

**FOSTER
TALK**



**ALLEGATION
SURVEY REPORT**

FEBRUARY 2024



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INTRODUCTION



ABOUT FOSTERTALK

SUPPORTING FOSTER, KINSHIP CARERS, SPECIAL GUARDIANS AND FOSTERING STAFF SINCE 2004, FOSTERTALK ARE RECOGNISED AS A LEADING ORGANISATION FOR FOSTERING ADVICE, PRACTICAL GUIDANCE AND INDEPENDENT SUPPORT.

FosterTalk's comprehensive membership packages provide support to those who care, those on their journey to becoming foster or kinship carers and those who have retired. In addition, FosterTalk delivers high quality training for foster and kinship carers and fostering staff, and an expert independent allegation support service to hundreds of carers facing allegations each year.





ABOUT THIS REPORT

Through this specialist work, we are aware of issues the allegations investigation processes bring to carers and services alike and have worked tirelessly to raise awareness of these to individual organisations, local authority partners and national policy making departments.

In 2016, an in-depth research report supported by FosterTalk was published by the Rees Centre, University of Oxford. “The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers” by Plumridge and Sebba (2016), made a range of recommendations which it found would make enormous positive impact upon carers subject to allegations for a variety of professionals and organisations.

Since the report was published, FosterTalk has continued to raise awareness and concerns. However, we have recognised that there has been little overall progress in making the recommended improvements, and through our work with individual carers experiencing an allegation, have become increasingly concerned at the impact on retention of foster carers that poorly managed allegations may be having for the fostering community.

As is well documented, the fostering sector is facing a crisis in lack of recruitment of new foster carers and loss of experienced foster carers over several years, meaning as a country, the UK is facing a lack of choice in finding suitable homes for children who need foster care.

In 2023 FosterTalk’s Advisory Committee undertook work in the various areas affecting this issue. Out of this emerged such concern about the impact of allegations in fostering as a whole, but also on carers and young people’s lives. FosterTalk recognised we needed to hear from the wider fostering community their experiences and views on the theme of allegations, and so this survey was born.

The survey was conducted anonymously, therefore only approval status of the respondent was collected. The survey was open to the public and advertised as widely as possible with the support of other fostering organisations to reach non-members. However, the survey was marketed extensively using FosterTalk member emails and through our publicly available social media accounts, which may have more of a membership following, so it is inevitable that a large proportion of the sample may represent FosterTalk members, which could have an impact upon the findings (*see page 26 for further context). That said, FosterTalk members who have gained support through our services may have more of an awareness of the subject and therefore there is potential for the picture in the wider fostering sector population to be less encouraging.

The primary purpose of the survey was to understand how the allegation process is being implemented in practice and the impact of this on foster carers, and to learn how well prepared

foster and kinship carers are for the possibility of receiving an allegation. Therefore, the outcome of the allegation was not the focus of the survey, but learning about individual’s experiences of how the process is working in practice and whether it is being applied fairly amongst those subject to it. We were interested in learning about the foster carer perspective and the potential impact of their experiences upon the retention of foster carers. We recognise the limits of this being self-reported information, and therefore the biases it potentially contains, however the strength of the survey is from the number of respondents – 2102 individuals, and the collective themes we have been able to identify from their experiences. The survey branched off into two sections after general questions were answered by all respondents, for those who had previously experienced an allegation which had concluded and those currently experiencing an allegation. Almost half of all respondents had direct experience of an allegation against them. This study has gained the largest response regarding allegation experience amongst the fostering community. The first hand experiences described by respondents adds to previous studies and research voicing many concerns in this area. However, it has captured only a small number compared to the amount of approved and previously approved foster carers across the UK, and had a low response from kinship and connected carers in comparison to mainstream carers.

ALLEGATION DEFINITION

“An allegation may relate to a person who works with children who has...

...behaved in a way that has harmed a child, or may have harmed a child

...possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child

...behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children

...behaved or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children”

(Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WE WISH TO THANK ALL THOSE WHO CONTRIBUTED THEIR TIME AND ENERGY TO THE SURVEY.



Most of all, our thanks go to our FosterTalk Advisory Committee from whom the idea arose, and who consulted over the design and delivery of the survey, reviewed its findings and shaped the recommendations. Thank you to all of the foster and kinship carers who completed the survey. It is a privilege to represent the fostering community through our work and we commit to continue to work with carers to champion necessary change and improvements to support them to care for children and young people.

Ruth Willetts

**Head of Social Work & Development
FosterTalk**



We have been overwhelmed by the response and commitment people gave to answering the questions and sharing their stories with us in such detail. We have read each and every message left in the survey, and whilst we cannot include every comment in this report, we have collated the information in themes identified to ensure foster and kinship carer's voices come through strongly, so that fostering services and governments can hear the messages they wish to convey.

We wish to express our sincere thanks and acknowledge the input of Professor Nick Midgley and Dr Rosie McGuire, who are affiliated with University College London and Anna Freud. They have supported survey development, subsequent analysis and the writing of this report. Their input and independent scrutiny has been invaluable to ensuring the quality and validity of these findings.



FOREWORD FROM PAUL ADAMS



Those of us who have been subject to an allegation of harm against a child will be only too aware of the emotional impact of such an event. For foster carers, allegations are an occupational hazard, and research suggests that one in three foster carers will experience an allegation in the course of their fostering career. This in itself should be sufficient reason to invest time and effort into thinking about the issue.

Furthermore, there are a shortage of foster carers in the UK, and being subject to an allegation is a factor in why some carers cease to foster. For others, a concern about the possibility and likely impact of an allegation, will mean that they never choose to foster in the first instance. Although it is hard to know exact numbers, it is fair to conclude that the experience or threat of an allegation is a factor that impacts adversely on the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Allegations result from a variety of complex issues associated with looking after children who have usually experienced abuse and neglect. While it is important to never forget that some allegations of harm will be ‘substantiated’, the vast majority of investigations conclude that the allegation was ‘unfounded’ or ‘unsubstantiated.’ Since many foster carers continue to foster following an allegation, it is important that the management of allegations leaves carers feeling they have been treated fairly, and that the need for robust investigation does not leave them feeling alienated from the wider system.

This report will likely be of interest to different groups of people. For foster carers, especially those who have had an allegation made against them, the consistency of some of the themes will hopefully leave them feeling validated, and less alone. For social work practitioners and fostering services, there are simple but important reminders about good practice, some of which are about no more than compliance with statutory guidance and National Minimum Standards.

The large number of carers reporting that they were not provided with independent support during an allegation is consistent with other evidence, but is no less shocking for that. It is also hard to understand how carers can be attending fostering panel without having seen the reports that have been written about them. Such practices need to improve, and there is a responsibility on practitioners, policy makers, and regulatory bodies to make sure that this happens.

There are very few people in the sector who think that the current arrangements for managing allegations against foster carers are consistently working well. In thinking about solutions or improvements one key element will be listening to what foster carers have to say about their experiences. This report – being based on a survey of over two thousand foster carers – makes an important contribution to that debate.

Paul Adams

www.pauladamsfostering.uk



SURVEY REPORT



2102 RESPONDENTS



22%

of all respondents said they were not aware of any of the different types of support that should be made available to them when they are subject to an allegation.

55%

of respondents did not receive or were not sure they received training within 6 months of their initial fostering approval.



67%

of respondents did not receive an Independent Support worker when subject to an allegation.



35%

said they did not have and did not know where to find a copy of their fostering service's allegation policy.



68%

did not receive any financial support if a foster child was removed due to the allegation.



62%

of respondents did not receive the written report of their Post Allegation review before attending the panel meeting.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Target Audience	Recommendation	More detail can Be Found
Fostering providers, UK governments	Fostering services should ensure newly approved foster carers are given a thorough induction which includes robust, clear information about allegations.	Policy and processes - p15
UK governments, Inspection bodies	The DfE (and equivalent in other UK countries) reissue (or issue) revised guidance on 'Protecting Children and Supporting Foster Carers during Allegations' to replace that issued in 2009. It's status should be the standard all foster carers should receive as a minimum when faced with an allegation.	Policy and processes - p15
Fostering Providers	Independent panel chairpersons should not accept cases to panel where it is clear foster carers have not received reports written about them in a timely manner and been allowed to respond.	Policy and processes - p15
UK governments	Guidance should stipulate that foster carers are given 15 working days from the date of notification that the allegation reports have been finalised ready to be provided to the panel, to read, consult with independent advice and respond to them.	Policy and processes - p15
UK governments	Guidance should be issued on access to any documents a foster carer has previously been in possession of about children and young people, where they feel that the information could support an allegation investigation, or indeed change the outcome.	Safer care and recording - p21
Fostering providers	Fostering services should have a robust system for monitoring of foster carer and social work records, tracking submissions, ensuring review and updates of documents and addressing anything outstanding in a timely manner.	Safer care and recording - p21
UK governments, Inspection bodies, Fostering providers	Specific training about allegations should become explicitly mandatory post approval within six months for all approved carers and advisable for adult household/family members. Training content should be standardised across services to ensure consistency.	Training - p19
Fostering providers	The support carers should receive is clearly outlined in the fostering agreements, handbooks, policies and procedures, and is freely available.	Support - p23
Fostering providers, UK governments, Inspection bodies	Social workers and the designated manager should ensure Independent Support is arranged for carers who want it. Inspection bodies should monitor this through the standard mandatory reporting already in place for incidents involving allegations against foster carers.	Support - p23
UK governments	There should be an agreed minimum payment guaranteed for all foster carers nationwide when they are subject to an allegation investigation.	Support - p23



FOSTERING APPROVAL STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

MAINSTREAM CARER

■ 1762 – 84%

KINSHIP CARER (friend or family)

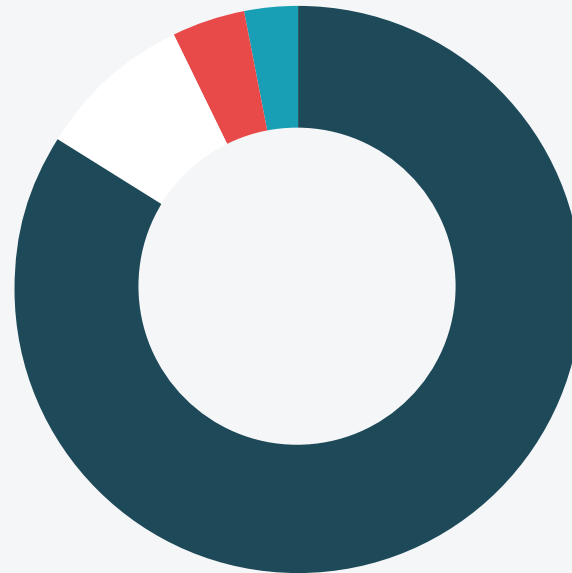
■ 192 – 9%

CONNECTED CARER (other relationship to child e.g. teacher)

■ 89 – 4%

DUAL APPROVAL (mainstream & kinship/connected)

■ 59 – 3%



89% of respondents told us they understood the difference in definition between ‘allegation’, ‘standards of care concern’ and ‘complaint’, with **4%** stating they did not and **7%** unsure.





ALLEGATION EXPERIENCE

Have you ever been subject to an allegation?

Yes 964 – 46%

No 1138 – 54%

This number is higher than previous research from The Fostering Network, State of the Nation research in 2021 where 471 out of 3352 respondents had experienced an allegation in the previous two years. This may be because FosterTalk's survey was focused solely on allegations so drew those with experience of them more easily and this survey asked for all experience, not just the previous two years.

The latest data on foster carer allegations from National Statistics Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 (Updated 29 November 2023), showed 3010 allegations were recorded. The Scottish government do not release data to compare.

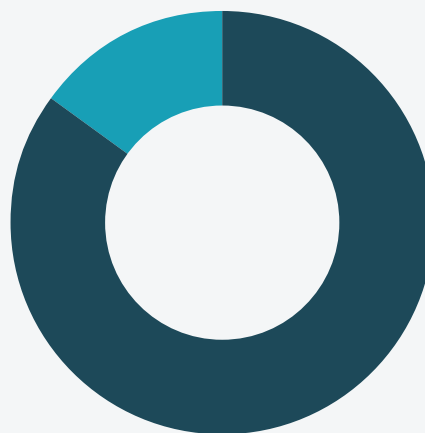
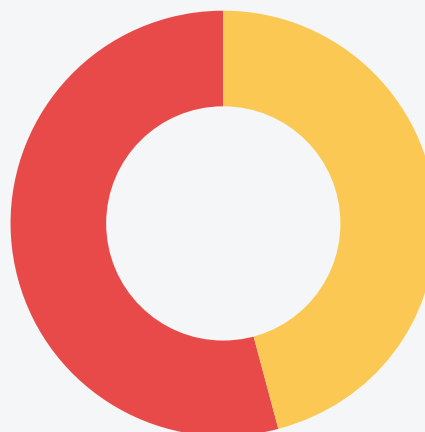
Please tell us more about the status of your allegation:

I have previously experienced an allegation which has concluded

824 – 85%

I am currently experiencing an allegation

140 – 15%



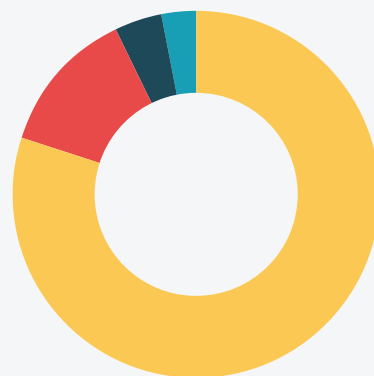


POST ALLEGATION STATUS/FUTURE FOSTERING

We asked

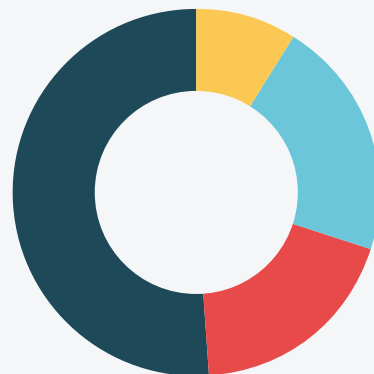
We asked those who had experienced an allegation which had concluded whether they continued to foster

- Yes 654 – 80%** There was no change in terms of approval
- Yes 110 – 13%** But with a change of terms of approval
- No 37 – 4%**
- 23 – 3%** I resigned before the allegation concluded (*see page 26 for further context)



47 of the 140 (34%) currently experiencing an allegation told us that they did not intend to continue fostering and when

- 4 – 9%** During the investigation
- 10 – 21%** At the conclusion of the investigation
- 9 – 19%** At the post-allegation review panel
- 24 – 51%** Unsure





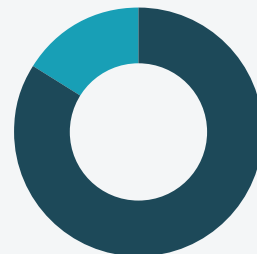
POLICY AND PROCESSES

We asked all respondents

Do you know the procedure to follow if a child in your care tells you they have been harmed by you or a member of your family?

■ Yes 1767 – 84%

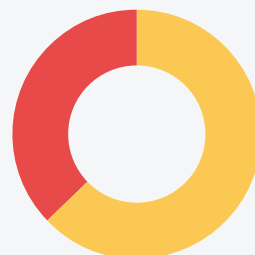
■ No 335 – 16%



Are you confident that you understand the procedure followed by children's services when an allegation is made against a foster carer?

■ Yes 1320 – 63%

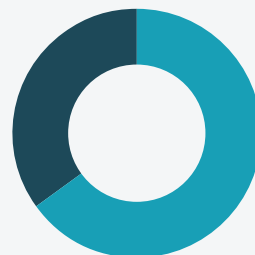
■ No 782 – 37%



Have you received a written copy or know where to find a copy of your fostering service's allegation policy and procedure?

■ Yes 1359 – 65%

■ No 743 – 35%



Of those who said no, 31% said they did not know who to ask for a copy of their fostering service allegation policy and procedure.



National Minimum Standards in England require that foster carers understand what they must do if they receive an allegation, have a copy of the services' child protection procedures widely available to them and, there is a clear policy framework for managing investigations into allegations of abuse against people who work with children compliant with Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Guidance and standards state that a designated senior manager in the fostering service should manage allegations and liaise with the LADO and that the safeguarding policy should set out clearly the procedure that staff and foster carers should follow in the event of an allegation, including how such matters are to be referred to the LADO. (Volume 4 The Children's Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations; NMS (England) 2011 22.5; Working Together 2023 para 226).



POLICY AND PROCESSES

We asked –

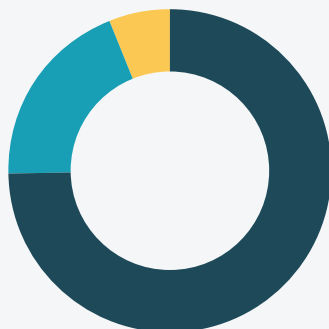
Were you notified the allegation was referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)?

Currently subject to an allegation

■ **Yes 104 – 74%**

■ **No 27 – 19%**

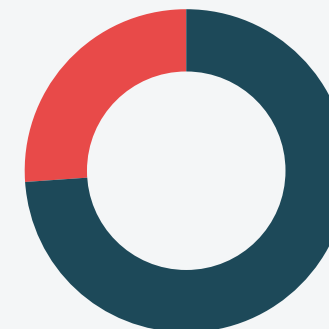
■ **Not yet 9 – 6%**



Concluded allegation

■ **Yes 609 – 74%**

■ **No 215 – 26%**

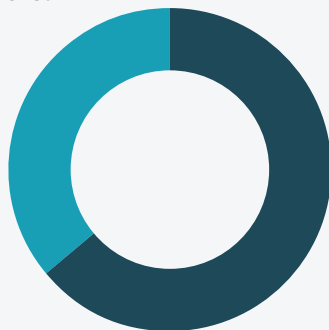


Was it explained why and what their role is?

Current allegation

■ **Yes 67 – 64%**

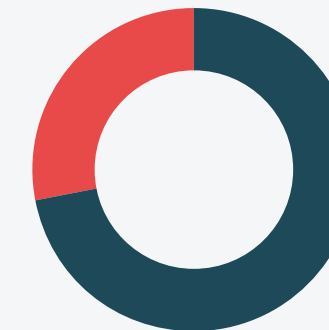
■ **No 37 – 36%**



Concluded allegation

■ **Yes 436 – 72%**

■ **No 173 – 28%**





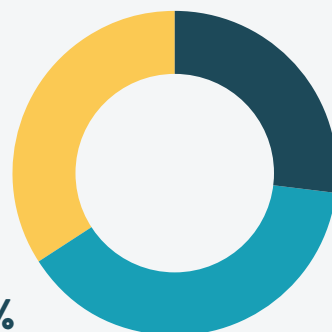
PANEL PROCESS AND POST ALLEGATION REVIEW REPORTS

The National Minimum Standards in England require that as soon as possible after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster is reviewed. Best practice guidance suggests that an IRO and independent panel process is used for these matters and that foster carers have adequate time before attending a panel to receive, read, respond and prepare for the meeting.

We asked those whose allegation was current

Have you received a copy of your Post Allegation Review before panel?

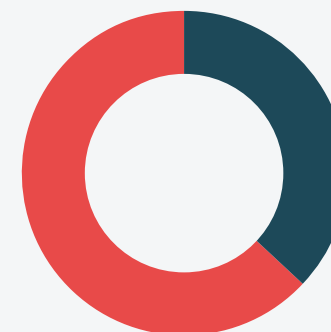
- Yes 38 – 27%**
- No 54 – 39%**
- I'm not at that stage 48 – 34%**



We asked those whose allegation had concluded

Did you receive a copy of your Post Allegation Review before panel?

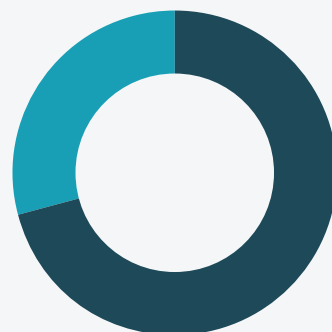
- Yes 306 – 37%**
- No 518 – 63%**



Of the 38 who answered yes, we asked

Did you have adequate time to read and respond in writing to the review?

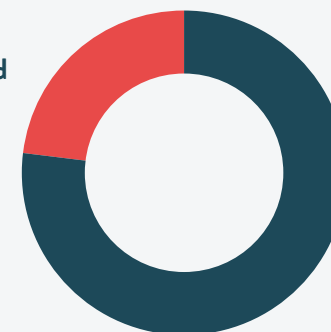
- Yes 27 – 71%**
- No 11 – 29%**



Of the 306 who answered yes we asked

Did you have adequate time to read and respond in writing to the review? (good practice is 7-10 working days)

- Yes 237 – 77%**
- No 69 – 23%**





RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Fostering services should ensure newly approved foster carers are given a thorough induction which includes robust, clear information about allegations and the legislation, guidance, policy and procedure they would be subject to should an allegation be made against them. Additionally this information should be discussed and reflected upon with the foster carers in their early supervision sessions, acknowledged as received by the foster carer and recorded on their file.
- 2.** As part of the above, we reinforce the recommendation in the Rees report (2016) that the DfE (and equivalent in other UK countries) reissue (or issue) revised guidance leaflet 'Protecting Children and Supporting Foster Carers during Allegations' to replace that issued in 2009.
- 3.** Independent panel chairpersons should not accept cases to panel where it is clear foster carers have not received reports in a timely manner and had the opportunity to respond.
- 4.** Foster carers should be given 15 working days from the date of notification that the allegation reports have been finalised ready to be provided to the panel, to read, consult with independent advice and respond to them. Their responses must be included in the panel paperwork. This should be written into legislative guidance.

Post allegation processes must be followed clearly, in a planned and timely manner, allowing time for reflection upon any written information by the foster carers, and support to write a written response and properly prepare for panel (with provision of support from someone independent of the service). The importance of this part of the process cannot be underestimated in its impact upon potential retention of foster carers and to begin to rebuild and restore any fractured relationships between them and their service/individual workers, to allow them to process their experience and move forward.

For those who cannot continue to foster, services have a duty of care to ensure that the process is completed as sensitively as possible and in a way which supports individuals and their family members to move on from fostering as positively as possible.

Agency Decision Makers should make comment where they can evidence the process has not been fair to foster carers, highlighting to services where processes have not been followed correctly. They should track time frames for cases, to ensure that services are following best practice guidance.



“Training around allegations should be designed to build trust in the system and process, not scare carers and make the process seem so cut throat. Thresholds for allegations and complaints needs to be clearer, giving carers clear understanding of what they can expect and the support on offer.”



TRAINING

We asked all respondents

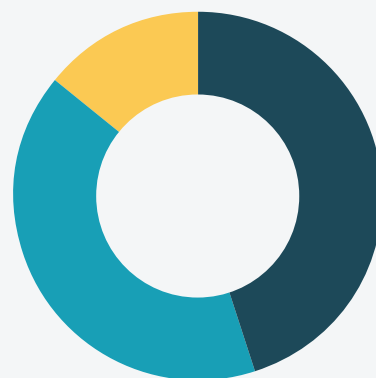
Did you receive allegations training within six months of your initial approval?

■ **Yes 936 – 45%**

■ **No 862 – 41%**

■ **Unsure 304 – 14%**

Of those who did, 58% received the training face-to-face.



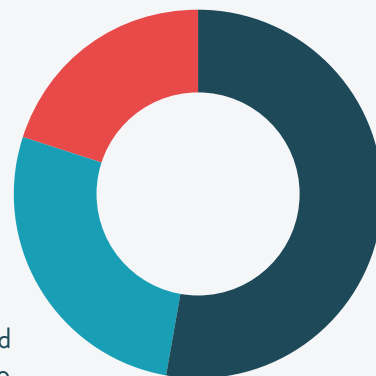
Are you offered ongoing regular allegations training post approval e.g. every two or three years?

■ **Yes 1123 – 53%**

■ **No 560 – 27%**

■ **Unsure 419 – 20%**

88% of those who answered yes said they had attended the offered training. Of the 12% who said no, there were a variety of reasons for not doing so.



Many cited lack of availability of training at a time that doesn't clash with work or commitments to caring for foster children and general time commitments and being too busy.

Many carers commented that they were new to fostering (defining 'new' as anything up to 3 years), this may create confusion in terms of priority areas for training as perceived by providers and foster carers and in relation to expectations in terms of knowledge held by foster carers.

Some cited that other training seemed to be a higher priority. *"It was online and didn't think it was relevant"* *"Other issues seem more pressing and interesting"*

A few prefer face-to-face training and their service only offer online courses.

A few had transferable knowledge from professions such as teaching and social work or had learned from experience along the way having experienced an allegation or being involved with other carers who have.

A couple commented that they weren't the 'main carer' in a partnership and that their partner had completed the training and passed their learning to them informally.

It is concerning that the number of respondents who answered 'unsure' was high at 20%. Although we are unable to be sure as to why this answer was given it does raise a number of questions in terms of the impact or priority placed on this training element.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific training about allegations should become mandatory post approval within six months, and renewed regularly and this requirement be explicitly outlined in standards and guidance across the UK. Training content should be standardised across services to ensure consistency. Providers must evidence how this training has contributed to the learning and experience of foster carers by evidencing discussions in supervision sessions following attendance.

This recommendation was previously made in 2016 in the research from Plumridge & Sebba (The Rees Centre, University of Oxford). It is not possible to comprehensively train foster carers in safeguarding and safer caring practice without inclusion of the subject of allegations, to bring to life how all three areas are inextricably linked. Arguably the TSDS in England already require this – ‘2.6c Know about the allegations policies and procedures of your fostering service and how to access support and legal advice.’, However the evidence collected from the survey may suggest this is not the reality.

All carers, should receive this training, and we recommend access to the training should be given to all adult household members, support network carers and any adult members of the

carer’s friends/family network whom it is deemed appropriate due to the level of contact they may have with children placed.

As set out in the freehand comments, it was strongly felt that fostering staff and managers, and linked professionals such as education leads and the police would benefit from a better understanding about allegations concerning foster carers.

Ideally the foster carer preparation training should begin to raise for discussion the subject of allegations alongside safeguarding and safer caring, and a consistent approach applied across services, especially where LA’s become part of a regional hub, to ensure equity of information to all new applicants to fostering.

“A nationwide training for all that is supported and clear about all aspects. So many differing ways and opinions makes the process muddled, confusing and traumatic for everyone involved.”

“Following the allegation we attended several training sessions that I believe ALL foster carers should have at the start of their fostering journey.”

“The children I don’t blame as they have been through a lot. It’s the system and social workers who are cold and have no understanding of home life with children that have complex needs.”



SAFER CARE AND RECORDING

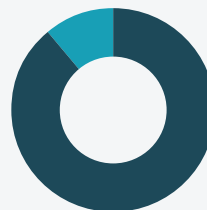
Training in safer caring skills is mandatory in England, and the use of family safer caring plans is a way of embedding these considerations into daily life, allowing for regular discussion and review with supervising staff.

General foster carer recordings about children are also required on a regular basis and the importance of these in relation to allegations, standards of care and complaints cannot be underestimated. Records of social work visits and supervision of foster carers are also powerful tools in understanding and documenting important information about discussions about children's needs and behaviour, and plans of action agreed and advice given for foster carers to follow. It is the responsibility of the supervising social worker to ensure carers are providing records in line with the legislation, guidance and standards and the local fostering service's policy on frequency and quality, and to countersign these records, having read and actioned any points arising from them before they are filed.

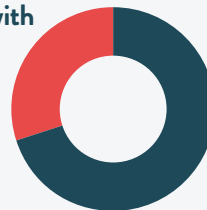
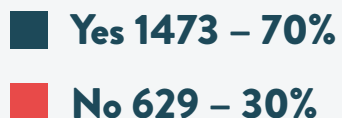
The survey has highlighted that foster carers feel that their recordings and safer care plans are strong 'evidence' which can support their position when they are subject to an allegation, and many freehand comments suggested that lack of access to these during the course of investigations is unfair and improper. This information is only given in the event the case is criminal and reaches a prosecution, when it would be shared with defendants through the legal process.

We asked all respondents

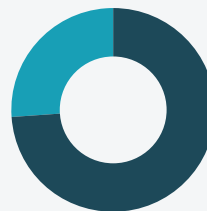
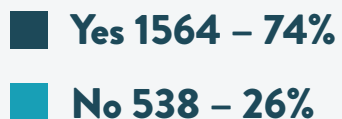
Do you have a family safer caring plan?



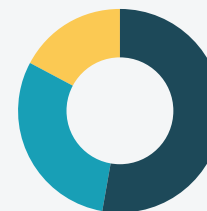
Do you regularly review your family safer caring plan in supervision with your supervising social worker?



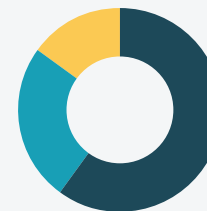
Do you have child specific safer caring plans in place for the child(ren) you look after?



Do you receive copies of your supervision notes from your fostering service which are signed by both parties?



Are your foster carer recordings on children and young people read and signed by your supervising social worker?





RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Fostering services should have a robust system for monitoring of foster carer and social work records, tracking submissions, ensuring review and updates of documents and addressing anything outstanding in a timely manner. Modern information recording systems are more immediately and easily accessible, and enable social work staff to access information written about children by foster carers more quickly than ever. Therefore, the results from this section are concerning.
- 2.** Guidance should be issued from all UK government policy departments on access to any documents a foster carer has previously been in possession of about children and young people, that they wish to access again if they feel that the information could support an allegation investigation, or indeed change the outcome.

“My experience although upsetting and traumatising was very good. I had an amazing team of LA Social Workers who supported me and my record keeping, communication and good working relationships with experienced SW helped me process what had happened, evidence against the allegations and prove they were unsubstantiated.”

“Full detailed report of the full investigation with verbal and written statements for safe keeping by the Carer in the event of future repercussions. This should not just be held by the Fostering Services in a system that could fail in the future and records then lost.”



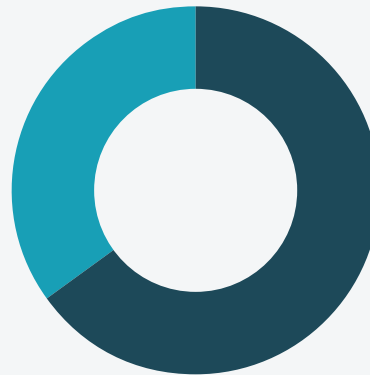
GENERAL SUPPORT

We asked all respondents

Have you and your Supervising Social Worker (SSW) reviewed your support network in the last 12 months to make sure it is up to date?

■ **Yes 1363 – 65%**

■ **No 739 – 35%**



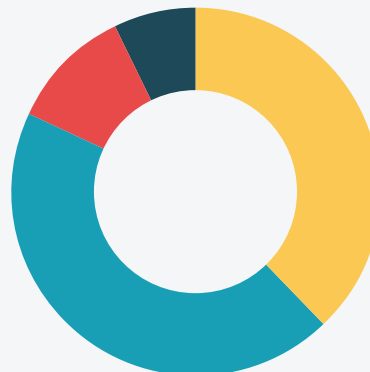
How satisfied are you that your contact with your SSW and/or the fostering service staff helps you to talk about any concerns or issues you have about the children you look after?

■ **Extremely satisfied 806 – 38%**

■ **Satisfied 921 – 44%**

■ **Dissatisfied 227 – 11%**

■ **Extremely dissatisfied 148 – 7%**





ALLEGATION SPECIFIC SUPPORT

We asked respondents what allegation specific support they were currently aware of from a selection of answer choices. They could tick as many options as they liked.

MOST KNOWN

- Information about the procedure immediately as an allegation is made (verbal and in writing)
- Ongoing information about the procedure as the investigation goes on (verbal and in writing)
- Independent support (from a person independent of the fostering service)
- Written copy of the allegation details (as soon as this is possible)
- Continued supervision and face-to-face support from your supervising social worker, for you and your extended family

MOST KNOWN

LEAST KNOWN

- Named senior manager within the fostering service who is responsible for obtaining updates on the investigation and sharing what they can with you regularly
- Support for any children in your family
- Continued offers of attending training
- Continued offers of attending support groups
- Detail of changes to your fostering payments during the process of the investigation

LEAST KNOWN

NONE OF THESE

- None of these 22% - that's 469 respondents!**

NONE OF THESE



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

We asked

Both those whose allegation was concluded and those where it was current 'during the course of the allegation investigation did your fostering service allow you the opportunity to vent any frustration and discuss your emotional needs with them?' (Answering this question was optional.)

47%



386 - SAID NO

44%



358 - SAID YES

9%



78 - DIDN'T SELECT EITHER BUT LEFT FREEHAND COMMENTS

OTHER

IF YOU HAVE ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, PLEASE SELECT 'OTHER' TO TYPE IN YOUR FEEDBACK

NEGATIVE



The SSW was withdrawn and no supervisions occurred thereafter;

My frustrations were viewed negatively and recorded and used against me. If I did vent I felt like I was judged highly.

I was accused of being too emotional!!

POSITIVE



My SSW was there when I needed to speak about it but she wasn't able to help other than listen to me.

My SSW at that time was an amazing lady and she contacted me very often to ensure I was OK and to offer supervision as often as I wanted it.



WHAT FOSTER CARERS TELL US ABOUT THE SUPPORT THEY NEED DURING AN ALLEGATION

OF THE 66% currently experiencing an allegation, but who intend to continue to foster once the allegation has concluded we asked - 'tell us what helped you want to continue to foster' from a selection of options.

The top 6 most selected responses were:

1. Preparation during pre-approval training
2. Preparation during support groups for foster carers
3. Received good information about the process
4. Received good information about the allegation
5. Support from staff within the fostering service
6. Independent support from a worker outside the fostering service

An option of 'other' was given to allow for respondents to tell us their individual views, and we received 29 responses.

The majority of respondents who left freehand comments stated it was their love and commitment to the children they foster which has made them feel able to continue to foster, also the understanding of why the allegation was made by a child who has experienced trauma. Several mentioned it was because they knew they had not done what was alleged. Several stated that they knew they were good foster carers and their self-belief has kept them going. Two mentioned support organisations providing independent support. Two mentioned support from other foster carers and one mentioned having good support from their supervising social worker.



*The survey respondents are likely to be predominantly FosterTalk members as we advertised the survey through our social media channels and other correspondence. Therefore, the 66% currently experiencing an allegation who intend to continue to foster, is likely to be more reflective of the wider picture of the impact of allegations on the retention of foster carers. It is encouraging to report that by the time the allegation concluded, the respondents who received the support from their service and organisations such as FosterTalk were retained, which highlights the value of this type of investment in foster carers. However, as the survey likely did not reach many previous foster carers due to our recruitment channels, it has not been successful in capturing information about those who left following allegations and why, thus a potential bias in our sample. Further research and data collection is therefore required by government bodies to enable further understanding of the effect of allegations on retention.

OF THE 93% who continued to foster after the conclusion of the allegation we asked - 'tell us what helped you to continue to foster' from a selection of options.

The top 6 most selected responses were:

1. Preparation during supervision sessions with SSW
2. Received good information about the process
3. Received good information about the allegation
4. Support from staff within the fostering service
5. Independent support from a worker outside the fostering service
6. Support for wider family

An option of 'other' was given to allow for respondents to tell us their individual views, and we received 310 responses.

The themes were similar to the other group of respondents, citing their love and commitment to the child, receiving the support of other foster carers, knowing that they weren't the only foster carers who have had an allegation, support from partners, colleagues, friends and family, believing they can help other children who need them in the future, their own resilience and tenacity, knowing they hadn't done what was alleged.

WHAT FOSTER CARERS TELL US ABOUT THE SUPPORT THEY NEED DURING AN ALLEGATION

What helped you want to continue to foster while currently experiencing an allegation?

“We love the child who made the allegation”

“I know the child in question is hurting, lashing out untrue but they believe their reality”

“I have a long term foster child who we love dearly and don't want to disrupt his life”

“...one Foster child removed and one returned very quickly which has kept us focused on continuing fostering”

“Having good friends and faith in my own abilities”



What helped you to continue to foster after the conclusion of the allegation?

“The other child we were fostering remained...She is the sole reason we stayed...If it wasn't for her, we would have resigned...”

“The only thing that stops us resigning is that should we stop, vulnerable children won't be able to secure a safe loving home... We do not blame the child!”

“I have had a young person in my care for 8 years. Otherwise I would of resigned as I am fed up with the system”

“Family and friends. Independent counsellor sought for birth children. Talking with partner and other professionals outside of fostering agency who helped make sense of things as there was a lack of and backing away from support from our agency!”

“The thought of not helping any other children encouraged us to continue”

“We have been fostering 17+ years and our continued resilience, support and motivation with each other kept us going”



WHAT COULD PREVENT THOSE CURRENTLY CONSIDERING LEAVING FOSTERING

Of the 47 carers currently experiencing an allegation who told us that they did not intend to continue fostering we asked - 'What would help you to continue to foster?' from a selection of options.



The top 7 most selected responses were:

1. Better information about the process
2. Better information about the allegation
3. Financial support during the investigation
4. Support from staff within the fostering service
5. Independent support from a worker outside the fostering service
6. Legal Support
7. Support for birth/adopted children

An option of 'other' was given to allow for respondents to tell us their individual views, and we received 14 responses.

These suggestions fell into several themes – support with finances during investigations, fair treatment/hearings where all evidence is included and the carers being able to submit supporting evidence, foster carers being given employment rights and/or respected as professionals, professionals held to account when they have made mistakes or don't practice in accordance with laws and guidance. Social workers who remain with families and children for longer, thus understanding children's histories and behaviours which may lead to them making allegations.

“Better trained and more experienced social workers who understand the children that they work with and their needs and disabilities so that we could work more closely together to avoid a situation like this happening again.”

“Continuity of social workers, so that they are aware of the child's needs and ours...”

“Nothing - it has been a terrible time and now threatens my future work as a teacher...”

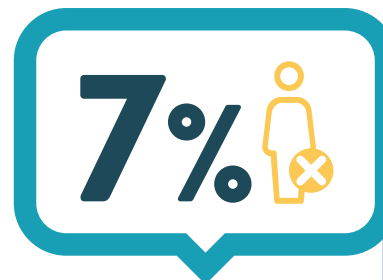
“Nothing would make me foster again.”

“An allegation was made 2 years ago - we were paid for some of this time but it stopped without explanation, 2 years later we have still not had the final Review - this is severely affecting our mental health.”



WHAT MAY HAVE PREVENTED THOSE WHO NO LONGER FOSTER LEAVING

Of the 7% (60 carers) whose allegation had concluded, who no longer fostered after the allegation we asked 'What would have helped you to continue to foster?' from a selection of options.



The top 6 most selected responses were:

1. Better information about the process
2. Better information about the allegation
3. Financial support during the investigation
4. Support from staff within the fostering service
5. Independent support from a worker outside the fostering service
6. Counselling Support

An option of 'other' was given to allow for respondents to tell us their individual views, and we received 10 responses.

Themes arising from the freehand comments left for this question ranged from being treated fairly, being given clear definition of what category the information is being investigated under i.e. allegation, complaint, standard of care concern, there not being such an impact on birth children, being listened to, better support for children and carers and reparation/restorative practices post allegation.

“To not be victimised after re approval and to be comforted after but to not be supported and looking for reasons to discontinued our services... Financially and emotionally it has broken us!”

“Better trained social workers who are prepared to listen to truth without bias”

“Not to have been treated as ‘guilty until proven innocent’.”

“A child social care system which bothered to listen to the child”



INDEPENDENT SUPPORT

In England, legislation and guidance state that foster carers should be provided with Independent Support; 'The fostering service should make support, which is independent of the fostering service, available to the person subject to the allegation and, where this is a foster carer, to their household'.

This support is to provide:

- information and advice about the process;
- emotional support; and,
- if needed, mediation between the foster carer and the fostering service and/or advocacy (including attendance at meetings and panel hearings).'

In Scotland consideration of provision of independent support is advised (Scottish Government, Riaghaltas na h-Alba (2013). Managing allegations against foster carers and approved kinship carers - How agencies should respond). Welsh safeguarding procedures underpinned by Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, state that the 'employer' should provide welfare support to the individual, and ensure there is appropriate support, information and advice for all those affected during this process.

824
RESPONDENTS 

Of the 824 respondents whose allegation had concluded, only 248 said they were provided with independent support – 30%

Leaving 70% without support.

30% We asked the 30% how quickly they received Independent Support -

20% carers received Independent Support within 2 days of being informed there was an allegation. At 7 days, 50% of respondents had Independent Support in place. 39% received this support between 2 weeks and 1 month. Concernedly 10% reported it took 3 months to 6 months + to receive Independent Support.

196 respondents told us this was offered voluntarily, leaving 21% without it being freely offered.

We asked the 21% how they learned about the support. The majority stated through a membership service such as FosterTalk, the next largest group heard from another foster carer, then their own research and previous experience. One person stated it was from another professional outside of a fostering service and one from a solicitor.

Of the 140 respondents whose allegation was current, 72 (51%) said they were provided with independent support.

Leaving 49% without support at the point they completed the survey.

We asked the 51% how quickly they received independent support -

19% carers received Independent Support within 2 days of being informed there was an allegation. At 7 days, 60% of respondents had Independent Support in place. 35% received this support between 2 weeks and 1 month. 6% reported it took 3 months to 6 months + to receive Independent Support.

57 respondents told us this was offered voluntarily, leaving 21% without it being freely offered.

We asked the 21% how they learned about the support. The majority stated through a membership service such as FosterTalk, the next largest group heard from another foster carer, then their own research. One person stated it was from another professional outside of a fostering service.

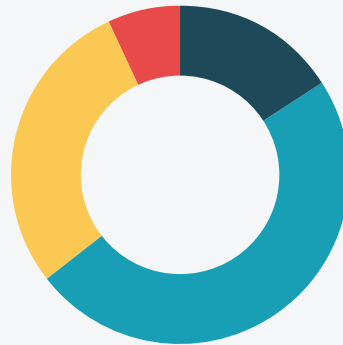


SUPPORT FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

In your opinion have your extended family been given sufficient support?

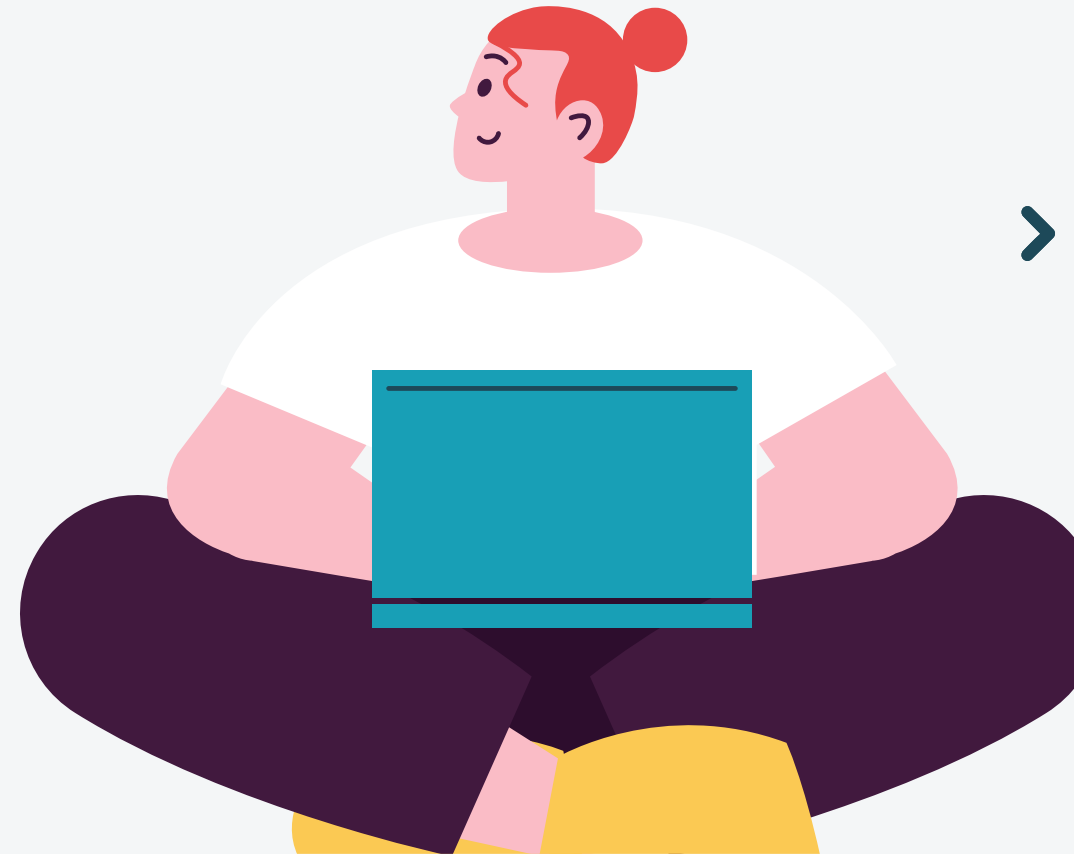
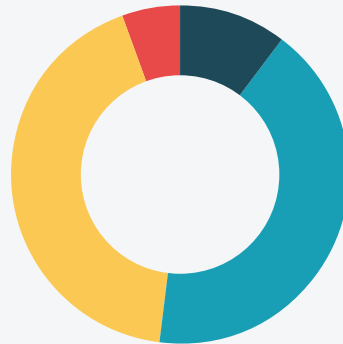
Current allegation

- Yes – 23
- No – 70
- Not applicable – 41
- Freehand comments – 10



Concluded allegation

- Yes – 87
- No – 351
- Not applicable – 358
- Freehand comments – 46





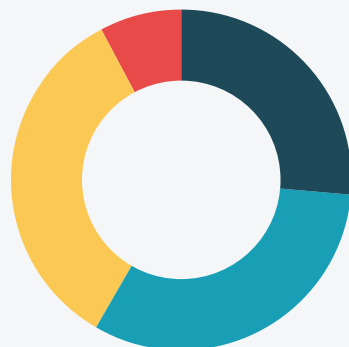
SUPPORT FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

We Asked

In your opinion were your birth/adopted children given satisfactory support? If you have any additional comments, please select 'other' to type in your feedback.

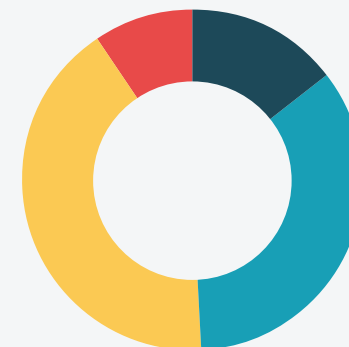
Current allegation

- Yes – 38**
- No – 46**
- Not applicable – 49**
- Freehand comments – 11**



Concluded allegation

- Yes – 126**
- No – 299**
- Not applicable – 355**
- Freehand comments – 80**



Overall the freehand comments left by respondents to the previous comments were negative – below is a small sample:

“Our son was mentioned in the allegation report written by a manager, yet the manager had never bothered to speak with our son, so his voice was completely missing.”

“Long term foster child who remained in our care was not supported well.”

“My son was physically attacked by foster child - foster manager investigating did not want to talk to him and was not interested in details of attack though this was focus of ‘allegation’.”

“My Mum thinks we should stop fostering, having always been supportive.”

“It was an awful experience. I would never foster or be a connected carer again. I always discourage my friends and colleagues from becoming foster carers although they need little encouragement.”

“Nothing offered to my grandchildren who witnessed the incident.”

“Families should be offered a professional debrief service to avoid trauma impacts.”

“My teenage daughter was angry at the lack of support offered to me. It massively affected her opinion of the service.”



FINANCIAL SUPPORT

We Asked

Have you been given financial support during the investigation if foster children were removed from your care?

Current allegation –

■ **Yes 49 – 35%**

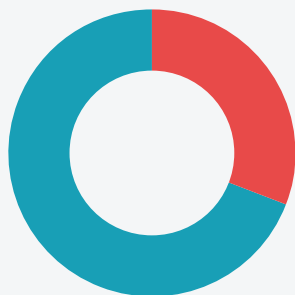
■ **No 91 – 65%**



Concluded allegation –

■ **Yes 256 – 31%**

■ **No 568 – 69%**



Whilst we didn't ask for freehand comments in this area, numerous respondents left comments in other areas of the survey about the financial impact of allegations -

"I do not agree that any foster payments should be removed at all during a period of allegation - should the allegation be dismissed then all fees should be reimbursed. We note any other government employee would be suspended on full pay - why should it be any different for foster carers!?"

"The stress has cost me my job, my sanity and my financial situation and personal life has suffered."

"If anything it would be better to have a system that repays money if found guilty of the allegation, rather than one that automatically terminates finances."

"The stress and upheaval of an allegation is bad enough, but is heightened when financial support is not provided during the course of the investigation. Although there is an expectation that foster carers do not depend on fostering allowances, this is unrealistic, because there is also an expectation that they don't have jobs... The combined stress of being investigated and also experiencing financial hardship creates an intolerable burden on fostering families, especially when an allegation is made maliciously or without foundation which is not uncommon."

"Foster carers should have a mandatory retainer payment while investigations are ongoing."

"Foster parents should continue to be paid in the same way as you would if you were suspended from a job. It would also make services work quicker if they were paying out!"



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. 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.”

“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.”

2. 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.

“Maintain good mental health, relieve your pressure, and release your emotions appropriately.”

“... 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.”

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.



RECOMMENDATIONS

3. 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.

“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.”

“...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...”

“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”

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



COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS FROM RESPONDENTS

We asked all respondents –

What changes could be made that would make the biggest difference to your experience of the allegation process?

Well over 400 responses were left.

The themes of these are summarised below.

- Openness and communication from fostering services
- Support and respectful treatment
- Better support for a foster carer, their birth/adopted children, foster children, family and friends in the household/ support network
- Mandatory time limits for investigations to be completed within
- Allegation investigations following a presumption of innocence until proven guilty principle
- Consistency and transparency of process and its application
- Training in allegations not only for foster carers, but for fostering staff and managers
- Guidelines and clarity on financial support that all carers should be entitled to whilst experiencing an investigation
- Employment rights – suspended on full pay equivalent and give the same rights and protections as an employee in the same situation would have
- Independent supporter being able to speak on behalf of foster carers in meetings where the carer requests this
- Lack of compassion and understanding from fostering staff of the real impact of an allegation on the fostering family
- The voice of the foster carer is not listened to and they are not included fully in investigations, including access to previous recordings to ‘defend’ themselves



CONCLUSION

It is evident from the number of respondents, the time they took to complete the survey (average 12.23 minutes) and the amount of freehand comments and considerations left, that the area of allegations is of great importance to previous and current foster carers, and despite previous research and recommendations, there are still significant problems with current processes and their application.

The content of the freehand comments evidence the confusion, dismay and frustration experienced by carers, and how as a sector more must be done to support and reduce the impact of allegations on carers and their wider networks should we wish to avoid further unnecessary loss of foster carers to the community. In addition, the impact upon recruitment cannot be underestimated, as we know that word of mouth is the best way to attract potential new foster carers to apply.

Some foster carers also highlighted the impact they felt this had on the young people in their care. We currently have little understanding of this, so would also recommend that further research on the experience of allegations for young people in foster care should be undertaken, to help inform the sector of the impact of current processes and practices, to ensure that our priority remains to keep young people and their carers safe and supported.



FosterTalk recognise that this survey has given access to real life experiences of those foster carers who wished to respond, and valuable insight into the impact of these experiences on not only them, but children and young people and family and friends. This will raise awareness which the sector can learn from and reflect upon within policy and practice.



APPENDIX





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