

The Kinship Care Alliance's response to the Fostering National Minimum Standards Formal Consultation Document

This response is drafted by Family Rights Group in consultation with The Fostering Network, The Grandparents' Association and Grandparents Plus.

It is also endorsed by: The Frank Buttle Trust and the Who Cares? Trust

The NMS consultation document describes the standards, which a fostering service provider should aspire to and deliver in the provision of foster care to looked-after children.

The standards as written would be applicable to both family and friends foster carers and to stranger/unrelated foster carers. In most cases these two types of foster care share the same general aims for the children in their care and these aims are embodied in the headings as listed in 'Standards around the child', namely::

- The child's wishes and feelings and the views of those significant to them
- Promoting positive behaviour and relations with the foster carers and others
- Promoting a positive identity, potential and valuing diversity through individualised care
- Protecting from abuse and neglect
- Children missing from care
- Promoting good health and wellbeing
- Leisure activities
- Promoting educational achievement
- Promoting and supporting contact
- Providing a suitable physical environment for the foster child
- Preparation for a new placement or a move (including back to parents etc.)
- Promoting independence and moves to adulthood and leaving care.

In the draft NMS, under each heading is a list of outcomes that the standard aims to produce, followed by the measures that a fostering service provider should take in order to ensure these outcomes can be delivered and the standards be met. To a significant degree, the decision as to whether to approve a foster carer, and then to maintain their approval, is measured against their ability to provide foster care that meets such standards.

Whilst family and friends foster carers would generally aim to achieve the same outcomes for children as those identified in the Standards Around the Child, there does need to be a recognition of the differences in the relationship that the carer has to the child they are raising and also to the child's family. In general, unrelated foster carers will be taking the care of children previously unknown to them. They have to be prepared to take in children about whom very little may be

known, and they have to be prepared to deal with the whole range of behaviours which looked after children might display as a result of their earlier experiences. Unrelated foster carers are also likely to enjoy a more distant relationship with the children's parents and other family members, making these relationships usually more easily manageable. The whole issue of the child's contact with parents is far less complicated for unrelated carers. The carer doesn't already have an attachment to the children and may struggle to form one, equally they aren't burdened by the legacy of the children's or the children's parents' previous behaviours towards them.

In contrast, by the time of a fostering assessment, the child(ren) may already be living with the family and friends carer. The carer and child(ren) may have a long standing bond and deep love and affection for each other. The carer may also be very well acquainted with the child(ren)'s history, warts and all.

Family and friends carers don't need to meet the general standards for raising any child, they specifically are needing to be assessed and supported to meet the needs of the particular child(ren) they are wishing to raise. Thus they need to be equipped to deal with the child(ren)'s behaviour but not any child's behaviour. Additionally, the fact that the children's parents are often relatives of the carer, eg their own birth child or sibling, means that the relationship between carers and parents can become particularly fraught. The parent is more likely to have contact with the child but this is not without difficulties for the carer. Family and friends carers are often placed in the position of having to prioritise, for example, the welfare of the grandchild they are raising over their relationship with their own child. While research demonstrates that they do almost always manage to achieve this, it can come at a high cost to the carer in terms of their family relationships, and this is not an issue which is faced by unrelated foster carers.

The result of these differences is that the standards are often over-prescriptive for the tasks facing family and friends carers. For example, the standard on providing a suitable physical environment for the child prescribes higher standards in terms of bedroom space than might be achievable for family and friends carers without the assistance from the local authority of a loft conversion or a housing transfer. Yet the placement may be suitable in all other ways for the child. The standards should be designed to facilitate the right placement for the child, including addressing what support the authority can provide to make the placement work, rather designed to exclude family and friends carers who are likely to be in significantly more impoverished and circumstances and living in overcrowded accommodation than unrelated carers.

We therefore propose that the following set of standards be adopted specifically for family and friends foster care. We feel that this would be a simpler and preferable option to providing additional statements for each standard, explaining how the standard should be applied differently to family and friends foster carers.

Proposed Standards for family and friends foster carers

- 1. The child's wishes and feelings.** Children should be consulted when the choice is being made of where to place them, including whether they wish to be placed with a family member or friend, and if so who this should be.
- 2. Promoting positive behaviour and relations with the foster carers and others.** Family and friends carers should be provided with full information about the child's experiences before coming to them, and be advised about possible behavioural difficulties. They should also be asked about their own knowledge of the child's background and behaviour. Carers should be supported to explain to the child the reasons that they are in their care and to understand why that explanation is important for the child. Training and advice should be offered on how to manage the child's feelings and behaviour, in such a way as to promote appropriate behaviour and sound relationships based on honesty and mutual respect. Techniques for positively managing any difficult behaviour that has been identified should be discussed.
- 3. Promoting a positive identity, potential and valuing diversity through individualised care.** The fostering service provider should identify to the family and friends carers any concerns they have about the child's positive sense of their own identity, and ask the carer/s about any concerns that they may have regarding the child's sense of identity. The fostering service provider should discuss with the carers ways to address this issue and promote the child's positive identity.
- 4. Protecting from abuse and neglect.** The fostering service provider should provide full details of any neglect or abuse experienced by the child before being placed with the carers, and ask about the carer's own knowledge of neglect or abuse that the child may have experienced. The agency should discuss with the carers how the child could be helped to feel safe with them, and how to avoid situations which the child could misread, leading to false allegations against the carers.
- 5. Children missing from care.** Where there is a possibility that a child may go missing, family and friends carers should be advised why this is thought to be the case, and asked for their views on the possibility. The carers should be given advice on how to lessen the possibility of it happening, and advised of the procedures to follow if a child does go missing.
- 6. Promoting good health and wellbeing.** The fostering service provider will ensure that family and friends foster carers receive full information about the health-care needs of the child being placed, and where children's health needs require additional support then the agency ensures that specialist help and advice will be made available.
- 7. Leisure activities.** The fostering service provider should ensure that family and friends foster carers are fully informed about the child's particular interests, talents and leisure activities, and should discuss with the carers how these can be supported.

- 8. Promoting educational achievement.** The fostering service provider will ensure that the family and friends foster carers receive full information about the child's educational achievements, and about any extra educational support the child may need. The fostering service provider will discuss with the carer the best way of providing the child with additional support, and ensure that specialist help is made available if required.
- 9. Promoting and supporting contact.** The fostering service provider should discuss any potential difficulties around contact arrangements with the family and friends carer before the placement is made, if possible, and ask the carer whether they think there might be difficulties around contact. The fostering service provider should continue to be alert to the possibility of difficulties arising in the contact arrangements after the placement has been made, and be proactive in suggesting solutions to contact difficulties, such as supervised contact and the use of contact centres. The fostering service provider should monitor contact arrangements, to ensure that the child's needs are being met, and should discuss possible solutions to contact difficulties with the family and friends foster carers including practical assistance.
- 10. Providing a suitable physical environment for the foster child.** The fostering service provider should discuss with the family and friends foster carer how the child will physically fit into their home, including where they are going to sleep. While it might be preferable for the child to have their own bedroom, or if sharing only to share with children who are similar in age or of the same gender, these considerations might be outweighed by the emotional bonds that the child already has with the carers. If the child does have to share a bedroom, there should be a discussion about:
- what is known about the child's relationship with any other child who will be sharing the bedroom;
 - how the child's needs for privacy and some private space will be met;
 - any risks of bullying or abusive behaviour that may arise; and
 - the potential for any overcrowding to be alleviated, through a housing transfer, or by the local authority providing financial support to build additional accommodation space.
- The reasons for deciding to proceed with a placement which might be overcrowded, or able to provide only limited opportunities for privacy, should be recorded in writing.
- 11. Preparation for a new placement or a move (including back to parents etc).** The fostering service provider should find out from the family and friends foster carer what would help them to welcome the child into their home. Do they need any additional furniture or equipment that the local authority could provide for them? If the child has to move on from the family and friends carers, then except in emergencies this should only take place following statutory reviews of the child's care plan chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer. Carers should be offered advice and

support from the fostering service provider in helping the child's move to take place in such a way that the child feels loved and valued.

12. Promoting independence and moves to adulthood and leaving care.

The fostering service provider should discuss with the family and friends foster carer and the young person what their plans are for when the young person attains adulthood. It should not be assumed that because the young person reaches the age of 18 they will automatically be expected to leave the carers' home, and many family and friends foster carers may wish to continue to provide a home for the young person into early adulthood. The fostering service provider should assist the carers in ensuring that the young person receives all the local authority leaving care support to which they are entitled.

13. Recognising the uniqueness of family and friends care. In all of its policies and practices for dealing with family and friends carers, the fostering service provider should recognise that this is a form of placement for children which confers unique advantages for children, by enabling them to be placed with people already known to them, with whom they already have close emotional bonds, and who are likely to show a high level of commitment to them.

14. Equal treatment for family and friends carers. A separate set of standards for family and friends foster carers should not be taken to imply that family and friends foster carers are in any way offering a 'second-class' service. They should be offered support services and financial support appropriate to the needs of the child, and not less than the finance and support being offered to unrelated foster carers..

The Assessment process

The standards as currently drafted largely fails to address the assessment process itself. This is a glaring gap.

Our response focuses upon children being raised in family and friends care We are currently undertaking a pilot with 10 local authorities of a collaborative approach to assessment, that places the welfare of the child at its heart, but is tailored specifically to circumstances where a child is being raised by family and friends carers and engages with the carer in drawing up a more informed assessment upon which professionals can make judgements. We believe there needs to be an explicit statement in the NMS that in relation to children potentially being raised by family and friends carers, the assessment process should focus upon the suitability of the placement for the specific child, should draw upon the knowledge of the family and friends carer as well as the views of the child and their parents, and address what support needs to be put in place for the child to flourish.

We would also propose that there should be some amendments to the **General Introduction** and to the **Standards of the Fostering Service/Agency**, in order to highlight the contribution of family and friends carers, who are currently looking after 1 in 6 of all children in foster care.

Values

In the general introduction (p4), under **Values**, the second bullet point should stress that the first option for children unable to remain with their birth parents should be a placement with family and friends carers.

Under **Structure and approach to inspection** (p6) it states that standards *“do not have to be followed to the letter if the service can demonstrate, and Ofsted is satisfied, that the outcomes are being met in a different way.”* The example given to support this statement is of short break placements for disabled children, but we suggest that the statement should also apply to family and friends care placements, and the standards should specify this.

Standards of the Fostering Service/Agency

Standard 14 – Fostering panels and the fostering service’s agency decision maker. We would suggest that in considering the approval of family and friends foster carers, the panel should take into account that being a family and friends carer is a different experience to being an unrelated foster carer. We would recommend that when a fostering panel is considering approving a family and friends carer to be a foster carer, one independent member of the panel should be a person who has been a family and friends carer, or who as a child was placed with family and friends carers.

We would also suggest that fostering service providers who assess and approve family and friends carers as foster carers should be obliged to consider how to promote good practice in this process. This would involve specific training for the fostering panel, to ensure that family and friends carers’ assessments are considered against standards specific to the task they are doing, and not against general fostering standards.

Standard 15 – Matching the child with a placement that meets their assessed needs. It should be recognised that in the case of a Regulation 38 emergency or immediate placement, there may be little or no opportunity for any matching process. In the case of non-emergency placements with family or friends already known to the child, the process of matching the child to potential carers could differ to the process described in the standard. The choice of placement may have been made through a Family Group Conference. There may be no need for a gradual introduction to some one the child is already familiar with. The ‘assessed needs’ of the child should include emotional needs for security and belonging which could be met through being raised by a person

with whom the child has a prior existing relationship. The introductions process may involve a discussion with the child about the differences between visiting the carer/s and staying with them.

Standards 17 – Fitness to provide or manage the administration of a fostering service. We suggest that the manager should ensure that where the fostering service carries out assessments of family and friends carers, there is expertise within the workforce in carrying out this sort of assessment.

Standard 20 – Training of foster carers. We suggest that while the agency should make training available to family and friends carers, there should not be a requirement on family and friends carers to attend training or to demonstrate that they meet Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care in order to maintain their status as approved foster carers. Family and friends carers should be offered expert consultancy on issues that concern them, and the opportunity to attend general foster care training courses which they consider relevant. The agency should offer specific training on issues that are relevant to family and friends carers, eg contact issues in family and friends placements, managing the shifts in family relationships, life story work with a child who is related to you, and what sort of support is available and where to go for it.

We would also suggest that fostering service providers should be obliged to ensure that family and friends carers have the opportunity to attend a support group specifically for them. There is experience that such support groups may work better if they are organised by people other than social workers, eg support workers, voluntary organisations, or the carers themselves. Support groups may provide an opportunity for carers to have some of their training and development needs met.

Standard 23 – Training, development and qualification of workers. We suggest that staff who assess or support family and friends foster carers should receive training that will equip them for this task, or should have experience of this work. Students and others who do not meet this requirement should carry out assessments under the supervision of someone who does.

Standard 29 – financial requirements – payment to carers. We suggest that this standard should explicitly state that payments to family and friends foster carers will be at the same level as payments to stranger/unrelated foster carers. It should also state that family and friends foster carers will be entitled to any additional payments, such as birthday, summer holiday or winter festival payments, which are routinely made to other foster carers, and enhancements to the foster carer allowance should be made to all foster carers on the same basis.