



Voices of Children in Foster Care

Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care

MAY 2018

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Introduction

The Children's Commissioner has gathered the views and experiences of children in foster care to inform the National Fostering Stocktake being conducted by the Department of Education and led by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers. This work complements contributions already submitted by children to the National Fostering Stocktake. The views expressed in this report are from children who are often overlooked or not consulted in calls for evidence and general consultation activities. The Commissioner is determined to shine a light on issues which effect foster children, such as placement moves, social worker contact and longer term contact with foster carers. This report provides a summary of the key themes arising from our discussions with children. Details on the methodology are provided at the end of the report.

Acknowledgements

The Children's Commissioner would like to thank the children who participated in this study and the organisations who helped facilitate these discussions.

Findings

Introduction

The findings presented reflect the responses of 100 children living in foster care or who are care leavers. Children were asked to talk about their views and experiences of living in foster care and about what changes they think need to be made to the fostering system to improve the care experience. We want to focus on specific experiences such as placement moves, the relationship they have with their social worker and the role social workers play in making day to day decisions about the children's life. Visual tools and stimulus were used to gather the views of children; these are exemplified throughout the report.

What's the best thing about being in care?

Feeling like part of the family

The majority of children said the best thing about care was their foster family, and feeling like 'part of the family'. Some children said that they viewed their foster carers as 'their mum and dad', and the foster carers' children as their brothers and sisters. Many enjoyed doing activities with their foster family, such as going on holiday and family 'days out'.

"[The best thing about being in care is] the family I am now placed with; I see my foster carers as my mum and dad".

"Pictures of my birth parents are centrally displayed in my bedroom for me but I am indifferent; I only think of my foster carers as Mum and Dad". – *10-year old boy with severe physical, learning and medical conditions.*

"I like going on holiday. My foster carers have been able to take me abroad so I felt like part of the family"

"[The best thing about being in foster care is] that we do things as a family. Could be going to the park, a restaurant, parties and stuff or holiday". – *10-year old girl*



A safe home

For a large number of the children, the best thing about being in care was having a safe, permanent home. Many said that they liked where they lived, and felt that their carers' house was their true 'home'. Children were happy that they were given their own room and possessions, and this made them feel safe and in control of their surroundings.

"I like where I live. I feel safe at home". – 11-year-old boy in care

"I am in a nice home with people that I like and they look after me"

"I feel comfortable living here, I have my things and my own room the way I want it".

"I like the food, my bedroom, I have a TV, Xbox. I feel wanted" – 13-year-old boy with learning difficulties

Pictured: A 11-year old's response

"I like where I live. I feel safe at home"

Enhanced opportunities

Some children felt that they had been given better opportunities after being placed in foster care. Many were grateful for the extra support they received with their schooling, whilst others said being placed in foster care had given them more 'preparation for life'.

"[I get] extra support with education".

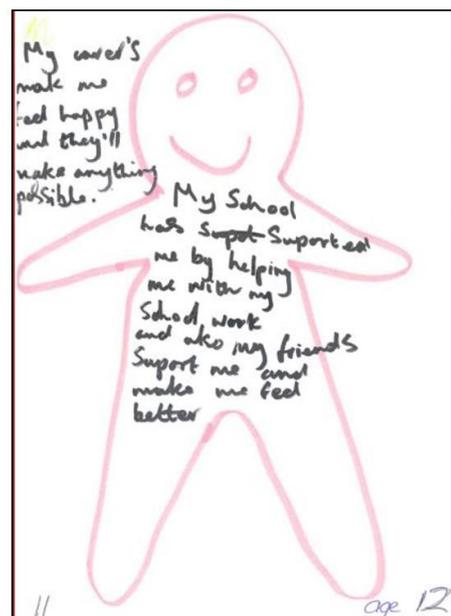
"[F]oster care is good because the foster carers help you get through life and help you do life skills for the future".

"My school has supported me by helping me with my school work" – 12-year-old in care

Overall, children felt that foster care had given them the chance of a 'better life':

"The best thing is that I have a chance to have a better life. Things would've not gone so well if I had continued to live where I did".

"You feel looked after more cause when you're in foster care- it's because your [birth] family can't look after you" – 11-year-old girl in care



Pictured: A 12-year old's response

"My school has supported me by helping me with my school work and also my friend's support me and make me feel better"

What's the worst thing about being in care?

A lack of stability

"I liked my previous foster carer. I do remember being happy there. I don't know why I left".

Many children said that the worst thing about care was the general lack of stability and security. For the majority this was the uncertainty of placement stability, whilst a few expressed concern about how frequently their social workers and/or respite carers changed.

As part of the consultation, we asked children how many foster families they had lived with in the past 2 years. The majority said that they had only lived with 1 or 2 families, and some said that they had lived with 3-4 families. One child said they had lived with 6 different families in the past 2 years.

"I don't like being moved around and staying at different places; I like home (current foster placement)"

"I wish that my respite was always with the same carers so that I know what to expect and don't worry" – *11-year-old girl in care*

"[I would like to stay] where I am until I'm 18"

"I liked my previous foster carer. I do remember being happy there. I don't know why I left".

Child A was moved from her last placement, but does not know why. She expressed how she was unhappy with her social worker, describing her as unresponsive and saying that she 'doesn't care' about her feelings.

Uncertainty of leaving care

Older children often expressed anxiety about leaving care. Some were disappointed with the social worker's involvement and felt that they had not been given enough information about what would happen after leaving care. Some said they were unclear about their entitlements and rights, as well as insufficient pathway planning.

"I'm 14 but worry about my future as a care leaver, housing in an appropriate area where I can feel safe, managing my money if I have no job" – *14-year-old girl in care*

“Leaving care is really bad, the social workers won’t tell you anything” – *Care leaver, age unknown*

“I’m 14 now, but I really need to know what will happen to me when I am 18. I want to live on my own” – *14-year-old boy with Autism*

Child B is a 14-year-old boy with autism, and some challenging behaviour. Due to the nature of his condition, he has started a ‘countdown’ pathway plan to prepare him for leaving care at age 18. His autism means he exhibits obsessional traits to the point he constantly worries about what will happen to him when he turns 18 (often several times within the day). According to his worker, he becomes very distressed at there being no firm plans put in place.

Lack of independence

Many felt that they did not have the sense of independence and freedom enjoyed by children who are not in care. Some thought that their social workers and foster carers were too strict, whilst others said that they were treated ‘unfairly’. This sentiment tended to apply to older children who took part in the consultation process.

“I want independence”.

“If I don’t come home on time I get a lecture, like a PowerPoint lecture about why I must be on time. If I am six minutes late I still get a lecture”.

“[I want] equality of age –treat you the age that you are – if you are a teenager treat [you] like a teenager not a child”

“Sometimes everyone can be overbearing”

“I don’t have a phone and everyone does”

Children’s contact with their social worker

The views we received from children about their social worker were mixed. Some viewed their social worker in a positive light; they felt supported and saw them as a ‘friend’. For others, their social worker was viewed as “unreliable, invisible and patronising”.

Not enough contact

Most children said that their social worker was unresponsive, and that they did not have contact as often as they would like to. Some children viewed this unresponsiveness as ‘lazy’ and felt that their social worker ‘didn’t care about them’.

Interestingly, the majority of children that expressed disappointment with their social worker tended to be older, usually in their teenage years.

“I hate my social worker because I haven’t got on well with her. She doesn’t care about me. She doesn’t do her job properly... all she cares about is money”

“I don’t really like my local authority social worker. It’s a one way connect. She comes to see me for a few hours at a time, when she needs to see me” –
15-year-old girl in care

Many children said that they would like to see more of their social worker outside of their mandatory visits.

“She doesn’t email or text, I would like to be able to contact her”

“She doesn’t come around or help us”

Some highlighted how they did not have enough contact because their social worker ‘was always changing’.

“[The social worker] keeps changing so [you] don’t feel like you have enough contact. I would like one social worker”

One 15-year-old girl said that where she did have contact with her social worker, she was not happy, and felt that she often didn’t have the opportunity to tell her the things she wanted to tell her.

“I feel like if I really wanted to tell her things, I can’t. Say like, if I wanted to say something to her or ask her something, it has to wait to my next meeting, and by then I have usually done something wrong so we talk about that instead”.

However, a few stated that that whilst they didn’t have a lot of contact, they did not view this negatively.

“I don’t [have enough contact] but I am supported”

“I don’t see my social worker very often, but this is ok because she knows I am happy; it’s fine.” – *12-year-old boy, non-verbal with cerebral palsy*

It is worth noting that all the children who made these comments were content in their placements, including the frequency of contact with their birth parents and siblings.

Good amount of contact

Some children felt that they had ‘the right amount’ of contact with their social worker. For these children, contact with the social worker was frequent, and they felt supported, happy, and enjoyed their visits; several viewed their social worker as their ‘friend’. All the children that participated who had additional needs or disabilities had an extremely positive view of their social worker.

“I like it when he comes to see me, we are friends”.

“She does a good job, she’s good. She makes me happy”. – *16-year old boy in care, nonverbal with cerebral palsy*

However, for others, the social worker was seen as ‘overwhelming’. Older ‘looked after children’ found them to be intrusive in their day to day lives. Several children who expressed these views were settled in their care placement, and ‘didn’t see the need’ for the social worker.

“Social workers want to know what you’re doing all the time.”

“I would like to see my social worker less – once a year would be good”

Children’s contact with their birth family

Contact with the birth parents

For the amount of children for whom the question applied, more than half said that they did not have enough contact with their birth family. Many felt that they had ‘enough’ contact with their birth parents, or expressed flexibility with their contact arrangements. A very small group of children felt that they had too much contact.

“[I want more] opportunities and more support [I’m] not seeing family when want and [I feel] alienated at times”

“I have too little [contact]. I’d like to see them more than 3 times a year”.

In addition to our main findings, a few children said that they wanted more contact with extended members of the family, such as their aunts, uncles and cousins.

“I don’t get to see everyone I like to. Like my auntie and cousins”.

“I wish that I could see more of my family”

A couple of children suggested that whilst they did have enough contact with their birth families, they were not happy with the provision of contact they were receiving.

“I am happy in my home as a LAC [Looked After Child], but I do find issues with my birth family contact, it’s never on time and sometimes boring because we are limited with what we can do when with a contact worker. I love it when my birth family visit me at my home... its more natural and feels like we are just on a night out” – *Young person in care, age 14*

Contact with the siblings

There was a similar pattern when it came to relationships with siblings. The majority of children for whom the question applied indicated that they had too little contact with their siblings. Few suggested that they had just ‘the right amount’ of contact, and a minority were co-located with their siblings. Where children were placed with their siblings, they described this as one of the ‘best’ things about being in care.

For the majority of children who took part, this question was not applicable, as they did not have any siblings, however, many viewed their carers children or co-habiting foster children as their siblings.

“I should see my siblings more but it wasn’t pushed for enough”

When asked why there was so little contact, they said it was because of distance, money and time.

“I can’t just drive down there – it takes four hours there and four hours back and time when I’m there”

Kinship care placement

Only a few children who participated in the study had been placed in kinship care arrangements. Whilst the questions being asked did not seek to capture children’s experience of kinship care arrangements, an account provided by one young person highlights the significance to them of such placements.

Child C is a young woman placed in a Kinship care placement. She believes that the best thing about being in care is that she is able to stay within her family. She feels that living with her aunt has given her some stability, and as a result, she is able to stay connected with her wider family. She will live her aunt for the remainder of her time in care, and feels that this has provided her with security knowing she will not be ‘moved around’ elsewhere.

What do children want from their foster carers?

To feel part of the family

An overwhelming majority of children said that they wanted to feel safe, loved, and part of the family. Many recognised the importance of identity and belonging in shaping their own happiness and well-being.

“To feel part of a family. I like it in the summer when we play games outside as a family”.

“My home to be warm, safe and ‘cool’. It’s important to me that I have a sense of identity and feel part of the family” – *13-year-old boy with learning difficulties*

“Keep loving me”

“I want to be looked after and have a loving family”

What do children want from their foster carers?

Some children were supported to answer this question by participating in a house-building activity. The worker encouraged the children to build a Lego house for an imaginary child. She asked them what they would like for that child’s life, and how they could best be supported.

Six children took part in this activity, and they were all between the ages of 5 and 7. Their responses highlighted the importance of feeling part of the family, being loved, supported and well cared for. Children also emphasised the importance of having their own room and a supportive social worker.



“I want the little girl to have a nice social worker who takes care of her”

“I want the little girl to have a brother or sister so they can play together and do things together”

“I want the little girl to have a foster mummy and daddy and a foster brother or sister”

I want to go to university in London to become a police officer

“I want the little girl to have foster carers that take care of everyone in the house.”



“The little boy might not feel well so he will need lots of love and care because it happened to me when I came”

“The boy needs a bed and food and he might need his own space”

“A foster carer that cares for him gives him food and water and loves him and keeps him healthy”

“A social worker who can arrange mummy and daddy contact and makes sure the boy likes the family he is in”

“The little boy should have a nice house and they can see nice places to make happy memories”



“I want a pet cat for the little girl”

“I want her to live in a seaside house”

“I want little boy to live with his brother and sister together in a house”

“I want a girl social worker because she will know when it's safe to go home”

“I want the little boy to live in a family and celebrate Eid next year”

“The boy should have toys in the foster carer's home”

“They want the boy to go to the same school as he does so he can see his friends and teachers”

This is the boat house the children built because they saw one on their holiday. The children referenced their holiday many times throughout the activity

Increased financial support

Some identified the need for increased financial support, particularly those who were on the brink of leaving care. Many said that they would like their foster carer to be able to provide them with additional financial support; however, they also recognised that their carer may not be able to provide this support.

“There is not enough funding – foster carers need more money so that they can help us” – *Care leaver*

“Foster carers should help with money but there is never enough” – *Care leaver under Staying Put arrangements*

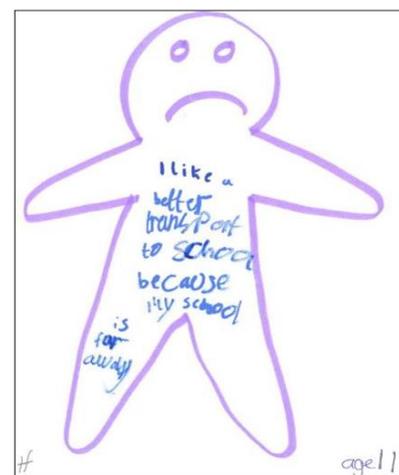
Some younger children said that they would like more money for extracurricular activities.

“[I would like] pocket money and more school funding”

“I would like to do more sports and have a free pass for [the] sports centre” – *10-year-old child in care*

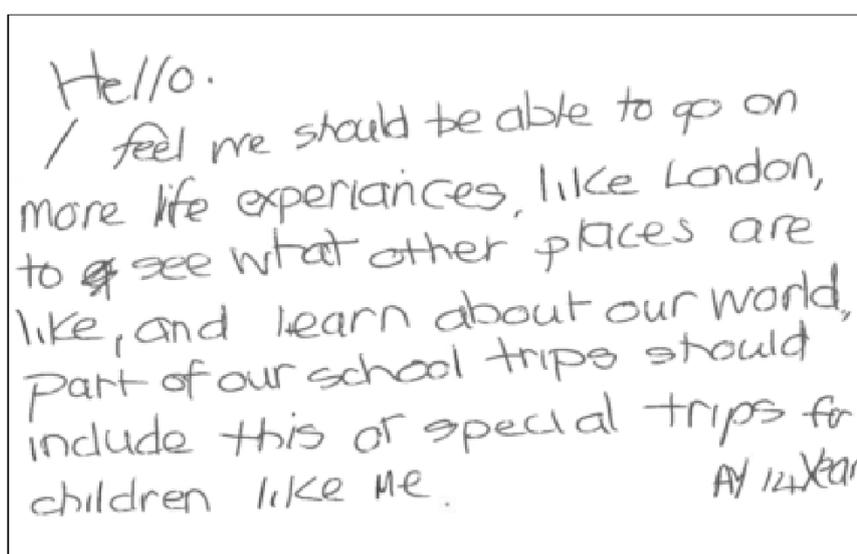
Some also complained that their placement was far away from their school and their siblings, and said they would like increased funding to provide good transport links.

“I [would] like better transport to school because my school is far away” – *11-year-old boy in care*



Pictured: An 11-year old boy's response

“I like a better transport to school because my school is far away”



Pictured Above: This 14-year-old would like better opportunities for children in care, including ‘more life experiences’.

To be listened to

Children of all ages were keen to emphasise the importance of being ‘listened to’ and to have a greater role in the decision-making process. Several said that they felt

like they “didn’t have a say in anything” and found that foster carers and social workers dominated decisions regarding their placement.

“I want people to listen to the things that I don’t like... I think it’s most important if I can tell someone if something is wrong” – *Girl with a learning difficulty and a number of medical conditions, age 10*

“If I were being placed again, could I have a say? A choice in where I get placed?” – *15-year-old girl in care*

“[It’s] annoying when people make decisions about you” – *11-year old girl in care*

Children’s perception of their foster carers

The majority of children had an extremely positive view of their carers and were grateful for their love and support.

“[A good carer] listens to how people feel, [and is] understanding, not judgemental” – *Child’s response to what makes a ‘good carer’*

Many said their carers gave them expanded freedoms and opportunities. When asked what they would want from their foster carers, several answered ‘nothing’ and stated that they were happy in their current placement.

“In my current placement I am able to state my point of view and I am allowed to disagree”

“[They are] Kind. They make sure I’m alright. They work hard and they stand up for me”. – *10-year old girl in care*

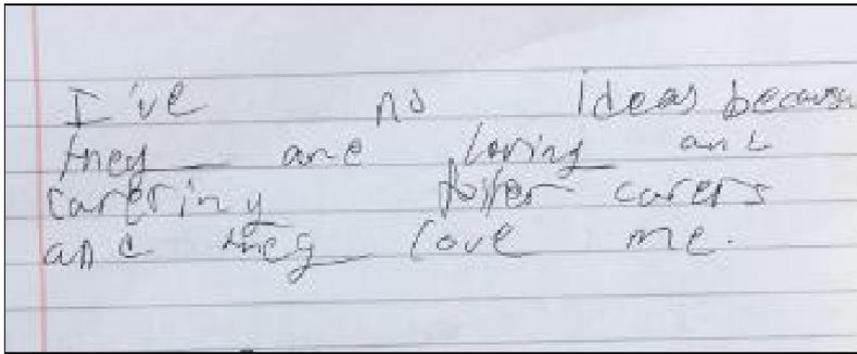
“My carers make me feel happy and they’ll make anything possible”

“I feel safe and have people to play with. Since living with my carers I can do more things and can be trusted”



Pictured: A 9-year-old child’s response

“My life is great. My life cannot be better. I love my life”



Pictured left: A child's letter sent to Anne Longfield, The Children's Commissioner.

"I've no ideas because they are loving and caring foster carers and they love me"

A few felt that their foster carers were too strict and 'overprotective', yet many recognised that they cared for them. Those who had these feelings were also older, and as previously mentioned, felt that being in care meant that they did not enjoy the same freedoms as children their own age.

"[They are] moany... they can be reasonable but sometimes we see differently" – 15-year-old girl in care.

Additional Findings

Some children raised other important issues which were not initially asked as part of the consultation. In light of these findings, we have decided to include them in the report, as they remain key challenges faced by children in care.

Stigma of being a child in care

As previously mentioned, children said one negative aspect of being in care was being labelled or judged. Several felt patronised by the provision of care offered to them and many suggested that they were treated inappropriately because of this.

Child D is a 15-year-old girl with no disabilities, yet is placed in a specialist placement after the Court Order stipulated the benefits of placing her with her brother, who has physical and learning disabilities. Child D feels that this was unfair and that she has been inappropriately labelled.

“The worst thing about being in care is I feel labelled and people think I need to be ‘treated’. They mean well but it doesn’t help. At school they have a special group that all looked after children have to go to. I don’t want to go; I don’t want the whole school to know that I am ‘different and in care’. I am the oldest in this group and I have to go for ‘special days out’ with a load of other children much younger than me, I go with all other children from my school and I hate it. I don’t want to go. I am supposed to feel glad I’m being treated as special but it makes me feel patronised and that I can’t just be a normal teenager”

Issues around ‘Staying Put’ policy

Some children had extended their care placement under ‘Staying Put (an arrangement where children remain with their carers following their 18th birthday). However, many suggested that there was a lack of information surrounding this policy, as well as their rights and entitlements. In particular, children were confused about the ‘tax’ on their income, which contributes to the funding of their placement.

“The worst thing about being in care is that now I’ve aged 18 and I’m a care leaver I haven’t had much support and I’ve been given wrong information, before I turned 18 the social worker told me that I’m allowed to work up to 16 hours a week and receive the full amount of income support £57.70 per week but when I’ve claimed my income support they’ve took out £35 out of my income because I work and now I only receive £20 per week. This is absolutely disgraceful.” - *18-year-old care leaver, under the Staying Put arrangements*

Lack of information prior to placement

As part of the consultation process, one of the services provided additional engagement work regarding whether or not the child had received sufficient

information prior to being placed. The majority of children said that whilst many had met their new carers, they had been given no information on what their home would look like, or who else was living in the household.

“When I go to a new home, school, hospital or place, I like to see it first, can you show me pictures before I stay somewhere so I can look forward to it? – 6-year-old boy with physical vulnerabilities and persistent medical conditions

“I think all children should get to talk to the new carers and to visit them at least twice and see the new house and to talk about what worries and scares them”

“[I would like] to be given more information about what was happening”.

“I would have liked to know what my carers and their family were like, what my room would be like”

Poor matching with carers

In the same vein, some children felt that this lack of information had often lead to ‘poor matching’ with foster carers, and several children expressed their disappointment in being placed with carers who did not ‘suit their needs’.

Children said that they would like a more stringent recruitment process for foster carers, as well as more training to ensure that their child feels as comfortable as possible in their new placement.

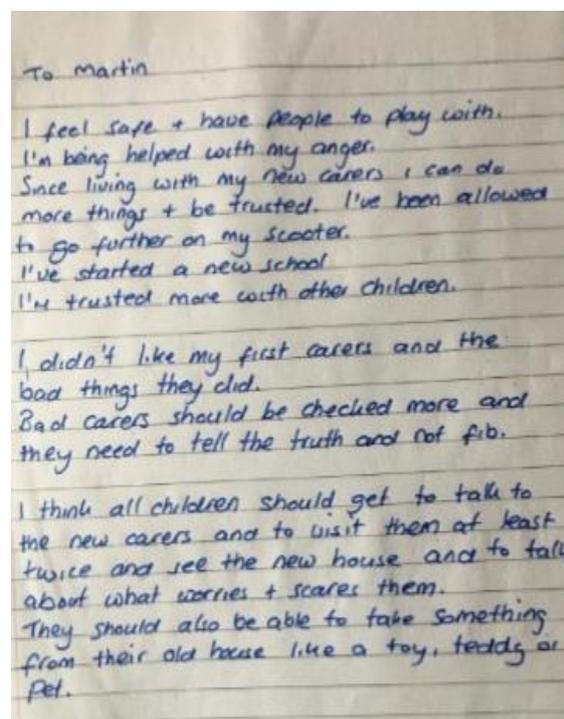
“The worst thing about being in foster care is not being with suitable carers that are best suited to the child’s needs”

This child was previously put into a placement where they were not happy with their carers. They described them as ‘unsupportive’ and ‘unfair’.

They also described their experience as ‘being shoved’ into the placement. When asked why they had moved placement, they said they moved ‘because I hated the way I was being treated’.

Key findings:

- Overall, the majority of children that took part in the consultation were happy in their current placements - talking about foster carers who provided them with love, care and support. Many said that they felt like part of the family.



Pictured: As part of their response to the survey, a child also chose to write a letter to Martin Narey. They describe their previous experience with ‘bad carers’, and ask for carers to have more check before being placement with the child.

Older Looked After Children felt that their foster carers were sometimes too strict and, sometimes, overbearing. The overwhelming majority suggested that the best thing about being in care was their foster family, and said they enjoyed family activities, such as going on holiday, going out to restaurants, and 'fun' days out.

- The worst thing about being in care was often the instability that children experienced, alongside the uncertainty surrounding their future after leaving the care system. Where children were in stable placements, they expressed discontentment about their lack of independence, and felt that they did not enjoy the same amount of freedom as children who are not in care.
- The majority of responses suggested contact with the social worker was 'not enough'. Many viewed this unresponsiveness as 'lazy' and said that they would like more contact with their social worker. However, some children were happy with the frequency of their contact. All children with additional needs or disabilities were happy with their social worker contact.
- A similar pattern can be seen regarding contact with the family. The majority said that they would like more contact with both their birth parents and their siblings. Some were not happy with the provision of contact when it did happen, and said they were limited with what they could do when the social worker was present.
- When asked what children most want from their foster family, the overwhelming majority indicated that they wanted to feel like part of the family. Many children also suggested that they would like increased financial support. For teenagers this tended to be support for day-to-day activities, whereas young children expressed that they would like subsidised access to extracurricular activities. Children of all ages expressed that they would like a greater role in the decision making process.
- Additional findings included children's thoughts about the stigma of being a looked after child, issues around Staying Put's 'income tax', and a lack of information prior the placement. The latter seemed to be an important issue for children, and some felt that previous placements had broken down because the foster carers were not suited to the child's needs.

Annex

Methods

The Children's Commissioner contributed to the National Fostering Stocktake by gathering the views of children, facilitated through a range of organisations, including statutory and independent fostering organisations. The Children's Commissioner also posted the survey on social media. The study heard from a broad range of children, many of whom tend not to be heard, including care leavers, those in kinship care, and children with severe disabilities and special needs.

The Children's Commissioner developed a small number of questions to be asked of children in foster care. The questions covered key topics, such as the worst/best thing about being in care, placement moves, contact with their social worker and what children would want most out of their care experience. 100 children living in foster care or who are a care leavers responded to these questions. Where stipulated, information about the young person is provided, including their age, gender and situation.

In the main, the views of children were gathered through group discussions and group activities, whilst individual interviews were conducted with children with disabilities, many of whom had non-verbal, or severe communication difficulties. Visual tools were used to gather the views of children; these are exemplified throughout the report.

Ethics

Information sheets for children were provided which explained the purpose of the study and how their views would be used to inform the National Fostering Stocktake. This also provided the opportunity to discuss any ethical or safeguarding concerns. Children were also asked to sign consent forms, confirming their understanding of their participation and use of the information gathered. Reassurance of confidentiality was also given; however, children were also notified that if they said anything that indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm then this information would need to be shared.

Due to the approach and number of the responses received, this report will not attempt to quantify any findings. We will however, discuss the key themes that were recurrent through the children's responses.

All children that took part consented to the public use of their responses.

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