

# COMPASSIONATE PARENTING:

What Foster Carers Really Think



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## FOREWORD

### **Being a foster carer was both the hardest and the most demanding role I ever had.**

Foster carers are the parents for the vulnerable children in their care. There is much talk of “corporate parents” but corporations and councils do not parent children. People parent children.

Far too often the foster carers are overlooked, ignored, not consulted and not involved in the decision-making process. In my view it is absolutely fundamental that foster carers are given full delegated authority, that no meetings about the child happen without them, and that they are afforded the respect and courtesy that their vital role demands.

This survey shows that foster carers see their role as a vocation; they have made a positive choice to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable children. They will advocate for them and offer them care, stability and love. It is clear that all of us involved in the “care system” must offer our foster carers support, training and advice as and when needed. We must do better at supporting carers when they face allegations as this is a very stressful process.

Another key improvement we must make is the quality of information about children that is shared with foster carers. Carers are right to point out that it is often incomplete and generally negative. Children also complain about this. In Peterborough, TACT are working to produce more asset based information about the children that is accurate, full but focuses also on what is strong, not what is wrong.

We must ensure that fees and allowances fully cover the costs of bringing up the children and that any back up care is child centred and does not penalise the carers financially.

We are lucky to have tens of thousands of excellent foster carers in the UK. It is our duty to support them in every way we can and not to undermine or exclude them from decisions. Our collective goal of transforming the lives of the UK's most vulnerable children can only succeed if we all work with and through the foster carers so that they, and the children they care for, are involved in decisions about the child's life.



**Andy Elvin, TACT CEO**

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The following report is based on TACT research into the thoughts of our foster carers. TACT is the largest charitable adoption and fostering agency in the UK and this report represents the organisation's largest ever survey: 186 foster carers responded to an electronic survey, a further 73 foster carers took the time to participate in a series of focus groups held throughout the UK. The research focused on key issues in foster care and the questions were drawn up in consultation with children and young people, social workers, and staff members at TACT.
- 1.2 Important issues from placement stability to professionalisation were looked at from the angle of the carer and that of the wider organisation. It was important that the questions were designed in part by looked after children and in part by TACT staff, so that the research reflected the concerns of children and young people. The research is intended both to inform positive policy changes and to improve the TACT service.
- 1.3 One half of the foster carers we spoke to chose to be foster carers to help children or make a difference in their lives. A comparable number considered fostering a lifestyle rather than a career. However, another 36 stated it was both. As safeguarding policies, austerity cuts, and media scrutiny all increase, TACT foster carers assert a need to be recognized for their work and raise the risk of being overlooked at a cost to the children. This need for respect from other professionals, financial support, and legal protections is in tension with their role as a parent. Whether called 'mum', 'auntie', or 'Sarah', each carer's priority is to give the child a safe home for them to feel that they are listened to, are respected and belong.
- 1.4 The sometimes-competing roles of parent and professional manifest themselves in answers about policies and support. To take holidays foster carers asked that the requirement that a child must have a room to themselves on holiday be revisited, so that in instances where the child feels comfortable sharing a room there can be exceptions. If foster children have to have their own hotel room as opposed to getting a family room, this increases costs significantly. The second most desired policy change had to do with delegated authority, as some complained they could not even take a child to the GP, or get their hair cut without the child's social worker's permission.
- 1.5 Under the topic of delegated authority, multiple carers complained about the nature of information held on their children. They recounted instances where decisions were made about children based on what had been written about their behaviour in a report years ago which was no longer true of them. In some cases, it inhibited the development of a child's education or contact with their sibling.
- 1.6 Predetermination of placement stability begins before a foster child even arrives. Most carers commented that information they received prior to a child's arrival was insufficient, often overly negative, which made it hard to prepare their birth children and often evoked nervousness as the carer awaited the child's arrival. Many have commented that the child described in the information they received was not the child they care for (in a positive way).
- "Not enough information is given before the children arrive and most is negative and about their behaviour. More is needed on what it would be like to care for them and what their interests are."
- 1.7 Despite a lack of information, 90% said they felt supported and consulted about new potential placements. Most were, sadly, used to the lack of information and were still able to discuss the decision with their birth children who were important in making a looked after child feel welcome. Other strategies carers used to help their foster child feel at home were involving them in their routines and including them in activities. With children from different backgrounds, carers ensured that they felt understood by using translation apps, researching their culture and religion to support their beliefs, and providing familiar foods.
- 1.8 In relation to placement breakdowns, threats to safety or uncontrollable destructive behaviour were the most cited reasons a foster carer would end a placement. When asked how they felt after unplanned placement endings, carers reported sadness and disappointment. Quite a few stated they felt like a failure.
- 1.9 Most placements ended with the young person becoming independent, returning to their birth parents or moving to a long term permanent placement through adoption or SGO. When helping a young person to leave care as an 18+ year-old, carers talked about the support they gave the young person, and asked that TACT and the LAs do more to support care leavers.
- 1.10 Another area of concern for foster parents is allegations: 95% of carers stated they were familiar with allegation proceedings. Only 16% experienced allegations and half of those said they did not feel adequately supported through one.
- 1.11 Eighty percent said they were involved with contact and the majority felt that TACT supported them adequately. Carers articulated the difficulties of navigating the strained relationships with the birth parents, especially when social workers were required to stay neutral. But they recognized that in most cases, contact was best for the children and many had positive relationships with the birth parents.
- 1.13 Most carers emphasised that they were involved in their child's education. Almost 80% of carers remarked that the school, social workers and TACT were also involved positively. When it came to special needs, however, many said it was a challenge getting the child the support they needed. There were mixed responses about mental health support and the most prominent complaint was about the waiting list. Some specified that by the time their child was seen, they needed a different type of support and the service was no longer applicable. Another told how her foster daughter was clearly struggling in school, but no one listened or acted on the carer's requests for educational and therapeutic support until years later when the young person was too far behind to be able to catch up and lead a normal life. This fed into a wider frustration about foster parents feeling that their voice was not sufficiently valued by the professional network.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** This year has seen unprecedented interest in the issue of foster care, with a massive scrutiny being placed on foster carers in England. First the Education Committee's Inquiry, followed by the Department of Education's National Fostering Stocktake. The Education Committee's Inquiry was paused as a result of the 2017 snap election and is now being taken forward by a new committee. At the time of writing the Fostering Stocktake led by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers was still in progress.
- 2.2** The August 2017 Glasgow court ruling—James and Christine Johnstone against Glasgow City Council—making the carer a council employee has given rise to a debate on the carer's status. The judge in that case was very clear that this was a unique circumstance and not applicable to foster care more widely. This has been further complicated by the ruling in Nottinghamshire (2017, UKSC 60) that the county council was liable for abuse to a looked after child in the foster carers' home. However, there is far more case law supporting the view that foster carers are self-employed. TACT has taken the opportunity to hear what foster carers think about these key issues.
- 2.2** TACT is committed to improving placement stability and investing in foster carers. We are interested in what foster carers think is working well and what they think can be improved. As many of the questions were designed by children and young people in care, this is a unique opportunity to hear the voice of the foster child and carer together - the question from the child and the answer from the carer - to appraise placement stability.
- 2.3** Placement stability remains a huge issue for anyone involved in children's social care. Two aspects of the survey feed into placement stability: the relationship between carers and looked after children, and the surrounding services and policies, such as education, delegated authority, advocacy, etc. Beyond their relationship with a looked after child, foster carers contribute to placement stability through their training, advocacy, and daily provision for the needs of the child. TACT affects placement stability through their support of the carers and advocacy on a larger scale. This survey highlights the relationship of these interactions and recommends improvements.
- 2.4** Every TACT foster carer (502 carers total) was sent a survey and 186 (37%) responded. Of those respondents, 20-30 regularly skipped questions, possibly because they did not apply to their situation as many were new carers (see demographics in Appendix B). In addition to the survey, 14 focus groups were facilitated, one in each of the 12 regional offices and two in Peterborough where TACT is partnering with the city council (127 carers total). Over 10% of TACT and Peterborough carers (73 in total) attended a focus group.
- 2.5** The open-ended questions were very effective, often promoting multiple answers. The addition of the nationwide focus groups provided an excellent opportunity to discuss much of the responses to the questions in depth. In fact, the inclusion of the focus group discussion to the survey responses added an important layer of scrutiny which provided greater clarity.



# 3. FOSTER CARER'S ROLE

## Why did you choose to become a foster carer?

3.1 Carers who responded with 'Making a difference' focused more on the future, a better life, new opportunities, or seeing real progress in their foster children. Others focused on helping the children through their present or past circumstances and wanting to care and nurture children in the care system. One person quoted the baby Peter Connelly case as a reason and another chose to foster in light of the shortage of Black Minority Ethnic carers.

"I had an extra room and wanted the house to be more lively"

"To give children safety, stability, care, comfort, and confidence"

"Because we wanted to share our home and our loving family with children who don't have that."

"To make a difference in young people's lives. I didn't have a good start myself."

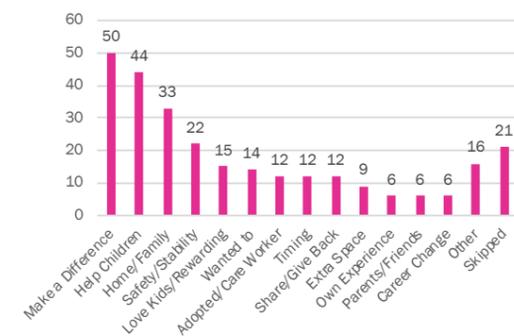
"To give a young person a chance to experience a happy safe family home and to help them to become the person they would like to be."

"Career change from accountancy work as always wanted to be involved in supporting children in some form and when investigating options came across fostering and haven't looked back."

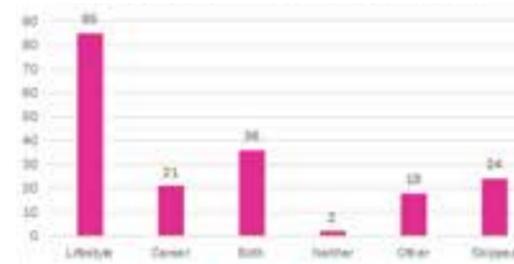
"I had worked with many challenging children within a variety of sectors and wanted to work keeping siblings together."

"To find a vocation in my life which made me happy. Being a foster carer means there are two winners, me and the children I care for."

## Why did you choose to become a foster carer?



## Would you describe your role as a foster carer more in terms of a career or lifestyle choice?



3.2 Of 162 respondents, the majority described their role as a lifestyle, stating that it impacted their whole life and affects their family. An overwhelming percentage (45%) of lifestyle respondents stated they enjoy watching the children reach their potential, they like being role models and an avenue of support, and sharing their lives and families with children that need it. Other reasons included: it is a 24/7 commitment, the child becomes part of the family, and they have to have another profession for an income."Lifestyle choice as the children in placement become part of your family and its 24 hours, not like a job"

"Lifestyle choice. Fostering is not a career - you don't get to go home at the end of the day and put your feet up. There is no end to the working day. It's 24/7/365"

"Lifestyle choice, as it's filled a gap in our lives and made the house more fun."

"I would describe myself as a carer because that's what I do for the children: I care for them and their individual needs, but it is also a lifestyle I choose"

"Definitely a lifestyle choice as we are in a very fortunate position to not need to be doing it for the money ... so I never really see it as a 'job'"

"Lifestyle choice, really love children, and feel we have a sense of purpose in what we do. I never thought I would enjoy anything better than teaching, however fostering is so rewarding."

"Lifestyle choice as life is never the same again when these kids walk into your life."

"Lifestyle choice, because it's not a job, you can't rely on it for an income, as it can stop in an instant."

3.3 Some respondents perceived fostering as a job on the basis they are getting paid for it, no matter how little the amount is. There is training involved, disciplines that need to be learnt for the job, and both policies and regulations that need to be followed. If you are not doing the job right you can lose the privilege of being a foster carer.

"A career, reasons being I was trained for my role as a foster carer and many disciplines are involved"

"Career as I am 100% committed. I see it as a full-time role."

"Career choice, goals and achievements, it's the [best] feeling in world."

"Career because I want to the young person to be safe and secure. Feel happy in our home but I am still professional with it."

"A career. Reasons being I was trained for my role as a foster carer."

"Career, foster carers have a valued role to play in the future of our children."

3.4 There were 36 respondents who stated that being a foster carer was both a job and a lifestyle. Even though they are getting paid for caring for children (job aspect), they are also gaining from the experience that can impact their lifestyle. Respondents stated being a carer enabled you to work from home, was flexible, they were gaining experience, and that it was extremely rewarding. Five individuals stated it keeps them busy and gives them a sense of purpose in their retirement.

"Suppose it is a career as we get paid for this, but more likely a lifestyle choice in reality as our whole world and lifestyle has changed"

"It is both. As a Foster Carer you will never become rich but that is outweighed by the privilege to help and see these children who would not have reached their potential have the opportunity to do so"

"Both, it's the lifestyle I want to lead and how I make my living"

"Both: career because I want [to] give 100 percent, the lifestyle is to give them a better lifestyle and belonging."

"Both, because both are intertwined."

"Both, it gives us a good work-life balance."

"Both career and a life style choice as it gives you great flexibility for the children."

"Both. It was a career change initially but quickly became a lifestyle change. Sometimes very demanding but always enjoyable and eventually rewarding."

"Bit of both as it's not a 9-5 job, more a job that fits around my lifestyle."

3.5 Two respondents said it was neither a job nor a lifestyle. They described it as a 'professional role without the feeling of bureaucracy' and as a 'substitute parent.' One respondent went on to mention the importance of having a job while being a carer, being an example to show the importance of work ethics and responsibility.

"Neither: it's a professional role but it's something that is about providing a home without the feeling of 'bureaucracy'"

3.6 Five respondents described being a carer as a vocation instead of a career or lifestyle. Some of the other responses were unclear.

"A vocational choice. Not a career. To share in their lives and have them share in ours"

"My role I would describe as my vocation in life as caring for children and supporting them."

"I started off fostering and running a business, then I went on for a vocational career in fostering"

3.7 The focus groups discussed how it was both a lifestyle and career. It is their job as they are receiving money and it is their responsibility to make sure the children are taken care of and looked after, however, it is a lifestyle they chose to have. They have created a lifestyle for themselves to look after children that are not their own. The children are integral to the family, one carer even talked about giving away his foster daughter at her wedding.

3.8 Though the majority of the carers see it as more of a lifestyle, they recognised aspects which are career-like and which career benefits could improve. With a career you have benefits, leave, holiday pay, financial protections, etc. If it was considered a career, some wondered, perhaps other professionals (local authorities, schools, mental health professionals) would listen to what carers have to say, consider their opinions, and respect their position. If it was considered a career perhaps they might have more authority when it comes to decision-making on the best interest of the child.

# 4. POLICIES AND RIGHTS

## Are there rights, supports or protections you feel are lacking?

**4.1.1 Benefits/Respite:** Carers touched on job security and stability. One mentioned pay in between placements and another asked for health benefits, such as dental and optical care coverage.

### Comments on lack of rights, supports or protections.



**4.1.2 Holiday or paid leave** was a common theme in focus groups. Multiple carers say that they 'I feel that foster carers have little financial and job security.'

**4.1.3 Many** asked for a higher pay, since there were already so many insecurities, such as not being paid between placements and the more recently added expectations to provide transportation to and from school and put more towards the looked after child's savings. The main difficulty was for pay in-between placements, especially for single carers who were unable to have a full-time job because of fostering.

**4.2 Delegated Authority:** five carers spoke of difficulties with delegated authority, specifically when the placement was a permanent one. They expressed frustration at the process of getting consent from social services. This will be addressed in more detail in the following question.

"We are treated disrespectfully at times. We are not seen as important in the children's lives when decisions need to be made."

**4.3 Allegations/Legal:** Four mentioned legal protections. One felt that carers should have a few more parental rights so that a looked after child couldn't be taken away without warning. Two talked about more support when allegations were made and training on how to go to court. Allegations and legal protection was a common theme in focus groups as well, specifically relating to pay cuts and confusion as to what was going on.

"As 'self-employed' if there is an allegation your pay is instantly taken away and you feel like you have been sacked without warning."

"Not by TACT but legally the child could be taken away at any time. Since our placement is supposed to be permanent it would be good to have some rights such as some parental responsibility."

"When an accusation was made about my daughter, TACT was supportive, thorough, and professional."

**4.4 Local Authority:** four carers mentioned the local authorities. One wondered if there could be a social worker specifically for children with special needs. One felt that the LA social workers regarded foster carers as second-class citizens.

**4.5 Family Support:** Support was asked for the carer's own children and for the carer's family when they faced difficult circumstances (illness or death of a family member). These themes were brought up by a couple of carers in the focus groups as well.

"Not enough support surrounding a foster child's bereavement for the child or carer."

**4.6 Unclear:** seven responded with answers that were unclear. Some said they did not know how to answer the question. A couple said yes, but there was no explanation, and one said that it was debatable whether anything was lacking.

**4.7 Other:** The following were raised: more support for children at a later age and to be able to stay with the carer longer; back-up support if their supporting social worker became ill; more and timely communication, specifically in the area of ICT, which was brought up in the focus groups as well; better mental health support, possibly a therapist for the children provided by TACT so they did not have to wait for CAMHS.

"Not within TACT but we are vulnerable to unfair criticism and accusation and generally unsupported in the community. Particularly in education, health, police and so on."

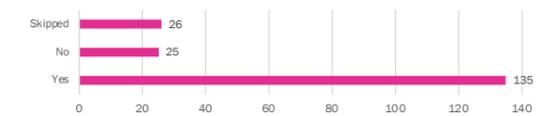
"I feel that foster carers are sometimes left to deal with very difficult situations. Sometimes social workers are not around or even contactable. I do not feel foster cares are safeguarded enough and sometimes you can feel unsafe in your home."

"TACT provides a wide range of support and training."

"I feel like TACT is part of a family and have always been there whenever I need them."

"Any advice or information I need is available whenever I need it."

## Do you feel that social workers, health workers, and teachers involve you sufficiently in decisions about your foster child?



"Yes, mainly because I have pushed to be treated as a parent."

"No, this answer is aimed mainly at social services, I feel they have too big of a workload."

"I have a good relationship with all professionals in the child's life."

**4.8** Nine carers added that it depended, and a few clarified that though they were involved, their input was not really listened to and they were not treated as professionals. In other words, they had no say in the final decision. Others spoke of how well everyone worked as a team for the interest of the child. Many named social workers as key figures and said depending on the social worker, he or she could make things more difficult or much easier. Some emphasized that the existing involvement only happened after they had pushed for it.

**4.9** Further thoughts about this were expressed in the focus groups. Some carers said they felt respected after establishing a working relationship with the social worker or other professionals, but this took time.

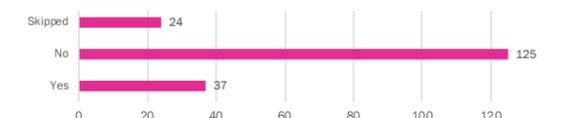
**4.10** The frustration of not being listened to or respected by other professionals was strongly expressed in the focus groups. Carers wonder why other professionals ignore what they say, since the carer is with the child most of the time and is familiar with their behaviours and needs. They are the ones who reap the consequences when the child does not get help or is put into a program that only makes the child's life and the atmosphere at home more stressful. Many remarked that when there was rapport with the social worker, things went smoothly and the child could get the support they needed more quickly since the schools and other professionals were more on board. When professionals did not work together, it could easily turn into a blame game, which is likely to be miserable for everyone involved.

**4.11** A common difficulty that many foster carers

honed in on was the inalterable nature of reports. Once something was on record as a decision made, or a behaviour noticed, professionals were reluctant to change it in case they were made liable. Consequently, no progress is shown. One child was barred from school because she had a behavioural problem in the past which had been exaggerated in the report in order to get the child some kind of support. Though the behaviour resolved itself, she was required to stay in a special school for behavioural needs which was not academically rigorous and meant she missed out on her education. Another said that there was a decision made about separating siblings due to some explicit behaviour when they were toddlers. Years later, no one would consider bringing them together in one foster family though none of the behaviours were visible in either child. Some of the carers complained that the reports were inaccurate and exaggerated because they were often written by carers or social workers who were at the end of their tether and desperate, these would then stay on the record and never be re-assessed. With these examples, foster carers asked that the looked after children's records be reviewed and updated periodically rather than set in stone to dictate future decisions.

**4.12** Delegated authority was a prominent issue for many foster carers, who clearly wanted more. They suggested that delegated authority be granted on a sliding scale as a placement moved towards permanency. Getting permission from the local authorities even for the smallest of things can take months and all too often results in the child missing out on an opportunity.

## Are there policies or legislation that affect you as a foster carer or your foster children that you would like TACT to campaign to change?



Additionally, those respondents that said they would like TACT to campaign to change policies and legislation were asked which policies they thought needed to be changed.

## 4. POLICIES AND RIGHTS (CONTINUED)

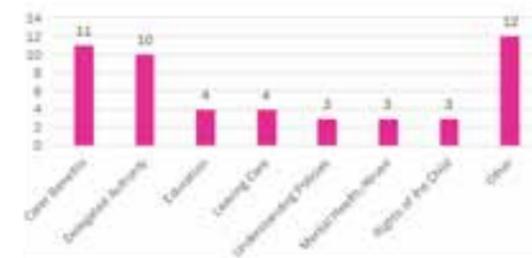
**4.13 Care Benefits:** Of the responses, most stated they would like benefits which include holiday pay, health benefits and financial protection when they are not fostering but 'on call' or when a child's placement is unexpectedly disrupted. In order to receive greater representation during an allegation process, some carers asked not be considered 'self-employed.'

"I feel that we should to have a right to paid holiday"

"Health benefits for foster carers. No carer gets into fostering for the money but there can be costs, such as dentistry and optical costs, that are both costly and important. I would like carers to receive some form of benefits to support carers receiving health care for free or at a greatly reduced rate"

"More recognition of the professional work that foster carers do and also more protection financially. We have bills to pay too"

**Policies and legislation that foster carers would like TACT to campaign to change.**



**4.14** The carers also discussed finances. As it is the carers are making 36 pence an hour for 24/7 work. This work is intense, emotional, and ultimately life impacting. The carers would love to see a raise. They discussed that a child could be taken away at any moment and there being no financial protections if that happens, the money automatically stops without warning. The carers are expected to be on call for a placement any time, any day, even throughout the night, and they think they should receive pay for this; obviously not equal to what they receive when they are caring for a child, but at least a small amount since they are always on call. The carers understand they are working with a charity, but even the slightest policy changes around financial protections would make the greatest difference to them.

**4.15 Delegated Authority:** 10 respondents wanted policy changes regarding delegated authority and having a say when it comes to the children they are looking after. The majority of focus groups discussed delegated authority and the lack of authority they have. This was discussed at length previously in Question 12. However, it is important to note that the carers spent a lot of time discussing delegated authority and expressing that they need more of it. The local authorities primarily having it is not working. Carers would like to have more of a say in LAC reviews, education, holidays, and contact.

"Give us more [parental] rights, so the kids can go on school trips without having to wait for the already too busy social workers to get back to us"

"More autonomy when caring for young people in permanency."

**4.16 Education:** Four carers wanted change in education policies including the Personal Education Plan (PEP). The focus groups described the education system as frustrating and confusing to sort through. The Pupil Premium was mentioned often and there is difficulty in accessing the funds. The schools seem to be confused about this policy as well as the carers. Some carers know there are resources for their child's education, however they don't understand how to access it. If they were educated on how this policy works, who can access it, how it can be used and when it can be used, it would be extremely beneficial.

**4.17 Staying Put/Leaving Care:** four respondents wanted policy change when it comes to children leaving care or moving on and the decisions around that. Once young people leave care, there doesn't seem to be any support offered. They are forced to move out of care, do not have the services or resources to make their independence successful, and this puts them in a very vulnerable situation. Staying put is one solution, but even if they leave at a later age supports are still needed.

"The staying put arrangements require further clarification"

"To give a longer-term placement the right to decide if they want to move on or not"

"To allow children to remain with successful placements longer as young adults"

"Funding for 18 plus placements to be as straight forward as with younger children, especially in relation to those with additional needs"

**4.18** The focus groups discussed Staying Put at length. The policy appears to the carers like lodging with no financial support which is the opposite of what it is intended to be. Staying Put seems to incentivize the young people not to work. They also talked about how the benefits of Staying Put are extremely confusing. [More on the Staying Put policy in Question 30].

**4.19 Mental Health and Child Rights:** Three individuals wanted more supportive policies around the child's mental health. Three others wanted more protective policies around rights of the child. The focus groups included discussion of the fact that it is the child's right to have contact with sibling they have been separated from.

"Always the rights of the child being heard. It has to be understood that they were the ones affected by the abuse that brought them into care"

**4.20 Other:** A few stated they would like help to understand the policies that impact on them being a carer and the children they are looking after. Special Guardianship Orders, contact with the birth family, the Dubs Amendment, the child's savings account, and adoption were all areas raised by carers.

"We have had issues around LA Policies and legislation concerning an SGO application"

"SGOs and Contact have to be looked at from the children's aspect in order that they have the right to see their siblings if they wish"

**4.21** The carers talked about finding the children's allowances frustrating and would like to see policy changes in this area. In some areas, there are more regulations and the allowances they are supposed to give the kids seem high and unnecessary. Not only do these children not need this much money weekly, but it also hinders their development when it comes to responsibility and being financially smart. If they are used to having that much extra money each week they only have disappointment to look forward to once out of care. The young people need to learn how to save money and when they have an excess of it this disregards the importance of saving. In a few locations, the carers would like the allowances to be more up to their discretion.

**4.22** Carers in the focus groups talked about having difficulties with the Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's). There seems to be a lot of confusion regarding SGOs and LAs who want the carers to have them. An SGO offers permanency and more authority to the carer, but it seems to penalize both the carer and the child, since financial and other supports are cut from the carer and children receive less resources and support. In some cases, the benefits outweigh the strains, and carers would like to understand it better without pressure.

**4.23** This is also true in the case of adoption. A couple of carers asked why there are no policies around support for adoption of foster children. Some consider adopting children who are looked after, however they have heard that once the child is adopted all support stops, including getting help with the child's mental health. The lack of these policies is making it so the carers do not want to adopt in fear they will lose resources and support. Since the permanence of adoption is in the best interest of the child, they ask for this to be addressed.

"Adoption of small children. Some local authorities have a very child centred approach accepting that having spent a significant amount of their early years with them, these children will be attached to their foster carers. The foster carers will know the best way to move the child on. However, it seems that a significant number of local authorities do not follow this approach, but impose their own timescales and procedures on the toddler who is moving, even if the foster carers disagree"

**4.24** Issues surrounding physical contact were raised in focus groups. Some expressed frustration at feeling they could not show physical affection to the children as they would to their own. It could also be difficult when trying to calm or restrain them. For example, if the child refuses to leave the car the carer cannot pick up the child and take them into the house, whereas they have that ability with their own children. This fits with delegated authority and making decisions on how one parents.

# 5. STARTING A PLACEMENT

5.1 Carers around the UK were asked in the focus groups what they think leads to a stable placement. Their answers were unanimous in many areas with a few interesting insights that were more individual.

5.2 Every single group emphasized the importance of routine and boundaries. The type of structure that these provided was important in creating a stable and safe space. They all said that over time, they might relax the boundaries, but that if this was done too soon, things would spiral into chaos.

"It is easier to let it be, or to say, "go out," or "go ahead," and harder to say, "Where are you going?" and "be home on time," but this makes them feel secure and valued."

5.3 Part of maintaining boundaries and a routine was sticking to the family's way of life and incorporating the new member into it. This way there could be structure and stability for the looked after child to learn or adhere to, since they likely come from a situation where there was very little.

"They will break rules you didn't even know you had,"

"Don't carry on the difficulties from the day before, but start fresh the next day."

"Always tell them what is coming next."

"If you need to change things, do it slowly,"

"Being able to be honest no matter what the information is, whether they are going home, for example. With honesty, even if it is not what they want to hear, trust will build up."

5.4 Many talked about doing activities with the kids. Some expressed difficulty in getting looked after children interested in activities, but once they were involved, they loved it. Carers attributed this to the fact that they had not had many of these opportunities before-hand, and many were shy or even scared. This built their self-esteem and helped them redefine who they were over time.

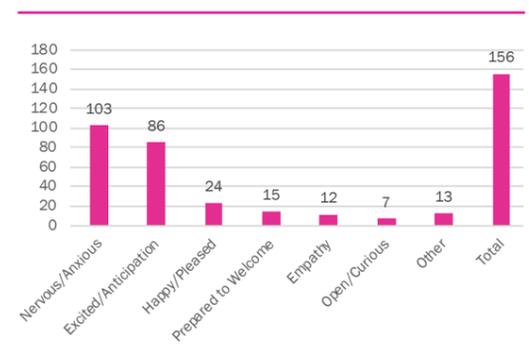
"The brother and sister looked like doom and gloom when they arrived... now we have two very cheeky children who dress well and know how to have fun."

"You can't always shield kids from real life and what happens, you need to teach them life skills and how to deal with difficulties and real life situations."

5.5 Many recounted the value of support. Some spoke of family support from the whole household, birth children and partner, since the whole family is fostering. Many talked of the importance of support from relatives, especially when it meant they would mind the children periodically. They also spoke of having a consistent team of support workers, and how when they all know the child and communicate well with each other, things are a lot easier.

"It is important to have time for yourself – even from your own kids – have one night or a weekend away and get a babysitter instead of it being official 'respite' since that has negative associations to children who understand what it is."

How do you feel when a foster child arrives?



5.6 The biggest category was nervousness or anxiety. However there was a high overlap with excitement, so apprehension was rarely the only sentiment. Most qualified their nervousness by saying they were only 'a bit' anxious and it was often linked with uncertainty as to whether the looked after child would like them or whether the placement would go smoothly. Many expressed excitement and the following quotes are representative of the responses.

"Excited, pleased, optimistic, keen to get to know them."

"Empathy for the child. Excited to help them feel safe and secure."

"Will they like us and how do they feel about the situation?"

"Anxious, nervous, ready for battle to obtain the services and understanding the young person's needs."

"It's scary at times, not knowing a lot about the child, but it's harder for the child, getting to know someone and forming new relationships can be hard for everyone involved."

5.7 During the focus groups carers described the bustle of preparing for a looked after child. They spoke more of the physical preparations than emotional ones: readying the room, assembling linens, pyjamas, toiletries, or toys. Some would wait and set up the room with the child, especially if they were older, so that they could personalize it. For many there was no time to prepare, since they would be phoned to say the child was on the way. For these placements, there was more of a scramble to rearrange furniture while some said they keep the room in constant readiness for these last-minute placements.

Were you given helpful information about the foster child before they arrived?

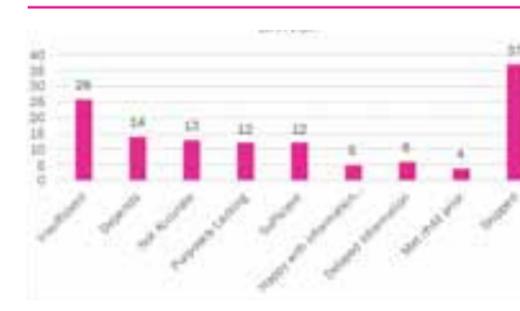


"No one can prepare you with all the information needed when a child arrives. This always seems to come to light as the placement progresses"

"We met him once before he arrived. We were given information about what he likes to eat etc. He had a medical condition and we were given very clear instructions about medication etc"

"Not enough information is given before the children arrive and most is negative and about their behaviour. More is needed on what it would be like to care for them and what their interests are etc"

Information carer was given prior to child's arrival.



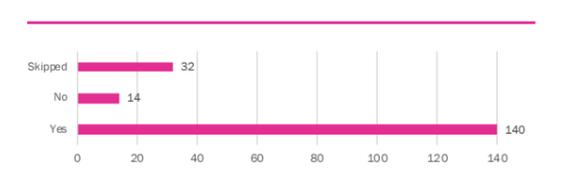
5.8 Carers in our focus groups also described the information they were given as 'exaggerated' and 'out of proportion' to the reality. A lot of the information may have been gathered from when the child was first brought into care and then is never updated or re-evaluated. Many carers believed the local authorities withheld information about the child to ensure the carer would accept the child. For example, the carers discussed receiving a child that was described as a Tier 1 when really, they were Tier 3.

"However, this is not always accurate, some information is not shared due to the concern of not being able to place the child/children"

"Very limited info and details which are usually out of date"

5.9 Three carers in the focus groups described not reading the information that was given prior to a placement so they would not have a preconceived opinion of the child. Others said how helpful it is to hear about the child through the child's previous carer or the school. Knowing what previous carers have done to stabilise the placement can be useful, as well as learning things to be aware of, approaches that are helpful or productive, and any birth family history they have knowledge of.

Do you feel well supported and consulted on a new potential placement?



5.10 No: a couple commented that the circumstances involved emergency placements which were usually rushed after a court case and too fast for there to be any consultation or support. Others stated information was limited and they felt that social workers did not have the time to work with them.

## 5. STARTING A PLACEMENT (CONTINUED)

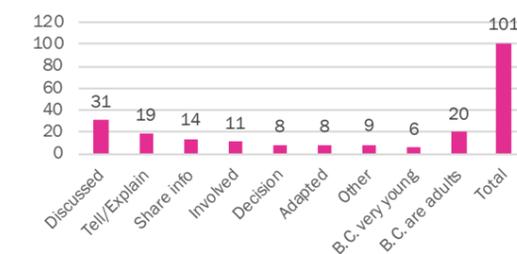
5.11 Yes: seven qualified their answer by saying consultation and support were limited and it depended on the placement. One recognised that TACT social workers were often given limited information to start with and that they did the best they could with what they had. Others expressed emphatically that TACT social workers supported them and described involvement in the decision.

“We never feel pressurised into taking a child if we are having doubts and have never been made to feel guilty for saying no.”

### Do you have any birth children living at home?



### How did you prepare your birth children for the arrival of a foster child?



5.12 Though only 64 said that they had children living at home, 101 responded as many valued the involvement of their adult children. Some mentioned more involved discussions and family meetings, while for others it was more a matter of telling the children that a looked after child would be coming and sharing relevant information. The varying degree of involving birth children was noteworthy, and likely correlated with the age of the birth child. A proportion of carers indicated that if their children were to be against it, they would turn down the placement and one asked that more support be given to the birth children in this process.

“Talked about what we could do to help them settle in and what part she [daughter] could play in this.”

“My children are in their 30s and feelings were mixed. Especially as we have grandchildren the same age. Consultation and discussion.”

“I ask my son how he feels about having a foster child living with us. We discuss potential issues and how we would deal with these and we discuss all good things about having a child living with us and the part that we would play in helping the child feel happy safe and contented when living with us.”

“Continuous family discussions, expectations of our role as a foster family. Although each child is an individual and presents different unexpected challenges.”

“Just talk through with them but as experience over time they just take it in their stride. But it is important to listen to them too.”

“Lots of conversations but they were not brilliantly prepared as we were missing lots of facts ourselves.”

“Very often the placement is an emergency and there is little time to prepare.”

5.13 During the focus groups, a few carers mentioned the involvement of their birth children. Most were positive, but a few instances did not turn out so well. Sometimes there were personality clashes if the children were near to the same age, or if the foster child was much older it could also be difficult. Many said that it was better if the looked after child was younger than their own children, but there were exceptions to this that worked out very well.

### Have you fostered a child who spoke a different language from you, came from a different cultural background, or adhered to a different religion than you?



- Language: 38 (24%)
- Culture: 42 (26%)
- Religion: 30 (19%)
- Not Applicable: 109 (69%)
- Skipped: 27

A total of 50 people (1/3 of respondents) said at least one of the three areas was applicable.

### How did you make this child feel part of your family?

5.14 The majority mentioned cultural activities and a dialogue about the two cultures. Carers researched the looked after child's faith and helped them to find a place of worship. A few celebrated or recognized their holidays, and many catered to their diet. A number talked about supporting their foster child in their beliefs and encouraging them to develop their own views. A few people mentioned making them feel safe and some said they treated them like their own birth children. During a focus group, one carer said that after a toddler arrived and seemed distressed, she found a lullaby on YouTube in the child's language and he perked up immediately, he then searched for another one and the child listened to it on repeat for hours, clearly soothed by it.

“Very open and supportive of their faiths and beliefs. Spent time reading and helping with their English.”

“We researched their culture and promoted it. We spoke to them about how much of their culture they understood and wanted to involve in their lives. Mainly it ended up being food!!!”

“Through body language, tone of voice and empathy.”

“Make sure we do understand each other with respect of background.”

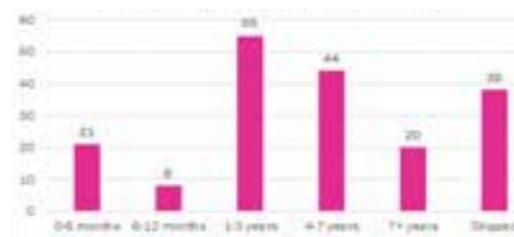
“Bringing their culture into my family, researching local Muslim groups and gaining a greater knowledge of the child's faith and background, but most of all being approachable and welcoming.”

5.15 There were some similar themes that came up in families who were not necessarily dealing with a second culture or language. Some families emphasised that they introduced their foster child to their relatives and included them in family events or occasions. Some spoke of including them in the daily tasks and normal life activities. Twenty-four of them said they treated them like their own children.

5.16 Food was regularly mentioned as a way of helping the newly arrived foster child feel comfortable and as part of the family. During focus group interviews, carers explained that food was an important element since some children lacked a stable and regular supply of food in the past. Many children had difficulty with over-eating (gorging themselves like they would not get another meal) or under-eating, so carers found themselves teaching their foster children to have a healthy relationship with food. The everyday activity of eating together, cooking, or sharing cultural food played into stability and food was posited as a way of making the child feel like a part of the family.

# 6. ENDING A PLACEMENT

What is the longest period that you have had a foster child without placement changes?



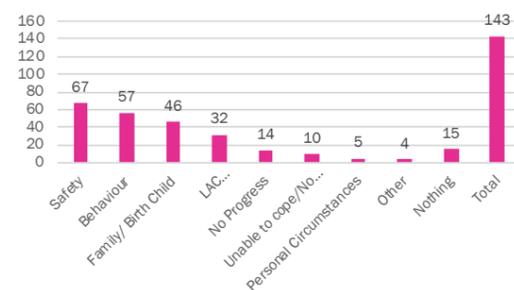
6.1 The carers were then asked why the placement ended when it did:

- 32 became independent,
- 34 still live with the carers,
- 11 returned to birth family,
- 8 were due to a challenging situation,
- 5 were adopted,
- 5 because of permanency,
- 5 were the child's decision,
- 5 were considered 'other' (the carers claimed, 'placement broke down' without giving a reason, 2 ended due to Local Authority's decision, and 1 due to a change in the foster carer's situation).

"He hasn't moved and there are no plans for him to move. Other sibling groups we have had have returned home, most of them successfully and some we keep in touch with"

"Through their own choice at an age when they could make the decision to leave care"

What would lead you to end a placement?



6.2 The biggest concern for carers was safety. Danger to the family or the looked after child would cause them to consider ending the placement. Physical violence was the main threat named, but

one carer said "extreme trauma which prevented the child from being safe from harm" would be a significant factor. Behaviour was linked to safety with 39 referring to violent behaviour affecting the safety of others. Fifteen said it would need to be destructive or criminal behaviour, so vandalism of their property, theft, or drugs, along with multiple run-ins with the police.

"We don't end placements; we think you have to show the child that you're always there for them, good and bad."

"That is a hard one, it would have to be something very serious. Or serious health problems for myself or my husband."

"Relationship breakdown, not sustainable for both child and carer."

"When we could not cope emotionally and physically."

"We have ended a sibling placement when we were aware of previous allegations and it became very clear that they were teenagers very capable of construing false allegations. This proved too much of a risk to our career and high risk to us losing the child we already had in long term care."

"If the child was disrupting my children and making their lives difficult."

"Violence against carers or family. Criminal activities such as stealing, arson etc."

"Violence, constant running away, if the child was unhappy."

"If myself and my kids didn't feel safe anymore."

"Uncontrollable behaviour. Not getting on with my own children. Too much interference from the local authority disrupting the placement."

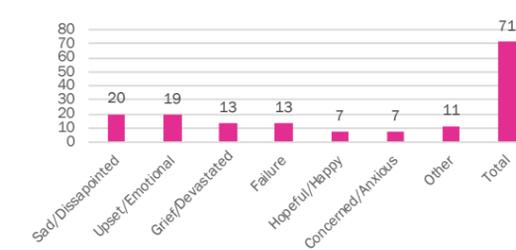
"It would have to be a situation that was exceptionally dangerous or totally unbearable and with real safety issues, otherwise wouldn't do so."

"No emotional attachment after a period of time."

"Lack of professional support."

6.3 These themes were consistent through the focus groups, many telling of how placements had broken down and how they still were not over it emotionally, because it had been so difficult. One carer was going to give up fostering because she was so devastated, but her supervising social worker gave her much needed support. Some went as far as to say that it was not difficulty with the kids that would trigger placement breakdowns, but interference from the LA or other professionals.

What do you feel or experience when a foster child moves, unplanned, from your care?



6.4 Only 71 carers experienced an unplanned move. Though the reactions provided are not surprising, it has implications for the support a foster carer may need after a placement ends. One carer specifically asked for this in a focus group and others said that if their supervising social worker had not continued to support and reach out to them after a placement ended, they would have stopped fostering.

"Disappointed that we may have failed that child but we know deep down there is always a reason why the placement has broken down, but it does make you sad at the time."

"I feel like I've let them down."

"Loss, sadness, confusion."

"Feels like a bereavement."

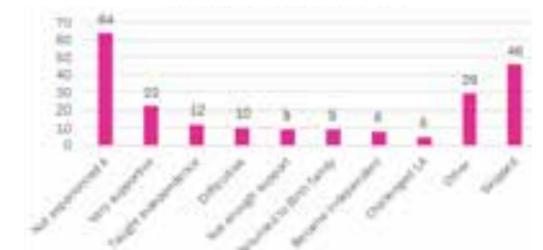
"Upset though we know it's what's best for the child and are happy they will be happy and settled."

"Disappointed but mainly because my own children don't always get the opportunity to say their goodbye. There isn't much emphasis put on their feelings, the priority is always the needs of the foster child which isn't always fair."

"Only happened once and I was relieved as I was being threatened personally."

"Upset, you question what you could have done differently and you question those decisions made by others which you didn't agree with."

What has been your experience of supporting your foster child to leave care?



6.5 A proportion of carers took this to mean children of any age, and not only care leavers, therefore, the answers are not all directly applicable to children aging out of care.

6.6 At least 22 foster carers with experience of supporting children and young people to leave care felt very supported. They discussed how they supported the child in becoming independent and assured the young person they would always be there for them and that they are a phone call away. Even though the child was leaving their care, they still felt a sense of responsibility for the young person to make sure they were successful. Some respondents still frequently talk to those that have left their care and are happy to still be supporting them in their adulthood.

6.7 The carers in the focus groups emphasised how the leaving care process is mainly left up to the carer. They discussed teaching independence and trying to be a role model of how to be responsible: how to properly wash clothes, drive, shop for healthy groceries, cook, pay bills, budget, etc.

6.8 Some discussed difficulties they had with the process of their child leaving care or with the child themselves. One said their child was not ready to leave care but was forced due to age and that it was difficult to push for independence when you know they are not ready. Others just described it as 'difficult' or 'frustrating'. Some young people did not want support after care and just left.

## 6. ENDING A PLACEMENT (CONTINUED)

**6.9** Four carers still have the young people visit them regularly, four are currently still living with the carer even though they are technically 'out of care.' A few described the process as being a lot of work and had to put a lot of personal investment into it.

"Investing a great deal of my personal time, money and effort"

"Letting them know I am always here for them and talking through any concerns they may have"

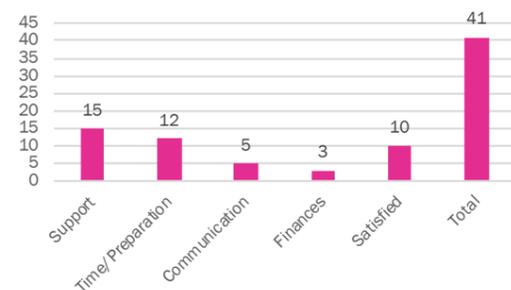
"Very good, all the ones that have moved on I speak to daily. And they visit regularly."

"One of my foster kids got a flat, so I was helping her use the heating and cook and shopping. Some just moved in with their relatives and they had sleepovers beforehand to get used to it"

"Emotionally challenging but with an enormous emphasis on supporting the children to find whatever positives can be offered for the move"

"I have always done my best to ensure the children have got the necessary skills they need and I have helped them as much as possible with getting ready and boosted their confidence assuring them that they can still call me"

**Is there anything that could be improved?**



"A formal support mechanism that enables foster carers to support the young person on a decreasing scale over a period of time."

"Timescales should be set (or adhered to) to ensure the ending is smooth."

"Training or trial to assess capabilities."

"Consistency, communication, and one to one support."

"More checks from social services on the young adult when they first leave care."

"There has only been a social worker present once when my previous placements have left us. I would prefer to have some kind of support to see the kids off, whether from TACT or the local authority."

"I think the 'Stay Put' agenda needs more work. We are lucky in that I am employed and we do not see fostering as a career or rely on allowances as some families do. The allowances should reflect the financial support carers give to children at Uni and remain in place until they move to their own accommodation. Children should have the cushion and security of their home remaining as it is until they are ready to branch out in the same way a birth child would. Some carers are in the position of having to push a child on as they need the room for a further placement in order to remain financially secure and this is wrong."

**6.10** In the focus groups, more was brought up about the Staying Put arrangement. For many it had worked well, but others brought up difficulties with the system. One is the hard date of the looked after child's 18th birthday. Some would chose independent living then regret it a month later. Another is giving the young person their savings on their 18th birthday. Carers watched the young person spend it all at once on whatever they wanted. These same young people who kept in contact with the carers later wished they had been older before receiving the savings. The issue around money, allowance, and savings was brought up by multiple carers. They said that the way the process is done sets up the young people for failure. They are given everything they need with a high allowance on top of that they can use for anything they want. But carers would watch them leave care, when suddenly everything was cut.

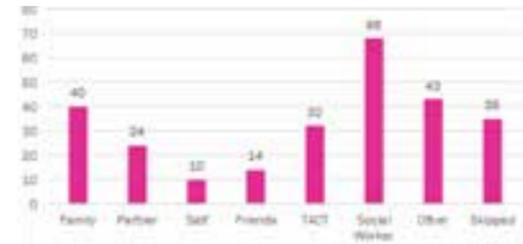
"It is not just about teaching them to do the washing, they need to learn economy."

**6.11** On the other hand, some carers struggled with the fact that their financial allocation decreased post 18. This discouraged carers from pursuing a staying put arrangement because they needed the money and were forced to take on another foster child, forcing the young person to enter independent living.



# 7. SUPPORT

Where do you feel that your strongest support comes from to help stabilise a placement?



7.1 It is reassuring to note that during all of our focus groups almost every single carer (73) said that TACT was a great support and they are immensely happy with the work and help TACT gives. They stated there was always someone available by phone who was there to help, support, or even just to listen. If things ever get difficult with LAs or

schools, TACT is there to back up the carer. They feel they can go to TACT for any concerns and speak openly, even critically, and TACT will take their thoughts on board.

"I have developed resilience through my own experiences which helps with getting the balance right and regular catch ups with my SSW"

"SSW are there to support. I feel if I asked them for support, I'd be given it"

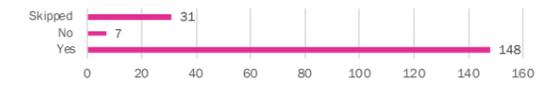
"TACT have a fantastic support network, [also] my family and close neighbours"

7.2 Those who answered Other included seeking professional help, reaching out to the birth family, the child's school, a link worker, and the foster child themselves. A few said they got support from training and a few from other carers.

"Professional advice and talking to other experienced foster carers"

# 8. ALLEGATIONS

Are you aware of TACT's allegation process and proceedings?



8.1 Out of 186 responses only 16% said they had an allegation made against them. These carers were then asked how supported they felt during the process.

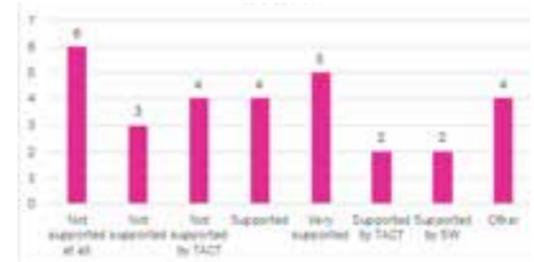
"Our experience was with another IFA and support from them was zero. After a lengthy battle we were left with no option other than to resign. This was where TACT became involved and supported us in completing a very thorough but successful assessment and thankfully we have never looked back"

"We felt very supported however the process can be very stressful as it takes an extremely long time to resolve"

"We were kept in the loop constantly, and made to feel involved. We were reassured of the worst-case scenario, and the best possible outcomes to expect"

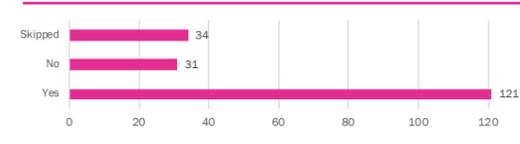
8.2 Unlike the survey, in the focus groups, we did not specifically ask carers if they felt supported during an allegation process, but a few discussed their personal experiences through the process. The majority of the experiences were children allegedly being untruthful or exaggerating the truth. The more serious allegations turned into placement breakdown. Sometimes the LAs did not put in the effort to investigate the allegation and the child would just be sent to another foster family. This left the carers feeling sad, frustrated, and confused. With the possibility of a false allegation against them and it greatly impacting their lives and reputations, many were asking if it was worth continuing.

If yes, how supported did you feel during the process?



# 9. CONTACT

## Have you been involved with facilitating contact with a foster child's birth family?



Do you feel that TACT supports you adequately with contact?

"She [birth mum] frequently does not attend. This causes stress and upset for child which in turn causes problems for us. Supporting social worker very supportive"

"I feel that it is not a foster carer's role to facilitate contact with birth family. This gives the child mixed messages. They are looked after for a reason and that is to make them feel safe and secure. What happens to these feelings when the person who is supposed to make them feel safe and secure then takes them to see the people who do not make them feel safe and secure?"

"TACT are always there to help and give support in anyway. Though contact is not for them to arrange"

"Every contact can bring up different challenges, and TACT are very aware of the power of contact."

9.1 Although in the focus groups we did not specifically ask about TACT's support during contact there were some recurring themes from every group. In general, carers realise the importance of supporting the relationship with birth parents, though it can be extremely difficult for them. Some parents are easy to work with and it is a great experience for everyone, but the majority of contact experience tended to be negative. Some birth parents seemed to take advantage of the situation – sometimes by 'playing the blame game on the carers' and finding every reason to complain about how the carers are raising their children. Some manipulated the child into giving them part of

their allowances or their new clothes. Some carers noted times when the birth parents did not show up to contact, leaving the child devastated. Carers described how the progress they made with the child would be undone after contact, and how they would have to start over again.

"Why do social services take the children away from the birth parents and then listen to their complaints about how we [carers] are doing with their children? It makes no sense. Then the LA is trying to cover their bases and so they pass on the complaint to us to fix it so they can say they have resolved it. We receive the blame. It is a blame game."

## Do you feel that TACT supports you adequately with contact?

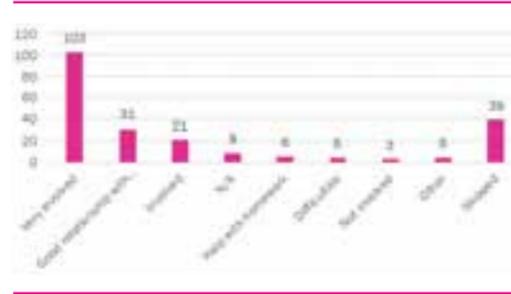


9.2 Another aspect that needs more support is contact with separated siblings. In one focus group, a carer related how there was no contact facilitated between her looked after child and the child's brother who was looked after by another family. Sibling relationships need more support during separation.



# 10. EDUCATION

## How involved do you feel in your foster child's education?



"Education is paramount in the child's development. I am fully equipped to support and challenge decisions in the best interest of the child. Everyone has a right to a fulfilling education."

"We help with her homework and liaise with her school"

"Very. Child's social worker is happy for me to act in loco parentis most of the time. I have built a good relationship with the LAC coordinator in school. It was initially very difficult due to ignorance on behalf of teachers"

"Very involved, has speech and language therapy educational psychologist and help in school and we help to advocate for him and help with his homework every night"

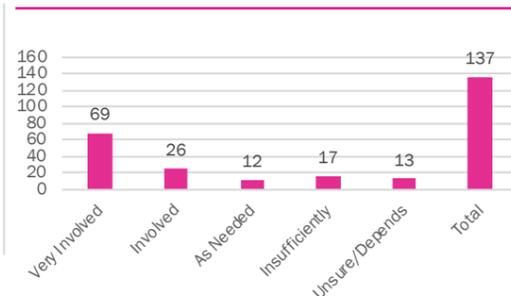
"Very - we put a lot of time and energy into their education and involve them in the whole process. We help them to think about their futures"

"We have always been very involved in all our children's education and in most cases supported them enough to improve their standard and grades, manners and behaviour while in school or nursery"

"We try to strike a rapport with the school and try to keep an open avenue for dialogue"

"To a point a foster carer is included and can when necessary advocate on behalf of the child, however, experience has shown that the Education Department will process on its own agenda, its own policies and the primary beliefs of the principal staff member dealing with the child. The foster carer can advocate for the child but the education professionals will apply their own prioritised beliefs"

## How involved do you think your local authority, foster child's school, or TACT are in your child's education?



"All are interested in keeping the young person in school and learning well."

**10.1** Schools were directly mentioned by 29 carers. Thirteen said schools were doing a great deal, four said it depended and five that they were not involved. Two of the latter complained that they would communicate needs to the school, but the teacher would be oblivious. Another two said the school became more involved after they pushed for it. One difficulty that some mentioned in the focus groups was that some teachers were so intent on treating looked after children like other kids, that they were not understanding of their mental health needs. For example, the child was told off for fidgeting, while using a stress ball. Some carers would point out their looked after child's educational or behavioural need, but unless it was extreme, no help would be offered. However, many expressed how supportive the schools were and equipped to handle any needs that the looked after child had.

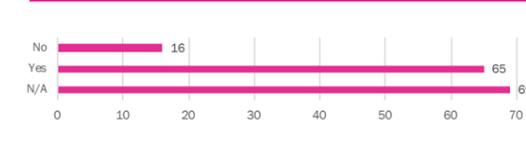
**10.2** Local authorities were explicitly referred to by 19 carers. Nine were satisfied with the LA's involvement, three said LAs could be more involved, two said it depended on the social worker, and another that it was hard for the LA to get involved with the high turnover of social workers and thus a lack of continuity. Four said they only got involved after the carer pushed for it or when there was a behavioural need.

**10.3** TACT was named by 23 carers. Seventeen carers said that they were very satisfied with TACT's involvement. One person said that TACT was not invited to PEP meetings, which was fine with her, but might not be for other carers. Some said that TACT was present.

"Tact are very supportive, they listen to the child's view. Local authority will listen and act but in many cases schools do not understand the trauma the children have suffered, therefore as education providers and with little education on the subject given to teachers children are often seen as disruptive and as a result often excluded."

"The school is very good, it is a specialist school and they teach them life skills as well as the normal Maths, English etc. The local authority is there if needed. TACT will always help me with educational matters."

## If your foster child has any special needs or disabilities, have you felt they are supported by their school?



"Teachers need training in needs of attachment of deprived and traumatised children. Disciplinary systems are very detrimental to these children"

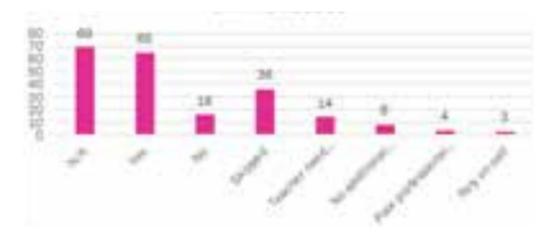
"Mental health and social skills"

"One of our children is a low achiever academically and in last year at school, the school seemed to dismiss or ignore this"

"The special needs were supported in the school but the long-term strategy for teaching tangible subjects was failing the child"

"Has one to one support who is supposed to intervene before the behaviour escalates, but this never happens as the support worker helps out in the class and the child doesn't have a designated support worker, so it doesn't work"

## If your foster child has any special needs or disabilities, have you felt they are supported by their school? What additional support do you think is needed?





# CONCLUSION

**This research into the thoughts of TACT foster carers crystallises the experiences and opinions of a wide range of interests. In drafting the questions, children and young people at TACT, social workers and senior managers were consulted, and each stakeholder group had a hand in the design of the final questionnaire.**

This research reinforces the key role that foster carers have in placement stability. They are the ones with the children 24/7, making sure that they feel comfortable and part of the family. More often than not, they are helping their foster children to navigate boundaries and work out healthy behaviours.

Many of the questions on the survey were questions asked by children in care who are being supported by TACT. Questions such as why the carers choose to foster, how they felt at the beginning and end of a placement, and at what point they would consider ending a placement are all questions that children and young people wanted TACT to ask its foster carers.

The foster carers' answers showed their dedication to the children and honesty about their struggles. Both the questions and answers show that the interests, hopes and anxieties of the foster carers and foster children are not so different. The care experience has bound them together.

A proportion of foster carers expressed anxiety and fear at receiving a new child and others admitted to a sense of failure when ending a placement. They also showed creativity in making the child feel at home in the activities they engaged the children in and how they worked to make children from different cultural or religious backgrounds feel they fit into the family.

The foster carer sees the daily struggles of their foster children as they try to understand their narrative and identity as well as their future. They see the repercussions when the child is not getting

the resources or support they need. While TACT understands professionals' needs to make their own assessments, we also urge that professionals consider the information the carer provides respectfully and inquisitively. With the training they undertake and the time they invest in the children, their views absolutely deserve to be heard on how the child is looked after.

Although creating a stable placement originates with the carers, there are a lot of ways that TACT can help to bring about greater placement stability. Through the survey and the focus groups it became quite clear that overall support from TACT is good and the carers feel comfortable with going to them when there is an issue, but there are some areas where TACT can improve their services to better support the carers and in turn create more of a stable placement.

The section on education is important to children in care. In fact, next to a secure stable loving foster family, education is one of the most important things to influence positive material outcomes for children in and leaving care. A significant number of carers are still without a good enough understanding of the policies designed to raise the quality of the looked after child's educational experience.

The issue of mental health support is a significant feature of the foster carer experience. TACT have identified mental health access as one of the key areas for policy reform.

Foster carers in this survey have exposed the negative reports coming from local authorities looking to place looked after children. This experience contrasts with the information that prospective adoptive parents receive – which starts from a more positive account of the looked after child.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Our carers have come up with 10 main recommendations as to how the current fostering system can be improved. These largely focus on respect for carers as the experts on the child, improving support for the entire foster family, making information recorded and shared about children more balanced and properly funding foster homes. TACT will be listening to these and acting on them and we urge all LA's and IFA's to do the same.**

## 1. CARER'S ROLE

Work with local authorities to ensure that carers can help make information recorded about the child dynamic and reflective their development and progress.

## 2. POLICIES AND RIGHTS

- Review carer support so that the carer can offer the maximum support without burnout.
- Increase delegated authority on a sliding scale as permanency is reached so that the carer's advocacy for the child on important decisions is taken into consideration and that the system does not get in the way of carers making day to day decisions.
- Involve foster carers in all meetings and decisions about the child.
- Review foster carer fees and financial support in line with rising living costs.

## 3. STARTING A PLACEMENT

Information to prospective foster carers should be more aligned to information for adoptive parents so that accounts about children in or coming in to care are asset, not deficit, based and focus on strengths as much as potential challenges.

## 4. ENDING A PLACEMENT

- Support children leaving care for a better transition.
- Proper funding for staying put that does not involve the child claiming benefits.
- Review to ensure consistent emotional support for carers after a placement ends suddenly.

## 5. BACK-UP AND SHORT BREAK CARE

Look at fully funding short break and support care so carers are not penalised for accessing support care when they need to go away without their foster children. Agreement that this should be part of the care plan and any arrangements made should be in the best interests of the child. Also, those that do not have to go away without their children are now financially disadvantaged by this.

## 6. ALLEGATIONS

Put further supports in place for allegations so the carer is not cut off without representation. Institute a buddy system so carers with experience of allegations can support those who are facing one for the first time.

## 7. CONTACT

More support for carers so that they do not feel 'blamed' should any difficulties with contact arise. A mediation service to try and help resolve differences with birth families.

## 8. EDUCATION

Improve interdisciplinary collaboration in educational settings to better support the child and provide clearer training on what pupil premium is for all involved.

## 9. MENTAL HEALTH

Advocate for shorter waiting times for CAMHS services. Provide support for the whole placement not just the child.

# RESEARCH

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