

# Evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services on behalf of FosterTalk Ltd.

## Executive Summary

FosterTalk is a not for profit organisation providing high quality independent support to foster carers and their families throughout the UK since 2007. FosterTalk offers a comprehensive benefits package which includes access to qualified advisors for fostering advice and information, tax and benefits advice, legal advice, medical, counselling and education advice and support, together with legal insurance for foster carers and their families. FosterTalk also offers the Foster Carers Independent Support service (FISS) which provides face to face support to foster carers during the investigation of an allegation or serious complaint. We are currently supporting around 30,000 fostering households through memberships and FISS.

Since 2013, FosterTalk has also delivered Fosterline England on behalf of the Department for Education. Fosterline offers free, impartial advice information and support to foster carers and prospective foster carers via our interactive website [www.fosterline.info](http://www.fosterline.info) and our team of qualified fostering advisors.

Delivering these services give us a unique insight into the challenges facing foster carers in the course of their work caring for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society. Through our work we seek to raise the profile of foster carers as key members of the children's social care workforce and strive to ensure that they receive the recognition and support that they deserve. In order to do this we work closely with our colleagues in the Children in Care Team at the Department for Education with whom we share issues raised by foster carers and attempt to seek solutions. We have also been able to represent foster carers views directly to the Children's Minister, Vicky Ford, and to host a roundtable discussion with our members and the Minister around the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this submission we will be focussing on the impact of the lockdown on foster carers and the children and young people they care for, including lack of social work support and input into contact, introductions to adopters, financial support and the lack of government awareness or recognition of the role foster carers play as key frontline social care workers.

We will also look at the impact on children in care whose education has been disrupted, including the confusion around whether or not children in care should be attending schools, access to IT equipment for online learning, and the additional social and educational disadvantages this group of children faces at this time.

Prior to drafting this submission, we asked our members what they would like us to tell the committee. The information that follows is based on the responses we received, and we will provide some case examples to illustrate these points.

## Introduction

During the current COVID-19 pandemic FosterTalk has been made aware of the additional pressures our current foster families are having to face. Lockdown and social distancing has increased the vulnerability for some children and the expectation will be that more children will enter the care

system as restrictions are slowly lifted and children return to schools. Foster carers have suffered increased anxiety and many have expressed a fear for their own, their children and their family's safety. Foster carers have been asked and expected to carry out activities that they believe are not in the best interest of the children they care for.

Examples of issues raised by FosterTalk foster carer members include:

- Foster carer being asked to travel over three hours to facilitate introductions with prospective adoptive family and reside in a nearby hotel for the week while the foster carers own birth children would move out of the home to other foster carers – Foster carer needed to know her right to challenge the situation without putting the placement at risk but maintaining the safety of their family
- Foster carer being told that their looked after children could not attend school and the decision being made by the school in not accepting the looked after child as in the vulnerable category as defined by the DfE guidance
- Foster carer rigorously following the government's instructions both to protect the child and themselves from exposure to the virus being instructed to continue face to face contact for the young person with the threat of deregistration if they didn't comply with the social worker

Many callers express a feeling of being bullied into taking actions where they feel they are putting themselves their children and family at risk. We have also been notified of existing foster carers giving notice on children within their care due to lack of support and collaboration with their fostering service and even taking the decision to resign.

Since the beginning of "Lockdown" the Fosterline website has seen an increase in new service users of 45% and our call volume has increased exponentially. Enquiries have focussed on the specialised, targeted, information on COVID-19 and the finances for foster carers. FosterTalk has also seen a 17% increase in the number of calls to our specialist tax and benefits service provided for all current members.

The role of foster carer is unique in many respects and non-more so than their status as self-employed. The current pandemic highlights this special status and the financial vulnerability of foster carers. Although classed as self-employed by HMRC, Foster carers are not able to benefit from the self-employment package for the self-employed announced at the end of June; Universal Credit is their only support option (if they meet the criteria). Worse than this, the most vulnerable sector of the Foster carer population (those without foster placements due to self-isolation for example) may have no entitlement to Universal Credit and are simply losing their income until lockdown ends.

### [The implementation of the critical workers policy](#)

Foster carers were dismayed to discover that they were not included in the definition of "critical worker" when schools closed for the lockdown. The fact that foster carers were not classed as "key workers" has been a major source of unhappiness throughout the lockdown and while foster carers are incredibly supportive of the NHS and care workers in general, they feel that they have been unfairly excluded from the status of frontline care worker, which is exactly what they are. This meant, for example, that they were unable to access the key worker shopping times that most supermarkets implemented, or receive the recognition that they feel they deserve from government or the general public, many members of whom are unaware of the key role that they play.

This confusion about whether or not foster carers were “key workers” led to differences of opinion between schools, foster carers and social workers as to whether or not children in foster care should be attending school as one of the “vulnerable groups”. Direction from the DfE was that all children to whom a social worker had been allocated were classified as vulnerable and should have the provision of education within schools, however Public Health England’s advice was to keep children within the home environment wherever it was safe to do so. The argument being that if looked after children were not safe within the foster home, then where would they be safe? This needed to be balanced against the need for some children within the care system to maintain routine to support their emotional or behavioural needs.

This lack of clarity resulted in mixed messages being given to foster carers. One school head told a foster carer that her foster child did not qualify for a school place as a vulnerable child as he was in a stable foster placement. Another foster carer was told that as she had two foster children in placement, the school could only take them on alternate days. Other foster carers have found that nursery or school provision is not being offered in their area and they would have to take the child to another venue. This is incredibly disruptive for children in care who often experience multiple changes of foster home and/or school and for whom consistency is vital.

Many foster carers with their own children at home made the decision not to send their foster child into school as this emphasises the difference between the birth children and the foster child and stigmatises the foster child. Others have made the decision not to send vulnerable children into school because of the health risks of transmission of the virus back into the foster home. It is particularly important to note that children with underlying health needs and disability are especially vulnerable in this respect.

The current confusion about whether or not schools will be re-opening on 1<sup>st</sup> June to nursery, year 1 and 6 pupils is particularly unhelpful for foster parents who are already dealing with anxious children and need to be able to reassure them about next steps. The disputes between policy makers, teachers and unions has a knock on effect for foster carers and vulnerable children which is unacceptable. Foster carers ask the question, “Whose needs are being prioritised here?”

### [The capacity of children’s services to support children and young people](#)

Following the commencement of the lockdown, social work visits to foster homes ceased, as did looked after children reviews, planning meetings, therapy, respite care and all external support. While many fostering services have maintained contact remotely with foster carers, many of the duties usually carried out of social workers ceased.

Additionally the Government amended legislation to remove some statutory duties regarding placement support which has placed additional pressures on foster carers who are being asked to undertake tasks outside of their responsibilities. (The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020) This change of regulations was fiercely opposed by many organisations working with looked after children and care leavers as denying them a level of support that they are entitled to receive. Following the intervention of the Children’s Commissioner some changes have been made and the Minister has assured us that these changes will be reviewed in September. We note that relatively few local authorities are using these measures and trust that they will end as promised in September.

Unfortunately, in the first few weeks of the lockdown, we had calls from foster carers saying they were resigning or had resigned as they felt ‘abandoned’ by their fostering service- for example, not receiving any courtesy calls from their fostering service, foster carer’s concerns about teenage foster

children in placement ignoring the government guidance to stay at home, with no support from the fostering service in dealing with this. Some foster carers have resigned from their role as their concerns were not being addressed and they felt that they and their families were being placed at risk.

During the lockdown foster carers have been left to manage numerous aspects of their foster child's care without support. These include contact with birth families, introductions of children to new placements, including adoption placements, and dealing with a myriad of issues which would normally be done by social workers. Foster carers have talked to us about being given conflicting messages about facilitating contact or undertaking introductions outside of the home during the lockdown despite the government instructions to stay at home and only undertake essential travel.

For example, one foster carer was instructed by the Local authority to carry out introductions to a kinship carer. The foster carer was concerned about undertaking non-essential travel and also the issue of contact with another household during lockdown. Furthermore, the foster child had shown symptoms of covid-19 two weeks previously and the foster family were self-isolating, of which the local authority were aware, but were instructed to go ahead. Another foster carer reported that she had been asked to travel from Birmingham to Ipswich to move the child in their care to new foster carers. The carer has been told by her fostering service that foster carers are classed as 'key workers' and will need to do these introductions as the LASW does not know the child as well as the carer. (This is incorrect, foster carers are not classed as key workers) Some foster carers have been told to facilitate contact with birth family through telephone, skype etc. Whereas other foster carers have been given permission to take a child to a birth family member's home and spend time with them as long as the 2 metres social distancing has been abided by.

Some foster carers have felt worried about losing their registration if they were to put their availability on hold or refuse to take on a placement until they felt ready to do so. This has been an issue for foster carers who have underlying health conditions or are over 70 or have family members in the "shielded group". Other foster carers have asked whether children being placed should be subject to testing prior to placement to ensure that they are virus free, to protect them and other members of the household. No foster carer that we are aware of has been offered PPE to assist with contact.

These examples demonstrate the clear anomaly in expectations between families in the community who are unable to have contact with other households, including close family members, in order to stop the spread of the virus, and foster carers who are expected to put themselves and their family at risk to carry out their roles. Most foster carers do this willingly and with clear focus on the welfare of children in their care, but they feel that their commitment is going unrecognised by government.

Foster carers understand the legal and statutory requirements for the children and young people they care for and are not being difficult when they question some of the decisions made around the child without the foster carer being consulted. Responsible foster carers are within their right to ask if robust risk assessments have been made around the actions they are being asked to undertake and where necessary, are willing to support those decisions. The balance needs to be addressed between the expectations placed on the carer to provide essential services which have been removed in times of crisis and the recognition of the foster carer as a professional in the team around the child. Foster carers' opinions matter in the care for the child and need to be higher up on the priorities for making care planning decisions.

## Support for children and families during school closures

We welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of funding for laptops and internet connections for looked after children and care leavers to enable them to continue their education during lockdown, however, these do not appear to be universally available. We have had calls from foster carers who have been passed from school to social worker and back again when trying to access laptops and equipment for home learning. Without access to IT equipment their learning will suffer in multiple ways. The provision of lesson plans or online classes has been very patchy, with some schools going the extra mile and others not providing any educational materials at all. This will undoubtedly have a detrimental impact on children's progress when they do return to school.

Most children find taking exams stressful and at some stages of their education testing seems unhelpful, however at GCSE and A level the impact of not having sat a recognised examination may prove damaging in the long term, despite the fact that teachers will assess and award grades. Research has shown that children in care are less likely to achieve good exam grades and to go on to further or higher education. This prolonged period of not being in school is likely to damage their educational prospects even further and we hope that a mechanism can be found for these to be validated at a later stage so that vulnerable children are not let down by the system for no fault of their own.

While some schools have remained open to provide care for the children of key workers and vulnerable children the daily routine is far from a normal school experience and many foster carers have chosen to home school their children. There are many benefits for children of being at home in a household where attention can be given to them. At home they are developing skills and learning that they would never have the opportunity to access through normal school life. They are baking, painting, planting, digging, drawing, cooking, climbing, riding, as well as following some work related activities from their schools. But for many children school is a refuge, a safe haven and a place of stability and security which is essential to their health and wellbeing.

This foster carer wanted us to share her positive story with you:

*"We have two adopted children age 9 and 12, and three foster children age 9 months, 3 and 15. That's 4 boys and a baby princess.*

*Our 12 and 15 year olds normally attend special needs schools. Our children have been out of school a week longer than everyone else as our eldest was sent home because his peg feed made home too vulnerable to be in school. We then chose to have all of our children at home to keep them safe. This is a one-time opportunity to really get to know our kids, without life getting in the way. It's a time for us to enjoy them without all the usual social workers, schools, medical appointments, health visitors, lac reviews. Always never ending meetings and phone calls. We are currently having video calls with social workers which are very pleasant and the kids enjoy them. Even the baby likes the video call as she tries to grab the phone. She wants in in everyone's video calls, they all do! We've had a pleasant lac review over the phone, short and sweet.*

*It's a time to reflect and see just how really lovely our life is, kids are happy, very happy. We're having some lovely family time. Don't get me wrong, we have a baby who doesn't yet believe us that the rest of the world sleeps at night, a 3 year old just finished toilet training, a 9 year old with one previous failed adoption issues, two more with severe learning disability and feeding machine three times a day, but life's good, our kids are gorgeous and we are enjoying ourselves. Our kids say they like corona virus, not ideal but I know what they mean. Our local authority are supportive without being intrusive."*

## The impact on mental health of children, foster carers and their families

The prolonged lockdown and absence from school will undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on the emotional wellbeing of vulnerable children as many of them are already disadvantaged by their pre-care experiences. This leads to sleep disturbances, deteriorating behaviour, regression, aggression and self-harm. Undoubtedly, some foster placements will disrupt as a result of this, as there is no support available to foster carers in order to help them cope.

One foster parent took the time to share her story with us, and as it illustrates the many challenges faced by foster carers at this time, we wanted to share it with you.

*"With regard to how the lockdown has affected us as a foster family here are some points from our journey:*

*Our foster son, like many foster children, struggles with change; it brings about a huge amount of anxiety and stress. This time is highly stressful for him, from not being allowed out, changes in shopping, no school for my other children etc. One of the main issues we had was the government gave guidelines of social distancing then suddenly announced lockdown. While I appreciate why this was done, for children with anxiety this is very difficult. They get used to one change then suddenly it all changes again.*

*Due to his childhood of uncertainty and trauma, he wants to take control when things are producing those same feelings, world upheaval produces the same feelings. This means at this time he is very controlling and we have to manage this.*

*We are lucky that he still attends school as this is a way of keeping an element of stability. This is a risk for our family as we are exposing ourselves and our younger children to the virus with him attending, but we have to weigh this up with his mental health and the stability of the family. This is tough; I know many carers have not had change to send their children to school as government guidelines have been not clear on this.*

*The fear of death is real for our foster son, and many other foster children. As a child they were faced with real life or death situations so the fear of death from Covid is very real for them or the fear loved ones will die from it*

*We have lost our support network to help maintain placement at present to give us respite from the trauma we all experience from our foster son. This is why school is a life-line for us at the moment and I hope more carers can access it"*

The experiences of this foster parent are sadly very common and very real. We have found a large increase in calls to our 24 hour counselling helpline for members during the current crisis. These calls cover a range of topics such as: bereavement, disrupted funerals, PTSD, social distancing fears, relationship issues, work issues, study anxieties where unable to be in university, health concerns and general anxiety. Foster carers will no doubt face mental health crises of their own once this is over.

When services are able to return to some kind of normality there will need to be an increased focus in counselling and support for children, help to enable them to feel able to return to school, and teachers will need to be able to reassure them that they are safe. Foster carers have borne the brunt of this crisis with very little in the way of support and they too will need access to counselling and services to support their recovery from the pressures of caring and managing challenging children through this crisis alone.

## The financial implications of covid-19 for foster carers

As previously highlighted, there has been a huge financial impact on foster carers as a result of the covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. Foster carers are self-employed and are only paid a fostering allowance when they have a child in placement. They do not receive sick pay, holiday pay or any kind of payment when they do not have a child in placement. When they have a child in placement they generally receive a fee plus an allowance to cover the cost of caring for the child. The fee varies depending on who their fostering service is.

Some foster carers with vacancies have been unable to accept placements due to someone shielding in their home. Others who provide respite care to children have no income as the children have been unable to receive respite care due to the lockdown restrictions. Other foster carers, who have a vulnerable child or adult in the household, have felt unable to accept placements due to the need to protect their family members from the virus are also without an income.

Following the Chancellor's announcement of the extensive financial support package, FosterTalk's tax and benefits helpline received a high level of calls from foster carers asking if they qualified for any of the support on offer. These calls covered the areas of Self Employed Income Support Scheme, Grants and Job retention and depending on the situation of other members of the Foster carer's family. People look to us as a trusted source of advice and support and many were shocked and dismayed to discover that there was little or no financial support available to them. Many foster carers feel that the pandemic highlights once again the uniqueness of a foster carer's position; self-employed, but not businesses, many caught between a rock and a hard place.

The simple fact is that the majority of foster carers have not been entitled to receive any additional support outside Universal Credit. The impact has been felt where partners and spouses have lost their income and increased the pressures on the fostering household. The additional funding provided to local authorities has not been fed down to the foster carer however some progressive local authorities have made additional payments to support their foster carers by continuing to pay holiday allowances (even though holidays have not been taken) and also provided retainer payments for carers even if it is at a reduced level

## Conclusion and Recommendations

While we acknowledge that Covid-19 is a global pandemic and urgent steps had to be taken to protect the vulnerable from this dreadful virus, there has been an unequal impact on certain members of the community. There is a growing feeling among foster carers that they are not seen as good enough to be viewed as professionals and be trusted to use their judgment in what is an extremely stressful and difficult situation, but are good enough to be left to cope with their traumatised foster children 24 hours a day, 7 days a week without support.

As our Managing Director, Steve Stockley, who is himself a foster carer and adopter, says

*"Recognising foster carers as "Key Workers" would go a long way to promote unity and respect. To be valued in line with health workers, transport workers, provisions suppliers as vital cogs in the wheel of a protective society would resonate throughout the fostering community.*

*For too long foster carers have been made to feel as if they are not respected yet have the pressures of care 24/7. The expectations placed on foster carers often make them feel taken for granted. Foster carers are expected to change their routines, undertake contact at specified times, become a teacher, therapist, case worker, advisor and counsellor especially now when these services are not*

*available to our children. The new found respect for our National Health Service fills us with pride and that caring streak runs through our foster parents, adopters, special guardians and kinship carers but not once has their role been addressed or acknowledged publically”*

As we begin to emerge slowly from the lockdown there are a number of lessons that need to be learned for children’s social care, notably the role and status of foster carers and the value that society places on them as front line social care workers.

Previous fostering reviews and inquiries (Narey/Owers, 2018; Education Committee, 2017) made numerous recommendations regarding the role, status and value of foster carers. It is now time to reassess the value we place on foster carers and acknowledge the vital role that they play. This will involve looking at the payment structures, approval, training and registration of foster carers. FosterTalk has previously suggested that there should be a National Register of Foster Carers, to hold the details of foster carers, their qualifications, skills, knowledge and training as a first step in recognising them alongside other care professionals such as social workers, care staff and nurses.

We must also, as a society, examine the way we care for our most vulnerable children and young people and to the support systems we need to put in place for them, including access to technology, mental health support, increased support for care leavers, especially to enable them to enter education and training and be able to forge worthwhile and fulfilling lives for themselves.

This can only be achieved by a root and branch review of the children’s social care system and by placing children at the centre of all decision making. Foster carers play their part every day with passion, energy and commitment, and FosterTalk is proud to be able to support them in these endeavours.

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