

Introduction

Three-quarters of looked after children and young people live in foster care (Fostering Network, 2019) and the majority of them are cared for safely. However, in common with others employed in positions of trust, foster carers always face the possibility that an allegation or complaint will be made against them at some point in their career.

Successful foster carers are always people who enjoy a challenge. When they open the doors of their home to an unknown child, they are willingly taking certain risks with their own health, happiness and peace of mind in exchange for the benefits of fostering.

(Cairns and Fursland, 2007)

The opportunity to live in a loving, caring foster home offers many children and young people their best chance of recovering from whatever adverse experiences they may have had. However, sometimes children, or others such as children's birth family members, may make allegations or complaints against foster carers, including accusations that they have harmed or abused the children in their care.

Children who are living with foster or kinship foster carers will have experienced significant trauma in their lives. If a child makes an allegation or complaint, some of these may have their roots in the child's previous experiences rather than the current placement. Some birth family members may also seek to undermine their child's foster placement through making allegations or complaints, perhaps in the hope that this will hasten a return of their child to their care.

However, over the years, there has been evidence that some foster carers, and residential workers, have abused their position of trust and harmed a child physically, sexually or emotionally. These situations have led some professionals and members of the public to distrust all foster carers, without appreciating the challenges that they face and the very low number of carers who have abused children.

Foster carers work unsupervised within their homes while also providing a public service. They care for children whose behaviour and emotions require sensitive, attuned caregiving. They may be trying to manage all aspects of the child's care alongside other caring responsibilities, at the same time as providing an experience of living in an "ordinary" family.

Studies on foster carer strain and compassion fatigue such as those by Wilson *et al* (2000) and Ottaway and Selwyn (2017) remind us that foster carers' capacity to continue to provide the standards of care they, and

their fostering service, aspire to can be seriously compromised, not only by significant events such as placement breakdowns, but also by the daily stresses of fostering and secondary trauma – see Chapter 8 in this guide, ‘Themes from research’.

Research has found that foster carers often talk of feeling blamed or inadequate when children’s placements break down, suggesting that the impact of fostering on carers’ parenting capacity is not always fully understood.

Even so, there are a small number of foster carers who, in hindsight, should not have been approved to foster and who go on to abuse and exploit the children in their care. These individuals may be successful at hiding their true motives and deflecting professionals’ attention away from their abusive behaviour, often over a significant period of time. Case reviews involving foster carers where a child has been harmed have invariably found deficiencies in the original assessment process – gaps and discrepancies were not fully explored, information given by applicants was not verified, references from ex-partners may not have been taken up, or checks were incomplete. These failures will be further compounded if the fostering service does not have detailed “checks and balances” in the form of rigorous quality assurance systems.

One key message of this practice guide is **not to assume that children are safe once they become looked after**. Fostering and children’s teams need to maintain a safeguarding focus in relation to the children and young people for whom they are responsible. When an issue concerning the behaviour or practice of a foster carer arises, the safety and welfare of those in their care is obviously paramount. Even so, the response must be proportionate, and must be balanced with a commitment to treating the foster carer justly and with respect.

Whether a matter presents as a complaint, an allegation or a concern, there is always a possibility that further probing might reveal a more serious picture than was first apparent, or that a seemingly serious situation may be less worrying once the matter has been fully understood and placed in context.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

This guide looks first at the context of allegations, concerns and complaints, and provides an explanation of what these are and the differences between them. The legal framework surrounding this issue, and what research tells us about it, are then explored.

“Corporate parenting” is a shared responsibility, meaning that those at the head of services for looked after children are ultimately responsible

for their safety and well-being. This guide looks at the role of leadership and management in creating safe structures and practices, and is relevant to managers, children's social workers and supervising social workers, as well as members and Chairs of fostering panels. It contains some salutary messages regarding the assessment, approval and review of foster carers, along with comprehensive good practice guidance for different practitioners across a range of scenarios. These are designed to ensure that any allegation, complaint or concern is recognised and acted upon in a fair and transparent way. The guide concludes by considering what should happen after an allegation or complaint has been investigated, and how fostering services, practitioners and foster carers can learn and grow from the experience. A range of useful appendices is included at the end of the guide to help practitioners with their work in this area.

By including the voices of children and foster carers, this guide seeks to inform practice by considering the perspectives of all those who may be involved in allegations and complaints, and to help professionals take actions that are proportionate and fair to both sides.

RELEVANCE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is relevant to both local authority children's services, and independent fostering providers (IFPs).

Fostering is a devolved issue in the UK and the legal framework for each nation has therefore been covered in four separate chapters. Later chapters focusing on good practice are written in more general terms and apply to all four UK nations, unless stated. Practitioners should in any case use this guide alongside their own local procedures and national guidance.

NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY

Where case scenarios are used for illustration, aside from quoting from case reviews, no real cases have been used. Where a hypothetical scenario appears to resemble a real person, fostering service or case, this is coincidental. Where the voices of foster carers are used, this is with their consent. Their names and exact words used have been altered to provide anonymity.