

**Written evidence submitted by the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP)
(CWSB158)**

Submission to the Bill Committee for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

1. The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP), first set up in 2008, campaigns for independent fostering agencies (IFAs), and the children for whom they care. We do not represent providers of other independent children's social care services.
2. We are a not-for-profit organisation with over 100 members, representing 97% of children living with IFA foster carers. We campaign to ensure that vulnerable children in care benefit from stable, loving foster parents.
3. We are delighted that the Labour government is introducing bold reforms through the Children's Wellbeing Bill in an effort to improve outcomes for children. We are particularly pleased that the government recognises the importance of encouraging family-based care over residential care for most children.
4. We have long called for the government to seriously consider the issues facing foster care services and look forward to working closely with MPs and civil servants to ensure the Bill is a success.
5. However, we are concerned that the Bill is not tackling the root causes of the financial challenges in children's social care services, and therefore local authorities will continue to be crippled by the cost of children's social care.
6. Based on our experience of being responsible for 44% of fostering placements, working alongside local authorities who make up the remainder of foster care services, to fix the chronic problems facing children's services, **the government must focus on encouraging more people with the right skills and compassion to become foster carers** and **improve commissioning services/remove bureaucracy to introduce more variety, greater efficiencies and more competition.** Without these measures, any other interventions will be fruitless.
7. **We believe that the government should consider how to tackle the root causes of issues arising in foster care by properly examining these causes in a dedicated foster care strategy. This would give the opportunity for all fostering service providers to work with the government to identify solutions, jointly, ensuring that any whole system reform is a success.**

8. **We also believe that a dedicated foster care strategy would:**
- a. **Help identify how precious government resources can be most effectively allocated to achieve the most positive outcomes for all, and most importantly, for vulnerable children who are relying on us to get this right.**
 - b. **Ensure that the reforms set out in the Children’s Wellbeing Bill are a success and any potential risks can be identified and solved before they materialise.**
9. As an organisation, our ultimate goal is to create better outcomes for children who are in foster care. We work with the overwhelming majority of independent fostering agencies across the sector (voluntary, small businesses and larger enterprises) to share best practices, work closely with local authorities and tackle challenges within the sector so that vulnerable children can receive the best outcomes and are placed in loving homes.
10. Many foster children feel their new home has given them a new chance and they feel like a genuine part of the family. Foster carers we work with overwhelmingly say that being a foster parent has had a positive impact on their lives as they provide love and support to vulnerable children.
11. IFAs play a huge role in providing high quality care for children. We account for 44% of mainstream fostering households.¹ 96% of IFAs are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. We hold a significant weight of responsibility for caring for vulnerable children, and we are proud of the positive outcomes we produce for children that might otherwise not receive the care they need. Our BERRI report demonstrates the excellent progress made by children living with IFA foster carers.²
12. We are keen that the government will soon:
- a. Provide clarity on the nature of the financial oversight scheme, including timelines for implementation and what reporting requirements will be placed on which fostering services;
 - b. Create and implement a dedicated foster care strategy, focusing on improving the recruitment of foster carers including those that wish to work for IFAs;
 - c. Use the Bill to bring meaningful change for commissioning fostering services – implementing cost-saving for local authorities and ensuring children get a better service faster.
13. It is widely understood that one of the most significant drivers of cost per placement and delay in placing children in the right home is the lack of foster carers able to take children into their care.

¹ Fostering in England 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 data set, Ofsted [accessed online: gov.uk]

² Outcomes from fostering: insights from BERRI data, 2024 [accessed online: nafp.org.uk]

14. The number of households willing or able to foster a child is decreasing. At the end of March 2024, there were 42,615 fostering households in England.³ At the end of March 2020, there were 44,540 fostering households.⁴
15. At the same time, the number of children in care remains at record highs. As of March 2024, there were 83,360 children in care.⁵ With 68% of all looked after children in foster care, demand is outstripping homes available. A reduction in fostering households means fewer options for the placement of children.
16. 2024 Ofsted research found that 91% of local authorities that responded to their survey frequently have difficulty in finding suitable homes for children with complex needs.⁶
17. IFAs are responsible for 44% of mainstream fostering households, accounting for 37,965 of all children in foster care in England.⁷ 68% of all children in care live with foster carers.⁸
18. When children enter the care system, they are triaged by local authorities first. If local authorities are not able to place a child in their own fostering service, the child is then passed to IFA services (sometimes called “sequential sourcing”).
19. This system explains, in part, why IFAs overwhelmingly care for children with “complex” needs when compared with local authority fostering services.⁹ IFAs also tend to be more successful placing older children.¹⁰
20. IFAs have been consistently shown to offer overwhelmingly high-quality care to children, excellent support for foster carers and value for money to local authorities.

³ Fostering in England 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 data set, Ofsted [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁴ Fostering in England 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 data set, Ofsted [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁵ Children looked after in England including adoptions, 2024, Official education statistics [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁶ Children’s social care questionnaires 2024 results, Ofsted [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁷ Fostering in England 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 data set, Ofsted [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁸ Children’s social care questionnaires 2024 results, Ofsted [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

⁹ Outcomes from fostering: insights from BERRI data, 2024 [accessed online: [nafp.org.uk](#)]

¹⁰ Foster Care in England report, Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers’s independent review of the fostering system in England, 2018 [accessed online: [gov.uk](#)]

21. 96% of IFAs are rated good or outstanding with Ofsted.¹¹ 60% of local authorities were judged to be good or outstanding.¹² IFAs have been consistently shown to offer overwhelmingly high-quality care to children, excellent support for foster carers and value for money to local authorities. This is evidenced by the government-commissioned Foster Care in England report, led by Sir Martin Neary in 2018.¹³
22. Since 2007, when Ofsted began the inspection of children’s social care provision, every annual Ofsted report has noted that IFA fostering services outperform local authorities in terms of positive outcomes for children.
23. IFAs produce better outcomes at least partly because they cost their fostering services to meet the level of resource required to provide the service. Caring for children with additional needs costs more.
24. The influx of “complex” children into care is widely noted. In a LGA 2023 survey of local authorities, over 90% of respondents noted that “children in care exhibiting challenging behaviours” or “children in care requiring support with complex mental health needs” were “instrumental” factors behind the high weekly cost of placements.¹⁴
25. High-cost placements tended to be emergency placements more frequently than planned placements. Emergency placements are often the cause of children being exposed to an unsafe environment, a sudden illness in the family or a number of other reasons. The vast majority of IFAs only make 6-8% profit.
26. The benefit of IFAs being agile is that they can provide consistent services and respond more effectively than local authorities facing financial challenges. 11 local authorities have gone bankrupt since 2018, and more are at risk.¹⁵
27. Local authorities have struggled to meet the demand of caring for children long before IFAs provided a significant proportion of care placements.
28. As well as being able to be more responsive, the resources and stability of social work staff that IFAs have means that the care they can provide children is more

¹¹ Largest national providers of private and voluntary social care, 2024, Ofsted transparency data [accessed online: gov.uk]

¹² Main findings: Local authority inspection outcomes as at 31 March 2024, Ofsted [accessed online: gov.uk]

¹³ Foster Care in England report, Sir Martin Neary and Mark Owers’s independent review of the fostering system in England, 2018 [accessed online: gov.uk]

¹⁴ High-cost children’s social care placements survey, Local Government Association, 2023 [accessed online: gov.uk]

¹⁵ Research paper: “Why are local authorities going ‘bankrupt’?”, House of Commons Library, 2024 [accessed online: commonslibrary.parliament.uk]

consistent. IFAs are better placed to provide a named, consistent and dedicated professional for children, and IFA services are not at risk of collapse if the managing local authority becomes bankrupt.¹⁶

29. Local authorities have been operating in an environment which has seen real-terms reduction in funding, coupled with a rising child population and an increase in the numbers of young people coming into care later in their lives with complex and multiple needs.¹⁷ The challenges of the pandemic only added additional pressure to local authorities, allowing IFAs to quickly step in and provide appropriate services as required.
30. Strategic oversight of local authorities is, by its nature, too short-term. Four-year electoral cycles, annual local authority finance settlements and year-on-year budget reductions mean that it is increasingly difficult for local authorities to plan how their services will be delivered, preventing any meaningful long-term planning.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch via ella.harvey@whitehousecomms.com if the Committee wishes to speak to a representative of NAFP or has any further questions.

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¹⁶ <https://www.nafp.org.uk/pages/outcomes-from-fostering-insights-from-BERRI-data>

¹⁷ Action research into improvement in local children's services, Final research report, 2016, Local Government Association and ISOS [accessed online: lga.gov.uk]