

Staying Put: Strengthening a Successful Policy

Reflections from the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP)

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1. Introduction

The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department for Education's review of Staying Put.

To inform this paper, NAFP sought views from members across England, including chief executives, registered managers, supervising social workers, finance professionals and practitioners with direct experience of supporting Staying Put arrangements.

The feedback demonstrates a striking degree of consensus. The overwhelming view of members is that Staying Put is one of the most important and successful developments in supporting care experienced young people into adulthood. The challenge is not whether the policy should exist, but whether the current policy, funding and operational framework fully support its ambitions.

This paper identifies what is working well, where challenges remain and where there may be opportunities for future policy development.

1. Staying Put works

Members consistently described Staying Put as delivering significant benefits for young people.

These include:

- Stability and continuity of relationships.
- Improved emotional wellbeing.
- Better educational outcomes.
- Greater opportunity to prepare for adulthood.
- The experience of family life beyond the age of 18.

Many members reflected that Staying Put more closely mirrors the support most young people receive within their own families, where support rarely ends abruptly on an eighteenth birthday.

The evidence gathered suggests that the policy should be strengthened rather than reduced.

2. The transition to adulthood should not become a cliff edge

A recurring theme was that young people do not fundamentally change because they turn 18. Many care experienced young people continue to manage the effects of trauma, disrupted education and relationship loss. They often require the same emotional support, guidance and practical help at 18 that they needed at 17.

Members consistently expressed the view that policy should be built around the developmental reality of care experienced young people rather than assumptions about chronological age alone.

3. The greatest challenge is inconsistency

Perhaps the strongest message from members is the significant variation in how Staying Put operates across England.

Differences exist in relation to:

- Funding arrangements.
- Foster carer remuneration.
- University and bedroom retention arrangements.
- Housing Benefit and Universal Credit processes.
- Local Housing Allowance approaches.
- IFA involvement.
- Planning and pathway processes.
- Support available to young people.

This can create a postcode lottery for young people and carers.

NAFP believes there is merit in exploring greater national consistency whilst retaining local flexibility.

4. Early planning is the single biggest success factor

Members consistently reported that successful Staying Put arrangements are characterised by:

- Early conversations.
- Robust pathway planning.
- Clear communication.
- Transparent financial information.
- Active involvement of young people and foster carers.

Conversely, late planning can create unnecessary anxiety and uncertainty and may jeopardise otherwise successful arrangements.

Consideration could be given to strengthening expectations around early Staying Put planning, ideally beginning well before a young person's eighteenth birthday.

5. Staying Put and fostering sufficiency are closely connected

Members highlighted that Staying Put arrangements inevitably impact fostering capacity. Where carers have only one available bedroom, a Staying Put arrangement may reduce their ability to care for another child.

Many respondents also reported that carers begin planning for this possibility several years in advance, influencing decisions about employment and future fostering.

This should not be viewed as an argument against Staying Put. Rather, it suggests that future developments in Staying Put policy should be considered alongside national fostering sufficiency ambitions.

6. The continuing role of foster carers should be recognised

Members consistently described the continuing parenting role undertaken by foster carers after a young person reaches adulthood.

Many carers continue to provide emotional support, practical guidance and family relationships, yet some experience a significant reduction in financial support or are effectively repositioned as landlords rather than carers.

NAFP believes there is an opportunity to better align policy and funding with the reality of these continuing relationships.

7. The role of Independent Fostering Agencies

Many members highlighted the important contribution IFAs continue to make during Staying Put arrangements through supervision, support, training and relationship continuity.

However, operational arrangements vary considerably, and some members reported circumstances where carers are encouraged to move to direct local authority arrangements, reducing continuity of support.

There may be value in reviewing how best to preserve stable support networks around young people whilst ensuring value for money.

8. Support for education, employment and periods of uncertainty

Members strongly supported the principle that Staying Put should enable young people to pursue education, training and employment. They also highlighted the importance of support during periods where young people are not in education, employment or training.

Many respondents felt that young people should not lose the stability of their home simply because they are still working out their next steps.

9. Learning from Practice

The experiences shared by members demonstrate both the potential of Staying Put and the risks when planning is inadequate.

Case Study 1: Early planning and successful transition

A young person approaching adulthood was due to move into accommodation closer to their university. When suitable accommodation was not available, the foster carers agreed to continue supporting the young person until the end of the academic year whilst an alternative was identified.

The arrangement allowed the young person to:

- remain in a stable and familiar home;
- focus on their education;
- avoid the disruption of an unplanned move; and
- transition into independent accommodation at a more appropriate time.

The positive outcome was achieved through partnership working, flexibility and a shared commitment to the young person's long-term wellbeing.

Case Study 2: Delayed planning and avoidable uncertainty

Another young person approached their eighteenth birthday without a Personal Adviser being allocated or accommodation arrangements being progressed. Benefit applications were delayed and communication became fragmented as responsibilities transferred between services.

The result was:

- uncertainty for the young person;
- anxiety for foster carers;

- confusion about responsibilities; and
- an unnecessarily stressful transition.

The difficulties arose not because of the young person's needs, but because planning and support arrangements were not implemented in a timely way.

Case Study 3: Staying Put and fostering sufficiency

One fostering household with a single spare bedroom wished to continue supporting a young person through Staying Put. The arrangement was positive for the young person and preserved an important family relationship.

However, it also meant that the household could no longer offer a placement to another child requiring foster care.

Members reported that similar situations occur regularly across the sector. They do not see this as an argument against Staying Put, but as evidence that future policy development should consider Staying Put alongside the wider challenge of fostering sufficiency.

10. Opportunities for future development

Based on member feedback, NAFP suggests consideration could be given to:

- Greater national consistency of Staying Put arrangements.
- Earlier and more robust transition planning.
- Improved financial transparency and consistency.
- Better recognition of the continuing parenting role of foster carers.
- Consideration of the relationship between Staying Put and fostering sufficiency.
- Clarification of regulatory arrangements for carers supporting Staying Put young people.
- Stronger support for education and university pathways.
- Continued review of age thresholds in light of wider care leaver reforms.

Conclusion

The feedback received by NAFP is notable for its consistency. Members overwhelmingly support Staying Put and see it as a vital mechanism for improving outcomes for care experienced young people.

The principal challenges identified are not with the policy itself but with the consistency of its implementation.

The experiences shared by members suggest that when Staying Put works, it works because the system behaves like a family: relationships are prioritised, planning starts early and young people are supported through a gradual transition into adulthood.

When arrangements are uncertain, fragmented or poorly planned, unnecessary anxiety and instability can be created for young people and their carers.

At its heart, Staying Put is about preserving relationships and providing care experienced young people with the stability that many of their peers experience naturally within their families.

NAFP welcomes the opportunity to continue working with the Department for Education and partners across the sector to strengthen this important policy and ensure that it delivers the best possible outcomes for young people.

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