

## **The Fostering Network NI – Issues for Foster and Kinship Carers in Welfare Reform**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 The Fostering Network is the leading charity for foster and kinship carers in NI and we work to improve outcomes for children in care. We have 1900 members who are approved foster carers, including kinship carers, and we provide support, training and advice to ensure they can transform the lives of children in care.<sup>1</sup>

1.2 We also deliver the flagship Fostering Achievement scheme on behalf of the Health and Social Care Board. This provides additional resources and support to improve the educational outcomes of children in care; it includes the award winning Letterbox Club.

1.3 The Fostering Network (UK) campaigned at Westminster to seek significant changes to the Welfare Reform Bill on behalf of foster carers a number of which were accepted by the Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>2</sup> However, there remain a number of outstanding issues with the Welfare Reform Bill as proposed that could have a significant impact on fostering and which the Fostering Network would ask the Committee to address. In particular we want to ensure that the DSD Committee replicates these assurances for approved foster and kinship carers in Northern Ireland.

### **2. Children in Care in NI**

1. There are currently 2644 children and young people in care in NI. This represents a 5% increase since last year and an underlying trend of increases since 2006. There is nothing to suggest that this trend is about to change and we should expect for the next five years either a continuing upward trend of children coming into care or it remaining at a similar level.
2. At the same time that the overall numbers of children in care has continued to increase the percentage looked after in foster or kinship care has also continued to grow. In NI at March 2012 75% of the total number of children in care were cared for by either foster or approved kinship carers. This represents an 18% increase over the last six years.
3. Care Matters and Transforming Your Care have both clearly indicated that they see foster and kinship care as the placement of choice for the future of care in Northern Ireland. Residential care has continued to shrink in-terms of the percentage of young people placed there and while there will always be some young people for whom this is appropriate, the majority of children and young people should be placed in a family setting.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this briefing we refer to foster and kinship carers. These are both carers who are approved as foster carers by Health and Social Care Trusts and are caring for a looked after child or children. An approved kinship carer is a family member or friend of a looked after child who has been approved as a foster carer and provides their care. They are treated differently for the purposes of tax and benefits than informal kinship carers whose needs are not addressed within this briefing.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/ucpbn-8-foster-carers.pdf>

### **3. Foster and Kinship Care in NI**

1. We currently have around 2000 approved foster and kinship carers in Northern Ireland. However, not all of these are available for full-time care placements and many carers only undertake respite care.
2. Each week here, there are 2 children who require foster care and for whom a placement cannot be found because of lack of carers. We are already in a deficit position with the number of carers and it is also the case that for foster care to work effectively there needs to be space in the system. Matching a child with the best carer possible for them means we should ideally have more carers than placements required so that we have space to choose properly for children and to ensure carers are not over-loaded with too many placements.
3. There are also on-going concerns about the demographics of foster and kinship carers. Many carers are older and have been caring for a significant period of time and may be unable to continue caring. The ability to recruit new foster and kinship carers is critical to the ongoing needs of the most vulnerable children who come into care.
4. The vast majority of foster carers in NI are recruited by Health and Social Care Trusts, with only around 8% recruited by independent or voluntary foster care providers.
5. Unlike the position in England and Wales the very vast majority of carers in NI are voluntary and are not paid a fee. We have a small percentage of fee paid carers but most carers only receive an allowance to cover the costs of feeding and clothing a child and covering the cost of pocket money and birthdays, Christmas and one holiday per year.
6. In both Britain and NI there are many foster and kinship carers who rely on the tax and benefit system to support the work they do. However, given that NI has a substantially lower number of fee paid foster carers then any reduction in their access to benefits will have a substantially higher impact.
7. The Welfare Reform Bill as it currently stands could have a significant impact on the ability of Health and Social Care Trusts to recruit foster and kinship carers and by default a significant impact on the most vulnerable children in NI.

### **4. Impact of 2011 Changes on Single Room Rents**

1. In January 2011 there were changes to Local Housing Allowances that have already begun to impact on foster and kinship carers and their ability to provide care for children.
2. New regulations came into force that meant for single people under 35 years of age their housing benefit claim would be restricted to the cost of shared accommodation, regardless of the kind of accommodation they currently occupied.
3. The Fostering Network is aware of a number of cases where single carers, who have no children of their own but are providing a foster or kinship placement have had their Housing Benefit reduced and have had to find the difference themselves. In one case this amounted to having to find almost £40 per week. Clearly shared accommodation was not an option for this carer and yet there is no exemption under the new regulations. (SR2011 No 293 – the Housing Benefit (Amendment No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011.

4. The potential impact of further reducing access to housing benefit for approved foster and kinship carers could have a hugely detrimental effect on our ability to provide family based placements for children who need them.

## **5. Impact of Welfare Reform**

1. As the Welfare Reform Bill was making its way through Westminster it became clear that it could have a significant impact on the ability of foster and kinship carers to offer a home to some of the most vulnerable children and young people.
2. A number of assurances were provided by the Westminster government in-relation to the impact of the Act on foster carers. These were:
  - **Fostering Income would continue to be disregarded for the purposes of benefit calculation**
  - **The sole or main carer of fostered children under 16 would not have to seek work outside of fostering**
  - **Other exceptions may be made to reflect exceptional need**
  - **Benefit payments would run on for a period of eight weeks after a fostered child leaves the placement.**
3. The provisions under the Welfare Reform Bill in-relation to under- occupancy could both prevent people becoming foster or kinship carers and make it more difficult for those who currently are carers to continue.
4. There was some recognition of this as the Bill passed through Westminster and it was agreed to create a ring-fenced fund that would provide additional support to carers.
5. An additional sum was to be added to **The Discretionary Housing Fund** which would be applied to local authorities in Britain and was estimated to help 5,000 foster carers.
6. Current evidence from the Fostering Network suggests that the discretionary nature of this support has not worked well. The response is patchy with some foster carers having access to the Fund and others not. The impact of this on foster placements is a significant cause of concern.
7. **The Discretionary Housing Fund does not operate in Northern Ireland. Therefore a compensation based solution is not possible and there is already a lack of parity.**
8. **The Fostering Network calls on the Committee to insert an exemption into the clause in the Bill which removes entitlement to all rooms that are under-occupied for approved foster and kinship carers.**

## **6. Priorities for DSD Committee**

- 6.1 The Fostering Network in NI would ask the DSD Committee in their scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill to write to the Minister and ask him to clearly outline the impact of the Bill on Foster and Kinship Carers and to provide similar assurances as were given in Westminster.
- 6.2 The Fostering Network would ask the DSD Committee to seek clarification from the Minister in-relation to the under occupation rule and its impact on approved foster and kinship carers. It would also ask the Committee to raise with the Minister inserting an exemption to the under occupation rule for approved foster and kinship carers.
- 6.3 The Fostering Network would further ask the Committee to clarify with the Minister if he is unwilling to give an exemption to the under occupation rule for approved foster carers and kinship carers how will he ensure they are compensated in a similar way to England.
- 6.4 The Fostering Network would also ask the DSD Committee to write to the Minister regarding the impact of the single room rent on foster and kinship carers since its introduction.

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