

Response to the Fostering Stocktake by Become

Introduction

[Become](#), the charity for children in care and young care leavers, provides help, support, and advice to make sure care-experienced young people can unleash their potential and take control of their lives. Until November 2016, Become was known as The Who Cares? Trust.

Our submission is based on evidence from our research and our work supporting children in care and young care leavers, as well as evidence from meetings of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, for which we are the secretariat.

Through our work, we are aware of excellent practice in the sector. We meet young people who consider their foster carers to be part of their family and who have been happy and well cared for by them. However, this submission reflects what we want to see for foster care – and care more generally.

The function of the care system

Become believes that the care system has two functions. It has a practical function - it is the safety net that enables children to be cared for safely when they are unable to be cared for by their parents. And it has a holistic function, which enables children to be cared for; to heal from the experiences that led to them coming into care; to experience a secure childhood and all that that entails in order that they can go on to live happy and successful adult lives.

When we talk about childhood, we mean that a child feels loved and wanted. It is when a child has the opportunity to learn and develop the skills and knowledge that they will need as adults, for example how to cook, how to care for themselves, how to manage money and how to build relationships. It is also a time for them to learn about who they are as a person and to grow and explore their own identity – to try new things, push boundaries and take risks and make mistakes. It is both the opportunity to explore and test being an adult in a safe environment, and also a degree of protection from having to deal with adult situations and behaviours too soon.

We have a trained fostering workforce, who provide homes for children who are removed from the care of their parents. This allows the care system to meet its practical function. However, in its present form, the system does not meet its holistic function. This results in the care system failing many children.

The Government has carried out reviews into adoption and residential care. This Fostering Stocktake covers a neglected but hugely important part of the system; the majority of all

children who spend time in the care system do so in a foster home. Ideally, these three reviews would have been carried out as part of a full review of care, enabling system-wide improvements to be made. Therefore, this review must take place in the context of the preceding reviews, and once the Stocktake has been completed, the knowledge gained from all reviews must be consolidated to ensure that there is a systemic response to meet the needs of all children in care and care leavers.

Measuring outcomes

Outcomes are not measured in a way that will allow us to judge how fostering improves outcomes for children and young people. The outcomes that are measured are arbitrary and often based on deficits. For example, the Department for Education's information on outcomes include how many young people have poor Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) scores; how many are not in employment, education or training (NEET); and how many are in the youth justice system. They do not offer insight into how much progress a child has made, or whether a young person has acquired the skills that they need for adulthood. As such, it is not possible to see the real difference that fostering, and the care system makes to children.

We need a whole care system review of the outcomes we measure for children in care and care leavers – so that we can capture the real difference care makes to children, and record their progress accurately. It will also help local authorities commission placements for outcomes, and help them to find the right place for a child to live at the right time.

Why foster care? The enabling of childhood

Most children are in foster placements because of the belief that a family environment is the best place for the child. The importance of family is such that the state replicates this environment as much as possible. We believe that care should enable a child to have a childhood. When a child lives in foster care, it is the responsibility of the foster carer(s) and fostering service to enable that childhood.

Currently, we hear too often of children whose experiences do not allow them a childhood, or whose experiences do not allow them the benefits of family life. We hear too often of children who are treated differently to the rest of the family, for example young people in long-term placements who are not given a set of keys, and children whose clothes are washed separately to the rest of the family's. If children are placed in a foster family because the state wants them to experience a family environment, they should be treated as a member of the family, with carers who want to, are able to and are empowered to care for them within that environment.

A lack of delegated authority to foster carers severely restricts the ability of carers to perform the role asked of them. It also prevents children feeling that they fit in to a family

unit, with adults who are able to care for them. We hear about children who miss out on school trips because their carers do not have authority delegated to them so that they can sign permission forms. A lack of delegated authority plays into a risk averse culture that leads to children and young people not being able to climb trees, have sleepovers, or manage their own medication. It marks them as different among their peers, and we hear of young people who do not ask permission to go on sleepovers or see their friends because they don't think that it is worth the hassle that comes with it. If we want a carer to nurture a child, to care for them then they must be empowered to do so.

Fostering as a permanency option – stable homes, stable childhoods, meeting needs

We have to see beyond the dichotomy between the care system and adoption in terms of permanency.

We should look at the concept of permanency in more depth. We believe that permanency goes beyond the physical location of a placement, to encompass the feelings that are created and developed in a child. Care should be able to provide permanency to young people, in the same way that adoption does.

All children in care should have a plan for permanence – even if permanence is an eventual return to the family home. Not all placements are permanent in the literal meaning – not all placements can be lasting or intended to last or remain unchanged indefinitely. Children's needs change, and circumstances change. But children need to **feel** that they are in a permanent placement. Placements can last for years, but never feel permanent to a child. Similarly, they can last for a period of months, but a child can feel that they had a permanent placement.

It is through the feeling of permanency – feeling stable in where you live, feeling cared about by your carers, feeling stable at school, feeling stable in your relationships – that allows a child to feel emotional security, build and sustain relationships, develop self-worth and resilience.

We do not give enough thought to permanency – to either finding those placements that are stable, but also those placements that embody permanence in other ways.

Young people tell us that placements break down too often, and often for reasons that would not result in family breakdown. It is 'easier' to move a child than put the training and scaffolding in place to ensure that foster families are able to remain together. Arguments or disagreements can result in a young person saying things that they go on to regret – including saying that they want to move placement. Adolescence is a particularly difficult time, for any young person, regardless of whether a child is in care – and not

enough attention or allowance is given to 'ordinary' childhood behaviours. Carers and young people need to be better supported to manage when faced with difficult moments, both by being supported to build relationships throughout the time they are living there, and also when these difficult situations occur. Breaking a placement should never be the easiest option.

If challenging situations arise, cooling off periods should enable children and their carers the time to work through problems or to apologise for things said in anger, with the support of professionals. Children growing up in care can have great power. If they ask to move, they may be moved. It is right that children and young people's voices are heard. But this power can come with enormous consequences – relationships can be fractured, stable placements ended, and young people moved on the basis of an issue which could have been resolved or overcome. By allowing this to happen, professionals risk teaching unhelpful messages about how problems are solved and how relationships are built. Working through relationship challenges gives a young person emotional security and shows them that they are cared for as a person.

There needs to be greater focus on the capacity of the system to ensure that children are placed in homes that are well matched and well supported, from the beginning. There is not sufficient capacity in the system to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. We hear too often from children that they were separated from their siblings because the local authority couldn't find a foster carer who was able to care for the whole sibling group or children who are placed with carers because their ethnic background *nearly* matches – for example African children placed with Black Caribbean carers. Black Caribbean culture – from its food to its language – is different to African culture – and even African culture differs across the continent. Some children will not mind the mix of cultures, but other children will want to be cared for by carers who share the same heritage. We also hear from young people that carers are often ill-equipped to care for the hair and skin of children of different ethnic backgrounds, for example white carers not understanding how to properly moisturise a Black child's hair and skin.

We also hear of foster carers, approved only to care for babies and toddlers, being asked to care for teenagers. This means that they are ill-equipped to deal with the turbulence of adolescence, and the challenges and experiences that come with caring for teenagers.

Carers need to be supported to meet every child's needs, particularly where a child's sexuality, gender identity, religion or other part of their identity is different from the carers' and especially where it challenges the carers' own values and views.

Commissioning of placements

As part of the bigger picture, there needs to be work done to address the issue of commissioning placements. There is little consistency nationally with how placements are

commissioned, and decisions can be made for budgetary reasons, instead of putting the needs of the child first. There is still a hierarchy of placements – with the tendency to approach local authority carers before Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs), and before commissioning a residential placement. Commissioners need to be commissioning for child-centred outcomes, and for childhood. Developing better outcome measures for children and young people will help commissioners to choose appropriate placements for children in care.

Local authorities have lists of preferred IFPs with whom they have pre-existing commissioning arrangements– and so may not be aware of the skills and experiences of foster carers beyond those who work for this group of IFPs, and their own in-house carers. This limits the pool of carers that a child can be matched with. Serious consideration should be given to finding a way for local authorities to look for matches for children beyond their existing pool of carers. While we acknowledge that increasing the pool may increase the distance a child may have to move to live with carers, we would expect all decisions to be made in the child's best interests – with any decisions taking into account location or distance of the placement.

Foster carers as professionals

The idea of a foster carer being a professional can be conflicting for children and young people. Being cared for, in a family environment, by someone who is paid (and trained) to care for them can make it difficult when a child or young person wants to feel that that they are cared for (and loved) as an individual, not because the carer is paid. It can cause problems, with young people feeling that they are only cared for because the carer is being paid, which impacts on a child's self-esteem and sense of identity, and feelings about the care system.

However, children coming into care will be children who have experienced trauma, abuse and/or neglect. They may have faced other adversities, like poverty or special educational needs. The effects of pre-care experiences may manifest themselves in a number of ways, including poor attachment, mental and physical health difficulties, and risk-taking behaviours. Foster carers need to know how to support the young people they care for with these issues, and know how to seek help for them when it's needed.

Carers are not automatically included in professionals' discussions about the child, however we believe that they should be included at all meetings of professionals. Similarly, they should be included and invited to all meetings where the parents of a child living with their birth parents would be invited, for example parents' evenings and SEN reviews. We would expect parity – both in expectation and invitation – as carers are acting in loco parentis. Many carers actively want to be included and there should be an expectation on all foster carers that they attend these meetings and advocate on behalf of the child they are caring for.

The state is asking foster carers to take on a role beyond that of a parent. They are expected to cope with the joys and challenges of caring for a child who is no relation, and often with high support needs. They should therefore be paid as such. However, with payment comes responsibilities – to undertake training, to care for children to a high level, to have a certain skill set, and to open their home and family to a child, or children. As professionals, we would expect them to manage the challenges that children may have with foster carers being paid. We would suggest including this as part of the training and support offered to the carer.

Training

Just like being a parent, it is not possible to prepare for all eventualities or be trained to cope with every situation that caring for a child might bring about. However, foster carers are not just expected to be a parent to a child, they are expected to be a parent+, and often to many different children. It is therefore not sufficient that a foster carer may have had experience of being a parent – they must be armed with a wealth of skills and knowledge to enable them to care well for any child in their care.

Therefore, a full and comprehensive range of training should be available to foster carers and much of the content should be mandatory. This should not only include first aid, attachment awareness, and support with behaviour management but also training to equip foster carers to be a parent+. For example, children in care may be more vulnerable to online risks. It therefore becomes **more** important that they are able to engage in online activities while within the foster care environment so that they can learn positive online behaviour and how to manage risks. However, we hear of foster carers for whom the solution is to limit access to the internet. For young people, who live much of their life online and have little concept of 'online' and 'offline' worlds, this is both socially limiting and turns the internet into a far riskier place.

For those caring for looked after children, it is not enough to just muddle through.

National Minimum Standards vs Quality Standards

It does not make sense that we have National Minimum Standards for fostering. The National Minimum Standards for Children's Homes were replaced in April 2015 by Quality Standards, designed to ensure that children living in children's homes receive the best possible care, have the best possible experience and the best possible outcomes. It encouraged homes to be ambitious for the children in their care, and ensure that the care that they provide is child centred.

The National Minimum Standards for fostering do not go far enough to put the child at the centre of care. They do not set out standards for care that are aspirational and of the highest possible quality.

Staying Put

The Fostering Stocktake must include a full review of Staying Put.

We hear from young people that Staying Put is often not planned for and discussions not had early enough. However, we also hear from young people that they have been told at the point of turning 18 that they are unable to stay put, which can significantly disrupt their final year of education and their move into independent living.

We hear from young people who are unable to stay living with their former foster carers for financial reasons, for example the allowance that they would be given would not be sufficient to cover their costs. The reduction in allowance can mean that foster carers have to turn them away. The level of support that a foster carer offers to a young person does not decrease when a young person turns 18 – it may in fact increase when they are supporting a young person on their journey to adulthood. This is the very type of support that Staying Put was meant to provide, and yet foster carers are finding themselves in the position where they have to decide between being able to provide this support for a young person and having sufficient income.

Some Staying Put policies of local authorities require young people to make a financial contribution to their carers, and is often done by requiring young people to claim benefits, particularly housing benefit. Where possible, care leavers should not be entering adult life as benefit claimants, and indeed goes against the accepted belief and drive to be aspirational for care leavers. We would like to see care leavers no longer be a conduit for the payment, but the housing benefit allocation be paid directly to the foster carers.

Our Care Advice Line has received a number of calls on behalf of young people with complex support needs, who have been placed inappropriately in a Staying Put placement beyond their 18th birthday, when an adult social care placement would better suit their needs. Their former carers tell us that they feel obliged to agree to the Staying Put placement, because they are concerned that the young person will otherwise be left unsupported. Staying Put should only be used where it best meets a young person's needs, not to reduce the burden on adult services.

Staying Put must be sufficiently funded in order to achieve the outcomes that it was introduced to achieve. Inadequate funding has been a key concern since the policy was introduced and has led to challenges with implementation.

Conclusion

There is a need for fundamental questions to be asked about the care system as a whole, in order to be certain that care is the very best it can be. We hope that this review will go partway to addressing some of these questions, but they need to be addressed in the wider context as well.

There are also structural challenges that must be addressed within foster care, as well as policies that do not work as well as they should, and knotty problems around the professional status of carers. These issues must not be shied away from, but properly tackled in order to ensure that foster care is the very best that it can be.

However, children are the reason we have a care system. And they must be placed at the centre of foster care, and this review.

Recommendations

The Government reviews the outcomes that are currently captured for children in care and care leavers, both locally and nationally, and develops outcome measurements that are important to children and allows the progress they have made to be sufficiently captured.

The Government revises the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and produces Quality Standards – setting ambitious and aspirational standards for the care of children in foster care.

Staying Put is fully funded so that young people who want to stay put, but cannot because their carers cannot afford the drop in financial support, are able to do so.

The Stocktake should address the issue of professionalisation of foster carers to ensure that children are cared for by carers who are fully equipped, respected and trained to deal with their often complex needs.

The Government should look at ways to increase the pool of foster carers from which a local authority can match a child.

The Stocktake should pay particular attention to how the needs of BAME children in care are being met.