

TACT

CALL TO ACTION

2019




TACT
Fostering & Adoption



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The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is the largest fostering and adoption charity in the UK. We know that with the benefit of loving foster families offering much needed stability, consistency and care, children and young people can go on to leave the care system to have positive and successful lives. But far too often their life chances are disrupted because the state is not a good enough parent.

Children and young people's voices should always be heard in the design of policy for children in care and it is time they are placed front and centre of every political party's election promises.

As a result of listening to children, young people and foster carers, we have produced this Call to Action - a five-point plan that we urge all Britain's political parties include in their manifestos, to transform the life chances for children and young people in care. TACT's Call to Action highlights what government and local authorities should be acting on to fulfil their responsibilities as corporate parents.

Many of these issues have already been addressed in Scotland and Wales where the devolved authorities are responsible for these services. This Call to Action is aimed at the Westminster Parliament who make these decisions for England.



1. FOSTER CARERS ARE EXPERTS ON THE CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE LOOKING AFTER

Foster carers provide stable, loving homes to the vast majority of children and young people in care, and the love and support they offer can be transformative.

Foster carers have a unique relationship with the children in their care which should be recognised and supported. They should be treated professionally, in that they should be valued, supported and listened to as a key part of the team around the child. They are experts on the children that they look after and therefore should be included in all decision making and planning that will affect them and the children that they care for. They should be treated without discrimination and be respected as colleagues. They should be valued for their skills and expertise equally to those of other professionals.

- **Automatic Delegated Authority for Foster Carers**

Foster carers should have full delegated authority for all decisions about the child unless there is a valid reason not to do so.

Government should review policy and guidance around Delegated Authority, so that it applies automatically to foster carers unless there are exceptional reasons for it not to be applied. If this is the case, it should be set out in the child's placement plan and should clearly set the limits to delegated authority and the reasons why.

Government and local authorities need to recognise that automatic delegated authority to foster carers must apply for voluntary accommodated children and help birth parents to understand this. Birth parents cannot be allowed to veto the ability of foster carers to provide day to day parenting.

- **Foster Carers as personal advisors for their care experienced young people.**

A Personal Advisor helps young people to plan for their future and supports them in achieving their goals. This support should start when young people turn 16. Personal Advisors should then continue to work closely with young people until the age of 18 and beyond, making sure that their Pathway Plan is realistic and continues to meet the young person's needs. A Personal Advisor should ensure that the pathway plan is reviewed regularly, and that the young person is receiving the support they need in their journey into adulthood.

This role is already fulfilled by foster carers in their day to day care of young people, so why would a different professional need to be introduced into the young people's lives?

When young people have positive relationships with their foster carers, they should be given the option of having them as their personal adviser as a natural continuation of the foster carers' role. This would enable foster carers and care experienced young people to continue their relationship with the financial support that will enable them to do this.



2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

We welcome the decision made in Scotland with regard to highlighting the importance of siblings' relationships and compliance with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Law should also be improved in England for brothers and sisters in the care system. At the moment, the Local Authority is required to accommodate 'looked after' brothers and sisters together where reasonably practical. A new duty should be put on local authorities to place brothers and sisters under 18 years of age together when they are looked after away from home if it is in their best interest. The existing duty on local authorities of allowing children reasonable contact with their parents should also be extended to brothers and sisters, as despite these relationships being increasingly considered as a relevant factor in care proceedings, the significance attached to them is easily and routinely outweighed by other considerations.

Also, new and more effective ways of supporting contact should be developed to ensure that where it is appropriate, successful contact can take place and be maintained.

It is right that children should be able to maintain contact with people other than their birth family, such as previous foster parents and children with whom they have been in placements. Maintaining relationships with previous foster parents can not only support the reintegration of children back into their family home, it can also help to provide a sense of stability and continuity once a child is at home.



3. SUPPORT FOR OUR CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

- **Waive or pay university tuition fees or a guaranteed apprenticeship for care experienced young people**

Currently only 6% of people aged 19 to 21 years, who experienced care while growing up, go to university. This percentage has not changed during the last 10 years, with care experienced young people making up only 0.1% of those who attend university.

Conversations amongst children in care and care experienced young people about choosing a university typically focus not on their educational needs, or the reputation of the education institution, but on the support and financial help that universities have in place. Young people should not be making such an important decision just based on what is financially sustainable for them, but on what their educational aspirations are

Universities should guarantee undergraduate places for care experienced young people regardless of their age and financial support with a maintenance grant in place to secure appropriate and decent accommodation during term time, and outside of it and to cover living expenses.

Many young people will not wish to go to university and there should be a guaranteed apprenticeship for those care leavers. Local authorities and governmental agencies should also be offering appropriate employment opportunities.

- **More central government funding for Staying Put**

When young people turn 18, they often still depend on their parents for guidance, practical and financial support. Young people who have experience of living in care do not tend to have the same support system, and so for them the transition to adulthood, always daunting, can be even more challenging.

In England, the policy of 'Staying Put' was introduced in 2014 to enable young people in foster care to remain with their carers until the age of 21. This gives young people the opportunity to develop their independence more gradually. The evolution of the pilots highlighted a number of benefits i.e. young people who stayed put were more than twice as likely to be in full-time education at 19 as those who did not.

The future of 'Staying Put' is currently uncertain because funding is only secured until 2020/2021. Underfunding and no guarantee of continuation to the scheme can leave carers unable to offer a continued home for their foster children when they reach 18.

- **Minimum post-18 allowance framework for Carers**

As more young people take advantage of the opportunity to stay with their foster parents into early adulthood, the availability of foster carers has declined, as those offering Staying Put are often unable to accept new foster placements or the other way around.

Underfunding the policy that supports young people to stay with their former foster carers

can leave carers unable to continue to care for young people. A minimum allowance should be introduced that would guarantee the support without regional differences or being set at local levels, which currently vary widely across the UK. Many local authorities reduce the allowance given to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that the shortfall is made up from the young person claiming housing benefits and/or other state benefits. In addition, the loss of income from fostering fees can be also a major barrier to carers offering a post-18 arrangement.

Foster carers should not be put at financial disadvantage when moving from a fostering placement to Staying Put arrangement, and no young person should be expected to claim state benefits to compensate for the funding shortfall of any post-18 care scheme.



4. CHILDREN BEFORE PROFIT

Private equity firms are increasingly present in the fostering market, buying and selling independent fostering agencies and making substantial gains in the process. Also, a small number of larger agencies appear to be making substantial profits and surpluses from fostering. At this moment in time, huge surpluses are being generated from the care of vulnerable children and young people and then passed onto shareholders.

Surpluses generated by fostering agencies should be re-invested into supporting children in placement and beyond. More transparency and accountability is needed, with resources remaining within each provider to ensure a total focus on the needs of children and young people.

- **Extend the current legislation prohibiting private for-profit companies from running child protection services to all of children social care services.**



5. MORE ACCESS TO MEDICAL SUPPORT

TACT is aware that a substantial number of the children in the care system are in need of speedier access to health services, particularly mental health provision. Whilst we welcome the NICE Quality Standard that is being introduced in 2020 in England in relation to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), we feel that more training on this is urgently required by all professionals, especially Social Workers and Teachers, as we know that many children with an FASD are mis-diagnosed, whilst many others are just viewed as either “naughty children” or the result of “poor parenting”. We call on the Government to ensure that these professionals are provided with the appropriate training that would equip them to assess and support families where there is a risk that a child might be affected by a FASD.

- **Awareness and knowledge about FASD prevention, diagnosis and support should be included in teacher and social work training.**



**TO FIND OUT MORE PLEASE
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