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By email: allowances.consultation@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

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Dear Sir/Madam

National Minimum Fostering Allowances Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a response to the consultation on National Minimum Fostering Allowances. Foster carers frequently provide young people in and leaving care with the continuity of care and support that has all too often been lacking in their lives. Providing young people with a stable foster placement during their time in care has been shown to lead to much better outcomes upon leaving care than young people who have a more unstable and disruptive care experience¹. We welcome the Government's decision to consult in this area to ensure more uniformity of support for the vital work provided by foster carers.

The vision of the National Leaving Care Advisory Service is that all young people leaving care will have an equal opportunity to achieve their potential and to participate fully in society. We are the only service with a national remit to promote and influence policy and practice in relation to young people leaving the care of local authorities.

Although the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 has resulted in significant improvements in the treatment of young people leaving care, outcomes for care leavers (in terms of each of the five Every Child Matters outcomes) continue to remain stubbornly behind those of other young people.

The issues we would like to raise regarding the minimum fostering allowances consultation centre on three main areas:

- 1. Supporting placements for young people post 18; including flexible placements and a right to return**
- 2. Additional support for carers of older/difficult to place young people**
- 3. Giving young people more say as they get older**

¹ Stein (2004), What Works for Young People Leaving Care? Barnardos

1. Supporting placements for young people post 18; including flexible placements and a right to return

Care leavers currently make the transition to independent living at a much younger age than other young people. The vast majority leave care abruptly and before they are 18. This is in stark contrast to the gradual transitions of other young people who don't leave the family home until an average age of 24. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service wants to see care leavers supported to make the transition from foster care more gradually.

Support for placements with foster carers post-18 aren't mentioned in the consultation document on minimum allowances. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service would like to see allowances for post-18 support from foster carers developed in the later stages of the consultation process.

Recent research from the University of York² challenges the key assumption that foster children have to move out at 18. The Government should look at how it can remove the current expectation that all placements will end when a young person is 18 and make it easier for young people to stay in their foster placements beyond the age of 18. This should particularly be the case for young people who plan to continue their education where placement moves at this time could destabilise their progress at school or college.

Specifically we would like foster carers given more consistent financial support that enables young people to remain with them after the age of 18. Whilst this is possible at the moment by transforming the status of the foster carer to a supported lodgings provider, payments are not calculated in the same way as fostering allowances and do not acknowledge the relationship between a young person and their foster carer.

Abrupt transitions could be further reduced by introducing more flexible placements as young people get older, with a right to return to a placement if independent living doesn't work out in the first year. In such cases foster carers could be paid some kind of retainer allowance to stay in touch with young people and support them in independent living.

Example: Leeds City Council currently pay foster carers a sessional rate for support once young people have left foster care.

2. Additional support for carers of older/difficult to place young people

Too little is known about why placements break down, especially for older young people. We know that lots of placement breakdown happens when young people are 15 or 16. This may be the result of young people behaving as many 15 or 16 year olds do or may be the result of a lack of emotional support at a younger age. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service want to see incentives that would

ensure young people can remain in their foster placements for as long as possible.

² Baker, C., Sinclair, I. & Wilson, K. (2005)_York Research on Foster Care and Adoption, Social Work Research and Development Unit, University of York.

Fostering Network provide evidence that a 16-18 year old costs more to maintain in a foster placement. We would support this evidence and believe there should be an acknowledgment that for young people over the age of 15, who can be particularly difficult to place in foster care, there is a need for even higher allowances.

Secondly, and for similar reasons, there is a strong case for additional funding for foster cares of young people who may be difficult to place (perhaps because of placement breakdowns in the past or special needs). We would support the idea of allowances that are sufficiently flexible that they can be increased to allow for the needs of a particular child or young person.

3. Giving young people more say as they get older

We know that care and transition from care that is planned alongside young people themselves is more likely to be successful³. The more prepared young people and foster carers are before placements begin and as young people leave placements, the more successful they are likely to be. The National Leaving Care Advisory Service supports the need for detailed forward planning with both foster carers and young people.

Just as young people do within their birth families, young people in foster care should be encouraged to take progressively more control over certain areas of their lives as they get older. We would like to see proposals to enable older young people to take a more active role in decisions about how part of the allowance for their carer is spent.

In addition, we would support the need for a national minimum allowance to include an element to compensate for the fact that children in care are less likely to have money spent on them by grandparents or other family members. The IPPR have done some work on the benefits of assets on outcomes later in life⁴. All young people in foster care should receive their own pocket money. In addition, we would support foster carers being encouraged to use part of their allowance to invest (perhaps in a saving account) for children and young people in their care throughout their time in foster care.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit a response to this consultation. Should you wish to follow up with us on any of the information in this letter, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely

Martin Hazlehurst
Manager
National Leaving Care Advisory Service

³ Jackson, Ajayi, Quigley (2003), *By Degrees: the first year, from care to university*. The Frank Buttle Trust

⁴ Maxwell (2005), *Child Trust Funds and Local Authorities: Challenges and Opportunities*. IPPR