Children’s views on fostering

Reported by the Children’s Rights Director for England

November 2012
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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children’s Rights Director for England

As Children’s Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children’s and young people’s views and on children’s rights and welfare, to Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children’s social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

We wrote a report giving children’s views about fostering, Being Fostered, back in 2005. This year, the government is proposing some changes to the law on both fostering and adoption, and have asked us to get children’s views on these changes, and on fostering more generally. This new report on fostering gives some up to date views from children on some major issues in fostering, and it gives the children’s verdict on the government’s proposals to change the law about who can give permission and make decisions on many things that matter to foster children’s lives.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children’s Rights Director for England
How we asked young people for their views

We contacted local children’s social care departments to invite foster children to join us at one of two consultation events. To make it possible for children to come from different parts of the country, we held one of these in London, at the Foundling Museum, and the other further north, at Chester Zoo. At both events, children were able to tour the attractions of the place after they had given us their views. We also gave them shopping tokens and some small gifts to thank them for their trouble in giving us their views.

At each of our two consultation days, we met children in groups to find out their views on fostering, and on the changes the government is considering making to the law on fostering. We held eight groups altogether, four in London and four at Chester Zoo. Each group was led by a member of our team from the Office of the Children’s Rights Director, with another member of the team taking notes of the children’s views and a third person operating the projector and computer equipment for us. Officials working on the changes in the law about fostering from the government’s Department for Education spent both days with us, and sat in on some of our children’s groups.

To make sure children could speak freely, the foster carers or social care staff who had brought them to our events were not with them in the discussion groups, but waited in a separate room where they could fill in and hand in copies of the government’s public consultation about fostering if they wanted to. This report though is about the children’s views, and we have not included foster carers’, staff or other adults’ views – nor have we included any views of our own or from other reports about fostering.

In each of our discussion groups, we asked children for their views in two ways. Firstly, we projected some questions on a screen and asked children to choose their answers from the screen by using an electronic voting pad. The computer counted their votes and showed the results on the screen for each group. The figures from our discussion groups in this report come from adding the answers together from all the eight groups.

Secondly, we discussed a number of important issues in each group, without suggesting any answers or views at all. We took notes of all the views and experiences the children told us about in each of the groups, and put them together for this report. As always, we told the groups that we wanted to hear all the views from different people – the group didn’t have to reach an agreement on anything as a group. We also told each group that we would be adding their views together for this report, and not giving anyone’s name or where they came from in the report.

Also at our two consultation events, we gave each child and young person coming to each event a ‘starter card’ with some questions on it, to fill in and bring with them on the day to hand in to us. Altogether, 113 starter cards were handed in. We have included the views and experiences written on those starter cards in this report too.

Many children were interested in coming to one of our consultation days, but were not able to get to the event for one reason or another, so we sent them the questions we were going to discuss for them to answer and send back to us. Altogether, 232 children and young people filled in our questions as a survey and sent their answers back to us. The views sent in to us are also included in this report.

As always in our reports, we have written in this report what the children told us, and not our own views. We have not added our comments. We have not left out any views we might disagree with, or which the government, councils, professionals or research people might disagree with. Where we have used a direct quote from what a child or young person said, this is either something that summarises well what many had said in a
As with all our reports of children’s views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children’s views reports (including our last report about fostering) on our children’s website: www.rights4me.org.

The children who gave us their views

A total of 131 children and young people gave us their views at one or the other of our two consultation days. Another 232 sent us their views using our questionnaire separately from these two events. So altogether, this report is based on the views of 363 children and young people in foster care.

Of the children who answered our survey, half were boys and half were girls. Of those who came to our two consultation days, there were more girls than boys; 40% were boys and 60% were girls. The children ranged from under 11 to over 18. Twenty eight percent of all those who took part were aged under 11, and 2 percent were aged 18 or over. The middle age group of everyone who took part in either our survey or the two events was 12 to 13.

What children would change about fostering

In our survey, we asked foster children if there was anything they would change about fostering if they could. Out of the 201 children who answered this question, 80 (40%) said there is nothing they would change. There was no one change which more than one in ten children proposed, so no single major change about fostering came through from this consultation. The four most commonly suggested changes, though none of these came from as many as one in ten children, were: better contact arrangements with birth families, fewer restrictions on foster children, social care services working better, and foster carers being able to make more day-to-day decisions for their foster children without having to go back to social workers.

Two children proposed that if a foster child goes back to their birth parents but that doesn’t work out and they have to come back into foster care, they should be able to return to the same foster parents again rather than have a new placement with strangers. Another proposed through our survey that children should be fostered near to their birth families if possible, so that contact would be easier. Yet another proposed that after leaving a foster home, children should still be able to visit and spend time with their previous foster carers.
We then asked all our eight discussion groups to tell us what, if anything, they would change about fostering if they could. Some in our groups said there was nothing they would want to change from how fostering is now, but members of all the groups did make proposals for improvements. Here is the complete list of suggested improvements (they are not in any particular order):

- Foster carers should always make their foster children feel fully part of their family
- Foster carers should treat their foster children the same as their own children
- Foster children should take part in all their foster family’s activities, including going on holidays with them
- Be treated the same as other children, with the same chances and opportunities
- Keep foster children in more contact with their birth families
- Be bullied less at school just for being a foster child
- Make it easier to get permission to do things that other children’s parents can give permission for straight away
- Foster carers to be able to give permission for everyday things like haircuts
- More funding for activities and trips
- More pocket money
- Keep it confidential that you are a foster child
- Better decisionmaking for foster children
- ‘Do things that other kids do’
- Better fostering allowances for looking after foster children
- Not having to have CRB checks for sleepovers
- Less strict house rules to keep
- ‘Not having to change foster carers’
- More frequent visits from social workers
- Social workers to listen more to foster children
- Try to place children with foster parents who have the same ethnic background and religious views
- Foster children should be able to stay with their foster carers over the age of 18 if they want to
- Give children more information when they are moving into their first foster home
- Foster children should have a key to their foster home so that they do not have to stay out until their carers are home
- Cater for any different diets foster children have, such as vegetarian diets, with a good choice of food of the right kind — or give foster children an allowance to buy their own food
- Give children some choice about which family they want to live with — ‘a choice over who you can live with’
- Give foster children themselves more say, and their social workers less say, about how they live their lives — ‘children should have more rights and say rather than social workers’
One person summed up what many talked to us about; ‘it should feel like your own family because then it feels like home’.

On keeping in contact with their birth families, those in one of our groups thought that once the foster child is over the age of, say, eleven, they should be able to make their own choices about when and how they keep in touch with their birth parents and siblings. This could include going to visit them. It was also important to be able to keep in touch with more distant relatives than your parents and siblings – including, for instance, your cousins, if you wanted to.

On the subject of rules and freedom, some in our groups thought that foster children are given less freedom than other children, and should be allowed more freedom as they grew older – for someone older than, say, twelve, ‘being allowed to go into town, have more freedom’. Those in one group said that one factor that limited foster children’s freedom to do the same things as other children was that social workers tend to be over-protective of them.

The issue that came up most often in our groups was about foster carers not being allowed to decide things or give permissions for foster children that parents were able to decide for other children. They had to get special permission from someone else, like a social worker, and this could mean that foster children could not do things that other children could do as long as their parents said yes.

A big example was going to stay overnight at a friend’s house; other children’s parents could decide for themselves, straight away, whether to say yes or no to this, but for some of our foster children, this was something that had to go up to a social worker, or that needed special police (or CRB) checks before it could be allowed. One child described what this is like; ‘quite a few (foster carers) have problems with sleepovers. Takes ages to clear and need to ask social worker first. Your friend’s family then need a CRB check. It’s not really fair to ask them if they are police checked or not’.

(In fact, there is no law or government guidance that says foster children cannot stay overnight at a friend’s house unless their friend’s parents have been CRB checked first – the government says that this is a decision that should be up to foster carers, like anyone else’s parents, unless the child’s care plan says something different).

This issue of letting foster carers make everyday decisions and give permissions for foster children to do things, in the same way as other children’s parents, is part of the government’s proposals for changes in the law about fostering. We asked for children’s views about those proposals, and their verdict is given later on in this report.
Giving permission for foster children to do things

The issue of getting permission to do things, and of your foster carers not always being able to give the same permissions that other children’s parents could, has already come up in this report as something foster children wanted changed about fostering.

Because this is something the government wants to change, we asked a lot more about this issue, and about the government’s proposals to change it.

We started by asking children coming to our events, and children filling in our survey, to tell us if there was anything they had not been able to do because their foster parents weren’t allowed to give them permission, and had to ask someone else like a social worker.

We had views back on this from 250 children. Sixty five of the children (26%, just over a quarter) said that there was nothing that they had actually been unable to do because their foster carers had to get someone else’s permission first. If permission was needed, it had eventually been given.

Three quarters of the foster children answering this question said there was at least one thing they had eventually not been able to do because their foster carers couldn’t give the permission themselves. The four most common things they told us they’d not been able to do because their foster carers weren’t allowed to decide, were:

- **Overnight stays with friends** (18% of the children said this)
- **Going on holidays** (15% of the children said this)
- **Seeing members of their birth family** (12% of the children said this)
- **Going on trips** (11% of the children said this)

Nine children told us they had not eventually been able to take part in a particular sport or hobby activity because of the permissions issue, seven said there had been problems getting anybody to sign official permissions forms for them, four said they had not been able to get signatures needed to get a passport, and four children said it had not been possible to get someone to give permission for them to have their photo taken. Three said they had missed out on a medical treatment because of problems in getting permission.

Altogether, 284 children told us in our survey things they thought their foster carer SHOULD be allowed to give permission for them to do, without having to ask anyone else. We did not make any suggestions ourselves. Here is the list of all the answers that came from at least one in ten of the children answering this question, with the percentage of children who proposed each one:

- **Overnight stays with friends** (24%)
- **Having a haircut** (11%)
- **Going on trips** (10%)
- **Going out** (10%)
- **Going on holiday** (10%)
Twenty two percent of the children answering this survey question said that they thought their foster carers should be able to give any permissions needed for their foster children, without having to ask anyone else. One child wrote that foster carers should be able to decide ‘everything – they should get one letter from social services to give permission for everything’.

While the things that children thought their foster carers should be able to decide and give permission for them did include things that children had told us they had not actually been able to do because their carers had not been able to give permission, there are two important differences.

One in eight foster children had told us they had not been able to see members of their birth families because their foster carers couldn’t give permission for this, but this was not something that so many children thought foster carers should actually be able to decide on their own. In fact, **only ten children (5%) told us they thought their foster carers should be able to give permission for contact with birth families without asking anyone else.**

There was another key difference between what children said they had been unable to do because their foster carers hadn’t been allowed to give them permission, and what children thought foster carers should be allowed to give permission for.

This was to do with haircuts.

**Only 10 children (5%) told us they had not been able to get a particular haircut they wanted because their foster carers had not been able to give them permission without asking someone else like their social worker, but more than double this number thought that foster carers should always be able to decide about requests for haircuts without having to ask for someone else’s agreement first.**

Some children wrote about very particular problems or concerns they had experienced over getting permission for things. One told us that their foster carer was not allowed to give them permission to spend their own money, but had to ask their social worker first. They thought this was wrong as it was their own money in the first place – they thought that it should be up to their foster carer to decide if they were spending it OK.

Another child wrote that they thought the foster carer should be allowed to give them permission to choose what books to read, without having to check with anyone else first.

We talked about the same issues in all our eight discussion groups too. Here is the complete list of what those in our discussion groups told us they thought their foster carers should be able to give permission for, without any suggestions from us, and not in any particular order:

- Going on school trips
- Having a hair cut
- Getting your ears pierced
- Having a tattoo
- Going for a sleepover at a friend’s house
- Having friends to stay over with you
- Going out with friends
- Visiting friends after school
- Contact and visits with birth family, brothers or sisters
- Having your hair dyed
- Being taken on trips by your foster family
- Going online
- Going on holiday
- Going to a friend’s party
- Staying out late
- Taking part in sports activities
- Signing to get a passport
- Talking to birth parents on the telephone
- Make decisions without having to do a risk assessment
One young person very clearly told us – ‘I don’t need my social worker to make decisions, my foster carer does’. Another said, summing up the views of many, that **foster carers should be able to decide or give permission for ‘anything parents would normally’**.

Contact and visits with their birth families was something that members of many of our groups thought needed faster decisions. As one person summarised it, ‘**decisions need to be made quicker if anything is to be sorted out re contact**’.

**Problems over getting permission to have a haircut** were raised in our groups, as they had been in our survey. This came up in no fewer than four of our eight discussion groups. Clearly, getting permission for haircuts (or for a particular type of haircut) is something that is often a problem, but children would want their foster carers to be able to make decisions about permission for this – if any permission was needed - without having to refer back to social workers or anyone else.

Those who told us they thought foster carers should be able to decide whether or not to give **permission for a foster child to take part in sports** gave us some examples of sports that might be seen as risky, but where they thought it should still be the foster carer’s decision. These included boxing, go-karting and football.

Some in our groups also said that it wasn’t just about foster parents giving permission for foster children to do various things - there were some things that foster carers should not be able to stop happening. As an example, **foster parents should not be able to refuse foster children having contact with, or telephoning, their birth parents**.

We heard that it is not just a matter of what foster carers should be able to make decisions about, but that **it can take a very long time to get a decision out of a social worker, or getting someone to ask for permission from birth parents**. ‘It has to go through social worker or parents, then it goes to a duty worker’. ‘Signing for passports and school trips has to go to parents and they can hold everything up ... so I miss out on trips.’ One group summed it up by saying that foster carers should be able to give permissions needed for ‘everyday life – asking social workers things drags things on and takes more time’.

**Sometimes a school insists on getting a social worker’s permission for a school trip, rather than accepting a foster parent’s signature**; ‘some schools want social workers to sign our forms for school trips. By the time they do this, the trip will be over.’
One group thought that **sometimes foster carers don’t really want to have to make decisions or give permission for things.** ‘They shouldn’t phone social workers for every little thing, some foster carers are lazy and use this as an excuse as they don’t want to deal with it’.

The group that talked about foster carers having to do risk assessments said that children in ordinary families didn’t have to have risk assessments done before they were allowed to do things, so ‘they shouldn’t do risk assessments, as it’s a house like yours’.

The solution put forward in one group about who can give permission for what, was that **it should be decided when the placement is decided, so things don’t get put on hold**. Another group came up with the same solution, giving foster carers the power to decide things from the start of the placement – ‘they should get a signature signing over authority to foster carers’.

Since the government is thinking of changing the law about what decisions and permissions should be down to foster carers, as well as asking what foster children thought their foster parents SHOULD be able to decide for them, we also asked what they thought their foster parents SHOULD NOT be allowed to decide for them.

Altogether, exactly 200 children answered this question in our survey. Over a quarter (27%) **said they thought there was nothing that foster carers should not be allowed to give permission for. They should be able to give all the same permissions that other parents could.** ‘Honestly, I think foster carers should get the same rights as your mums and dads. They’re the ones who are looking out for you 24/7’; ‘my foster carers are protective of me and wouldn’t do anything silly’.

Only two issues were put forward by more than one in ten of the 200 children as things they thought foster carers should not be able to give permission for without checking with social workers or others first. These were **permission to go on a holiday, and medical treatment.**
There were obviously different views among the children we consulted, because permission to go on holiday was also on the list of things over one in ten children wanted foster carers to be able to give their own permission for. And as we have already seen, a few children had told us that they had missed out on a medical treatment because their foster carers had not been able to give permission for this, as the children thought they should be allowed to do.

We discussed these issues in more detail in our discussion groups. The most common view from our groups was that there are some decisions that should be checked with a child’s birth parents rather than made by their foster carers. Examples given of these sorts of decision included taking a foster child abroad, going on school trips, hospital appointments and treatment for the child.

There were fewer decisions that children and young people in our groups thought should be made by social workers, rather than by birth parents or foster parents. Examples of decisions and permissions that members of our groups thought should involve their social workers were hospital appointments and treatments, and any decisions that would have a big impact on the child’s future life.

Many in our groups told us that as well as being clear what decisions and permissions were up to their foster carers, carers and social workers needed to allow young people themselves to make some decisions for themselves as they grew older; ‘depending on your age, you should decide things for yourself’. As well as age, what you could decide for yourself should depend on how responsible you were and on your own behaviour; ‘should get treated the way you behave’. Sometimes a foster carer shouldn’t simply make decisions for a young person who is old enough to make those decisions for themselves – especially about whether the foster child is going to go away on holiday with the foster carer.

One group thought going on holiday with a foster carer should be an option, not a compulsion; ‘you should get the option to go in to respite if you don’t want to go on holiday and they shouldn’t make you feel like it’s a compulsion’.

One of our groups was concerned that while foster carers should be allowed to make day to day decisions, and give everyday permissions, for their foster children, there should be limits on what a foster carer should be allowed to give permission for. They should not be able to give permission for things that were too big a risk for the child, especially for a younger child. For example, ‘to go to London if you were eight’ or to go to school on your own if you were too young. Foster carers must be responsible about what they give permission for, and must sometimes say no to things that are too risky.

Someone in our survey had written that one reason foster carers always tend to ask social workers before they give permission for some things was so that they would not get into trouble themselves; ‘to be honest, it is always best if they ask so they don’t get in trouble themselves’. This was a concern we have already come across in this report.
Another group raised a worry that foster children who move from one foster home to another often find it difficult to adjust to the different sets of ‘house rules’ that different families have, about quite small things like whether you can help yourself to something to eat in the kitchen, what you can do in the house without asking and what you need to ask the foster parent about first. Getting these things wrong can cause major problems between foster carers and foster children. The group thought that either foster carers should be expected to have similar house rules, or that children should always get information about different house rules when they change placements.

As well as asking children for their own views in this consultation, there are some things that we have heard from our earlier consultations might be things foster carers should be allowed to give permissions for. Some of these had come up again in this consultation. We asked the children taking part in our survey and those at our discussion groups which, out of a list of these we suggested to them from the views of other children in the past, they thought should be added to a list of things foster carers should usually be able to make for a foster child without having to ask anyone else. We had answers from 346 children, and here, in order, is how they voted on our list of suggestions (the percentage of children voting to add each of these to the list is given next to each answer):

1. **Staying overnight with friends** (87%)
2. **Having your hair cut** (81%)
3. **Having treatment from your GP** (64%)
4. **Going abroad for a holiday** (60%)
5. **Having a body piercing** (51%)
6. **Having a hospital operation** (40%)
7. **Whether to have or to stop family contact** (33%)

We have now seen children’s views on what foster carers should be allowed to give permission for, from a number of different questions, in both our discussions and our survey. Overall, children would clearly put staying overnight with friends, having a hair cut, having medical treatment, and going for a holiday, on the list of things foster carers should usually be able to decide on if permission is needed. They are clearly less sure about foster carers being the only ones giving permission for having or stopping family contact.

After they had given us their votes on this list, we asked our discussion groups to tell us in more detail about any changes they would want to see made to the list. They also gave their comments on each item on the list. Here are the comments from the groups on each of the eight items on the list:

### Staying overnight at a friend’s house

Most in our groups said this was one of the decisions that should always be taken by foster carers. If this was not something foster carers were allowed to give permission for, many suggested that this was a matter for children and their birth parents to decide, rather than social workers.

### Having your hair cut

Most thought this decision should be up to the child, rather than taken by foster carers. If anyone’s permission really was needed, then it should be something for the foster carer to decide.

### Having a body piercing

There was support from our discussion groups for foster carers to be able to give or refuse permissions about this. Some thought though that it was a decision that could also be taken by young people themselves, and that if permission was needed, this could also be given by their social worker or their birth parents.
Going abroad for a holiday

Overall, there was general agreement that foster carers should be able to make this decision. One group thought that others too should be able to give permission for this, including birth parents, grandparents, and a social worker.

Doing a risky sport – like diving, flying or parachuting

We brought this one up in our discussion groups. One group thought that both parents and social workers should be informed if the foster carer is giving permission for a foster child to do a risky sport, ‘because they’ll want to know if you’re safe’.

Many others thought that giving permission to take part in a risky sport should not be up to foster carers, but should be decided by either social workers or birth parents.

Having treatment from your own doctor (GP)

Some thought that birth parents and social workers should always be informed when a foster child has treatment from their GP. However, this should depend on how serious it is, and is not needed for something very minor. Others thought that foster carers should not have a say in seeing a GP, and that birth parents and social workers could also agree to this for a child who is too young to make the decision for themselves.

Many made the point that having treatment, from your doctor, or a dentist, depends on your age. Once you are old enough, all the decisions should be made by the young person themselves.

Having a major hospital operation

Many thought that decisions about major operations should be made by birth parents and social workers. Some also thought that consent could also be given by other relatives.

Some were concerned that if a child needs an operation straight away, the foster carer should be able to give permission, as it might take a long time to get hold of birth parents and social workers.

Some told us that if a foster child has a major operation in hospital, this is something that both their birth parents and their social worker should know about.

Whether to have or stop contact with members of your birth family

Most in our groups thought that having or stopping contact is one decision that should be made by social workers, not foster carers, but with decisions depending very much on the child’s own wishes and feelings about contact.

We have already heard for this report that contact with birth families is something many children put on the list of permissions that foster carers should be able to give. Now we were hearing in our groups that many thought that contact decisions should not be up to foster carers. What is clear from what children told us about this is that a foster carer being able to give usual permission for something is not the same as a foster carer being able to refuse permission for something.

There is a big difference between on the one hand not needing to go to anybody other than a foster carer for permission for something like contact with your family, and on the other hand allowing a foster carer simply to refuse permission for something like this. A foster carer can agree to contact arrangements, but a foster carer should not be able to stop contact – refusing permission for contacts needs to go to a social worker.

From these points, it is clear that many children and young people thought that there were some things, like hospital operations or taking part in a risky sport, that birth parents and social workers should be told about, even though the decisions and permissions were up to foster carers. The government needs to be clear that there are some decisions that can be made and permissions that can be given by foster carers, but which
birth parents and social workers should be told about.

An overall point made in one group was that ideally, major decisions for a foster child should be made jointly by their birth parents, foster carers and social worker. But if these people cannot agree, or it is not possible to get birth parents involved, then the social worker should have the final say on major things.

From these discussions, it is clear that many children see their birth parents as needing to be more involved in decisions being made for them, and that while a foster carer can usually be expected to give permission for day to day arrangements for things, decisions to refuse permission for something altogether should not be up to a foster carer but needs to go to someone else, like a social worker.

The foster children’s verdict on the proposed new law on giving permission for foster children to do things

We asked the children in both our discussion groups and in our survey to vote directly on whether or not they supported the change in the law that the government is putting forward about giving foster carers more say in day to day decisions for their foster children. Here is the change in the law as we set it out in our question:

Every child should have a Placement Plan. The Government is thinking of making a new law that says every child’s Placement Plan should say who can make decisions about each of these things (it could be different people for different children):

- being treated by a doctor or dentist
- your education
- giving permission for your spare time activities and hobbies
- following your faith or religion
- using sites like Facebook
- other things that social care think are important decisions for you

Altogether, we had votes from 355 children. Figure one shows the results.

**Figure one**

Do you agree that this law should be made?

- Yes 58%
- No 7%
- Not sure 17%

[Figures from 355 children voting]
The children clearly supported the proposed change in the law to write into children’s placement plans which people could make each of these sorts of decisions for each child.

After our eight groups had voted on the government’s proposed change to the law, we asked them to discuss the government list, and especially to tell us what changes they would like to see made to it.

We had already got comments on some items on this list, which we have put in the earlier parts of this report. This time, we were especially interested to hear from those who had voted to support the government’s list, but with changes, exactly what changes they would like to see made to the list. Here are the further comments, not already set out in this report, that came from our groups on each of the items in the government’s list, together with some more information from our survey:

**Being treated by a doctor or dentist**

As before, most thought that it was important to say that when they are old enough, children themselves should make decisions about seeing and being treated by doctors and dentists.

As we have already heard, some thought this should be decided by parents or social workers rather than foster carers, unless an urgent consent is needed. Others thought that a child’s birth parents, not their foster carer or social worker, should be able to make decisions about medical or dental treatment. Yet others thought their foster carers should make decisions where the child isn’t old enough.

There was no general agreement across our groups over which adults should make decisions about treatment if the child wasn’t old enough to make decisions for themselves. When we asked one of our groups to vote on this, equal numbers of members of the group chose birth parents, social workers and foster carers as the right people to make such decisions.

In the survey, 88% of children answering a question about this told us they thought that foster carers were usually the right people to make decisions about being treated by a doctor or dentist, if an adult did need to make a decision for the child. After foster carers, birth parents came second as the right people to make these decisions.

Members of one group thought that there might be a role for their Independent Visitors in helping them make their own decisions about going for treatment from a doctor or dentist.

Those in three of our groups said that, quite separately from who makes decisions about a child going to a doctor or dentist, foster carers need to take a responsibility for helping make sure the child then makes it to any appointments they need to attend.

**Your education**

In the survey, 67% of those answering thought foster carers should usually be the ones to make education decisions that needed an adult to make them, with social workers coming next at 26%. Most in our groups thought that wherever possible, children should make educational decisions – like choosing their options of subjects to study – for themselves. With younger children, more decisions needed to involve professionals, but for older children and young people, most educational decisions should be made by the young person themselves.

Those in two groups said that while children should be able to make choices about their education for themselves, they needed advice for that from their schools and their foster carers. Their designated teachers at school were important for giving them advice on decisions about their education. Another group thought that a child’s choices about education should depend mainly on what they were good at; ‘we should be able to do what we are good at and not be forced into anything’. Having money (from the ‘pupil premium’) to help with
Many in our groups thought that decisions about their education should be taken by a number of people together, not just their foster carers. These should include birth parents, the child’s social worker, their foster carers, and the child themselves.

**Giving permission for your spare time activities and hobbies**

We have already heard what children thought about getting permission for activities or sports that are especially risky. Our groups mostly thought that **day to day permissions needed for most spare time activities and hobbies should come from foster carers**. Those answering our survey agreed with this, 89% saying foster carers should usually make these decisions.

The point was made in a number of groups that there are two very different sorts of decisions here. **First are decisions about what activities or hobbies a child should have, and these were for children themselves to decide. Second are decisions about giving or refusing permission for various activities and hobbies, which may need to involve carers or others.**

**Following your faith or religion**

Most in our groups thought that **following their faith or religion, or keeping to religious practices and festivals, should be up to the young person themselves**; ‘faith and religion should be your choice’, ‘if we don’t have a religion it shouldn’t be forced on us’, ‘I don’t think children should be made to follow a religion’.

Some said that if any adults had a say in this, it should be a child’s birth parents. Some others thought that foster carers should have a say.

There was much the same message in the answers from our survey. **Almost half of those who answered this question (49%) thought that foster carers should usually be the ones to make decisions about faith or religion, but 27% said it should usually be their birth parents, and 21% said it should be the child him or her self.**

One group told us that **if a child has a particular faith or religion, they should be allowed to follow the celebrations and practices of their own faith or religion, and this shouldn’t be up to whether someone else gives or doesn’t give them permission to do that.**

Those in one group said they were concerned that sometimes a child is placed where the carers follow a different religion, and this can make it difficult for both the carers and the child. One child in the survey said that when this happens, just as the child should be able to follow their own religion, the foster carers shouldn’t have to start following the child’s religion, either.

**Using sites like Facebook**

Most in our groups agreed that although **young people should be able to make many decisions for themselves about using social networking sites, any permissions needed being given by their foster carers.** As one young person put it, ‘should be us but in certain circumstances it should be up to an adult as some young people are more vulnerable’. Adults should base their decisions about permissions on the safety of the child. Keeping to age restrictions is important for children’s safety.

Some children also need adults where they are, like foster carers, to monitor their safety and use of social networking sites and the internet generally. One person pointed out that anyone can use Facebook to contact a child nowadays, so foster parents do need to monitor this.

Those in one group said that for some, Facebook is the only way they can keep in touch with relatives and friends, but sometimes they are not allowed to use Facebook because of other risks it brings. ‘Facebook is the only way I can talk to my Dad, and I can’t use it’.
Another said that there is always a tension between privacy and protection. Foster carers can be expected to check a child’s computer use to protect them from cyber bullying or paedophiles online, but that in turn invades the child’s privacy. Just saying foster carers can decide whether to give permission to use Facebook is really too simple.

Just one of our groups thought that birth parents should be able to give permissions to children in foster care to use social networking sites like Facebook.

We were warned in one group that it is important not to make different levels of permission and safety for children in care than children have generally – there are safety issues about the internet for every child, and it is something all children and all parents and carers of children have to deal with.

In some groups, we were warned that whatever the government guidance on permissions and decisions might say, children can access the internet on their phones these days, so it is very difficult to say that anyone, whether foster carers or anyone else, can actually do anything about giving or not giving a child or young person permission. Young people will make these decisions for themselves and have to keep themselves safe. What adults like foster carers need to do is give children advice and help in keeping themselves safe and keeping their personal details safe.

In the answers to our survey, exactly three quarters of the children thought that foster carers should usually be the adults to give permissions about using social networking sites, followed by social workers (suggested by 24% of the children answering this in the survey).

Other things that social care think are important decisions for you

Many in our groups thought that contact with their birth families should be listed under this heading. As we have already heard, this was something that most wanted social workers, rather than foster carers, to make decisions about – as long as the child’s wishes and feelings about contact were taken on board.

Some children were very clear that where a child’s placement plan says who can give permissions for something else that is important for that child, the child’s birth parents should be the people able to give that special permission for their own child.

In the survey, over half the children (58%) said that foster carers should usually be the people to give permissions for other things not on the list.

Those in one group told us that who makes any other important decisions for a particular child should always be decided properly in that child’s review.

A general point about all this was made in one group – that every child in care should be told who it is that can make each sort of decision, or give them each sort of permission, and the child should be able to challenge this if they want to. As one member of this group summed it up, ‘children should have a copy of rights or rules of what social services or foster carers are allowed to make decisions on during your time in care’. As one person added in the survey, ‘I think it is good as it gives the young person a greater understanding of each person’s role’.

Children should have a copy of rights or rules of what social services or foster carers are allowed to make decisions on during your time in care
The answers to our survey tell us how much say the children thought each kind of person should have in each type of decision.

The children thought foster carers should have most say in giving permission for spare time hobbies or activities, followed by decisions about seeing a doctor or dentist, and then giving permission to use social networking sites.

They thought social workers should be more involved in decisions that were special to a particular child, decisions about education, and decisions about using social networking sites. They thought social workers should be least involved in decisions about faith or religion, or about seeing a doctor or dentist.

Children who answered our survey thought overall that their birth parents should be more involved in decisions about faith or religion and things that were special to the individual child rather than all children, and should be least involved in giving permissions for hobbies or activities.

Finally, children thought they themselves should be most involved in decisions about their faith or religion, and next most involved in decisions about their education.

Making complaints about fostering

Altogether, 112 children answered our question about whether they had ever made a complaint about a foster carer. Out of these, 28 (a quarter) told us they had made a complaint about a foster carer at some time.

We asked what their complaints had been about. Twenty one children told us what their complaint had been about. The most common type of complaint was about how their foster carer was treating them. This sort of complaint had been made by 14 of the 21 children, and so made up about two thirds of all complaints by foster children. Examples were ‘I was getting into trouble for something foster carer’s children did’, ‘smacking me’.

Other, less common, sorts of complaint were about food, and making a complaint about a previous foster home the child had now left.

Twenty three of the 28 who said they had made a complaint about fostering told us how it had turned out. Twenty of these 23, almost nine out of ten, said their complaint had been sorted out OK.

As well as asking about complaints foster children had actually made in the past, we wanted to know who children would talk to about any future complaint about how they were being looked after in their foster homes. In both our survey and in our discussion groups, we asked who children would talk to if they had a complaint about how they were being looked after in their foster home. We gave them a list of possible people to choose from.

Figure two sets out their answers to this question.
Children’s views on fostering

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Figure two

Who children would talk to if they had a complaint about how they were being looked after in their foster home

Answers from 355 children. Numbers are percentages.

From Figure two we can see that **eight out of ten foster children** would talk to their social worker if they had a complaint about how they were being looked after in their foster home. After their social workers, teachers were the next most likely professionals for children to talk to. **Six out of ten** told us they would raise their concern with their foster parents themselves. Almost half would talk about it to their birth parents. As we have found from many of our consultations, very many children (47% from these answers) would **talk to a friend** if they had worries about how they were being looked after. **One in ten** told us they did not know who they could talk to about how they were being looked after.

We heard advice from one young person that they were unsure who to talk to, but had found they needed to tell lots of people about a problem to get it sorted out; ‘you should talk to as many people as possible because they get the problem dealt with’.

We also asked in our survey and discussion groups how easy or difficult foster children would find it to make a complaint about how they were being looked after to any of the people on the list. Their answers are set out in Figure three.

Figure three

How easy foster children would find it to make a complaint about how they are being looked after

[Figures from 353 children voting]

Nearly **six out of ten** foster children told us that they would find it easy or very easy to make a complaint about how they were being looked after. But one in five foster children said they would find it difficult or very difficult, and another one in five were not sure how easy they would find it to make a complaint.
Many told us how they would find it very difficult to speak to anyone about how they were being looked after; ‘I am not good at talking to people about some things’, ‘I get scared talking about it’, ‘I probably wouldn’t say anything’. It could be hard talking to someone you didn’t know about how you were being looked after; ‘it would be a bit hard talking to strangers because I would be shy’.

Our discussion groups made a number of points about things that made it easy or difficult to make a complaint about how they were being looked after as foster children. Most of our groups agreed that the easiest people to make a complaint to about how they were looked after would be their social workers or their teachers. Some told us that more independent people like advocates or Independent Reviewing Officers were the right people to go to with a complaint, ‘because they don’t judge’.

Some said that in their experience, making a complaint gets difficult because the adults often change what the child has said, and a professional adult can usually outsmart a child if the child is disagreeing with them about something. We also heard that having lots of changes of social worker can break down the trust a child has in their social worker to take up a complaint for them. One child said that their social worker had not got back to them about a complaint they wanted to make. Someone in another group said that they found they often got a duty social worker if they wanted to raise a worry about something, and they didn’t feel they could really talk with a duty social worker they didn’t know.

Others, in different groups, told us that it is difficult to make a complaint about someone you are living with. They would find it difficult to make a complaint about the care their foster carer gives them because they would not want to upset their foster carer, or to get them into any trouble. It would be embarrassing for their foster carer to find out they had shared a concern with someone else. In one group, they said their complaint would have to be a very serious one for them to upset their foster carer by making it. As three children put it; ‘don’t want to hurt anybody by making a complaint’, and ‘it shouldn’t be awkward but if you raise things with them involved and you’re living with them, it is awkward’, ‘if they find out I’ve talked about a problem I get into trouble’.

Another difficulty, raised in one of our groups, was that professionals – including foster carers – usually took each other’s side when a child made a complaint, and didn’t believe the child. ‘You don’t get believed all the time. When I’ve had problems, some think I’m lying’, ‘social workers and foster carers can take each other’s sides and don’t listen to you’, ‘foster carers have a way of expertise and put over a pretence in front of social workers’.

A final difficulty that got in the way of making a complaint was worrying about confidentiality. Some said that if they told a social worker something bad about their foster carers, the social worker would take it straight back to the foster carers.
‘Even if you speak to someone privately, they bring it up’. Another told us how difficult it had been when a problem they had raised got discussed with the other children in their foster family; ‘problems were discussed at the dinner table in front of other siblings’.

**Why foster placements can end**

In our survey and at our consultation days, we asked children whether they had been in any other foster homes in the past. Out of 347 who answered this question, 62% said they had lived in more than one foster home. The other 38% had never been in any other foster home than the one they were living in at the time of our consultations. Adding together children who had left a previous foster home, and those who hadn’t, the two most common reasons children thought foster placements might have to end were problems with the young person’s behaviour, and foster carers and foster children not getting on with each other.

We asked those who had lived in another foster home before their present one to tell us why they had left their last foster home. Here are the top six reasons for leaving their last foster home, each reason coming from at least one in ten of the children answering this question:

- **It was a short term foster placement** (from 51 children)
- **The foster carers and I didn’t get on** (from 30 children)
- **I didn’t like the placement** (from 17 children)
- **My own behaviour** (from 17 children)
- **I returned home to my birth parents** (from 15 children)
- **The care wasn’t suitable** (from 15 children)

As well as these ‘top six’ reasons for leaving their last foster placement, 12 children told us they didn’t know why they had to leave. Another 12 said they had to leave because they had been treated badly by their last foster carers. One of these told us they had left because of physical abuse and neglect, and another said they had left because they were being hit and sexually abused. Three told us they had to leave because of problems with their birth parents. Four said they had left their last foster home in order to move into the same placement as their brothers or sisters, but another three said they had left their last foster home because siblings needed to be separated.

Children gave us a number of different examples of how the care had not been suitable at their last foster home; ‘because I didn’t get my own time with my other foster carer’, ‘because I was made to do a mother’s job with my little sister’, ‘because the new family were kind of linked to my religion’.

From these figures, just over a third of the children who gave us reasons for leaving their past foster homes had left them for planned reasons. For some, this was because the foster placement was a short term one in the first place, or because they were moved to the same placement as their siblings. For others, they had left their last foster home because at the time they were going back to live with their birth families, to
leave care, or to be adopted - although they had later come back into care and gone into another foster home. **Just under a third had left their last foster home because it didn’t turn out to be the right home for them, and eight percent told us their last foster placement had broken down because of their own behaviour there.**

We then asked our eight discussion groups to talk in more detail about what sorts of things they thought were most likely to make a foster placement have to end. We heard about how **some fostering placements just end because it is time for the young person to move on** – as two young people put it, ‘age and going off to university’, or ‘it might just be time to go home’. A foster placement may end because it was **an emergency placement and not meant to be permanent**. We also heard about **some placements ending when the foster carers moved house or left the country**, ‘foster carer moving abroad and us not being able to go with them’. One child told us of a foster placement that ended when the foster carers split up.

Our groups also told us about their own experiences of **placements ending because the child and the foster carers didn’t get on, or because the placement didn’t turn out to be the right one for the child**, or in many cases because of the child’s behaviour.

We heard examples of how the foster carers and child simply didn’t get on with each other. One child said this could happen very quickly, while the child was in the placement for a short trial period, though even then it could be a bad experience for the child; ‘you go to foster care for two weeks to see if they like you, it’s not fair on us if they change their minds after those two weeks’. Examples of children and foster carers not getting on were: ‘lack of communication and trust’, ‘if the relationship between foster carer and you breaks down’, ‘when confidentiality is mistrusted’, ‘if you haven’t got a close relationship’, ‘constant tension in the house. If you couldn’t be happy and be in the house’, ‘clash of personalities’, or simply having ‘misunderstandings’.

Sometimes there was something about the placement that just made it the wrong one for the foster child to be in. One young person told us that in their placement, there had been some much younger children who were very noisy and the foster child was unable to do their revision for exams. Another said that they had been treated differently from their foster carer’s biological children.

Here are some examples of what children told us about how their own behaviour could bring a foster placement to an end: ‘I used to run away. I needed more discipline from my foster carer’, ‘if we want more freedom, we start rebelling and being naughty’, ‘kicking off, swearing, fighting’. One group told us that sometimes foster carers simply can’t cope with their foster child’s behaviour and needs; ‘if you are too much work for them’.

One child told us that a foster placement would of course come to an end ‘if they are abusing you’. Another said that whether or not a placement had ended had depended on their attendance at a college course; ‘being threatened when aged 16 that if you don’t go to college your placement will end’.

**What could be done to help stop a foster placement having to end?**

We asked children in our survey what they thought could be done to help stop foster placements having to end. One in five said they couldn’t think of anything that might do this. The top five things they thought might help stop a placement ending were:

- **Carers and children talking things over together**
- **The young person improving their behaviour**
Good support for the family

Finding a suitable placement in the first place

Visits from social care services

We went on to ask our eight groups whether they thought there was anything that could be done to help stop a foster placement having to end. They raised, without any suggestion from us, much the same ideas that had come from the answers to our survey, plus some more of their own.

The biggest single issue from the groups was that the best way to avoid a foster placement having to end is to get a good matching between the child and the foster carers in the first place. ‘They need to get the match right. If it’s not the right placement it stresses us and them out’, ‘make sure the foster carer wants you first’, ‘selection of who you want to live with’, ‘ask both parties what they want’, ‘before you move in, see how well matched you are with them’. One child simply said ‘if they don’t like the person then it won’t work’.

After moving in to a foster carer’s home, it is important that the child and carers do get to form a close bond, and the placement can come to an end if this doesn’t happen; ‘having 121 times to bond closer with carer’. It would be helpful if children could visit the carers and get to know them really well before actually moving in.

Talking about foster children’s own behaviour sometimes making a placement end, some said that in order to stop a placement having to end, ‘young people could try to behave better’. Some children thought that foster carers need to be able to expect and cope with behaviour problems; ‘they need to be able to cope with a difficult child and behavioural problems’, ‘maybe the child can’t be handled by the foster carer, but really it shouldn’t end because it’s the carer’s job to look after and give the young person a safe environment to live in’.

One group said that foster carers could perhaps change the house rules in their foster home if those were causing a problem, and were different to what the child had been used to before.

Another group thought that social workers need to talk problems through confidentially with foster carers to support them; ‘carer and social worker should talk privately’. A good social worker could help to stop problems becoming so big that the placement had to end; ‘a good caring social worker who can spot the early signs of problems’.

We also heard that other sorts of support were needed to keep placements going rather than breaking down. If problems were developing, having a period of respite care somewhere else for the child could help; ‘going into respite for a few days for you and your foster carer to work your problems out’. It was also important that foster carers and children got outside help before things really broke down; ‘somebody trying to help before the situation ends it’. With support, ‘you can always sort it out - if it’s sortable’, but if it isn’t sortable, then at least you have tried to keep the placement going.
One of our groups thought that it is too easy these days to end a foster placement if things start to get difficult. Another thought that if things were breaking down, it was best to be honest and say so; ‘talk to social worker and say if it’s working out or not, just be honest’.

The idea of a permanent placement

Very often, social workers and other professionals talk about how important it is to find a long term, or permanent, placement for a child in care – to avoid lots of changes and to give them ‘permanence’ for the rest of their childhood, until they are ready to move on to live on their own as adults.

Children and young people often hear professionals talking about wanting to find ‘permanence’ for them. In our survey, the most common comments about the idea of a placement being permanent were that this was a good thing, and that it meant stability. It could mean living in the same family all the time like other children; ‘you get treated the same as the other children who are not in care’. It could mean not getting your education disrupted; ‘if someone has settled in at school for a few years and social services want to move them, it would interrupt their education’. One person wrote ‘permanence means that I have somewhere to stay till I grow up. Like a permanent marker, once you put it on there it never goes’.

We wanted to check what the children in our groups thought about this. All our groups understood what the idea of ‘permanence’ meant; ‘staying with the person, not for the rest of your life, but until you’re mature’, ‘you will live with that family until you are 18’, ‘staying there’, ‘you are going to be there a long time’, ‘staying in the same foster placement until we move out into independent living’. As people in different groups put it, ‘permanence is the final decision on anything’, ‘if they say permanence, it should mean permanent’.

But permanence was actually much more complicated than that. One group did not think that permanence really meant foster placements being permanent, but meant a foster child moving on to something else that might be permanent – like special guardianship, or getting adopted.

Another group was not sure that being in a foster home permanently did always mean right up to their 18th birthday; ‘long term, they’ll take you ‘til you are 16 or 18’, ‘staying somewhere ‘till you are old enough to look after yourself’. As yet another group said, permanence meant that you would only leave when you were thought to be old enough, but you would not be moved before then - you would stay until ‘you’re old enough to leave. They are not going to move you’. A third group discussed what age they thought permanent placements were supposed to last to – some thought 16, others thought 18.
One young person told us that although in their experience, **having a permanent placement meant they did not get moved around as a child, there had been pressure for them to move out to independent living well before the age of 18;** ‘when you get to 15 or 16 they hound you, saying have you heard about this independent living?’

We were told that **permanence is not always the right thing,** as well as not always being what actually happens even if the plan is for a placement to be long term. As one person put it, whether permanence is a good thing or not ‘**all depends really, if anything is going wrong, it’s not good**’. A person in a different group told us their plan ‘says that I stay here till I’m 18 – unless it breaks down’. Not everyone agreed that staying in the same placement was more important than other things in their lives; ‘I don’t think a child should be in one home until they leave care’, ‘it depends why the child is in care’, ‘not fair really, but I don’t like that – permanence would make me really mad’, ‘it’s a good idea, but depending on how far from home you are – see, I feel lonely at my placement because I haven’t got my friends’.

If a placement that was supposed to be permanent does break down, the child often feels they are very unclear about what is going to happen, and when. ‘It’s like hanging on a cliff hanger’.

**One child told us how they did not like the fact that their temporary placement became a permanent one, simply because they could not go back home when they were supposed to;** ‘I was only meant to stay for 2 weeks, but I’ve been there 4 or 5 years. I don’t like the thought of permanence and can’t bring myself to let them write the word down because I still want to go home’.

We also heard that **as well as trying to make a placement permanent, it was also important for a child to be able to leave and move to a different placement if they need to;** ‘they should let you know you can stay in this place as well as let you know you can move if you want to – permanence is not really permanence’.

People in one group thought that professionals talked a lot about ‘permanence’ but couldn’t really make sure that a placement would be permanent. Some said that when social workers talk about permanence ‘they are lying’, ‘they can call it that although it may not be that’. Someone in another group told us that they thought **social workers always thought their placements were going to be permanent, but they usually weren’t;** ‘they all think it’s long term’. A different group reached the same view; ‘they say it’s long term, then move you again. They can’t judge it for sure, the placement might break down’.
Being fostered by people you know

We asked children whether they had already known their present foster carers before going to live with them as foster children. A total of 334 children answered this question. Twenty five children (7%) told us that they had gone to live with foster parents they already knew. Twenty of these had been fostered with a relative, and five with people who were already friends of their birth family. As many as 25 children (7%) said they didn’t know whether their foster carers had been relatives or friends of their birth families. Overall, 85% of the children who answered our question were sure that their foster carers had not been relatives or friends of their birth families before they were fostered with them.

We asked the 25 children who had been fostered with relatives or friends to tell us whether they thought knowing their foster carers before going to live with them had made a difference to them. A third said it had not made any difference to them. The two most usual differences it had made for the others were that it had been good to join the family they had joined, or that it had been good that they had not been sent to live with strangers. Some told us that one of the good things about being placed with foster carers your family already knew was that you got to see your parents more often, and could still feel loved by them. None of the 25 told us it had been a bad thing for them to be placed with their relatives or family friends.

Helping children settle into a new foster home

Children had told us it is important that a child settles well into a new foster home, and gets to form a good bond with their new foster carers. We asked in our survey what helps a child settle into a new foster home, and we had answers from 213 children. The most usual answers (each given by at least one in ten of the children who answered the question) were making the foster home friendly, carers being welcoming, the carers and child spending time getting to know each other before moving in, and the child being able to take their own possessions into their new foster home.

To quote some of the answers, ‘a welcoming family who are ready to take on new challenges’, ‘bringing my own stuff’, ‘foster carers clear about what behaviour they want, being friendly, kind’, ‘knowing they’re right for you and feeling comfortable’, ‘not being pushed in too quickly’, ‘information before changing foster homes’, ‘open discussion with carers and social worker’, ‘people talking to me to tell me what’s going on’. One child wrote ‘truly you should speak to my carers because they made me smile and were just mum and dad from the start’.

A welcoming family who are ready to take on new challenges
We then asked our discussion groups to tell us, from their experience, more detail about what helps children settle into a new foster home.

We heard from most in our groups that **getting to know your future foster carers well before you move in with them** is important; ‘if foster carer meets you and you stay overnight’, ‘finding out about each other’. It is all to help make sure that you will ‘get on with each other in the placement’. As one young person put it, ‘chill over there and see if it’s good’. You need to get to know who you are living with, and get to know the members of their extended family too. You need to find out the personalities of your future foster carers – and, one person said, say honestly if you don’t like them or the family. Your new foster carers need to ‘make you feel welcome, give normality and make you feel comfortable and safe’. You need to be able to build up understanding and trust – it is the people already there that make you feel settled or not in a new family home.

Something else we heard foster carers could do to help a new child settle in to the foster family was to create **‘calmness and consistency at home’**. We also heard that foster carers having a **good sense of humour** can be very helpful.

Having time to prepare to move in is also important – **sudden moves may not last well**; ‘instead of leaving at the last minute in the back of a car, they should help you pack, talk to you and help you relax’. If you are moving from one foster home into another one, it helps if the new carers ‘work with present foster carers’. Your social worker is important in helping you change placements.

Because different families have different ‘house rules’ for children to keep to, and are all very different places to live, one group proposed that **a child should be given a welcome pack of information before they move in to a new foster home**, telling them about the house, who lives there, and about everyone’s roles. ‘If you are brought into someone else’s home, you don’t know them, so a welcome pack would help you get to know them better’. Another group said it would be helpful if the young person and their future foster carers could each write a paragraph about themselves to swap before the child moved in. A third group said that foster carers should set up a photo album of their family, home and activities for their new foster children before they came to live.

We heard in other groups how important it is to know some very basic things about what you can and cannot do in your new foster home; ‘use the fridge’, ‘knowing whether you can flush the toilet at night’.

One of our groups told us how important it is that once they have joined a foster family, they feel that they are being treated like other children in the family, and **not picked out for different treatment because they are only a foster child**. You settle in well if you are made to feel part of the family, and if you are included in family activities.

There were **differing views in one of our groups about whether or not having contact with birth parents helped children to settle in a foster home**. In this group, we heard both the view that talking to your birth family would help some children to
settle, but that for others, ‘seeing your birth parents less can help you settle’.

One group told us how important it can be for the social worker to keep checking that 

the child is settling in well, and to help with any problems while the child is still settling in. ‘Being able to talk to social worker, or social worker visits, to check young person is settling in’.

Keeping in touch with siblings

We used our survey and starter cards to ask children coming to our consultation days how they kept in touch with their own brothers and sisters once they had come into foster care.

A total of 111 children filling in our starter cards told us whether they had any brothers or sisters who were not in care. Out of these, 76 (68%, or just over two thirds) said they did have brothers or sisters who were not themselves in care. From answers to our survey, we found out that 23% of foster children with siblings who were not themselves in care had no contact with those siblings any more. One in twenty (5%) of those who told us they had siblings in care but in different placements to themselves, said they had lost contact with their brothers or sisters in care.

A total of 108 then answered a question on our starter cards about whether they had any brothers or sisters who were also in care. Out of those, 69 children (64%, just under two thirds) said they did have brothers or sisters who were in care at the same time as themselves. Twenty of these, just under a third, said they were living with their brothers or sisters in the same foster home, the others were separated from brothers or sisters in different placements.

The most common way for foster children to keep in touch with brothers and sisters, both ones who weren’t themselves in care, and those who were also in care but separated by living in different placements, was through formal contact arrangements. Contact arrangements might mean visits, or specially arranged meetings somewhere. The next most common way to keep in touch with brothers and sisters was by telephone.

In answers to our survey, we found out that 34% of foster children who had siblings who were not in care kept in touch with them through formal contact arrangements, and 16% kept in touch with them by telephone. For foster children who had siblings who were also in care themselves, 25% told us they kept in touch through formal contact arrangements, and eight percent by telephone. Only between three and four percent of children used the internet or social networking sites as their main way of keeping in touch with brothers or sisters.
Helping children over big changes in their lives

As well as settling into a new foster home, and things like whether or not you could stay in touch with brothers and sisters, foster children have lots of other changes to cope with in their lives. We asked our groups what sort of help they had, or needed, to help them cope when other big changes happened in their lives. We asked about things like changing schools or starting college, another foster child coming into their foster home, moving house with their foster family to live in a new area, leaving care, or starting work.

One group added one more big change to the list, that happens for lots of children in care. This was **coping with a change of social worker.** One person in the group summed this up for us; ‘when they change our social workers, we have to tell new ones about our background all over again’.

Those in our groups said that **help from their foster carers** was essential to cope with many sorts of changes and difficulties in their lives. Sometimes this was by giving practical help, but sometimes it was by giving comfort when things were difficult. Some people told us they had found specialist services helpful in coping with some changes – examples were the local CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service), local advocacy services and the NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service).

Just having **someone to talk to who would listen to you** was a great help when things were changing in your life. So was **having someone to explain** what was going on. One person gave us an example of this; ‘someone from school came to help by explaining what was happening’.

If you were changing placements, or moving to a new area or a new school or college, it was **helpful if carers and staff helped you to feel comfortable, and helped to introduce you to new friends.**

Leaving care and going to live independently were very big changes in a young person’s life, and the best help was for carers to teach young people how to cook and wash for themselves, to **give them the skills they would need to live alone** – and then to visit after you had moved and do things like take you out for a meal.

Some told us that **it would have been helpful for them to be able to talk things through with someone who had already gone through the same things.**

Others told us **things they had found it helpful to do for themselves to help cope with changes in their lives.** They told us that it had helped not to expect too much at once, and it was helpful to try ‘taking one day at a time’. Also, in moving somewhere where you were with new people, they had found it helpful not to try to act differently to the way they were usually; ‘don’t try to be someone you’re not’. One thing that we heard could make this hard was how other people reacted to you when they knew you had been in foster care.

Others said that **you had to be proactive and to make things happen for yourself,** rather than expect help from social care services or anyone else. For example, one young person told us how they had done all the work for themselves to find out how to get to university, and had made it without anyone else’s help but their own efforts.
In one group we were told that it is always easier to cope with big changes if you have some choices to make about what actually happens to you.

When we asked children in our survey what most helped them cope with big changes in their lives, one message came through strongly from many children – that having information and knowing what is happening and what is going to happen are extremely important; ‘they help you by talking to you about what’s ahead of you’, ‘everything was explained to me so I could understand’, ‘information before changing’.

Help children get from their foster carers

Lastly, we asked each of our groups what sort of help they got from their foster carers for their education, to help them to take part in hobbies and activities, and to keep in good health.

On education, we heard that foster carers are important when it comes to helping with homework. They also gave lots of encouragement to do well at school. We also heard about foster carers boosting children’s confidence by going into school with them, or giving help and support when their foster child got into trouble at school. Foster carers also helped by attending parents’ evenings, getting their foster children the right equipment for school (like books and school uniform) – and by making sure the children got to school every day and on time. Children in our survey told us that the three biggest things helping them to do well at school were help with homework, encouragement from their foster carers, and support from carers attending school meetings.

We did however hear that foster carers going to school parents’ evenings could cause problems for their foster children too. It could be ‘not a good thing – young people have to lie about who they are’. Many foster children do not want other children to know that they are in foster care. This could be a problem when teachers talked about children’s foster parents in front of other children; ‘teachers will mention that they will contact your foster carers, that brings issues about other people knowing that you are in foster care, it’s embarrassing’.

On helping with hobbies and activities, we heard that foster carers let children try out new things, and encourage their foster children to try things out to see if they like them. Their help was also needed to buy the equipment needed for many sorts of activity, like a bike, or special clothing. They also help by taking their foster children to and from sports or other activities; ‘they drive you to activities’.

On helping to keep foster children in good health, three sorts of help were mentioned in different groups. These were; help in eating well (‘makes sure I get five a day’, ‘lots of fruit and veg’, ‘they feed me good food’, ‘sweets occasionally and not all the time’), encouraging children to take enough exercise (‘makes me walk a lot’, ‘makes you walk dogs’), and helping with making and keeping health appointments. One child told us the biggest help their foster carers gave them with health was making sure they
got to hospital appointments on time, and another said their foster carers took them to the dentist when they needed it. Children answering our survey also told us that having regular health checks helped them to stay healthy.

Last words

One child wanted us to say clearly in this report that we must all be careful not to think that the same things are right for all foster children. They wanted anyone reading this report to know that ‘a lot of the answers to these questions depend on the individual child or young person’.

The last word of all goes to the child who said their foster carers ‘give me all the things that will give me a better childhood’.