

**Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Flaenoriaethau'r Chweched Senedd](#)**

**This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) consultation on [Sixth Senedd Priorities](#)**

**CYPE SP 48**

**Ymateb gan: Maria Boffey, Pennaeth Gweithrediadau Cymru, Y Rhwydwaith Maethu**

**Response from: Maria Boffey, Head of Operations in Wales, The Fostering Network**

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Beth yn eich barn chi yw'r prif flaenoriaethau neu'r materion y dylai'r Pwyllgor eu hystyried yn ystod y Chweched Senedd? Os oes modd, nodwch eich barn o ran sut y gallai'r Pwyllgor fynd i'r afael â hyn.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Sixth Senedd? Where possible, please set out your view about how the Committee could address them.

**Thema 1: Addysg oedran ysgol | Theme 1: School-age education**

Children in care have the same aspirations as other children but they face particular challenges in relation to education. Research links this to the trauma they may have faced, and the number of placement moves and education disruptions they may have experienced. We have conducted numerous programmes and pieces of research on looked after children's education and have gained a unique insight into the issues.

**Recommendation:**

Every child has the right to an education and looked after children need to be supported to engage and achieve in their education, recognising that their needs may be different to peers.

**Thema 2: Addysg bellach ac addysg uwch | Theme 2: Further and higher education**

**Support for care leavers within education**



There remains a significant gap in educational achievement between looked after children and young people and non-looked after children and young people. We need to be increasing the number of children and young people accessing further education and improving the support offered to children and young people. This should include ensuring that a young person who is at university is able to return to their foster family during holidays like their peers are able to. Young people should also be encouraged to 'Tick the Box' on their [UCAS](#) form to say they have been in care so that universities know that they are entitled to support. The number of young people ticking the box isn't as high as it should be. We believe that too many care experienced young people are missing out on support, and we want to change that.

### **Recommendations:**

1. More should be done to encourage care leavers to enter into further or higher education including greater awareness of the support available and encouraging care leavers to 'Tick the Box' on their [UCAS](#) applications.

Allowing those young people who want to return to their foster families during university holidays to be able to.

## **Thema 3: Iechyd a lles, gan gynnwys gofal cymdeithasol (i'r graddau y maent yn ymwneud â phlant a phobl ifanc) | Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)**

### **Maintaining relationships**

Relationships are the 'golden thread' running through a child's life. It is important that as well as parent relationships, that effort is made to maintain their sibling/sibling-like relationships, if it's in their best interest. Additionally, their foster carers become some of the most significant adults in their lives. It is destabilising for them to move on and not keep in touch. Our research has found that over one third of foster carers said they were not at all supported to keep in contact with their former fostered child. Our Keep Connected campaign calls on UK governments to support fostered children to maintain their most important relationships.

### **Recommendation:**

Fostering services should have a duty to promote, on a regular basis, personal relations and direct contact between a child in foster care and anyone that the child has a personal and ongoing relationship with, if it is in their best interest, this may include siblings or former foster carers. The [Keep Connected Principles](#) should be included in national guidance.

### **Access to appropriate services: mental health**



We asked foster carers in Wales if they cared for any children/young people who they felt should have access to mental health support, but who were not accessing this service - 38 per cent said yes. Further evidence on this topic and more detailed recommendations can be found in our response to the Welsh Government's inquiry into the emotional and mental health of children and young people in Wales.

**Recommendation:**

Children in foster care should have access to a mental health assessment and have their assessed needs met.

**Thema 4: Plant a phobl Ifanc | Theme 4: Children and young people**

**Hearing and listening to the child's voice**

The UNCRC states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and must have their views considered and taken seriously. We welcome that all looked after children in Wales have a right to advocacy and that there are checks built into the system to ensure children and young people are aware of this right.

There are other procedures within fostering where the child's voice is supposed to be considered and captured, for example in end of placement reviews. However, we know from our members that there is sometimes a lack of scrutiny on placement endings which means that the child does not have the opportunity to express their views about a decision that directly affects them, despite end of placement reviews being mandatory.

**Recommendations:**

1. To consider enshrining the UNCRC in Welsh law.
2. To ensure that children have the opportunity to make their voice heard in all decisions made that affect their lives.

**Digital access**

The pandemic highlighted the importance of digital access for children. Access to a digital device, and a good internet connection can open up a wealth of opportunities and improve their educational outcomes. In addition, particularly for those children in foster care, digital access is essential to maintain important relationships with their birth family and wider networks.

**Recommendation:**



Looked after children should be provided with the appropriate equipment and support, including laptops and internet access.

### **Delegated authority**

This is the process that enables foster carers to make everyday decisions about the children they care for, such as allowing them to go to friends' houses for sleepovers, signing consent forms for school trips and even arranging haircuts. Holders of parental responsibility can delegate authority to foster carers to undertake such tasks and decisions.

Foster carers never have parental responsibility for a fostered child, so they can only make decisions about the fostered child where that authority has been delegated to them by the local authority and/or birth parents. Clarifying who is best placed to make everyday decisions depends on many factors: the child's age, views, legal status and care plan, the parents' views and the experience and views of the foster carers.

Collaboration and consultation are essential for successful working partnerships and ensuring children and young people have the ability to access a range of educational and social opportunities without delay.

We asked foster carers about the decisions that they have the delegated authority:

- 29 per cent were not clear what day-to-day decisions they have the authority to make in relation to their fostered children.
- 30 per cent who had children in long-term placements felt that they were always able to make day-to-day decisions for their fostered children.

When asked about the decisions foster carers did not have the authority to make - 55 per cent felt that social workers sometimes/rarely/never replied in a timely manner.

The impact of this bureaucratic process of decision making for children in foster care is ultimately felt by the child, as it can hinder their ability to participate in normal family, school or social activities.

### **Recommendation:**

Mechanisms should be in place to ensure foster carers are enabled to make everyday decisions that mean that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family. It should be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot make, and social workers should deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.

### **Foster care allowances**



Each year a national minimum allowance for foster carers is set by the Welsh Government across three-age group brackets. We check the allowances provided by all local authorities (LAs) in Wales to ensure they meet the national minimum level. Our most recent report found that all LAs are providing allowances at or above the minimum allowance.

The three-age bracket allowance model was scheduled for review by Welsh Government in 2020 but has been subject to delay due to the pandemic. We request that this promised review be completed for implementation in April 2022.

Our State of the Nation report found that 61 per cent of foster carers felt that their fostering allowance, and the expenses they claim, do not meet the full cost of looking after a fostered child, meaning they are having to go into their own pockets where current allowances fall short.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Welsh Government should review the national minimum levels of fostering allowances and related expenses for all foster care placements, as well as mandatory payments for When I am Ready arrangements (where a foster carer continues to support a young person beyond 18 to 21) to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
2. To re-evaluate the national minimum foster care allowances in Wales, at each age band, such that they reflect the true cost of catering for the needs and development of a child.

### **Placement endings**

Placement decisions for children in care should not be resource led and maintaining stability in the placement should be paramount. All children have the right to family life and all placement decisions should have the needs of the child at the heart, not budgets.

All children should have the right to appropriate alternative care should they need it. They therefore must be appropriately informed about all the placement options available in order to make an informed decision about what would be best for them, and their views, wishes and feelings need to be considered. In addition, appropriate planning should be carried out such that the child has access to the full range of placement options.

### **Recommendation:**

To ensure that all planned placement endings in Wales are preceded by an end of placement review where children's voices are included and considered.



## **When I am Ready**

When I am Ready has the potential to transform the lives of hundreds of care experienced young people every year, providing them with extra time in a stable home. Our State of the Nation 2019 survey found that only 16 per cent (36 foster carers) of respondents had taken on a When I am Ready placement. While there are other contributing factors as to why uptake of the scheme is low, in some cases, the placement has not been able to go ahead because of local policies or lack of planning which mitigated against a seamless transition from child to adult services. Another key barrier is that foster carers experience a drop in income when entering When I am Ready arrangements and there is a lack of funding for the policy at a national level.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Government should carry out a full review of how When I am Ready has been implemented.
2. Government should ensure that When I am Ready is properly costed and then fully funded. Additionally, there should be monitoring of the implementation of the policy to ensure practice is in line with national requirements and to share learning from best practice models.
- 3.

## **Strengthening capacity within families**

Step up, Step Down, The Fostering Network's pioneering programme which works to prevent children who are on the periphery of the care system from being taken into care, and instead support them to stay within their own homes.

The Mockingbird Family Model lead by The Fostering Network is an innovative way of providing foster care. It is a model that aims to replicate the support available through an extended family network. It creates a constellation of 6-10 satellite fostering families who are supported by a hub home. The model has been proven to improve placement stability, foster carer retention, prevent children unnecessarily entering residential care and improve peer support opportunities for foster carers.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The Mockingbird Family Model and Step Up, Step Down should be available in every local authority area in Wales as a key support model for looked after children.



2. Foster carers have a huge role to play working in local early intervention and preventative services. Foster carers have the skills and expertise to interface between families and children's services, support children on the edge of care and help families to stay together.

