

Contents

Introduction	1
What this guide covers	2
Relevance of this guide	3
Note on confidentiality	3

1 The context	4
Allegation, concern or complaint?	4
A holistic approach	5
Cultural competence	5
Safeguarding looked after children	6
Unfounded allegations	7
Harm or significant harm?	7
Significant harm	8
Historic allegations	9
Safeguarding	9

2 The legal framework in England	11
Allegations and child protection concerns	11
Complaints	16

3 The legal framework in Northern Ireland	20
Allegations and child protection concerns	20
Complaints	25

4 The legal framework in Scotland	28
Allegations and child protection concerns	28
Complaints	36

5 The legal framework in Wales	39
Allegations and child protection concerns	39
Complaints	45

6 Setting the scene: the role of the “corporate parent”	49
Principles of good management	49
Summary	53

7	The role of fostering services	55
	The registered manager	55
	The supervising social worker – good practice points	59
	The fostering panel adviser	66
	Summary	66
<hr/>		
8	Themes from research	68
	What does research tell us?	68
	Why foster?	69
	Why do allegations happen?	69
	The incidence and prevalence of abuse in foster care	70
	The impact of unfounded allegations on foster carers	73
	Maltreatment in kinship foster care	76
	Compassion fatigue: the effects of caring for traumatised children	78
	Summary	81
<hr/>		
9	Learning from case reviews	82
	Leadership and management	83
	Assessment and approval of foster carers	84
	Independent oversight and quality assurance	85
	Foster carer reviews	85
	Safeguarding looked after children	86
	Assessing and managing risks	88
	Working with other agencies	89
	Compliance with regulations and standards	90
	Communicating with children and young people	92
	Supervision of social workers	95
	Supervision of foster carers	95
	Summary	96
<hr/>		
10	Concerns about foster carers	97
	Following up a concern: the process	98
	Good practice in dealing with concerns	99
	Summary	104
<hr/>		
11	Investigation and assessment	106
	Referral	106
	Initial risk assessment	106
	Referral to the local authority	107
	Concerns and complaints	107

Safeguarding the young person during the investigation	108
Informing the foster carer that an allegation has been made	109
Multi-agency (strategy) meeting	110
The police	110
Safeguarding children and young people following an allegation	111
Outcomes	112
Ending the process	112
Reviews of foster carers' approval	114
Timescales	117
Foster carer resignations during an investigation	118
Notifications	118
Roles and responsibilities	119
Summary	124
<hr/>	
12 Decision-making under pressure	126
The decision-making environment	126
The impact of human biases	127
Leadership	129
Staff support and supervision	130
Hypothesising	130
Reflection	131
Summary	132
<hr/>	
13 Moving forward	134
De-briefing	134
Evaluation meeting	135
Summary	137
<hr/>	
Conclusion	138
<hr/>	
Bibliography	140
<hr/>	
Appendices	
1: Good practice in managing complaints against foster carers	147
2: Allegations and complaints: good practice for foster carers	153
3: Allegations and complaints: good practice for children's social workers	156
4: Chronology of events	161
5: Allegations flowchart	162
6: Glossary of abbreviations	163

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.

Chapter 7

The role of fostering services

Foster care is at the heart of services for looked after children and young people. At its best, fostering provides children and young people with love, stability, acceptance and security while also being rewarding and enjoyable for foster carers themselves. Even so, many looked after children have needs requiring more than “ordinary” parenting, and it is important for foster carers to feel part of a team, rather than feeling left to manage alone.

This chapter explores the role of fostering services in strengthening good fostering practice and ensuring the safety and well-being of children and young people in foster care, thereby reducing the potential for allegations and complaints.

THE REGISTERED MANAGER

Regulations for all four UK nations require fostering services to have in place policies for safeguarding children and young people placed with their foster carers, and procedures for dealing with allegations and complaints. The role of the fostering registered manager in relation to allegations is articulated in the National Minimum Standards for England, which state:

NMS 22.5: Each fostering service has a designated person, who is a senior manager, responsible for managing allegations. The designated person has responsibility for liaising with the LADO and for keeping the subject of the allegation informed of progress during and after the investigation.

This duty is reflected in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (s.5).

The fostering service has two main responsibilities in relation to allegations:

- First, it must ensure that the service complies with the relevant legislation and statutory child protection guidance for their nation.
- Second, it must ensure adherence to fostering regulations and standards relating to the treatment of foster carers and actions required when an allegation or complaint is made.

The registered manager is responsible for fulfilling these duties on behalf of the fostering service. See Chapter 6, 'Setting the scene: the role of the "corporate parent"'.

Foster carers' training and learning – allegations, safe care and recording

An important cornerstone of a fostering service's practice is the provision of training. Like other professionals, foster carers need to develop themselves and to be prepared for the demands and challenges of caring for traumatised children.

The research studies in Chapter 8 indicate that as many as 54 per cent of foster carers have not received training about allegations, complaints and standards of care concerns.

When an allegation is made, foster carers will have questions such as:

- What will happen next?
- How long will it take?
- What support will I get?
- Will I still be able to foster?

By commissioning training on allegations, recording and safe care, the registered manager can ensure that carers have a better understanding of what to expect, and sources of support and advice, if they do have an allegation made against them. It will also clarify the service's expectations of them in relation to safe practice and, in some cases, help to reduce the risk of unfounded allegations.

Therapeutic parenting

Foster carers are aware that "ordinary" parenting techniques may not be enough to support children who have suffered adverse early experiences. There are a number of therapeutic caregiving models that can help carers reflect on the meaning of a child's behaviour, what they may be trying to communicate, and how the carer can respond in a way which helps the child deal with difficult feelings and behaviours. Some popular approaches include:

- Secure Base (Schofield and Beek, 2014)
- PACE – Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy (Golding and Hughes, 2012)
- Empathic Behaviour Management (Elliott, 2012)
- Fostering Changes (Bachman *et al*, 2016)

These models aim to reduce a child's anxiety and build security and trust – essential for children and young people to feel loved, known and fully understood, and for foster carers to feel confident in managing problematic behaviours with warmth, sensitivity and authority.

Training in therapeutic re-parenting helps foster carers to make sense of children's behaviour that may be confusing, upsetting or frightening. By reflecting on its meaning, carers are more likely to stay calm and are less likely to react angrily or to get into difficult power struggles, thus reducing the risk of some allegations and complaints.

Staff recruitment, induction and training

The recruitment process for staff, including freelance assessing social workers and panel members, should always test applicants' awareness of safeguarding and ensure that they have the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are compatible with safe practice. Induction provides an opportunity for new staff, foster carers and panel members to become familiar with the service's ethos and values, to understand the expectations of their role and to learn about legal requirements, policies, procedures and standards. Managers also need to make clear what supervision arrangements are in place and who staff can turn to for advice and support. This helps to ensure that staff do not work in isolation, and seek help appropriately.

Supervision training for fostering social workers

As with foster carers, relevant, ongoing training is critical to effective practice for fostering social workers. The fostering social worker's role is unique in that it involves the supervision of others' work, absent in most other social work roles. Supervision is a skilled task, and given the complexities of foster care, it is vital that social workers develop the confidence to deal assertively with foster carers, and are able to strike the right balance between support and challenge. (See also Chapter 12, 'Decision-making under pressure').

Commissioning supervision skills training will provide fostering social workers with the tools they need to help foster carers' development and deal effectively with any concerns or compliance issues. It can also help ensure that any action the service takes in relation to concerning behaviour is defensible.

Regular safeguarding training for all staff, assessors, panel members and foster carers

By requiring all staff to attend safeguarding and child protection training, plus regular updates, a service will be establishing a safeguarding culture within the service. This allows staff to "think the unthinkable"

and carefully evaluate all allegations, complaints and concerns, while also helping them to feel more confident in managing risk where concerns may be less serious.

Safe recruitment of foster carers

In cases where children or young people have been seriously abused by foster carers, subsequent case reviews have invariably found deficiencies in the assessment of those carers, highlighting the importance of compliance with minimum standards. For example, the National Minimum Standards (England) require that:

13.5) Checks are carried out in line with regulation 26 and prospective foster carers understand why identity checks, relationship status and health checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken about them and why enhanced CRB [now DBS] checks are made on them and adult members of their household.

13.6) Prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets the child's development needs.

13.7) The written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information. The reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider's fostering teams.

13.8) Reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster.

13.9) Areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed. Such matters identified between reviews are addressed at the time they are identified.

Robust quality assurance processes for assessing and approving foster carers

The registered manager needs to ensure that those responsible for quality assurance are suitably independent, knowledgeable and experienced for this role. It is also important that any concerns they raise are listened to and acted upon. The registered manager also needs to be satisfied that the service's fostering panel is fit for purpose,

is chaired effectively and is able to provide robust challenge and independent oversight (see Borthwick and Lord, 2019).

It may be helpful to have policies in place to maintain impartiality in the service. For example, some services stipulate that a carer's supervising social worker should not be the person that assessed them, and some have a policy of changing supervising social workers at regular intervals. This helps to avoid the natural human tendency to inadvertently overlook shortcomings in people we know and like.

Putting in place a system of regular managers' audits is another way of ensuring that fostering files are looked at with fresh eyes. A simple audit tool can be used a) to help managers check that key performance indicators are being met, and b) to carry out "themed" audits, such as checking that every child has a safe care plan and risk assessment.

THE SUPERVISING SOCIAL WORKER – GOOD PRACTICE POINTS

If you are a supervising social worker, you will play a key role in ensuring that children and young people are safe in foster care – primarily through the relationship you have with the foster carers whom you supervise. This is a professional relationship, ideally one based on trust, mutual respect and honesty, but with clear expectations and obligations on both sides.

The good practice points below are intended to support supervising social workers with the difficult balancing act of building relationships of trust with foster carers, while maintaining a level of "respectful uncertainty" (Laming, 2003).

Ensure that the foster carer has adequate information about the child or young person

Without information about a child's background and any trauma that they may have suffered, foster carers will struggle to make sense of behaviours which may seem disturbing, upsetting or frightening. Providing such a narrative can act as a starting point for thinking together with the carer about how best to welcome the child into their home, how to meet their emotional and developmental needs, and how to identify situations where the child might, because of past experiences, misunderstand innocent actions.

Get to know the children placed with your foster carers

Young people do not always feel safe or able to make allegations against their foster carers. This may be particularly difficult if a child

is placed with family members. The case review of Child A and Child B (NSPCC, 2020) highlights that, while many don't like lots of professionals asking them their "business", some children need to be given regular opportunities to talk about what is happening to them.

Young people need to know that supervising social workers are responsible for, and committed to, ensuring their safety and well-being. Using basic direct work tools may help you to find out the child's views about their placement without being too intrusive – see *Research in Practice*, 2013. Young people should also be given information about how to make a complaint and details of other organisations that can provide them with advice, support and advocacy. These may be national organisations or helplines, such as Coram Voice, the Children's Commissioner or Care Inspectorate, Barnardo's, or local groups such as Children in Care Councils. The important message that this conveys to young people and their carers is that their safety and well-being matter.

Work with the child's or young person's social worker

As well as attending the initial placement agreement meeting together, it is important that the young person and carer see you communicating with each other. Joint visits also convey the message of "teamwork" and give the message that professionals are working together in the young person's interests. Visiting together may also be helpful when a placement is under strain, or where there are anxieties about a foster carer's practice.

Continue to try and find out more about the young person's early life from the social worker and share this with the foster carer. Encourage the young person's social worker to get to know the foster family, including any carers who may work away from the home, and to observe the child or young person in the company of the whole foster family. Understanding the child's experience of the family may become clearer with a combined perspective.

See all members of the fostering household regularly

There is a tendency for professionals to relate mostly to the "main carer", especially if one member of a couple works away from the home. The carer/s may also have their own children at home, including adults, so observing the child or young person in the company of the whole family will help you to gain a rounded view of the strengths of the fostering family, the parenting style of both carers (if applicable) and the roles each family member plays in the life of the fostered child. As well as helping to identify the strengths and strains in the family, observations provide a richer context in which to evaluate any allegations or concerns.

Support foster carers in understanding and dealing with difficult behaviours

It is essential on supervisory visits to make time and space for reflection, especially if the foster carer is feeling stressed or upset. Allowing a carer to express how the young person's behaviour is making them feel, without judgement, can help them reflect on what might be going on – in their own, and in the young person's mind.

Keep accurate records

By keeping detailed and accurate records of your visits and observations, you will be able to build up a comprehensive picture of the foster carer's strengths and areas of challenge. All investigations into allegations, concerns and complaints should be noted and, in addition, added to a separate chronology (see Appendix 4). It is important to check the foster carer's records regularly and ensure they are passed on to the child's social worker as appropriate.

Be aware that children in long-term placements continue to be vulnerable

The NSPCC research discussed in Chapter 8 (Biehal *et al*, 2014) highlights the fact that a significant number of allegations against carers are made by young people in settled, long-term placements where the level of oversight may be less. It is important to work with the child's social worker and guard against complacency by ensuring that children maintain connections, e.g. with other looked after young people, and that their views continue to be sought regularly.

Look out for signs of carer strain

There are certain behaviours that may test even the most skilful and experienced foster carers, and reduce their effectiveness as carers. You may start to notice changes in the functioning of a fostering household that may be possible indicators of strain or compassion fatigue – see Chapter 8, 'Themes from research'. In such situations, it is essential that professionals a) avoid placing all the responsibility on the foster carer; b) carry out a thorough assessment of the child or young person's needs; and c) think about additional specialist help to assist the carer and/or the child.

Some possible warning signs of carer strain include health, money or relationship problems, cancelled appointments or a drop in standards of care. In this case, it is important to address these with the carer by:

- checking how they are feeling;
- noticing and stating what is going well;

- exploring with the carer what they need;
- holding a placement stability meeting to explore ways of supporting the young person and the carer.

Placement stability meetings can be especially helpful when there is a risk of a placement breaking down. They provide opportunities to explore and address what is happening and advocate for additional resources and support.

Continue to monitor the situation in order to assess whether the support provided is making a difference to the child's progress and well-being.

Use supervision to reflect on your own practice

Social workers are only human, and it is important that you have some dedicated time to reflect on how the work is impacting on you and to examine your own practice. Supervision enables workers to step back from situations and consider what might be going on under the surface, and can help you in a number of ways to:

- examine your own feelings and what may underlie them;
- think about what else is going on;
- understand the carer's context – has this happened before? Have there been any previous concerns? Is this placement testing the carer's resilience?;
- think about how you might have handled the situation differently;
- plan what you will do next.

CASE EXAMPLE

You visited unannounced and found that the foster carer was quite rude, and reluctant to allow you in. You had to leave home very early for this visit and were anxious about completing it before the carer's upcoming review. You found yourself feeling quite angry with the foster carer. The carer allowed you in, but the visit was not productive.

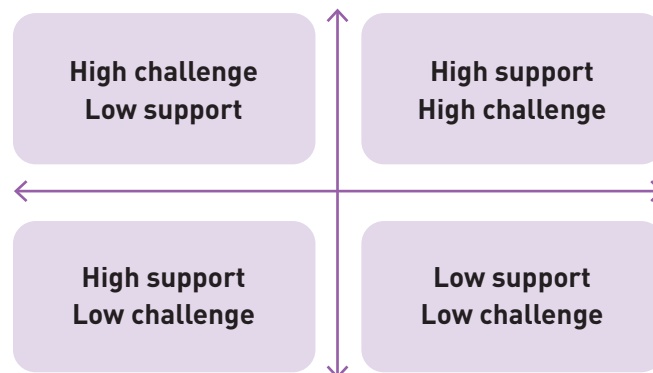
When we have a safe space, we can reflect more fully and learn from experience. Supervision can help to clarify different perspectives and consider the most helpful response to a problematic situation.

Get the right balance between support and challenge

Restorative practice, as developed by Finnis and Moran (2016), argues that offering too much support without sufficient challenge leads to cosy relationships without significant growth, but high challenge without affirmation and support can be de-motivating and cause a loss of confidence.

To illustrate – you may start to notice that a foster carer is demanding more and more help, but when it is given things don't seem to be improving for the young person. Somehow your focus of attention has shifted to the foster carer and away from the young person. The "Social Discipline Window" below illustrates the need for a balance. Restorative practice requires high levels of challenge – things like setting limits, boundaries, expectations, a clear "bottom line" and consequences, hand in hand with high levels of support – things like encouragement, nurture, compassion, empathy and listening.

Figure 1: Social Discipline Window



(Taken from Finnis and Moran, 2016)

In this case, you may need to provide more challenge in the form of recognising what the carer does well, but:

- limit the support given;
- request evidence of how the support has been used;
- give timescales for things to be done;
- be clear about what might happen if expectations are not met.

Challenging includes asking tough questions, sharing responsibility, giving honest feedback, and agreeing shared goals. This serves to provide motivation, accountability and the energy to act. **Support** aims to encourage, and to build self-belief and confidence. This includes showing an interest, making time to listen, suspending judgements, creating trust, and recognising and expressing feelings.

Ensure that you are familiar with fostering standards and regulations

Ensure that you are familiar with the contents of these documents and have a copy to hand to refer to when needed. For example, they can be used to remind foster carers of the service's expectations where there are disagreements or concerns.

Assess the risk of an unfounded allegation being made

Where a child or young person has previously made allegations, foster carers may feel especially vulnerable, and may be reluctant to accept those placements. It may be helpful for professionals and the carers to meet and consider what actions will be taken in the event that a further allegation is made, for example:

- it should be made clear that any allegation will be investigated with an open mind but past allegations will be taken into account;
- the support to be offered to the carers and young person should be clarified;
- there should be a review of the family's safe care policy;
- the service should ensure that the carer keeps detailed records.

Be prepared to “think the unthinkable”

It is important to maintain a safeguarding focus when children become looked after. Although small in number, people who deliberately abuse children and young people are skilled at hiding their abusive behaviour and silencing children. They may have made a good first impression, which lowers people's guard and helps them to avoid suspicion. It is important to notice and be curious about any discrepancies or “gut reactions”. Take time to reflect and talk to others if you have a sense that something is not right. Is there any evidence to back up your feelings? Do you know how the child feels about the placement? Has any direct work been done to ascertain the child's views? Tools such as chronologies and genograms also help to identify patterns of worrying behaviour and previous concerns. A series of minor incidents may look very different when viewed together.

Ensure that the children placed with carers you supervise are made aware that they can talk to you, and others, and that what they say will be taken seriously. Even if this is via a helpline, it is important that children and young people are empowered to express their views about the care they are receiving.

Keep an open mind

In some cases, an allegation may be untrue. Particularly where allegations of a sexual nature have been made, professionals are understandably reluctant to disbelieve a child or young person, and tend to be cautious when deciding on how to proceed. Unless the suspected abuser can leave the household, it is common practice to move the fostered child. Often this is the only defensible course of action.

A further complication is that it can be almost impossible to prove that something did not happen. Nevertheless, where there are possible reasons for an untrue allegation, and there are no indicators that the foster carer has behaved inappropriately in the past, it is important for there to be a thorough weighing up of all the available evidence. It may also be advisable to seek specialist advice – from the designated officer or a senior manager, and to hold a review where the circumstances of the allegation and the available evidence can be evaluated within the context of the carer’s fostering record.

If it is concluded by the fostering panel and the decision-maker that the foster carer remains suitable to foster, a risk assessment should be carried out and consideration given as to whether any of the children who were in the placement may be returned. The wishes of the children and young people, along with any identified protective factors, can help to inform this decision.

Ensure the foster carer has a safe care plan for each child

This should be regularly updated, along with a risk management plan or individual safeguarding plan. It should start by identifying any vulnerabilities and risks arising from the young person’s background or behaviour. You, as the supervising social worker, and the foster carer/s should spell out the actions and behaviours that will be adopted by the family – to safeguard the young person from harm, and to minimise the risks of mistaken or unfounded allegations. The safe care plan should also clarify the limits of the foster carer’s delegated authority and the services that will be provided to support the placement.

Where the young person has made unfounded allegations in the past, any discussions or risk assessments should be added to the safe care plan – see above. (See also Adams, 2021, and the risk assessment Form R available through CoramBAAF.)

At the same time, Slade (2012) recommends a “risk sensible” approach, which allows young people to nevertheless be given opportunities to learn and grow, through a proportionate and realistic approach to risk taking.

THE FOSTERING PANEL ADVISER

When a review has been held following an allegation or concern about a foster carer, the issues that the fostering panel will have to consider may be extremely complex and challenging. The panel adviser facilitates this in a number of ways:

- checking whether all reports have been submitted;
- quality checking the standard of reports – content, date, signature, etc;
- identifying any gaps, discrepancies or concerns in the reports and following these up with the workers concerned and their managers;
- deciding whether the case can proceed to the fostering panel;
- ascertaining whether the foster carers have been sent the reports within the regulatory timescales and checking whether they can attend;
- inviting the foster carer to submit a written report if they wish;
- discussing with the panel Chair whether the foster carer/s may bring a support person;
- working with the panel administrator to make sure there is sufficient time allocated to the case;
- checking whether the carers have any access or communication needs, or are likely to have child care issues that could potentially delay proceedings.

Depending on the panel adviser's role in the service, they may also be in a good position to report back, on behalf of the panel Chair, any concerns about practice; see also Borthwick and Lord, 2019.

SUMMARY

The majority of carers foster because they want to make a positive difference to the lives of children and young people (Sebba, 2012). Most are motivated to learn and improve their knowledge and skills in order to help children and young people reach their potential. Fostering services may nevertheless be challenged by the behaviour of some foster carers, as some might:

- resist attending training;
- have unreasonable expectations of children or professionals;
- dominate discussions and/or not act on advice;
- deliberately abuse or exploit the children and young people in their care.

The fostering service may also contribute to things going wrong, for example, by:

- offering insufficient support to foster carers struggling to deal with children's difficult behaviour;
- over-using certain foster carers because they are flexible and accommodating (see Chapter 8);
- lacking sufficient challenge when carers do not comply with expectations;
- not recognising potential safeguarding scenarios and acting appropriately.

Fostering services, whether independent or local authority, need to therefore evaluate the overall effectiveness of their services and take action to address those areas of vulnerability where harm could potentially be caused – to children, foster carers or to the service's reputation.