cited. Further, many expressed dissatisfaction with ineffectual placement and care plans.

Crucially, none of the respondents attributed their decisions to the children or young people in their care, underscoring that the root causes lie within the system, not the children. As detailed throughout this report, allegations touch upon and exacerbate the majority of these concerns.

II. Past Recommendations

To gain a thorough understanding of the present situation, it is essential to reflect on past recommendations, evaluating their influence on policy, procedures, sector culture, and outcomes for children and care leavers. This paper demonstrates that many past recommendations directly relate to the impact of the allegations system, which affects multiple facets of the fostering system.

Allegations, and how they are managed, permeate every level of the sector, making it vital to understand historical efforts in order to avoid repeating mistakes and to examine why so many recommendations have had such limited impact.

This section provides a review of surveys, research, and reports from the past decade, assessing their effectiveness and exploring the reasons why certain recommendations continue to be disregarded. The analysis goes beyond government responses, delving into the entrenched cultural and systemic barriers within the fostering system that impede meaningful change.

Understanding these deeper issues is key to addressing why many recommendations are ignored. Although some recommendations may appear unrelated to the allegations process, there is a clear and direct correlation. Rather than providing an exhaustive list of all recommendations, this review highlights recurring themes that are particularly affected by the allegations system.

Fostering Network State of the Nation 2014

Recommendations:

- Every foster carer is respected as a professional childcare expert, given all the information they need to care for each child properly, fully involved in decision making and empowered to make appropriate day to day decisions concerning the children in their care.
- A cultural shift to ensure foster carers are treated as full members of the team about the child, that information is shared with them, and that they can exercise appropriate day-to-day decision making.

- Poor practice in care planning being addressed, thereby increasing stability, reducing unnecessary placement moves, and ensuring that fostering placements are properly supported.
- Increased emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training, to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care.
- Children's social workers being given manageable caseloads to improve availability and consistency of support for fostered children.
- The turnover of social workers - which is so damaging to both fostered children and foster families - being urgently addressed.

The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers - 2016

[Rees Centre/Oxford University, Researchers: Gillian Plumridge, Judy Sebba]

They acknowledged the National Minimum Standards for Fostering in England set out how foster carers should be treated and supported during investigations into allegations, and that previous research suggested that these standards are not always met. They said their research study was "aimed to explore the impact of unproven allegations on carers in order to improve the way that allegations are dealt with by fostering services, local authorities and the police."

Recommendations:

- Offer foster carers independent support services, making clear what these services can provide.
- Ensure that foster carers complete high-quality training specifically on allegations within six months of approval. This should be regularly repeated covering the situations likely to lead to allegations, the procedure when allegations occur and support for coping with the impact of allegations.
- Ensure that newly qualified social workers are trained in allegations and regularly updated.
- Work with police to ensure that social workers are informed at the same time as foster carers when police investigations have ended.
- Inform foster carers of the procedure, both as soon as an allegation is made and again a short while later, to ensure the procedure is understood.
- Discuss with the carer what support, if any, is needed for children in the carer's family.
- Social work managers must provide cover for key professional roles when they are unavailable.
- Provide a clearer definition of 'allegation' that is consistent within and between fostering providers and distinct from Standards of Care concerns.
- Department for Education: emphasise the need to provide specific allegations training and independent support.
- Ofsted: monitor the extent to which the training and support are being provided.

Fostering Network State of the Nation 2016

Recommendations:

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales.
- Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.
- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.
- The support and training for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- A much higher value must be placed on the relationships a child has throughout their lives, including those with former foster carers, and these relationships must be protected and nurtured.
- Foster carers should always be given all of the available information they need about a child.

Education select committee report 2017

This enquiry had contributions from independent foster carers as well as fostering charities. The committee found it of great concern that foster carers had 'limited protection' and support during allegations and that they "are often completely cut adrift from their service, provided with little information or explanation, and nothing by way of support, despite National Minimum Standards setting out what they are entitled to receive " one foster carer told them he was "hung out to dry."

They raised the issue of whistleblowing and said "the fear of being 'blacklisted' or 'deregistered' was a real and ever-present threat when dealing with the authorities and agencies."

They found the training of foster carers inadequate and sketchy amongst other concerns. A carer who had been through an allegation told them full-time foster carer is 'barely tenable as things currently stand', and that some carers he works with are so 'battered' and 'abused' by the system, so 'incredibly unsupported, neglected and are feeling totally overwhelmed, that they stop fostering'.

The foster carers they heard from suggested that the system in England needs fundamental reform.

One said that "there now needs to be a root and branch look at a change in what we are doing. We have been trying one way for 20 years; it is now time for a change."

Recommendations:

- We recommend that the Government works with experts and organisations in the sector to develop high-quality training resources for foster carers.
- The Government should bring forward legislative proposals to extend the scope of the Public Interest Disclosure Act to cover foster carers, so that they are protected during proceedings or when raising concerns of their own and safeguarded from the consequences of malicious or unfounded accusations.
- We recommend that the Government develops and consults widely, including with foster carers, on proposals for a national college for foster carers. For a college to be truly national and accessible, it should be a virtual association, which works to represent foster carers, share knowledge and resources, and bring greater prestige to the role of foster carers.

The Fostering Stocktake 2018

Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers's independent review of the fostering system in England with recommendations to the government about improving foster care

Recommendations:

- Foster carers are not professionals. But - and this is crucial - they must be treated professionally.
- The key document that deals with reviews of children who are in foster care is inconsistent in promoting the importance of the role of carers and fails to list them as people who must be involved in reviews. The statutory guidance should be changed to ensure the involvement of carers in review meetings is the default position, and that they are only excluded in exceptional circumstances.
- The Department for Education should urgently remind all local authorities that the delegation of total authority for all category one decisions should apply automatically to foster placements unless, for exceptional reasons, such delegation is inappropriate. In those cases, the reasons for the exception must be set out in the child's placement plan.
- A thorough assessment and consultation with the sector and with carers about the effectiveness, cost, and value for money of fostering panels and we urge the Department for Education to commission such an assessment.
- We do not believe that Department for Education guidance on allegations needs to be changed. But local authorities need to be sure that it is followed in all cases. And carers need to be reassured that, however unlikely the prospect of an allegation being made, they can be confident that they'll be supported through the process.

Fostering Network State of the Nation Survey 2019

Recommendations:

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales. Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.

- The foster carer role must be recognised by all those involved in the children's sector as a key member of the team around the child.
- Language is key to reflecting status, and therefore we recommend that the term foster carer is universally acknowledged and used as the correct title that reflects this role.
- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.
- All services should provide a dedicated out of hours fostering support service for carers and ensure access to short break/respite provision as required.
- Peer support opportunities should be enabled and promoted at a local level.
- Foster carers must be given access to independent support throughout the allegation process.
- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers must be enabled to make everyday decisions that mean that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family.
- It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.
- Foster carers should always be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition.
- Guidance should be introduced to ensure that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them.
- Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services whenever needed, and without delay.
- Regardless of current job status, all foster carers should be recognised as equal members of the children's social care workforce and should be treated as co-professionals by others involved in the team around the fostered child. Their terms and conditions should be a reflection of the work that they do, in line with the other recommendations in this report.

The Social Market Foundation, Fostering the Future 2021

[Recruiting and Retaining more Foster Carers, Mathew Oakley, sponsored by the Hadley Trust]

Recommendations:

- A Foster Carers' Charter – including specific and measurable commitments, with nationally agreed minimum standards (NB: There has been a Foster Carer's Charter since 2011 introduced by the Fostering Network, it has been largely ignored and ineffectual)
- A right to access respite care, training and support.

Fostering Network State of the Nation Survey 2021

Recommendations:

- Foster carers must always be given all the appropriate information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe. Information sharing is a prerequisite of good fostering practice.
- Children should be placed with a foster family that they have at the very least, had the opportunity to meet before moving in.
- Governments should introduce information sharing standards for children's placing authorities, to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching. Governments should consult with foster carers about what level of information they feel is appropriate to enable them to care for children.
- The matching process for long-term foster care should be reviewed and clarified.
- When a child moves on from a placement, the former foster carer should have the opportunity to contribute to the referral information to support a smooth transition for the child.
- Foster carers should be empowered and confident to have an ongoing dialogue with social workers about the stability of placements. They should also be confident that action will be taken to avoid placement breakdown following any concerns raised.
- All fostering services should actively engage with, consult and listen to their foster carers to ensure continuous service improvements and the retention of high quality and experienced foster carers.
- Providers should engage with their foster carers to understand what they need to support their mental health and how these needs are going to be met.

NB: This most recent Fostering Network survey provides minimal information or recommendations regarding allegations, despite evidence that the issue has intensified.

Fostering Network: Foster carer retention and recruitment 2023

Recommendations:

Allegations: Commission a 'deep dive' into allegation investigations in foster care including analysis of current policies and processes and how they are working in practice for children and carers.

- Provide more support to foster carers.
- Show appreciation and respect, foster carers want to be invited to 'professional meetings.'
- Act on foster carers' feedback and complaints
- Foster carers wanted better pay and for financial administration to be accurate and treated more professionally.
- Foster carers also felt that retention would be improved if they had inductions, better training and support, professional mentoring and support throughout their time as a foster carer.
- Reduce social worker turnover:

- Provide appropriate support for children:
- Introduce information sharing standards for children’s placing authorities to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching.
- Application and approval process: Review the application and approval process.
- Ensure there is quality, pro-active support for foster families including specialist out of hours and peer support.
- Delegated authority: Actively involve foster carers in decision making about a child in their care

Fostertalk Allegations Survey Report, 2024

Recommendations:

- The support carers should receive is outlined clearly in guidance but from the results appear to not be being applied routinely or consistently within the sector. Fostering providers must ensure this is clearly outlined in their service specific fostering agreement, handbook, policy and procedures. These supportive measures such as receiving ongoing supervision, access to training, understanding of financial support payable, support for wider family members can reduce the stress and impact experienced by the carers and their family during investigations. The impact on the mental health of foster carers is significant and all steps should be taken by fostering services to minimise this.

“I can understand why people commit (sic) suicide having been through this process. It broke me emotionally and mentally... and ended my 18-year career working with children with special needs.” [Foster Carer]

“... I have not only become a full-time carer to my husband because of the stroke and heart attack he had as a direct result of the stress. My mental health has collapsed and I’m no longer sleeping. The anxiety and stress of no income, my husband’s health and the continuing waiting for the police to decide if they even want to speak to me has destroyed my life.” [Foster Carer]

“Everything should be done to limit stress and anxiety placed on carers and their families. Especially if a working relationship is going to work post allegation between the agency and carer.” [Foster Carer]

- Social workers and the designated manager for overseeing the allegation from the fostering service should ensure Independent Support is arranged for carers who want it immediately as they inform the carer about the allegation. We recommend that carers begin to receive this within 3 working days, as they experience high levels of distress upon receiving the news that they are the subject of an allegation. FosterTalk arrange this support within 1 working day of a referral being received into our Allegation Support Team, so the issue in lack of support appears to be the referral being made by services.

- We recommend that inspection bodies monitor this through the mandatory reporting of the schedule of notifiable events, that services already complete as a matter of routine when an allegation is made against a foster carer, with a simple tick box to indicate that independent support has been offered and arranged.
- There should be an agreed minimum payment guaranteed for all foster carers nationwide to receive when they are subject to an allegation investigation where children are removed from them, thus reducing their income, and this should be reported on by fostering services to government departments for monitoring purposes.

“My supervisor and social worker was always too busy and never contacted us to find out how we were never visited during the allegation to see how we were doing” [Foster Carer]

“If something isn’t done about the way allegations are handled, the rate of Foster carers quitting or being de-registered unfairly is going to keep going up. Retention of the carers is most important and the building of relationships between FC and their employers is crucial.” [Foster Carer]

“I have never experienced a lack of lack of human compassion or lack of fairness like this is has been utterly soul destroying.” [Foster Carer]

“...no wonder so many foster carers leave due to this most are unfounded there need to be review and complete new system were the very people who give so much are treated in this way...” [Foster Carer]

12. FosterWiki Analysis

As outlined in the previous section, the past decade has seen a recurring cycle of recommendations from various sources, acutely repetitive they consistently echo the same concerns and proposals. Despite this, meaningful change has not materialised. In fact, many indicators, particularly regarding foster carer retention and recruitment, have worsened.

The sector is facing a crisis, unable to provide the stable, skilled, and nurturing homes needed for children and young people, and current trends suggest that without significant intervention, this situation will only continue to deteriorate.

While many of the recommendations are well-founded, they have repeatedly failed to be meaningfully implemented or enforced. Instead, they are often overlooked, leading too little to no progress. Furthermore, these recommendations frequently address surface-level symptoms rather than tackling the root causes of the systemic issues within the foster care system. As a result, they lack the depth and enforcement necessary to drive lasting, effective change.

None of these recommendations are enforceable, followed or taken any notice of, and due to the current systems, the power in balance, the lack of checks and balances on social work practice, the failings to adherence to policy, standards and regulations due to their being no consequences or anyone to be accountable to, add to that the foster carers lack of any comeback or lack of any rights whatsoever and we can see that we simply cannot just come up with these repeated 'recommendations' year on year.

To ensure children receive the quality of care they deserve and to empower foster carers to advocate effectively on their behalf, it is essential to break the cycle of repeating actions with unchanged expectations. A shift is needed to focus on implementing tangible solutions, rather than repeating the same recommendations for another decade.

13. FosterWiki Solutions

A culture shift

A cultural shift in foster care is essential, as part of a broader, transformative reform effort, and requires substantial work. A narrow focus on allegations training or policy tweaks falls short, and has fallen short, of addressing the deep systemic impact allegations have on every aspect of foster care.

Crucially, a fundamental shift in culture is essential to end the normalisation of using the allegations system to suppress whistleblowing, retaliate against, or silence foster carers who raise concerns. We must move beyond a system that penalises those who speak up about inadequate practices, insufficient support for children and young people, or other critical issues. No longer should the allegations process be a means to sideline or dismiss foster carers who are committed advocates for the wellbeing of those in their care.

We need to move to a fostering system that is kinder, more compassionate and more caring to foster carers. To do so, we need to explicitly rebalance the use of power. Foster carers need to be empowered to be the best carers they can be.

Solution

FosterWiki and Mark Owers, a national fostering expert, have developed a foster carer empowerment model, to be tested with choice local authorities. We are ready to present it to the department at your earliest convenience.

The Education Gap

As illustrated in this report allegations can affect nearly all areas of a foster carer's role and responsibilities, influencing both actions taken and those avoided. To address this, foster carers need a thorough education that equips them to meet the complex needs of vulnerable, traumatised children, while also having a comprehensive understanding the statutory standards and regulations essential to their role. With this foundation, foster carers are better positioned to adhere to these standards, reducing the likelihood of allegations and ensuring high quality, consistent care.

A pathway to an accredited, meaningful foster care qualification that aligns with fostering regulations and national minimum standards is essential. This qualification should emphasise safeguarding and adopt a strengths-based approach to equip foster carers with the confidence, resilience, and knowledge they need, lessening the potential for allegations and standards of care concerns.

There must also be a comprehensive allegations course, but this needs to be practical, from a foster carer's perspective, such as the NFCQ/FosterWiki 'Allegations: From the foster carer's perspective'

that is designed to alleviate that fear and equip carers with the knowledge and tools to navigate the complex landscape of allegations in policy and practice.

Whether it is this course or any other new course, it has to have a focus on practical, real-life applications, essential skills to address allegations confidently and professionally, whilst understanding the emotional impact of allegations and ensuring that foster carers are not left to navigate these waters alone.

Solutions

Allegations: From the Foster Carer's Perspective

To support this shift, FosterWiki, together with NFCQ, has launched *Allegations: From the Foster Carer's Perspective*, a 2024 course designed to equip foster carers with insights and strategies for effectively navigating allegations on the frontline.

The NFCQ with Fosterwiki Allegations Course is meticulously crafted by two organisations recognised and respected for their expertise grounded in extensive frontline practice.

Participants gain a solid understanding of National Minimum Standards and statutory regulations, allowing them to operate within the framework of child protection and safeguarding effectively.

"Cannot emphasise enough how important this course is. We thought the basic training given by our agency would cover all that we needed to know; but in reality, it didn't even scratch the surface. It's probably the most important training you need."

[Foster Carer (name can be supplied)]

The National Foster Carer's Qualifications

The National Foster Carer's Qualification (NFCQ) is an International Teaching and Occupational Learning (iTOL) accredited, purpose-built pathway that equips both new and experienced foster carers with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to excel in their roles. This qualification is specifically designed to support carers in meeting the diverse and evolving needs of children in care, promoting stability, resilience, and positive outcomes.

Through a blend of practical learning and evidence-based training, NFCQ empowers carers to navigate complex challenges, fostering an environment where children feel safe, understood, and supported. The qualification's emphasis on continual learning reflects our commitment to high standards in foster care, ensuring that carers are well-prepared to provide compassionate, informed, and skilled support to the children and young people they serve. <https://nfcq.co.uk>

Reform of the Assessment and Approval Process

A reformed assessment and approval process should establish this robust foundation from the outset. According to government statistics 30% of new recruits are deregistered within 12-18 months, many falling foul of allegations or standards of care that could have been avoided if they had understood their role and all that underpins it. A critical element in this approach is trauma-informed care.

Carers must understand the underlying factors that drive children's behaviours and presentations. With this insight, they can provide stable, nurturing homes that meet each child's needs and reduce the likelihood of allegations.

Solution

The NFCQ Integrated Assessment Process

Modernising systems and reflecting on processes is essential for improving foster care, a field where progress benefits thousands of vulnerable children and young people. The primary challenge today is the shortage of skilled, compassionate foster homes that can meet the rising needs of these children.

In response, NFCQ has developed an innovative, strengths-based foster carer assessment process. This approach is designed not as a one-time task but as a foundation for ongoing learning and growth, enabling carers to provide relational, high-quality care in collaboration with their teams. The NFCQ Integrated Assessment Process (IAP) aims to improve outcomes, ensuring children receive not just stable placements but aspirational, loving homes.

Importantly, NFCQ has reduced assessment timelines from 6–8 months to approximately 8–10 weeks, addressing a critical barrier to recruitment and conversion. <https://nfcq.co.uk/integrated-assessment-process/>

Solution

Address the misuse of the allegations system

The misuse of the current allegations system is systemic, often employed to unjustly remove foster carers. This deeply ingrained culture must be confronted. Surface-level adjustments focused on timeframes or procedural adherence have failed, as shown by our survey findings, which reveal foster carers reporting widespread disregard for National Minimum Standards (NMS) and statutory regulations among many agencies and services.

The core issue is the lack of any independent oversight. Currently, the same agencies responsible for these allegations also hold sole investigatory power, with foster carers left without rights, recourse, or

an independent voice in the process. This unchecked system is vulnerable to misuse, with 78% of allegations found to be unsubstantiated or unfounded (Plumridge and Sebba 2016).

Also important is that the 'outcome' of allegations must be expanded beyond the existing categories of 'founded', 'unsubstantiated' or 'unfounded'. Under the current system, foster carers often bear a lasting stigma, regardless of their innocence, and may face additional training, modified approvals, or repeated panel reviews within six months, even when no wrongdoing is found, there is no resolution that fully clears their record, leaving them under a cloud of implied blame and it staying permanently on their record. This approach is inherently unjust and urgently requires reform.

The delay in informing foster carers of allegations made against them is wholly unacceptable. Foster carers must be promptly and fully informed of any allegations to ensure they have a fair and timely opportunity to respond.

It is equally essential to approach anonymous and unsubstantiated third-party allegations with caution, focusing instead on firsthand, verifiable information. Carers urge that they be interviewed directly to share their perspective, rather than relying solely on second-hand interpretations, rumours, or unverified accounts as 'evidence.'

Record-keeping integrity is another serious concern raised by carers. They emphasise the importance of reviewing original supervision and day notes to determine if there was any documented indication of issues at the time of the alleged incident. Retrospective changes to records by professionals should not be permitted, as these actions undermine trust and the accuracy of evidence. Furthermore, carers note that it is unreasonable to expect them to document events that never occurred simply because an allegation has arisen.

Foster carers also stress the damaging impact of prematurely escalating unsubstantiated issues, such as notifying the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) or alerting carer's employers and volunteer organisations, actions which can have far reaching consequences on a carer's personal and professional life. Carers have called for accountability measures, such as formal disciplinary actions against staff found to have falsified information, and for decisions to be thoroughly documented, with full details of discussions and the names of decision makers clearly recorded to enhance transparency and accountability.

Solution

Independent oversight mechanism

If we are committed to meaningful change, then robust oversight, accountability, and protections for foster carers must become core components of a reformed allegations process. Independent oversight in foster care requires a genuine rethinking beyond the usual approaches seen in the sector. True independence cannot come from within the same organisation, from contractors or support organisations hired by fostering providers, or from social workers embedded in the system.

We need to redefine both what oversight entails and what true independence looks like. This fresh perspective is essential to build accountability and trust, ensuring that oversight serves the best interests of children, carers, and the fostering system as a whole.

There are several approaches to achieving meaningful independent oversight, from establishing a fully independent foster carer licensing and approval council to creating a more streamlined independent regulatory and oversight body. Given the current volume of around 250 allegations monthly, such an entity would not need to be large to be effective.

We believe that implementing an independent oversight mechanism would not only reduce misuse of the allegations process but also lead to fewer overall allegations, fostering greater trust and fairness in the foster care system.

While establishing an independent oversight mechanism is a crucial step, a fundamental question remains: should the same parties who make allegations also be responsible for investigating them? This dual role risks bias and undermines trust in the process. Independent investigation is essential to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability within the foster care system.

Any independent oversight mechanism must give equal weight to the evidence, perspectives, and facts presented by foster carers as it does to those brought forward by social workers and agencies.

Solution

To ensure a fair and sustainable approach to handling allegations against foster carers, it is essential to establish a broader range of possible outcomes. The prevailing 'guilty until proven guilty' stance places undue burden on foster carers, eroding trust and stability within the system.

Sector-Led Representation and Support for Foster Carers

Foster carers should be informed about their option to join the National Union of Professional Foster Carers (NUPFC). As this is the only organisation equipped to provide full defence support during allegations. Unlike other support bodies, the NUPFC can represent foster carers, conduct casework, challenge reports, and offer a legal team and legal support within a certified union framework.

This distinction must be made transparent, from the support offered by The Fostering Network and Foster Talk across the sector, as foster carers deserve a robust defence in the face of allegations.

Support services such as FosterWiki that are independent and led by those with experienced grounded in front line practice, who are also not in a contractual arrangement with services and can give independent helpful advice.

Replace fostering panels

To strengthen safeguarding and integrity in foster care, fostering panels require critical evaluation due to conflicts of interest and lack of true independence. Though intended to be impartial, these panels are controlled by the fostering services that select and pay them, compromising objectivity.

Panels review allegations against foster carers based largely on reports from the fostering providers, who are often the same entities raising these allegations. Foster carers have limited ability to respond, and decisions are often made swiftly, based on a single report.

When the panel makes an independent recommendation that diverges from the report submitted to them, it is often overridden by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), who holds the final authority and is closely affiliated with the fostering service or agency.

Panel members also tend to accept social workers' views uncritically and lack the legal training or accountability necessary for high-stakes decisions. This setup leads to biased outcomes, which harms foster carers and weakens the system.

To improve the sector, panels should be replaced with modern independent, transparent structures that prioritise accountability and fair treatment for all stakeholders and represent a more robust safeguarding protocol.

CONCLUSION

A clear priority for reform is emerging within the foster care system. In discussions with the Department for Education and the Government's Fostering Board, the question of where to begin was raised. We proposed the starting point should be the allegations system.

As we have demonstrated, the allegations process casts a pervasive shadow over the entire foster care framework. This process fuels a culture of fear, discouraging foster carers from fully advocating for children, voicing concerns over inadequate support, or challenging poor practices. This climate significantly impacts morale and retention, as foster carers, often hesitant to recommend fostering to others, face a power imbalance that stifles open communication and trust across the sector.

Addressing these issues through targeted reforms can provide the foundation for a foster care system that is fair, independent, and transparent. By improving support for carers and enhancing recruitment and retention, these reforms would deliver more stable, supportive environments for children in care.

We hope this report has demonstrated that incremental changes, minor policy adjustments, and further recommendations alone will be insufficient. Over the past decade, repeated recommendations and approaches have yielded little to no improvement. Now is the time to be bold and courageous in our commitment to modernise the foster care system.

By prioritising these changes, we can build a foster care system that not only ensures safety and transparency but also genuinely serves the best interests of children, young people and those who care for them.