



## Scottish Government consultation: future of foster care

### Place2Be Response

#### What are your views on our vision for foster care?

We welcome the vision for foster care and particularly support the goal of providing “ongoing support for caregivers to develop their skills and knowledge”. We believe that this should include skills and knowledge relating to children’s mental health; improving relationships between children and carers; and on how to respond to challenging behaviour.

We believe, however, that the vision could be strengthened in three ways:

- The Promise stated that foster carers “...primary purpose is to develop nurturing, patient, kind and compassionate, trusting and respectful relationships”. The importance of relationships and the role of foster carers set out in the Promise should be stated in the vision.
- There should be specific reference to children in foster care getting access to the services they require to meet their mental health and wellbeing needs. A Fostering Network survey of foster carers in 2021 found that one quarter of carers felt that at least one of the children they supported had a mental health need but was not receiving the support they required.
- The Promise called for “ongoing support and space for reflection for foster carers”. While the first part of this has been referenced, there is no mention of the importance of reflective spaces. This should be included in the vision. We agree with the Fostering Network who also strongly advocate for reflective practice among foster carers, recognising its significant role in enhancing caregiving skills and improving outcomes for children in care. In particular:
  - **Emphasis on Reflection in Social Pedagogy:** in their exploration of social pedagogy, The Fostering Network highlights the importance of reflection as a means of continuous development for foster carers. They emphasise that being able to stand back and reflect on situations enhances understanding and improves caregiving practices.
  - **Reflective Practice in Building Relationships:** The Fostering Network also underscores the role of reflective practice in strengthening relationships within the team around the child. By reflecting on interactions and dynamics, foster

carers can improve their collaboration with other professionals, ultimately benefiting the children in their care.

### **What are your views on the proposed flexible fostering approach?**

As set out elsewhere in our response, foster carers should receive training and support to give them the knowledge and skills to develop positive relationships with the children they care for. We believe this is also vital to ensuring foster carers are confident in delivering the flexible fostering approach, particularly in providing supporting to birth families, facilitating family time, or strengthening transitions. This learning could be embedded through reflective practice, particularly group reflective practice that will allow foster carers to connect and learn from their peers.

From our own experience of delivering our Parenting Smart Online Course to foster carers, we know how much participants appreciated the opportunity to learn practical ways to improve their parenting skills and learn from their peers. In collaboration with the Fostering Network, we have delivered a pilot of our Parenting Smart course to 252 foster carers of primary-age children, giving carers extra tools to help strengthen their relationship with their children. This had a high completion rate of 63% and 96.5% of participants would recommend it to a friend.

### **Should there be a new national learning framework for foster carers which could also be a pathway for continuous development?**

Yes, we agree that there should be a new national learning framework for foster carers. As set out above, this should set out a requirement for fostering providers to create learning opportunities on children's mental health; improving relationships; and responding to challenging behaviour. The framework should set out the minimum level of learning and development opportunities all foster carers should have access to and the topics this should cover.

Crucially, there should be a clear plan for the implementation of the framework, including where responsibilities lie (e.g. at a national, local or agency level) for the provision of training. Where responsibility lies with local authorities or fostering agencies, the necessary funding should be provided to deliver the necessary training or reflective practice opportunities.

We strongly support the provision of reflective practice opportunities to foster carers but for this to be a reality, there must be a clear plan on who should provide this and how it is funded. We also know from our experience of our Promise Partnership-funded project, delivering reflective practice to social work and education professionals, that understanding of reflective practice and supervision varies across professions and can impact buy-in. It is important that for reflective practice to be embedded across all professions supporting care-experienced children and young people that there is a shared understanding of what reflective practice is and how it is best delivered.

## **What more can the Scottish Government do to nationally support the learning and development of foster carers?**

Our experience of providing training to professionals, parents and carers of children and young people tells us that they value flexibility in how learning and development is provided. The Scottish Government could support the delivery of the national learning framework through the provision of an online hub with useful knowledge for carers to draw on as they need it; links to training available to them; and signposting to wider support. For example, we provide a free Parenting Smart website which includes an FAQ-style database of hints and tips for parents to support their children and young people. Similarly, we have for several years provided all participants in our training offer access to our 'Staff Room', a regularly updated resource for education professionals. These models of providing up-to-date and clinically-sound advice for parents and carers could be utilised specifically for foster carers.

## **Is there anything not covered in the consultation which impacts on fostering that you would like to tell us about, or take action on?**

Research suggests that care-experienced children and young people, including those in or who have been in foster care, are more likely to have mental health difficulties than the general population. Mental health issues may be 2.4-4 times more prevalent amongst care-experienced children and young people, with a likely higher need for specialist mental health care (Allik et al, 2021).

Children in foster care must have access to the mental health and wellbeing support they require when they require it. Beyond the health benefits to the child, this can also help ensure they have strong, positive relationships with their foster carers. Respondents to Who Cares? Scotland survey of care-experienced people published in 2022, cited a negative impact on their social relationships when they experienced poor mental health.

Respondents said this could lead to them not being able to “fully commit to or trust people in their lives” or, conversely, “becoming attached very quickly to people, whilst also feeling like they were always a problem or burden due to low self-esteem.” This suggests that good mental health is a key component of good relationships.

Achieving better access to mental health and wellbeing services will require greater financial investment, and flexible targeted ways of prioritising their needs. This is crucial in ensuring a system that responds to the growing needs of children and young people. We know from our work delivering peripatetic mental health services in East and West Lothian that it is possible to prioritise care experienced children within a multi agency approach. This relies very much on care experienced children being known to the Local Authority and particularly prioritised within school improvement plans and referral pathways. With more than half of all mental health issues developing before the age of 14, this increased investment should be focused on early intervention and prevention and delivered in schools and communities. While there has been a welcome investment in recent years counselling services for children aged over 10, there remains a gap in provision for therapeutic support in schools or communities for young children. The Scottish Government, working across health and education, should work to close this gap to ensure that no child faces mental health alone.