

NAFP

NATIONWIDE ASSOCIATION
OF FOSTERING PROVIDERS

Towards a Sustainable Fostering System

Insights and Recommendations from
Independent Fostering Agencies



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Foreword **Jess Asato MP**

I am pleased to introduce this report from the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP) at a pivotal moment for children’s social care. The Government’s policy paper, *Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children*¹, sets out an ambition to expand capacity and strengthen the stability of placements across the country. Meeting that ambition will require every part of the fostering system to be valued, supported, and working in genuine partnership. Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) are a vital part of that picture.

For decades, IFAs have played a crucial role in supporting some of the most vulnerable children: those with complex needs, those who have experienced multiple placement breakdowns, and those who require specialist, trauma-informed care. Their ability to recruit diverse foster carers, provide intensive wrap-around support, and respond quickly to emerging needs has been essential in ensuring children receive safe, nurturing homes when they need them most.

This report highlights the pressures facing the current system, the contribution IFAs make in meeting children’s needs, and the practical steps required to deliver the government’s ambition at scale.

As we look ahead to the implementation of the Government’s policy paper: *Renewing fostering*, it is clear that the success of the Government’s ambitions will depend on a whole-system approach. IFAs are not an optional extra; they are a core partner in delivering the additional homes, specialist provision, and sustained support that children deserve. The insights in this report offer a constructive, evidence-based foundation for that partnership.

I am grateful to NAFP for bringing together this important analysis and for their ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for children in care. I hope this report will inform policy development, strengthen collaboration across the sector, and help ensure that every child, whatever their background or needs, can grow up in a home that offers safety, stability, and the chance to thrive.

¹ *Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children* - GOV.UK



Executive Summary

Harvey Gallagher

Chief Executive, NAFP

The fostering sector stands at a critical juncture. At its heart, fostering is about offering children safety, stability, and the chance to heal and thrive within a loving family. IFAs play a central role in making this possible, delivering exceptional care for some of the country's most vulnerable children. Yet the pressures facing our services, and the foster carers we rely on, have never been greater. The findings of this report present a clear and consistent message from across the IFA community: without decisive national action, the sustainability of fostering provision is at risk, and with it the life-changing opportunities that foster families provide.

Across every theme, members report escalating challenges. Recruitment and retention have reached crisis levels, driven by burnout, financial strain, and the profound impact of allegations processes that too often feel disproportionate and destabilising. Foster carers, who open their homes and lives to children in need, are exhausted, overstretched, and increasingly questioning whether they can continue in the role. At the same time, operational costs are rising sharply, while commissioning practices remain inconsistent, bureaucratic, and frequently disconnected from the needs of children.

The complexity of children's needs continues to grow, yet access to therapeutic support remains patchy and slow. IFAs are caring for higher-acuity children while navigating more rigorous inspection regimes than local authorities, often without the recognition or partnership they deserve. This imbalance undermines both placement stability and the long-term viability of the system and ultimately affects the children who rely on us most.

What emerges from this report is not a collection of isolated concerns, but a systemic pattern: a fostering environment that is increasingly risk-averse, administratively burdensome, and financially unsustainable for foster carers and fostering services alike. These pressures are directly contributing to placement breakdowns, reduced sufficiency, and a shrinking pool of experienced foster carers. Without urgent reform, too many children will face fewer options, less stability, and longer waits for the right home.

The message from our members is clear. We need:

- **A reformed, proportionate allegations process that protects children while supporting foster carers**
- **Consistent, transparent commissioning that prioritises children's needs over internal capacity**
- **Improved access to therapeutic support for children with complex needs**
- **Recognition of IFAs as equal partners in delivering high-quality, stable foster care**

NAFP welcomes the Government's commitment to reform foster care and supports the introduction of the newly published *Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children* policy paper. We are committed to working with government, local authorities, and sector partners to deliver these reforms. The fostering system cannot function without a stable, respected, and well-supported IFA sector. This report provides a clear evidence base for the changes required and a mandate for action to ensure every child has the chance to grow up in a safe, nurturing family.



Who are NAFPP?

The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP), established in 2008, campaigns solely for independent fostering agencies (IFAs), and the vulnerable children for whom they care. We are a not-for-profit organisation with over 100 members, representing around 97% of children living in foster care with IFAs. We campaign to ensure that vulnerable children in care benefit from stable, loving foster parents.

Our ultimate goal is to create better outcomes for children who are in foster care. We work with IFAs across the sector (voluntary, small businesses and larger enterprises) to share best practices, work closely with local authorities and tackle challenges within the sector so that vulnerable children can receive the best outcomes and are placed in loving homes.

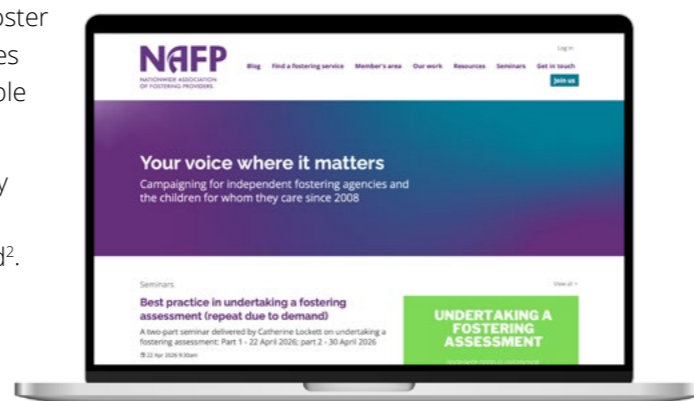
Many foster children feel their new home has given them a new chance and they feel like a genuine part of the family. Foster carers we work with overwhelmingly say that being a foster parent has had a positive impact on their lives as they provide love and support to vulnerable children.

IFAs play a huge role in providing high quality care for children. IFAs account for 44% of mainstream fostering households in England². 96% of IFAs are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted³. We hold a significant weight of

responsibility for caring for vulnerable children, and we are proud of the positive outcomes we produce for children that might otherwise not receive the care they need.

We welcomed the Government's publication of Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children. It reflects a clear acknowledgement of the scale of the challenges facing the fostering sector in England and the urgent need for systemic reform. We are also encouraged by the government's commitment to expand fostering opportunities, simplify approval processes, strengthen regional collaboration and support innovation.

However, these initiatives will only succeed if foster carers feel properly supported, recognised and sustained over the long term. Without addressing the underlying causes of pressure in children's social care, such efforts risk falling short of delivering lasting impact.



What is the Foster Carer Forum?



The Foster Carer Forum represents foster carers from IFAs across the country.

Foster carers are at the forefront of ensuring that some of the UK's most vulnerable children, those in care, receive the love, family support and stability they need and deserve. Without us, more vulnerable children would be denied the care they need. Alongside local authority foster carers, IFA foster carers care for almost half of children living in foster care in England. They love what they do but it is becoming harder to do it; in part because there is a lack

of understanding of exactly what foster carers from IFAs do and the challenges they face.

That is why they have come together to raise awareness of the role foster carers from IFAs play in shaping the lives of so many amazing young people, and to call on government to do more to support the sector, so that foster carers from IFAs can continue to provide stable loving homes for vulnerable children.

The Foster Carer Forum provides lived examples of the current challenges and benefits faced by foster carers from IFAs.



Case studies



Janet has been a foster parent for nearly 23 years and has cared for 11 children during that time. Before fostering, Janet had adopted two boys and seen first-hand the powerful, positive impact that a stable, loving home can have on children.

"I saw how fostering could have such a positive effect on children and decided to look into fostering once my boys were in a place that felt right for all of us."

A typical day starts early.

"I get up at 6.30am, have a quick shower, put some washing on and then go to wake B. I start making breakfast, then go back to wake him again, he's not always keen on getting up - especially on school days."

"Mornings are spent getting ready for school, making sure everything is in place and driving B to school for 8.20am."

"I check he's got money on his lunch card, do some paperwork, then go into work at school myself."

After collecting B at 3pm, the afternoon and evening are filled with snacks, conversations, activities and routines.

"We'll have a drink and a snack, maybe a quick game of darts, then it's off to football training. When we get home, I make drinks and snacks, check homework, support him to have a shower, complete my daily log and get to bed about 10.30pm."

Reflecting on their fostering journey, Janet is clear about the importance of support, and how this shaped her decision to move to an independent fostering agency (IFA).

"The lack of support from the local authority was instrumental in my decision to transfer to an IFA. I was concerned by the attitude of the fostering social worker, who only visited when the children were at school and never checked their bedrooms. I've now been with my current IFA support for 12 years and have been fantastically supported."

Through their IFA, Janet has access to 24/7 from a fostering social worker or another member of staff who knows them, their family and the children they care for. "I can have open, honest and non-judgemental conversations, and those conversations always have the children at the centre." Placement matching is handled carefully, with the foster carer fully involved in discussions.

"My IFA know me well enough that they will only present placements they feel will be appropriate for us."

One of the most difficult moments in Janet's fostering journey came during a divorce, when they discovered how the law views foster children.

"One issue that still stays with me is that a foster child is not considered 'a child of the family' in the eyes of the law."

"My husband's barrister argued that the children in my care, one who had been with me for eight years and another for six, could simply be returned to Social Services and placed elsewhere. I was horrified."

Determined to keep the family together, Janet fought to protect the children's stability and succeeded.

Looking ahead, they believe better outcomes for children depend on greater understanding of trauma and stronger recognition of foster carers as professionals.

"Social workers need more training around the effects of trauma on the developing child, and there also needs to be a cultural shift. Foster parents are often not viewed as professionals, despite knowing the child better than almost anyone else."

Above all, Janet believes foster carers, and their wider families, deserve recognition for the commitment involved.

"The role the whole fostering family plays in supporting a child in placement needs to be acknowledged."

Their advice to anyone considering fostering is simple:

"Thoroughly research the opportunity. Speak to foster carers and looked after children to really understand the role".

Case studies



Ruth and Chris became foster parents six years ago and are now mum and dad to three foster children aged 12, 15 and 16.

“We’ve always been drawn to foster care, there are so many children in the world that need a loving home and family. We knew there was something missing in our life. We now feel a sense of fulfilment.”

Ruth and Chris see their experience as creating a home and family, rather than as a placement. Both Ruth and Chris have a background in mental health services, which they credit as giving them greater experience of the skills and understanding required to navigate how children’s trauma will impact the rest of their lives.

“Foster children have often experienced things that they never should have as children. Our motto is to drown them in love, it’s not just a job, it’s a way of life. You need a happy medium between quality and a quantity of foster carers, otherwise every time that child is passed on, you’ve made it even harder for that child.”

Through their local IFA service, Ruth and Chris have easy access to a supervising social worker for each child. They also provide mandatory and specialised training, pastoral support and funding for activities and experience tailored to each family’s needs.

“If you ring, you see or speak to them on the same day, rather than waiting two weeks [as opposed to with a local authority]. It’s really personal, nurturing and non-judgemental. Without that package, you’d struggle. Once you start the assessment process, you’re also given a buddy. I’m a buddy now, we’re all carers together, we feel safe talking to one another, it’s really powerful.”

The placement matching team at the IFA service don’t just fill beds, they make sure it’s a proper match.

Ruth and Chris spoke at length about the focus their local IFA service puts on ensuring their family is seen as a unit, even for their child who is no longer in foster care thanks to an SGO (special guardianship order).

“Our local service has allowed us to follow our dreams. When we rowed to North Wales, they sponsored us, and the operational manager was at the start line to cheer us on with the kids.”

Ruth and Chris, as part of their therapeutic support, have also been able to work with the same psychologist for six years. They started working with their psychologist at the start of their fostering journey, and having the same named professional build a relationship with them and their children has been a critical part of their support network.

“We meet with him every two weeks; he’s the backbone of us. He knows how our children and our family works, giving us different tools and options to get through.”

Ruth and Chris are concerned about the recent move by the Welsh government to remove for-profit independent foster care services like theirs, and what this will mean for children in care.

“Without IFAs, the children would be totally alone. Most local authorities would probably resort to putting most of the children in residential care.

We’ve received files from LAs on children that we were considering fostering where we couldn’t even tell the gender of the child because their notes were so poor. When we got our 16-year-old that we first fostered as a 10-year-old, the local authority said that we were their last chance... and they were 10! How could we be their last chance?”

The challenges in foster care

There are currently not enough foster carers to look after the increased number of children needing foster care. IFA foster carers are playing a vital role in increasing capacity and working in partnership with local authorities. IFAs are an established part of services for children in care, with foster carers proudly on the frontline, caring for almost 50% of children in foster care in England. However, there is still a lack of government support for real change in the sector and vulnerable children are impacted as a result.

Key statistics:

The number of mainstream non-kinship – approved foster care households in England declined by

10%

from 2021-24, to 33,745, with the number of approved places shrinking by 8%, to 70,465, over that time.⁴

However, some IFAs are turning the corner of recruitment and slowly increasing the number of foster carers.

- **51.2% of children in care were in mainstream foster placements as of March 2024, down from 58% in 2019, with their number falling from 45,310 to 42,730 over the past five years, despite the overall growth in the care population during this time.**⁵
- **The falls reflect increasing challenges in recruiting foster carers, with there being 3,785 households who were newly approved during 2023-24 and still registered as of 31 March 2024, a similar number to the previous year but 18% down on that recorded in 2019-20.**

The care population has continued to grow year on year, increasing by

2%

in 2022-23, to 83,840.⁶

This all points to a perfect storm: more children in care, fewer current foster carers and fewer people applying to become the next generation of foster carers. We are therefore calling on Government to go further on the issues facing foster care services. More needs to be done to ensure that vulnerable children in care can access the stability and care that comes from being placed with loving foster carers. And that means doing more to support those who want to become and remain foster carers.

The urgent need for more foster carers



NAFP conducted a survey of member fostering services to understand the current core challenges facing the fostering sector. Based on 120 survey respondents, the findings reveal a sector facing acute operational, financial, and regulatory challenges that directly impact placement sufficiency, stability, and the wellbeing of foster carers and children.

This report summarises the key themes emerging from the survey and sets out priority policy reforms required to strengthen the fostering system and ensure IFAs can continue to deliver high-quality care.

Recruitment and retention crisis

80%

agreed that recruitment of new foster carers is a challenge

Over 80% of respondents agreed that recruitment of new foster carers is a challenge for their fostering service at present and 72% agreed that retention is also a challenge. The most frequently cited drivers include burnout, impact on family life, financial pressures, fear of allegations, and excessive bureaucracy.

Rising operational costs

56% of respondents reported significant increases in operational costs, including recruitment, training, HR, social work, and compliance. These pressures are not matched by fee uplifts.

Commissioning and local authority practice

Commissioning arrangements were described as inconsistent, opaque, and increasingly fragmented with 78% of respondents also noting that these are creating barriers to delivering high quality placements. Concerns include single-authority tenders, lack of transparency in fee reviews, and matching driven by internal capacity rather than children's needs.

Sufficient choice of foster care homes and complexity

Respondents agree that placement sufficiency is worsening and over 90% agreed that children's needs are becoming more complex. IFAs report supporting higher-acuity children for the same cost as local authorities.

Regulatory and inspection pressures

Respondents describe a regulatory environment that is increasingly risk-averse and procedurally driven, contributing to foster carer and staff burnout. Over 50% of respondents felt that regulatory or inspection pressures are placing significant strain on their organisation.

Lack of national recognition for IFAs

A strong theme throughout the survey is the perception that IFAs are undervalued by national government and sometimes by local authorities, with 92% of respondents feeling as though IFAs are not sufficiently recognised by national government as essential partners in the children's social care system.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The survey findings point to a set of structural issues that cannot be resolved through local practice alone. They require coordinated national reform. The following priority areas reflect the strongest and most consistent themes raised by IFA leaders and represent the changes most likely to stabilise the fostering system, improve outcomes for children, and support the sustainability of the workforce.

Reform the allegations process

The handling of allegations is the single most destabilising factor affecting foster carer retention. Carers describe processes that are slow, inconsistent, overly punitive, and often disproportionate to the concerns raised. Many report feeling “guilty until proven innocent,” with investigations that can last months and leave foster carers isolated, financially insecure, and emotionally exhausted.

This climate of fear is directly contributing to placement breakdowns and deterring both new and experienced foster carers from remaining in the role.

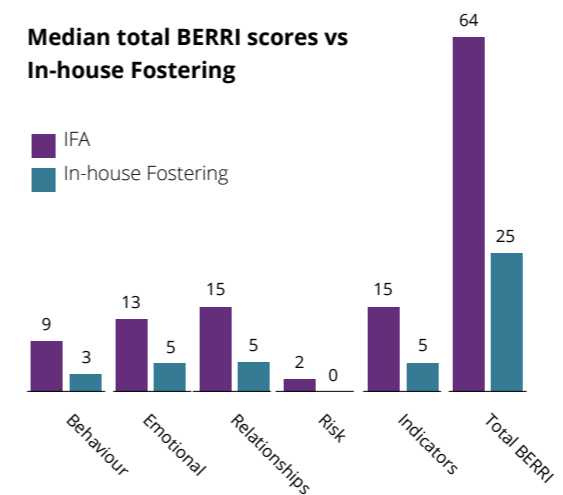
NAFP are supportive of the Government’s work in this space and announcements as part of their Fostering Reforms. As such, we are asking to work with Government to support in the development of clear national guidance promoting proportionality, early fact-finding, trauma-informed approaches, national data collection, and guaranteed support for carers.

Improve access to therapeutic support

IFAs report a significant rise in the complexity of children’s needs, including trauma, mental health challenges, and behavioural difficulties. Yet access to therapeutic services remains slow, inconsistent, and often unavailable. This gap places additional pressure on foster carers and increases the risk of placement breakdown. Many IFAs have stepped in to fill this gap with their own therapeutic services.

In 2024, NAFP commissioned children’s data analysts BERRI to examine the differences between local authority and IFA placements from data collected across a wide sample of local authorities and placement providers since 2021. The study found that, when children who are older and have more complex needs are in a foster care family placement facilitated by an IFA, they demonstrate comparable levels of progress as shown by younger and less complex children in a local authority provided foster family⁷.

The bar chart (below) shows the BERRI scores of children in IFAs have significantly higher total BERRI scores, as well as all 5 BERRI domains individually (Behaviour, Emotional Wellbeing, Relationships, Risk and Indicators) when compared to children in in-house foster placements. This suggests that those children in IFAs were both more complex in their needs and better understood by those who care for them, including from specialist foster carers with greater experience of caring for children with complex needs.



We therefore need guaranteed access to specialist children’s mental health services (CAMHS) or equivalent, funding for therapeutic training, and investment in multi-disciplinary support teams. Improved therapeutic support is essential to stabilising placements and improving long-term outcomes.

Commissioning reform

Current commissioning arrangements are fragmented, inconsistent, and often driven by cost rather than children’s needs. Single-authority tenders and opaque fee review processes create administrative burden and reduce placement flexibility. Poor information sharing undermines matching quality and placement stability.

NAFP are therefore calling for consistent, transparent frameworks, regional cooperation with both local authorities and IFAs, and matching based on children’s needs.

Regulatory reform

IFAs report increasing regulatory burden, inconsistent expectations, and a risk-averse culture that drives unnecessary bureaucracy. While regulation is essential for safeguarding, the current system can unintentionally undermine foster carer confidence and create operational strain.

Simplified processes, reduced bureaucracy, consistent Ofsted expectations, and recognition of IFAs as equal partners would create a more balanced regulatory environment that would support quality without overwhelming fostering services.

National recognition of IFAs

IFAs consistently report feeling undervalued by national government and sometimes by local authorities, despite supporting a disproportionate number of children with complex needs and achieving strong inspection outcomes. This lack of recognition undermines partnership working and contributes to negative public narratives about the sector.

Inclusion of IFAs in national reform programmes and public recognition of their role, supported by a national partnership framework which sets expectations for cooperation between local authorities and IFAs would create a foundation to effective partnership and system reform.

Foster children deserve love and care, and foster carers deserve support and understanding. If we are to help foster carers give the children they care for loving, stable homes then more needs to be done to retain existing foster carers and to recruit the next generation. If you are interested in finding out more about the challenges facing the independent foster care sector, the potential solutions identified by the Foster Carer Forum, and how you can help, then please contact the FCF secretariat.



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