



# *Getting the Support They Need*

*findings of a survey of foster carers in the UK*

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the fostering network  
the voice of foster care



## Introduction

Over 51,000 children live with 43,000 foster families on any one day in the UK. Today's foster carers are child care experts working alongside a team of other professionals to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

Foster families have to manage and deal with a whole range of challenging situations. Managing children's behaviour, contact with the birth family, the fear and reality of allegations, children coming and going and moving on and the feelings of failure and distress brought on by a placement breakdown – all of these can be very stressful. It is essential that fostering services provide flexible and appropriate support to foster families throughout their fostering careers.

A recent review of research on foster care in the UK found that '*carers want respect; efficiency; reliable, warm support from social workers; good information on foster children; responsive out-of-hours services; relief breaks when they need them; information on entitlements; fair remuneration; appropriate training and an absence of avoidable hassles (e.g. quarrels over insurance)*'.<sup>1</sup>

Fostering services in the UK are covered by a range of regulations<sup>2</sup> which address the areas of support that foster carers should be provided with and guidance on the information they should receive about the child in their care. The Fostering Network wanted to explore the levels of support that foster carers are actually receiving and to identify whether this support is adequate in meeting their needs.

Therefore in April and May 2009 the Fostering Network carried out an online survey of foster carers. It also asked if foster carers had looked after children outside of their approval range in the last three years and if so, did they have the skills and experience needed to look after them, or were they able to access additional support to help them if required. Responses were received from 442 foster carers and the findings are detailed in this report.

Fostering services are responsible for providing foster carers with a range of formal and informal support. Although the latter can often be sought or developed independently it does not make it any less valuable to foster carers. Fostering services should, in partnership with their foster carers, acknowledge, identify and encourage all forms of support which are beneficial to foster families and should look at ways to improve the services they offer. As one respondent observed:

*'We need a proactive system rather than a reactive one which is creaking under the strain. We all know that the children in the care system are the most damaged so let's support the carers with relevant training and information to allow them to do their job effectively.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, I *Fostering Now. Messages from research* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2005) p. 107

<sup>2</sup> UK National Standards for Foster Care 1999; The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2002; The Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2003; The Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996; The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

## The findings

The following sections explore the issues raised by foster carers through the survey around accessing and receiving support and information needed to care for children.

### 1. Types of support

The survey asked foster carers about the range of support they received from their fostering service. Foster carers were asked to rate how important particular services were for them as well the quality of the support they received.

#### Supervising social workers

All approved foster carers must be linked with a social worker who provides supervision and support to them and other members of the family. This person should regularly contact the foster family to find out how things are going, offer support and guidance all year round and discuss development opportunities. It is beneficial to foster carers if they keep the same supervising social worker for a period of time to provide continuity and help develop effective working relationships.

- 95 per cent of foster carers had a named supervising social worker at the time of completing the survey.
- Nearly half of foster carers had had the same supervising social worker for more than two years.
- For 50 per cent of foster carers keeping the same supervising social worker was one of the most important types of support for them.

The regularity of contact between foster families and their supervising social workers can vary. Many fostering services offer planned contact but access between supervision varies from one fostering services to another.

- Just over 70 per cent of foster carers met with their supervising social worker either monthly or every six weeks.
- Over 90 per cent of foster carers were able to contact their supervising social worker directly on their office or mobile phones.

If foster carers are contacting their supervising social worker in an emergency it is particularly important that their call is returned promptly or alternative support is available to the foster carer.

- Over 60 per cent of foster carers had experienced their call being returned on the same day if the supervising social worker was not available when they called.

Receiving good quality and timely support from a qualified and experienced supervising social worker is very important.

- 96 per cent of foster carers rated the availability of their supervising social worker as being important to them.
- 75 per cent of foster carers rated their current supervising social worker as either excellent or good. Nine per cent rated them as poor.

**The Fostering Network recommends that all foster carers have regular supervision from a named supervisor.**

## **Availability of the child's social worker**

Children's social workers have a legal duty to make sure that the children they are responsible for are being properly cared for, emotionally and physically. In order to carry out their responsibilities, the child's social worker must visit foster homes regularly to observe the child and talk through with the foster carers and the child how the placement is going.

As foster carers look after a child on a day-to-day basis they have a lot of useful information for the child's social worker. Foster carers are expected to keep records on a range of things such as the child's reaction to contact with parents, their progress at school and their relationships with the foster family and other children.

- 96 per cent of foster carers rated the provision of support from the child's social worker as important to them.
- While over 40 per cent of foster carers rated the actual support received from the child's social worker as excellent or good. 25 per cent of foster carers rated the support they received as poor.

As foster carers will often receive confidences from the child it is important that they have a good working relationship with the child's social worker and are valued and respected, so that they can work together in the child's best interests.

**The Fostering Network is calling for all social workers working with children in care to undertake specific training on foster care so as to understand, respect and value the role of foster carers.**

## **24-hour support**

The nature of fostering means that foster carers might need to call on assistance and advice outside of office hours, at any time of the day and night and especially in an emergency. Fostering services offer a wide range of out-of-hours services for their foster carers. This may be through the children's services duty team or out-of-hours support run by the fostering service. In addition, some fostering services have recruited a team of experienced foster carers to be available on a rota basis when their colleagues need them. Having effective and knowledgeable staff is very important.

- Although 45 per cent of foster carers rated the out-of-hours service available from their fostering service as excellent or good. 14 per cent rated the service as poor.

**The Fostering Network recommends that fostering services provide a dedicated support service to their foster carers at all times and that such arrangements are reviewed regularly to ensure they are meeting the needs of foster carers.**

## **Training**

All foster carers receive pre and post approval training to ensure that they can carry out the many tasks of fostering. Some is mandatory, such as *The Skills to Foster* or similar, and the successful completion of the *Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care* (England only). The availability and regularity of other learning and development opportunities varies from one fostering service to another.

- Just over 90 per cent of foster carers rated access to training as important.
- Nearly 65 per cent of foster carers rated the training they received as either excellent or good, although 10 per cent felt it was poor.

Many foster carers could benefit from additional training as and when the needs of a particular child they are caring for requires it and fostering services must offer this (see section 2 for further information).

**The Fostering Network is calling for all foster carers to have access to a learning and development framework to enable them to develop their skills and experience.**

## **Financial support**

Foster carers receive an allowance to cover the cost of looking after the children in their care. There are national minimum allowances in place in England and Northern Ireland but currently not in Scotland or Wales. In addition, 60 per cent<sup>3</sup> of foster carers receive a fee for their work and 75 per cent receive less than the minimum wage from fostering. Without adequate payment, many current foster carers and potential new recruits may simply make the decision that they cannot afford to foster and will choose an alternative career.

- Being fully recompensed for the work they do is important for foster carers, with 93 per cent of foster carers rating it so

**The Fostering Network is calling for all foster carers to be paid for the work that they do.**

## **Respite foster care**

Fostering is very demanding and many foster carers need to be available to the children in their care 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which can include taking them on family holidays. Having access to breaks and some time away from the children in their care can be re-energising and help avoid placement breakdown.

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<sup>3</sup> Swain V *Can't Afford to Foster* The Fostering Network, 2007

- 65 per cent of foster carers stated that having access to respite was important to them.
- Just over 20 per cent of foster carers rated the provision of respite by their fostering service as poor, although 30 per cent rated it as either excellent or good.

Due to the national shortage of foster carers having breaks can sometimes be very difficult, as approved foster carers with the right specialism and space in their homes might not be available when they are needed. As one foster carer commented: *'our social worker is struggling to find appropriate respite for us'*. Sometimes relationships between foster carers allow reciprocal arrangements to be made, whereby they provide approved respite for one another throughout the year.

It is important that fostering services get respite right for children too; respite care must be planned and with a foster family known to the child, or at the very least they must have had the chance to meet the family prior to going to stay there.

**The Fostering Network recommends that fostering services make respite care available for their foster carers where appropriate.**

### **Advice from someone who is independent**

At times fostering can be very stressful and challenging and it can be beneficial for foster carers to receive independent advice about a range of issues. This is particularly important during an allegation as this can be a very distressing time for foster carers. Having an independent person to help with negotiations and discussions in order to resolve disagreements and disputes can make a real difference to foster carers and to their decision to continue fostering.

- Although nearly 30 per cent reported that the independent advice available to them was either excellent or good, 22 per cent of foster carers rated the provision of independent advice as poor.

The Fostering Network can provide an independent advice and mediation service to fostering services and their foster carers.

**The Fostering Network is calling for all foster carers to have access to the provision of independent support, advice and guidance - especially during an allegation.**

### **Support groups**

Fostering can be a very isolating task and having the opportunity to talk to people who share the same experience or can impart their knowledge to others is very important. Foster carers benefit from having access to regular support groups.

In reality, the structure of these varies around the UK. What is important is that fostering services offer foster carers the chance to get together in a planned and prepared way to share their experiences, discuss issues and hear possible solutions and ideas from other foster carers. Support groups must offer a safe environment to do this where confidentiality and people's views are respected.

- Only 44 per cent of foster carers thought that the support groups arranged by their fostering service were excellent or good.

It is essential that support groups are worthwhile and distinguishable from training opportunities. Their main function is to enable foster carers to network and share experiences in a structured way, making sure that sufficient time is set aside to do this. As one respondent noted:

*'to be able to let off steam or share problems with people who understand and walk in the same shoes as we do would be great. But the support groups run by our fostering service are another way of giving us training, they have an agenda and expert people to come and talk to us, hardly a real support group.'*

Fostering services need to be clear about the purpose and make-up of the support groups that they offer and ensure that they meet the needs of their foster carers through consultation, discussion and listening to their foster carers.

**The Fostering Network recommends that fostering services encourage and enable foster carers to attend effective support groups.**

## Foster care associations

A foster care association<sup>4</sup> is a local voluntary organisation set up and run by foster carers. They can be very useful for foster families by providing a framework to support them as well as making contributions to developments and improvements at a local level. Some foster care associations are well established, well-funded and represent an effective local resource for all those involved in fostering, but others struggle to succeed and there are many foster carers who have no access to a local association at all.

- 75 per cent of foster carers rated their foster care association as OK or better.

**The Fostering Network is calling for fostering services to encourage and enable the development of effective foster care associations.**

## Peer support (mentoring)

For new foster carers and those struggling with placements in particular, fostering can feel an isolated activity. Although family, friends and neighbours can be a useful form of support, they might not really understand what is involved in fostering and foster carers are limited as to the information they can share. Although most foster carers have a supervising social worker with whom they can discuss issues, they may not always feel comfortable raising particular anxieties and doubts, for fear of being seen as unable to cope.

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<sup>4</sup> There are currently at least 115 foster care associations operating in England and a small number elsewhere in the UK. For more information see *Foster Care Association Development Project – a forum for change summary report* (The Fostering Network, 2009)

Having access to other foster carers is very important. As one respondent put it *'the most important support is the network of carers that make themselves available to me at times when I need help and advice, I feel they know and understand the difficult task we all do as carers.'*

- 56 per cent of foster carers rated the peer support they received as OK or better, while 19 per cent said it was poor.

**The Fostering Network recommends that fostering services encourage and enable foster carers to offer and receive support from each other, including through peer mentoring.**

## **Other forms of support vital to foster carers**

The survey flagged up that foster carers find support in a whole range of other places, including through their family, friends and community networks. As one respondent commented *'having a good – not necessarily large – group of friends who have nothing to do with fostering but who can lift your spirits or just be there when you need a 'moan' and who understand the confidential nature of foster carers' work is important.'*

Respondents highlighted the importance of support from a range of other professionals. These include psychologists offering advice on children's behaviour, CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), consultation with clinical psychologists, contact with the child's therapist, doctors, teachers, medical teams, youth offending teams and voluntary groups.

## **2. Matching and placement support**

The support required and on offer is likely to change during foster carers' careers. This is often due to the needs of a particular child in their care. It is important that fostering services are flexible in providing access to a range of services at the time needed by the foster family.

The shortage of foster carers in the UK means that often it is necessary for foster carers to look after children outside of their approval range. This is not an ideal situation for children as foster carers might not have all the skills and experience necessary to meet the child's individual needs. Gaining access to appropriate support and learning and development opportunities is vital to improving the chances of a successful placement.

- In the past three years nearly 40 per cent of foster carers had looked after a child who was out of their approval range.

Fostering a child outside of their approval range can be very challenging and is likely to have an impact on placement stability.

- In the past three years just over 30 per cent of foster carers have had a child placed with them for whom they did not feel equipped to care.



- 60 per cent of foster carers who found themselves in this situation accessed more support from their supervising social worker.
- 40 per cent obtained access to specialist services to meet the needs of a particular child.
- Nearly 10 per cent obtained specialist equipment.

It is vital that fostering services provide extra support from the supervising social worker and the child's social worker, access to specialist services (such as therapeutic care), specific training and equipment and support from other foster carers and the rest of the team.

**The Fostering Network recommends that all fostering services have a recruitment strategy which includes an audit of the needs of their looked-after children and their current pool of foster carers to ensure recruitment activity is appropriately targeted.**

### 3. Information on the child or young person

Having detailed and timely information about the background and needs of children in their care is essential because it enables foster carers to carry out their work safely and effectively. Each public authority has a duty to provide this information. When information is unavailable or is withheld this can be very damaging to the fostered child and to the foster family, as the circumstances that led to the two Essex Judgments demonstrated.<sup>5</sup>

- In the past three years just over 50 per cent of foster carers reported that they had had a child placed with them for whom they were not given all the information they needed to care for them safely.

Many foster carers were not told about a range of information concerning the child in their care.

- 33 per cent needed more information about their child's medical requirements.
- Information was lacking on the child's history of abuse for 48 per cent of foster families.
- 68 per cent needed more information about the child's general behaviour.
- 40 per cent of foster carers did not receive sufficient information about the child's previous placements.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1998 the Court of Appeal allowed the children of foster carers to sue Essex County Council after they were sexually abused by a fostered child. In 2000 the House of Lords ruled that the foster carers could also sue the council for the emotional damage they suffered because they had unintentionally exposed their children to abuse. Essex County Council had failed to provide the foster carers with vital information about the child placed in their care.

The needs of every child in care must be thoroughly assessed. A written care plan should then clarify what the child requires now and into the future. This care plan should only be revised after discussion at a statutory child care review. A signed Placement Agreement is also necessary to confirm matters such as the levels of responsibility foster carers have for day-to-day decision making and the arrangements for contact between the child and their birth family, and important friends.

- In the past three years 45 per cent of foster carers did not have all the information they needed about the care plan.
- 50 per cent of foster carers felt that they did not know enough about the child's family and friends.

A number of foster carers raised examples of when they were not kept fully informed about the content of and changes to the care plan, such as *'it would be nice to be kept up-to-date on the changes to the care plan in-between review meetings and consulted with. We are told we are professionals yet excluded from professionals' core group meeting.'*

**The Fostering Network recommends that all public authorities provide foster carers with the information they need to help children reach their potential and to care safely for them and their own family.**

## 4. Workforce development

Maintaining a wide enough pool of foster carers with the relevant skills and experience to care for children is vital for the effective running of any fostering service. The foster carers who contributed to the survey had been approved for varying lengths of time: some were new recruits and others had been fostering for more than 20 years. Not having adequate support throughout their careers and especially when they need it is most demoralising, and can impact on a foster carer's decision to change their career.

- 40 per cent of foster carers had seriously considered ceasing to foster for their fostering service due to a lack of support.

Foster carers are very committed to the task of fostering and the children they care for. Therefore, they will be keen to highlight when they are concerned about the practices of the fostering service they work with.

- Nearly 20 per cent had made a formal complaint about the level of support on offer from their fostering service.

The quality and quantity of support available to foster carers from their fostering service can be a deciding factor when choosing to work for a particular service or considering moving to another.

- While 25 per cent of foster carers were very satisfied with the quality and quantity of supported received, just over 25 per cent of foster carers reported either being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

## Conclusions

The findings of the survey confirm that being well supported in a wide variety of ways is very important for foster carers and impacts on their ability to look after children successfully. It is encouraging that nearly half of foster carers surveyed had had the same supervising social worker for more than two years and three quarters rated the support they received from them highly. More worrying was the feedback about foster carers' working relationships with children's social workers and the patchy delivery of other types of formal and informal support.

Moreover, there is real cause for concern about the levels of dissatisfaction expressed by foster carers regarding the matching of children and the lack of provision of all the relevant information required to care for them safely and effectively. Public authorities' failure to provide foster carers with full information about the children they place with them is putting foster families and children in care at risk.

Furthermore, there are particular difficulties accessing support when it is particularly needed and in getting tailor made support to meet the needs of the foster family. As one foster carer observed *'whether support is good, bad or indifferent, it's all about personal relationships and support when it's most necessary'*.

With shortages of foster carers affecting most fostering services in the UK, having a well-supported and valued team of foster carers can make all the difference to success in providing stability to the children in their care. When foster carers are left to cope with inadequate support and are lacking the vital information they need to care safely for a child, many will be left with few options other than to cease fostering. As one respondent noted:

*'Fostering services have changed significantly over the years. Some of the children's behaviour is much more extreme... The standard of social workers varies tremendously and that can have a huge impact on life as a carer. The understanding that we may need breaks and the use of respite carers has been very helpful to me, just knowing that we were going to have a weekend off has enabled us to keep going with a difficult placement.'*

There is still a long way to go before all foster carers are truly recognised as equal members of the child care team and fostering services are adequately funded to ensure that all the services necessary to provide high quality care are made available. The Fostering Network is therefore making the following recommendations as part of the *Together for Change* campaign.

## **Recommendations for the four governments of the UK**

1. Revise National Minimum Standards to ensure appropriate and timely support and clarification on information sharing in England, Scotland and Wales.
2. Introduce regulations and standards in Northern Ireland.
3. Clarify with public authorities their role in the sharing of information with foster carers, and urge them to implement this.
4. Ensure that foster carers are defined and treated as child care experts and part of the children's workforce.
5. Ensure all social workers who are or will be responsible for care planning for children gain relevant training and post-qualification experience of working with foster carers and children in care.
6. Ensure the availability and suitability of social workers to provide comprehensive support to children and foster carers.

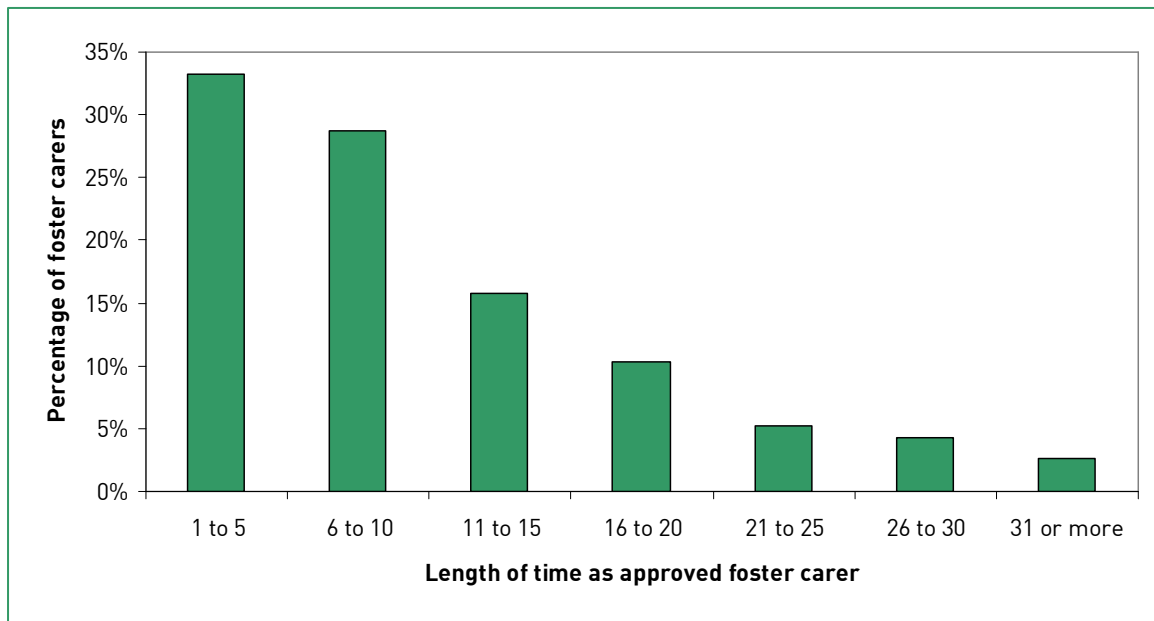
## **Recommendations for fostering services**

1. Ensure that all children are placed with foster carers who can meet their needs, taking into account the child's care plan and written assessments of the child, their family and the foster carers.
2. Ensure that all foster carers are provided with all the relevant information they need to care safely for a child and other children in the household (includes clearer policies on confidentiality and information sharing).
3. Ensure the availability and suitability of experienced children's social workers.
4. Ensure that foster carers have planned monthly contact with their supervising social workers throughout their fostering careers.
5. Provide 24-hour specialist support for foster carers.
6. Provide access to ongoing learning and development opportunities that are flexible and timely to ensure that foster carers can offer the best quality care to children.

## SURVEY RESULTS - SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS

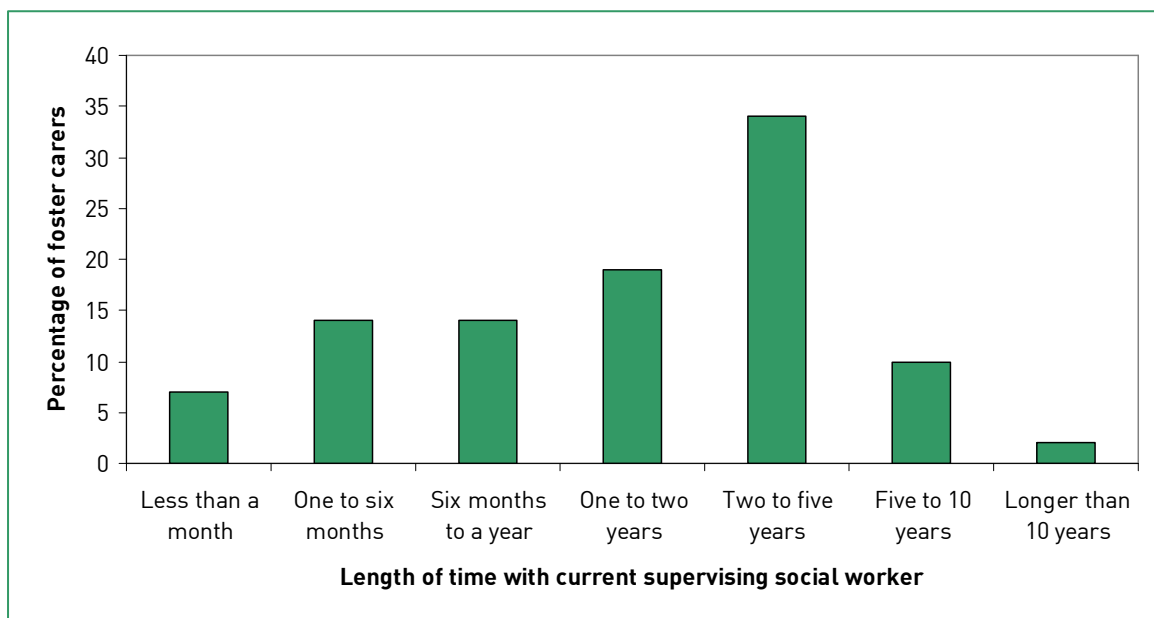
A total of 442 foster carers from across the UK completed the survey. Of these 82 per cent worked for a local authority or health and social care trust and 18 per cent worked for an independent fostering provider.

Foster carers who responded to this survey had been approved for the following lengths of time:

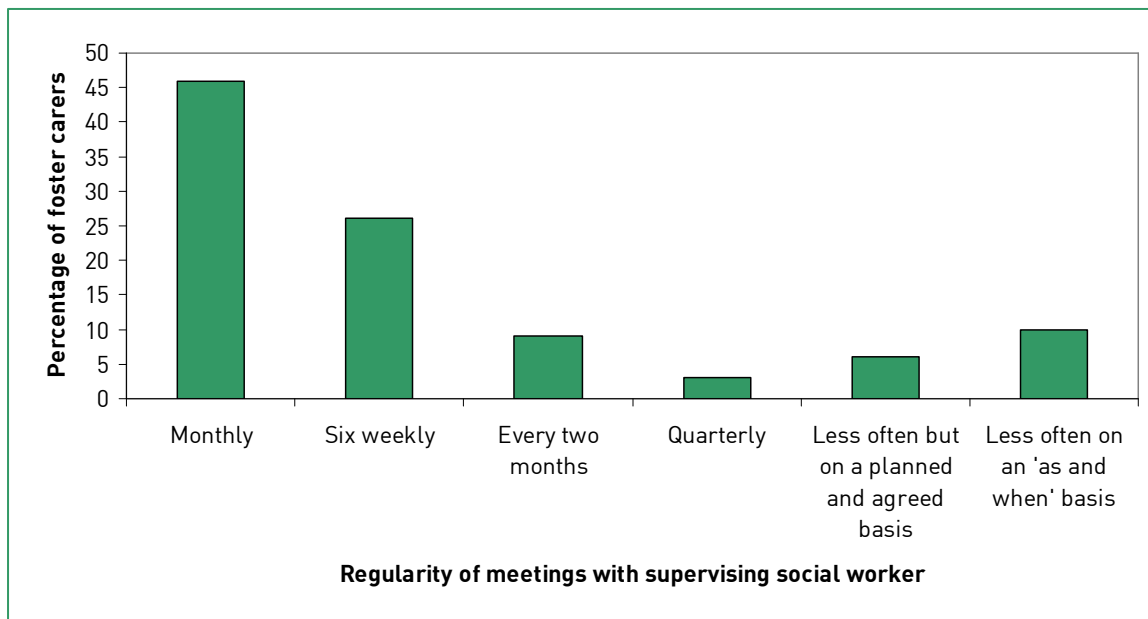


	Yes	No
Do you currently have a named supervising social worker?	95%	5%

If yes, how long has this person been your named supervising social worker?



## How often do you meet with your supervising social worker?



Between planned supervision meetings how do you get in contact with your supervising social worker? <sup>6</sup>	%
Call on their direct line in the office	61%
Call their mobile telephone	37%
Through the fostering service duty desk	33%
Other	27%
Through the out of hours duty team	6%

Please tell us about the response times to your contact with your supervising social worker. How long do you have to wait to speak to them?	%
They are available or return my calls within the same day	63%
I often don't get a response the same day	27%
I usually have to ring a few times before I get a response	7%
I often don't get a response for over a week	3%

## TYPES OF SUPPORT

Please rank the importance of these elements of support to you	Most important	Quite important	Not so important	Not at all important	No View
Availability of your supervising social worker	58%	38%	3%	0%	0%
Keeping the same supervising social worker	50%	43%	6%	0%	0%
24-hour support from the fostering team	59%	27%	11%	1%	2%
Out of hours support from children's services duty team	53%	31%	13%	0%	2%

<sup>6</sup> Respondees were able to choose more than one option.

Support groups	28%	41%	23%	6%	0%
Peer support (mentoring)	23%	39%	27%	7%	4%
Training	52%	39%	7%	2%	0%
Financial support	59%	34%	6%	0%	0%
Local foster care association	25%	40%	26%	4%	5%
Availability of child's social worker	68%	28%	3%	0%	0%
Availability of fostering team manager	22%	45%	28%	4%	1%
Respite foster carer	33%	33%	22%	7%	6%
Advice from someone who is independent	32%	38%	24%	4%	2%

How do you rate the actual provision of the following types of support from your current fostering service?	Excellent	Good	OK	Poor	No View
Your own supervising social worker	46%	29%	14%	9%	1%
Out of hours service	17%	28%	30%	14%	11%
Independent advice	10%	20%	27%	22%	21%
Financial support	13%	32%	36%	18%	1%
Support groups	14%	31%	33%	16%	7%
Foster care association	16%	33%	28%	8%	14%
Peer support (mentoring)	8%	23%	26%	19%	25%
Child's social worker	14%	28%	30%	25%	2%
Fostering team manager	15%	28%	36%	15%	7%
Training	25%	39%	23%	12%	1%
Respite	10%	20%	26%	23%	21%

### MATCHING AND PLACEMENT SUPPORT

	Yes	No
In the past three years, have you had any children placed with you outside of your agreed approval range?	38%	61%
	Yes	No
In the past three years, have you had any children placed with you who you did not feel equipped to care for?	32%	68%

If yes, were you able to access any of the following forms of extra support from your fostering service?	%
Access to specific equipment	61%
Peer support	41%
Access to specialist services	35%
More support from your supervising social worker	30%
Specific training	29%
More detailed information about the child's needs	18%
More support from the child's social worker	8%
Other	36%

	Yes	No
In the past three years, have you had a child placed with you for whom you were not given all the information you needed to care for them safely?	52%	48%

If yes, which of the following did you not know about?	%
The child's general behaviour	68%
Information about the child's family and friends	50%
History of abuse suffered by the child	48%
The Care Plan for the child	45%
History of child's previous placements	39%
The child's abusive behaviour towards other children	38%
The child's medical requirements	35%
The child's education requirements	35%
History of self harm	16%
Other	24%

In the past three years, have you done any of the following?	%
Encouraged others to consider fostering for your fostering service	60%
Actively praised your fostering service for the support they offer	50%
Seriously considered ceasing to foster for your fostering service as a result of a lack of support	40%
Made a formal complaint to your fostering service due to lack of support	19%

Overall, how would you describe your levels of satisfaction with the quality and quantity of support you receive from your current fostering service?

