



Regionalisation: Building a Stronger Fostering System Together

Custodianship of Children. Stewardship of the System.

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This is the first in a series of NAFP discussion papers exploring leadership, commissioning and the future of fostering.

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Foreword

When I accepted the role of Chief Executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, I expected many of my conversations to focus on commissioning, procurement, contracts and Regional Care Cooperatives. Quite rightly, these have become some of the defining issues facing fostering today.

Over recent months, however, I have had the privilege of listening to foster carers, independent fostering agencies, commissioners, Directors of Children's Services, Regional Care Cooperative leaders, and others who care deeply about improving the lives of children and young people. Those conversations have been thoughtful, generous and challenging. More importantly, they have changed my own thinking.

I am grateful to everyone who has shared their experience, challenged my assumptions and contributed so generously to the conversations that have shaped this paper. Whilst the reflections that follow are my own, they have been enriched by the insight, openness and commitment of many people across the fostering community.

This paper reflects that learning.

It is not intended to provide all the answers, nor is it a blueprint for regionalisation. It is an invitation to think together about the opportunity this period of reform presents.

The Department for Education has announced the next wave of Regional Care Cooperatives. Together, the seven Regional Care Cooperatives now represent more than 100 local authorities across England. Regionalisation is no longer simply a policy ambition. It is becoming the operating environment within which much of fostering will develop over the coming years. That makes the questions explored in this paper increasingly important.

Much of the national conversation has understandably focused on structures, commissioning and governance. But as I listened to conversations taking place across England, I found myself returning to a different question.

What kind of fostering system are we trying to build?

Because beyond every procurement exercise, commissioning framework or organisational chart are children and young people whose futures will be shaped by the decisions we make today.

Throughout this paper I return to two ideas that have shaped my thinking. The first is **custodianship**: our shared responsibility to the children whose lives are entrusted to us. The second is **stewardship**: our collective responsibility to leave the fostering system stronger than we found it. Those ideas have become the thread running through my reflections on leadership, commissioning and regionalisation.

My hope is that this paper stimulates discussion, challenges assumptions and encourages providers, commissioners, Regional Care Cooperatives, government and national partners to learn from one another during this period of change.

Most of all, I hope it encourages us to ask better questions and make better decisions for the children and young people, and foster carers we all serve.

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Chapter 1

Why This Matters

Regionalisation represents one of the most significant changes to children's social care in England for many years. It has understandably prompted important conversations about commissioning, procurement, governance and the future role of Regional Care Cooperatives. Those conversations matter, and they deserve due attention.

With seven Regional Care Cooperatives now covering more than 100 local authorities, regionalisation has moved beyond policy design and into implementation. Attention is therefore beginning to shift from whether Regional Care Cooperatives will become part of the landscape to how they will exercise leadership, build confidence and strengthen the fostering system.

Yet there is a danger that, during periods of significant reform, we become preoccupied with how the system is organised rather than what it is trying to achieve. Structures, governance and commissioning matter. But they are not ends in themselves. They are how we seek to create something far more important: safe, stable and loving family lives for children and young people.

The discussion about regionalisation has naturally focused on procurement models, commissioning arrangements, organisational design and accountability. These are important questions. But they are only worthwhile if they improve children's lives. Children do not experience organisational structures. They experience relationships.

They will never know which framework secured their foster home or how a commissioning decision was made. They are far more likely to remember who comforted them after a nightmare, who turned up to parents' evening, who celebrated their achievements, or who continued to believe in them when life became difficult.

Those are the experiences that shape childhood. More importantly, they shape adulthood.

During one conversation, John Turberville, Chief Executive of the Mulberry Bush, asked me a deceptively simple question that has stayed with me throughout the writing of this paper.

What kind of adults are we hoping today's children become?

It is a question that changes everything.

We are not simply trying to help children reach adulthood safely, important though that is. We are trying to help them become adults who can build trusting relationships, contribute to their communities, sustain employment if they choose, experience love, raise families of their own if they wish, and live fulfilling lives.

Once we begin thinking in those terms, regionalisation looks rather different. The question is no longer simply how services should be organised. It becomes how we create the conditions in which children and young people are most likely to experience the relationships that enable them to thrive throughout their lives (see Figure 1).

Independent fostering agencies, local authorities, Regional Care Cooperatives, government, representative bodies and regulators all have different responsibilities. They will continue to have different perspectives, priorities and, at times, different interests. That is entirely healthy.

The challenge is not to remove those differences, but to ensure they are directed towards a common purpose.

Throughout this paper I return to two ideas that have increasingly shaped my thinking. The first is **custodianship**: our shared responsibility to the children and young people whose lives are entrusted to us. The second is **stewardship**: our collective responsibility to strengthen the fostering system that those children and young people depend upon.

Regionalisation is not the destination. It is an opportunity to strengthen relationships, improve commissioning, increase confidence and encourage long-term investment. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to build a fostering system that gives more children the chance not simply to be safe today, but to thrive throughout their lives.

Everything that follows in this paper can be distilled into two questions.

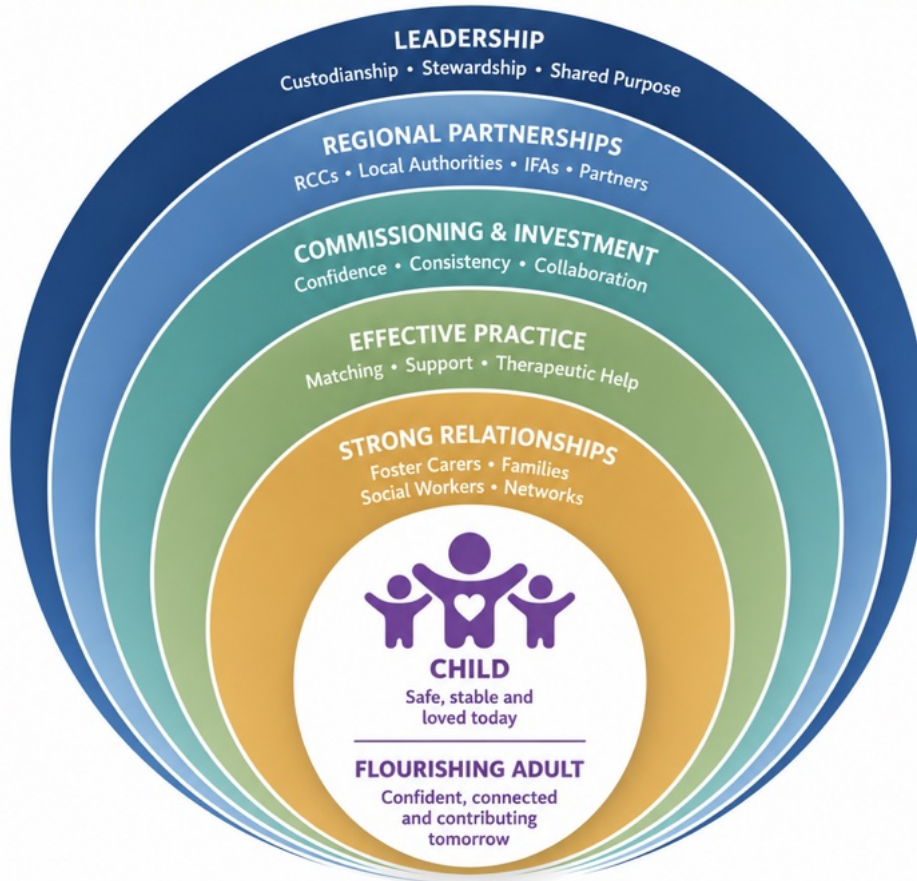
1. **Will this make it more likely that today's children become adults who thrive?**
2. **Will it leave the fostering system stronger than we found it?**

If those become the questions against which we judge every significant decision, I believe we will make better decisions about commissioning, leadership and for children and young people.

Figure 1. A Child-Centred Model of System Leadership

Children experience relationships, not systems.

The role of leadership is to create the conditions in which those relationships can flourish.



- 1 Will this make it more likely that today's children become adults who flourish?
- 2 Will it leave the fostering system stronger than we found it?

Chapter 2

The Same Conversations Keep Happening

I expected every region to tell a different story. Each has its own history, relationships and challenges. Instead, by the third or fourth regional partnership meeting, I realised I was hearing the same conversations, only in different accents. Whether I was in Newcastle, Coventry, Bristol or London, the underlying experiences were similar.

One meeting focused on referral quality. Another on matching. Elsewhere the discussion centred on delegated authority, therapeutic support, notice periods, foster carer retention or commissioning arrangements. The examples differed. The underlying themes did not.

That made me wonder whether we have sometimes misunderstood the nature of the problems we face. If every region is wrestling with the same issues, perhaps they are no longer regional issues. Perhaps they are telling us something about the way the fostering system operates.

Referral quality provides a good example. At first glance, incomplete or late information appears to be an operational issue. Yet its consequences reach much further. Poor information makes good matching more difficult. Poor matching increases the likelihood of instability. Instability places additional pressure on foster carers, disrupts children's relationships and gradually weakens confidence across the wider system.

What begins as a problem with information quickly becomes a problem for children and young people. The same pattern emerged repeatedly. Meetings postponed. Decisions delayed. Support agreed but not implemented. Planning drifting. Communication breaking down. Individually, none of these issues appears especially significant. Collectively, they create uncertainty. And uncertainty makes it harder for everyone to do their best work.

What struck me most, however, was not the problems themselves. It was how much agreement existed about what good practice looks like. Whether I was speaking with commissioners, providers or Regional Care Cooperative colleagues, I heard consistent aspirations. Earlier conversations. Better referral information. Stronger matching. More timely decisions. Greater transparency. Better partnership. More opportunities to learn from one another.

The challenge is not discovering what good practice looks like.

The challenge is making good practice ordinary.

Regional Care Cooperatives have the potential to do much more than coordinate commissioning. They can identify patterns that individual organisations cannot see on their own, encourage greater consistency, spread learning more quickly and create the conditions in which continuous improvement becomes everyone's responsibility rather than each organisation's challenge in isolation.

Recent work by the Department for Education points in the same direction. Its analysis of children's social care sufficiency recognises that sufficiency is shaped by the interaction of workforce, placement availability, suitability, quality and wider system factors, rather than capacity alone.

That mirrors what I have heard consistently across England. Many of the issues we describe as operational are systemic. As the months passed, I came to value these conversations for another reason. They did not simply provide intelligence about individual regions. They provided perspective.

A conversation taking place in the South West often had similar roots to one taking place in Yorkshire. Commissioners and independent fostering agencies were frequently wrestling with the same underlying issues, albeit from different starting points.

Once you begin to recognise those patterns, it becomes much harder to believe that another piece of guidance, another local process or another procurement exercise will solve them on its own.

The challenge is not a lack of good ideas. Nor is it simply a lack of evidence. In many cases, the harder question is why good ideas, repeated warnings and shared learning have not translated into more consistent change. That takes us beyond process and into culture, leadership and governance.

If we are still having these same conversations five years from now, as we were having five years ago, regionalisation will have achieved far less than it could. If, instead, our conversations begin to focus less on recurring frustrations and more on shared learning, continuous improvement and collective stewardship and custodianship, then something much more significant will have changed.

Regional Care Cooperatives will have become more than a different way of commissioning services. They will have become catalysts for building a stronger fostering system together.

Chapter 3

Relationships Change Lives. Systems Should Help Them Thrive.

Children experience the quality of relationships far more than they experience the quality of systems. That may sound self-evident, but it has profound implications for how we think about regionalisation, commissioning and leadership.

Children do not judge the fostering system by the quality of a procurement exercise, the design of a commissioning framework or the structure of a Regional Care Cooperative. They judge it by whether the adults around them know them, understand them, keep their promises and remain alongside them when life becomes difficult. The adults working within the system understand this instinctively.

Before joining the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, I expected to find a sector characterised by tension. I imagined independent fostering agencies frustrated with commissioners, commissioners frustrated with independent fostering agencies, and almost everyone frustrated with procurement. Those tensions certainly exist, and it would be naïve to pretend otherwise. What I found was much more encouraging.

Across England I met commissioners who care deeply about children and young people and genuinely want to work collaboratively. I met independent fostering agencies investing heavily in foster carers, therapeutic support and practice development because they believe children deserve the very best care. I met Regional Care Cooperative leaders determined to build partnerships rather than reinforce divisions. I met social workers whose commitment consistently exceeded the expectations of their job descriptions.

Above all, I met foster carers whose patience, compassion and resilience reminded me why fostering remains one of the most extraordinary things anyone can choose to do.

What surprised me was not the quality of the people. It was how often those people described systems that made doing the right thing harder than it should be. Perhaps we have sometimes thought about this the wrong way round. We often describe good relationships as the outcome of good systems. Increasingly, the opposite is true. The purpose of good systems is to help great relationships thrive.

Good referral information matters because it enables better matching. Timely decision-making matters because uncertainty places unnecessary pressure on children and young people and foster carers. Effective commissioning matters because it creates the conditions in which organisations can invest in people, practice and support. Partnership matters because children benefit when the important adults in their lives work well together.

The value of each of these things lies not in the process itself, but in the relationships, it helps to protect. Leadership is not simply about designing better systems. It is about designing systems that make it easier for caring people to do what they came into this profession to do.

One experienced foster carer captured this powerfully.

“Children don’t make me question whether I can keep fostering. It’s everything that happens around them.”

I have returned to that sentence many times whilst writing this paper. It reminds us that many of the pressures experienced by foster carers are not created by the children and young people they care for. They arise from the systems designed to support them.

When information arrives too late. When decisions drift. When support is agreed but not delivered. When communication breaks down. When organisations retreat into their own priorities rather than solving problems together.

Each frustration may appear relatively small in isolation. Collectively, they erode confidence, place additional pressure on foster carers and make it harder for the relationships children depend upon to remain strong.

This is why I have become increasingly convinced that experienced foster carers deserve much greater national attention than they currently receive. We often talk about recruitment and retention in the same breath, almost as though they are equal priorities. They are both important. But they are not the same.

Experienced foster carers are the anchor of stability for children and young people.

They carry knowledge that cannot be replaced quickly. They mentor newer carers, support families through extraordinarily difficult experiences and often become the people children remember long after professional involvement has ended.

When experienced foster carers leave, we lose much more than capacity. We lose relationships. We lose wisdom. We lose confidence. We lose some of the foundations upon which stability is built.

We have the relationship the wrong way round. **Recruitment matters. Retention matters more.** The organisations that retain experienced foster carers well are usually those that attract new carers most successfully. Their existing carers become their strongest ambassadors, not because they have been asked to recruit others, but because they genuinely believe in what they are part of.

That has important implications for regionalisation. If Regional Care Cooperatives help create systems that encourage earlier conversations, better information, quicker decisions and stronger partnerships, they will strengthen the relationships that children and young people experience every day. If they simply create different organisational structures, they will have missed a remarkable opportunity.

The success of regionalisation will not be judged by the structures it creates. It will be judged by the quality of the relationships those structures make possible. That is the real opportunity presented by the reforms now taking place across England. Not simply to redesign commissioning, but to create a fostering system that makes it easier for children to experience enduring relationships, for foster carers to succeed, and for professionals to work together with confidence and trust.

In the end, relationships change lives. Our systems should exist to help them thrive.

Chapter 4

Commissioning Creates More Than Care Settings

The conversation about commissioning is rarely just about commissioning.

It often begins with procurement, contracts, frameworks or fee negotiations, but it doesn't end there. Before long, people are talking about confidence, relationships, investment and the choices organisations make about where they focus their time, energy and resources.

That is because commissioning does much more than purchase foster homes. It helps shape the conditions in which organisations make decisions. Those decisions influence far more than today's placements.

Independent fostering agencies decide whether to invest in recruiting foster carers, strengthening therapeutic support, developing leaders and creating new services. Local authorities decide where to focus their commissioning effort, how they engage with providers and the kind of relationships they want to build. Foster carers decide whether they feel valued enough to continue fostering.

None of those decisions is made in isolation. All of them are influenced, at least in part, by the confidence people have in the system around them. Perhaps we have viewed commissioning through too narrow a lens. We understandably ask whether it purchases care effectively, delivers value for money and responds quickly enough to children's needs. Those questions matter. But there is another question sitting behind them.

What kind of fostering system is our commissioning helping to create?

That question changes the conversation. It reminds us that good commissioning does not begin when a child or young person needs a foster home. It begins much earlier, when organisations decide whether they feel confident enough to invest in the future.

Capacity is built over years through recruiting and retaining foster carers, investing in practice, developing staff, strengthening leadership and creating organisations that people want to be part of. Good commissioning responds to capacity. Great commissioning helps create it.

Confidence is sometimes dismissed because it feels intangible. It is one of the most important ingredients of a healthy fostering system. Organisations that have confidence in the future are more likely to invest, innovate and think beyond today's pressures. Where confidence is low, attention naturally shifts towards managing immediate risks rather than building long-term capability. Commissioning is therefore a leadership function as much as a procurement function.

Leadership must do two things at once. It must respond to today's needs whilst creating the conditions for tomorrow's success. Commissioners cannot ignore the reality that children need families today, just as providers cannot ignore the need to remain financially sustainable. Those pressures are real. The challenge is ensuring today's decisions also strengthen tomorrow's fostering system. Providers cannot invest confidently into uncertainty.

One of the most important roles of Regional Care Cooperatives will be to develop a shared understanding of what children and young people in their region are likely to need over the coming years. Bringing together local authority sufficiency plans, population trends, placement data and wider intelligence creates an opportunity to build a richer picture of future demand than any single organisation could produce alone. The clearer independent fostering agencies understand future demand, levels of need, geographical priorities and service gaps, the more confidently they can make investment decisions.

This is where commissioning becomes an act of stewardship. It creates the confidence organisations need to make decisions whose benefits may not be realised for several years.

That has important implications for how we think about independent fostering agencies. Providers contribute much more than foster home capacity. They recruit and support foster carers. They invest in therapeutic services. They develop leaders. They strengthen practice. They create environments in which children are more likely to experience stable and nurturing family lives. These are not optional extras. They are part of the infrastructure of a healthy fostering system.

Good commissioning should recognise and encourage that investment because children and young people benefit when organisations have the confidence to think beyond the minimum required to meet today's demand.

Relationships matter here too. Trust should never replace accountability, and good commissioning will always involve challenge, transparency and robust decision-making. But trust makes those conversations easier. Where relationships are strong, difficult issues are identified earlier, information is shared more openly, and organisations are more willing to solve problems together. Innovation becomes easier because people have confidence in one another's intentions.

The quality of commissioning is therefore influenced not simply by the contracts that are signed, but by the relationships that surround them. This way of thinking is increasingly reflected in national policy. That reflects what I have heard consistently across England. The strongest commissioning conversations are no longer simply about buying foster homes. They are about creating the conditions in which good fostering can thrive.

Fostering also sits within a much wider system of support. It cannot be considered in isolation from early help, family support, kinship care or residential care. Decisions

made upstream shape the children who later need foster care, just as decisions made elsewhere in the system influence the pressures experienced across fostering.

Of course, they will coordinate commissioning across larger geographies and develop new approaches to procurement. But I hope they also become organisations that increase confidence, strengthen relationships, encourage long-term investment and help regions learn together.

Chapter 5

Custodianship and Stewardship

I have found myself returning to two ideas. They are not new concepts, nor do I claim any originality in the words themselves. But they have helped me make sense of the responsibilities we all carry during a period of significant change. More importantly, they have changed the way I think about leadership.

The first is **custodianship**.

The second is **stewardship**.

Although closely related, they describe two different responsibilities. One concerns our responsibility to the children and young people whose lives are entrusted to us. The other concerns our responsibility to the fostering system itself. Good leadership requires us to hold both responsibilities together.

For me, custodianship begins with a simple truth. Every child and young person who enters foster care is entrusted to adults carrying an extraordinary responsibility. Whether we are foster carers, supervising social workers, commissioners, providers, policy makers, inspectors or representative bodies, the decisions we make influence their lives. Sometimes that influence is immediate and obvious. Sometimes it is indirect and almost invisible. Either way, it is important.

Thinking about custodianship has encouraged me to look beyond today's placement or tomorrow's review meeting and ask a different question.

What kind of adult are we helping this child to become?

Will they grow up believing that adults can be trusted? Will they experience relationships that help them recover from trauma? Will they develop the confidence to build friendships, sustain employment, form families of their own if they choose and contribute to their communities?

Those questions feel very different from asking whether a process has been completed on time. Yet they are the questions that give our work its purpose. That, for me, is custodianship. It is the discipline of continually asking whether our decisions make it more likely that today's children become adults who thrive. It reminds us that the purpose of every meeting, every assessment, every commissioning decision and every policy discussion is not the process itself. It is the future life of a child or young person.

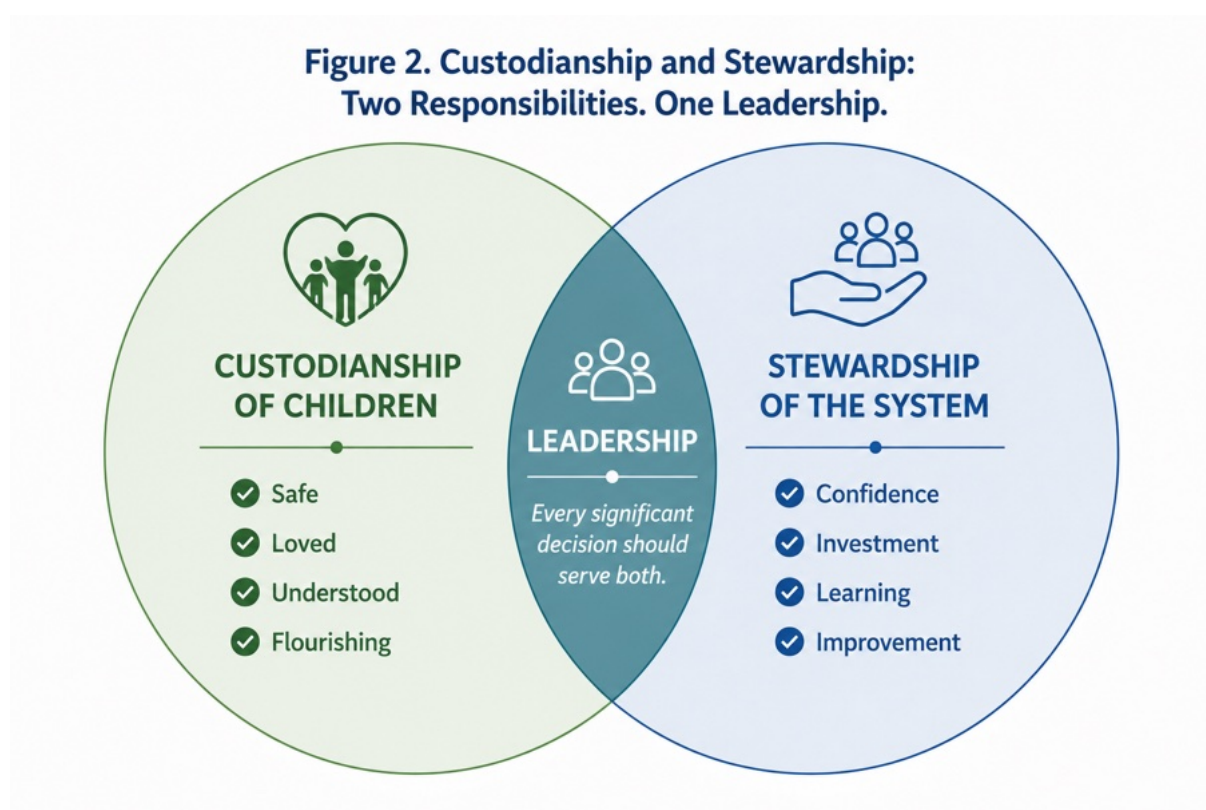
Stewardship asks something different. None of us created the fostering system we have inherited. We inherited it from people who devoted their careers to improving it, often in circumstances every bit as challenging as our own. One day we will hand that system to others. The question is whether they inherit something stronger because of the

decisions we made, or whether they inherit the consequences of opportunities we failed to take.

For me, that has become one of the defining questions of regionalisation. It is easy to think about reform in terms of structures, governance arrangements or commissioning models. But they are only valuable if they leave the fostering system healthier than it is today.

If regionalisation simply changes who commissions services, we will have missed a remarkable opportunity. If it strengthens relationships, increases confidence, encourages investment and helps organisations learn more effectively from one another, then I believe it will have achieved something much more significant.

Stewardship asks us to think beyond today's pressures without losing sight of them. It recognises that commissioning decisions influence future investment. Contracting decisions shape relationships. Leadership decisions shape organisational culture. Every significant decision leaves something behind. Good stewardship is not about protecting organisations. It is about strengthening the conditions in which children can thrive (see Figure 2).



Custodianship without stewardship risks becoming entirely absorbed in today's pressures without asking what future children will inherit. Stewardship without custodianship risks becoming absorbed in systems and organisations whilst losing sight of the individual children those systems exist to serve. Good leadership requires us to hold both responsibilities at the same time. To think about today's child and tomorrow's fostering system together.

I suspect the best leaders in fostering have always thought this way. They may not use the words like custodianship or stewardship, but they instinctively balance immediate decisions with long-term consequences. They understand that looking after today's child and strengthening tomorrow's system are not competing priorities. They are two sides of the same responsibility.

I hope these ideas begin a wider conversation. I hope providers, commissioners, Regional Care Cooperatives, government and national organisations challenge them, refine them and improve them. If they encourage us to ask better questions, they will already have served their purpose. For me, those questions are now very simple.

- 1. Are we acting as good custodians of the children whose lives have been entrusted to us?**
- 2. Are we acting as good stewards of the fostering system future generations of children, foster carers and leaders will depend upon?**

If we continue asking ourselves those questions, I believe we will make better decisions, not just about regionalisation, but about the future of fostering itself.

Chapter 6

Leading an Independent Fostering Agency in a Regionalised World

Regionalisation will undoubtedly change the environment in which independent fostering agencies operate. Commissioning arrangements will evolve. Relationships with Regional Care Cooperatives will become increasingly important. Expectations of providers are likely to change. It would be easy to see this simply as another organisational change programme. That would be a mistake.

Leadership is about more than responding well to today's pressures. It is about leaving the fostering system stronger than we found it. For independent fostering agencies, regionalisation provides an opportunity not simply to adapt to change, but to help shape it.

If I were leading an independent fostering agency today, these are the conversations I would want to have with my Board.

1. Start with your purpose, not the procurement

It is tempting to begin preparations for regionalisation by studying procurement models, governance structures and commissioning intentions. But I would begin by asking whether we are clear about the organisation we are trying to become.

- What do we want to be known for?
- When commissioners, foster carers or children and young people talk about our organisation in five years' time, what do we hope they say?
- Do they talk about:
 - Our matching?
 - Our therapeutic support?
 - Our foster carer experience?
 - The stability children experience?
 - The way we work in partnership?

Regionalisation is an opportunity to think again about organisational identity, not simply organisational structure.

Question for Boards

What do we want our organisation to be known for in five years' time, and are today's decisions helping us get there?

2. Understand your Regional Care Cooperative

Every Regional Care Cooperative will develop differently. Each region has different relationships, different priorities and different challenges. The strongest providers will invest time in understanding what their Regional Care Cooperative is trying to achieve and how they can contribute to those ambitions.

That means understanding Sufficiency Strategies and Market Position Statements. It means understanding future demand, emerging service gaps and geographical priorities. It also means recognising that Regional Care Cooperatives are learning too. The strongest relationships are unlikely to be built during procurement exercises. They will be built beforehand through openness, practical ideas and a willingness to solve problems together.

Question for Boards

Do we genuinely understand the ambitions of our Regional Care Cooperative, and how are we helping it succeed?

3. Invest before you need to

Experienced supervising social workers cannot be developed overnight. Outstanding managers grow through experience. Therapeutic services take time to establish. Foster carers need consistent support if they are to remain confident and resilient. Capacity is not created when referrals increase. It is created years beforehand through investment in people, practice and leadership.

Regionalisation should encourage organisations to think beyond today's pressures and ask whether they are building the capability they will need tomorrow. It also means being able to explain clearly what good care actually costs. Therapeutic support, creative practice and skilled supervision are not optional extras. They are often the very things that prevent instability and protect children's futures.

Question for Boards

Are we investing in tomorrow's capacity, or simply responding to today's demand?

4. Make matching your strategic advantage

Relationships change lives, and matching is where those relationships begin. Organisations that understand children's strengths and needs deeply, support improvements in referral quality and invest in thoughtful matching are much more likely

to achieve stability. Good matching is not simply an operational task. It is one of the most important strategic contributions an organisation can make.

Every improvement in referral quality. Every investment in assessment. Every conversation that leads to a better-informed match. Each strengthens the foundations upon which successful foster homes are built.

Questions for Boards

How confident are we that our matching consistently gives children and foster carers the strongest possible start?

How well do we understand children's strengths and needs before those relationships begin?

5. Make retention a Board priority

Recruitment matters. Retention matters more. **Experienced foster carers are the anchor of stability for children.** They carry knowledge, wisdom and confidence that cannot quickly be replaced. Boards should therefore understand their experienced foster carers as well as they understand their financial performance.

- Why do carers stay?
- Why do they leave?
- When do they begin to disengage?
- What can we learn from those who have fostered successfully for many years?

Retention is not simply an operational issue. It is one of the most important strategic responsibilities an organisation has.

Question for Boards

How well do we understand the experience of our most experienced foster carers?

6. Bring evidence, not assertion

Regionalisation is likely to increase expectations around evidence, outcomes and transparency. That should be welcomed. The strongest organisations understand themselves well. They know their outcomes, their stability and their foster carer experience. Just as importantly, they understand where they still need to improve.

Independent fostering agencies also hold a valuable strategic perspective. Working across multiple authorities allows them to see patterns, emerging risks and unintended

consequences that individual organisations may never see. Confidence grows when organisations are prepared to learn as openly as they celebrate success.

Question for Boards

If someone asked us tomorrow to demonstrate our impact, what evidence would we bring?

7. Build relationships before you need them

Trust is rarely built during procurement. It is built long beforehand. The organisations that contribute to regional conversations, share learning, support innovation and work constructively with commissioners are more likely to become trusted partners. Relationships remain one of the strongest strategic assets any organisation possesses.

Question for Boards

Are we known as an organisation that helps solve problems, or simply as a provider of services?

The greatest opportunity presented by regionalisation is not simply to become better providers. It is to become stronger organisations. Organisations that develop exceptional foster carers. Build deeper partnerships. Contribute confidently to the wider fostering system. And ultimately ensure that more children experience stable, loving family lives.

Chapter 7

Leading Regional Change Together

This is the chapter I have approached with the greatest humility.

Regional Care Cooperatives are now becoming established across much of England. While each region remains at a different stage of development, together they now cover most local authorities. Different regions are testing different approaches and, quite rightly, no one is pretending that a single model has all the answers.

This chapter is offered in the spirit of partnership. I would not presume to tell Regional Care Cooperatives how they should operate. Instead, I want to share the questions worth asking as regional leadership develops.

I hope some resonate. I hope others are challenged. Most importantly, I hope they become the basis of a conversation that continues long after this paper has been read.

1. Start with the outcomes you want to create

Regional Care Cooperatives have understandably been established to strengthen commissioning, improve sufficiency and create greater consistency across larger geographies. But if we look back in ten years' time, I doubt anyone will remember how procurement processes were organised or how many frameworks were established.

They are much more likely to ask whether more children experienced stable family lives. Whether foster carers felt better supported. Whether local authorities became better able to meet children's needs close to home. That leads to a simple question.

What kind of fostering system are we trying to create?

Keeping that question at the centre of every significant decision will influence almost everything else.

Question for Regional Care Cooperative leaders

What outcomes do we want children, foster carers and partners to experience because Regional Care Cooperatives exist?

2. Create confidence to invest

Confidence changes behaviour. Independent fostering agencies invest when they have confidence in the future. Commissioners innovate when they have confidence in one another. Foster carers remain when they feel confident, they will be supported. Confidence rarely comes from procurement alone. It grows through consistency, openness, transparency and relationships that deepen over time.

Regional Care Cooperatives can create that confidence by setting out clearly what children and young people in their region are likely to need, where current provision is insufficient and what kinds of fostering capacity and capability they want to see develop. Providers cannot invest confidently into uncertainty. One practical way of creating that confidence is through transparent regional intelligence that brings together local authority sufficiency planning into a shared picture of future need and opportunity.

Regional Care Cooperatives have a unique opportunity to create confidence across an entire region. If they do, they will encourage investment in foster carers, practice, leadership and innovation that extends far beyond the life of any contract.

Question for Regional Care Cooperative leaders

Are our decisions increasing confidence across the fostering system, or simply managing today's pressures?

3. Become your region's learning organisation

Regional Care Cooperatives can see patterns individual organisations cannot. That creates an extraordinary opportunity for collective learning. This learning should flow in every direction. Independent fostering agencies bring experience from working across multiple authorities. Local authorities hold deep knowledge of children, families and communities. Foster carers understand what it feels like to care. Children and young people understand what it feels like to grow up within the system. Each perspective should be valued.

Regional leadership should create the conditions in which those different perspectives inform one another. The strongest Regional Care Cooperatives will become known not simply for coordinating commissioning, but for helping their regions learn more quickly.

Question for Regional Care Cooperative leaders

How are we helping good ideas spread across our region?

4. Listen to every part of the system

Independent fostering agencies care for around half of the children living in foster care. That gives them a perspective no single organisation can hold. Working across multiple local authorities allows them to see patterns, unintended consequences and emerging risks that might otherwise remain invisible. That does not make them right. It does make their perspective valuable.

The same is true of local authority colleagues, foster carers, social workers and, most importantly, children and young people themselves. Regional leadership is strongest when it actively seeks different perspectives before important decisions are made.

Over time, Regional Care Cooperatives may also wish to consider how independent fostering expertise is embedded within regional governance. The form that takes will differ from region to region. The principle is what matters. Strategic partnership should be designed in, not added later.

Question for Regional Care Cooperative leaders

Whose voice are we not hearing often enough?

5. Measure what matters

Every Regional Care Cooperative will be expected to demonstrate value for money, improve sufficiency and strengthen commissioning. Those measures are important. But they are not enough. We should also ask:

- Are children experiencing greater stability?
- Are experienced foster carers choosing to remain?
- Is referral quality improving?
- Are relationships between providers and commissioners becoming stronger?
- Are organisations investing with greater confidence?
- Are we learning faster as a region than we were before?
- Are we reducing avoidable escalation into residential care?

Those questions take us much closer to children's everyday experience.

Question for Regional Care Cooperative leaders

How will we know that children's everyday lives have improved because of the decisions we are making?

Think beyond commissioning

Regional Care Cooperatives can become more than commissioning organisations. They can become leaders of a stronger fostering system. Commissioning remains an essential part of that role. But the aim is a fostering system that attracts and retains excellent foster carers, encourages organisations to invest with confidence, strengthens relationships between partners and enables more children to experience safe, stable and loving family lives.

Build this together

I believe the ideas of custodianship and stewardship they apply every bit as much to Regional Care Cooperatives as they do to providers. Custodianship asks whether today's decisions improve children's futures. Stewardship asks whether those same decisions leave the fostering system stronger for those who follow. Neither question can be answered by one organisation acting alone.

Over the coming months NAFF will establish its **Commissioning, Sufficiency and System Stewardship Group** to help develop the provider perspective on these issues. My hope is that this becomes the beginning of a much wider conversation involving Regional Care Cooperatives, commissioners, government and national partners.

This chapter is therefore not intended to define what excellent Regional Care Cooperatives look like. It is an invitation to discover that together. Regional Care Cooperatives and local authorities can develop a genuinely shared understanding of excellent regional leadership and strengthen relationships, increase confidence, learn together and build a stronger fostering system for the children who depend upon it.

Chapter 8

What Success Could Look Like

How will we know whether regionalisation has been successful?

In time, Regional Care Cooperatives will become established. Commissioning arrangements will mature. Procurement processes will become familiar. Today's reforms will gradually become tomorrow's business as usual. But they are not, in themselves, success. Success will be judged by something much simpler.

Whether more children experience safe, stable and loving family lives.

Everything else should help us achieve that.

Success for children and young people

Success for children and young people will mean more of them remaining in homes where they feel they belong. It will mean better-informed matching, earlier support when placements begin to come under pressure, fewer avoidable placement moves, and decisions being made with sufficient confidence and information that children and young people no longer carry the consequences of weaknesses elsewhere in the system.

If those become ordinary experiences for children, regionalisation will already have achieved something important.

Success for foster carers

Success for foster carers will mean more experienced carers choosing to continue fostering because they feel valued, well supported and confident that help will be available when it is needed. It will mean foster carers increasingly experiencing themselves as trusted partners in children's lives rather than participants in a process.

Experienced foster carers remain one of the greatest strengths our fostering system possesses. Retaining their knowledge, wisdom and commitment may prove one of the most important measures of success.

Success for organisations

Success for organisations will mean commissioners and providers spending less time defending positions and more time solving problems together. Relationships will become stronger. Investment will become easier. Innovation will become more common. Regional Care Cooperatives will become known not only for coordinating commissioning, but for creating the confidence that enables good fostering to thrive.

Success for the system

Success for the system will mean good ideas travelling more quickly than they do today. Different regions will learn from one another more readily. Providers, commissioners and Regional Care Cooperatives will share experience more openly, and improvement will become something we pursue together rather than separately.

A stronger fostering system is one that learns faster than the challenges it faces.

Success for leadership

Perhaps the biggest change will never appear in a performance report. It will be reflected in the way people think and work together. Providers recognising their responsibility not only for the success of their own organisations, but for the strength of the wider fostering system. Regional Care Cooperatives seeing themselves not simply as commissioners, but as stewards of confidence, relationships and long-term capability. Representative bodies connecting ideas as readily as they represent interests. Government, regulators and partners creating more opportunities for learning alongside accountability.

If those shifts begin to happen, we will have created a fostering system that is better able to learn, adapt and continually improve for the benefit of children and young people.

If, ten years from now, more children experience stable and loving family lives, more foster carers choose to continue fostering, organisations trust one another more than they do today, and we have become better at learning together than working apart, I believe regionalisation will have achieved something genuinely worthwhile.

Chapter 9

NAFP's Commitment

The future of fostering will not be shaped by any one organisation acting alone. It will be shaped by the quality of the relationships we build, the confidence we create and our willingness to learn together.

That has implications for NAFP too. Independent fostering agencies care for almost half of the children living in mainstream foster care in England. They recruit, support and invest in thousands of foster carers. They innovate, develop services and make an extraordinary contribution to children's lives every day. They deserve a strong and independent representative body. That responsibility will never change.

We will continue to represent members' interests, challenge policy where challenge is needed, champion the contribution of independent fostering agencies and speak confidently whenever decisions risk undermining children, foster carers or the wider fostering sector. But I also believe NAFP has an opportunity to contribute in another way.

One of the privileges of representing members nationally is the perspective it provides. We hear similar conversations taking place across every region of England. We see innovation emerging in one part of the country that could benefit another. We hear about successful approaches to recruitment, retention, matching, commissioning and practice that deserve a much wider audience.

Increasingly, I believe one of our responsibilities is to help those ideas travel. The best ideas are already widely distributed throughout the fostering system. Our role is often to connect them.

That is why, over the coming months, we will establish the **Commissioning, Sufficiency and System Stewardship Group**. Its purpose is not to create another committee. It is to bring together experienced leaders from across the independent fostering sector to think collectively about one of the most significant periods of change fostering has experienced for many years. I hope it becomes a place where practical experience is shared honestly, where different perspectives are welcomed and where ideas are tested before they become positions.

One of the group's first priorities will be to develop a practical **Continuous Improvement Framework** (See Figure 3) for independent fostering agencies.

The ambition is deliberately simple. Not another inspection framework. Not another compliance process. But a framework that encourages honest reflection, shared learning and continuous improvement. One that helps organisations strengthen themselves whilst also strengthening the wider fostering system.

Figure 3. Continuous Improvement Cycle



It should encourage providers to ask **“How are we performing?”** and **“How are we contributing to a stronger fostering system?”**

That important because representation carries responsibilities as well as rights. Supporting members sometimes means challenging them. It means encouraging honest reflection, sharing learning openly, strengthening safeguarding and helping improve practice where it falls short.

Everything we develop should help members become stronger organisations whilst also strengthening the wider fostering system children depend upon.

None of this will be achieved by NAFFP alone. It will depend upon members choosing to shape it with us. That is why this has always been intended as a discussion paper rather than a position statement. I hope some of these ideas prove useful, others are challenged and many are improved.

With Regional Care Cooperatives now serving most local authorities in England, the opportunity and the responsibility to shape a stronger fostering system together has never been greater.

Five Principles for Building a Stronger Fostering System

Five Principles

These reflections can be distilled into five simple principles that I hope continue to shape conversations about fostering long after today's reforms have become tomorrow's business as usual.

- 1. Children experience relationships, not systems.**
- 2. Experienced foster carers are the anchor of stability.**
- 3. Good commissioning creates confidence to invest.**
- 4. Leadership requires custodianship of children and stewardship of the system.**
- 5. Continuous improvement strengthens organisations and the wider fostering system.**

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