

Staying Put: solutions to the fall

Experts explain how to reverse the decline in the number of fostered children in Staying Put places

SOCIAL CARE

By Derren Hayes

At the time of its introduction in 2014, Staying Put was hailed as a groundbreaking policy that would improve stability for young people and help their transition from care to independent living. Introduced through the Children and Families Act 2014, it places a duty on councils to support looked-after children who want to remain with their foster carer until they are 21.

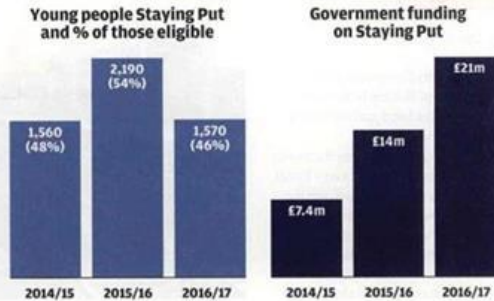
The Department for Education allocated £42.4m for councils to cover the cost of Staying Put for the

first three years of operation - £7.4m in 2014/15, then £14m in 2015/16, and £21m in 2016/17.

In 2014/15, the first year of operation, 48.3 per cent (1,560) of young people eligible stayed with their foster carer after their 18th birthday. This rose to 54 per cent (2,190) in 2015/16.

However, data published by Ofsted in April showed that the number of young people staying with their foster carers fell in 2016/17 - to 1,570 of those eligible, or 46 per cent.

The fall in young people staying put has raised questions about the future of policy.



Source: *Fostering in England 2016/17, Ofsted, April 2018*

Bring in minimum stay allowance



Kevin Williams, chief executive, The Fostering Network

"We are proud of the part we played in the campaign. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly evident that the result of the policy being introduced without sufficient funding and a commensurate cultural shift within fostering services is that woefully few young people are staying living with their former foster carers.

The implementation of Staying Put has not been consistent enough, and the root cause of this is the lack of financial support from central government. We are concerned that there is no minimum Staying Put allowance, meaning that the majority of foster carers - 80 per cent according to our most recent survey - find themselves out of pocket when a young person stays living with them after turning 18. No foster carer should be financially worse off because they agree to a person remaining living with them.

We need fostering services to accept that Staying Put is the new norm and do all that they can to make it a reality for as many young people as possible. Local authority and independent fostering services must work together to help young people stay with former foster carers. Currently, planning for Staying Put is starting too late and young people are not sufficiently involved in the process. This is not good enough.

The change to the law was a major step towards improving outcomes for care leavers, but now we need to see commitment from the government to ensure Staying Put is funded properly."

Ensure consistency by councils



Dominic Stevenson, public affairs manager, Become

"Care-experienced young people are simply not at the heart of Staying Put. It was introduced because at long last MPs recognised that what was being offered to children in foster care as they transition into independence wasn't good enough - that it wouldn't have been good enough for their own birth or adopted children. Yet despite this, still one of the most common calls we get to the advice line is from young people approaching 18 who don't feel like they have anywhere to live after their birthday.

The inconsistent implementation of Staying Put across the country has meant that care-experienced young people are facing a postcode lottery. Some councils are forcing young people to claim benefits and hand them over to their foster carer in lieu of an allowance - but if a young person is in education, employment or training, this just doesn't work as they're not eligible for the benefits.

Our sector preaches stability and positive relationship building for young people. Yet when many of them reach their 18th birthday, draconian cuts to council budgets means carers are forced to make the decision as to whether they can afford to continue to provide a home.

Over 32,000 children came into care last year, and around 8,700 left care on or around their 18th birthday. There is a need for beds, and so there is no incentive to make Staying Put a financially viable prospect for foster carers."

Set Staying Put place targets



Andy Elvin, chief executive, The Adolescent and Children's Trust

"Staying Put is a brilliant initiative, but there are three key problems with how the policy has been enacted that, if fixed, would lead to much greater take-up.

It would be very easy for the Department for Work and Pensions to pass on to the Department for Education a benefits contribution to Staying Put if central government deem it necessary. The DfE could distribute this money to local authorities so Staying Put foster carers are paid their full allowance and fee rather than the young person having to claim housing benefit.

The task of parenting a child of 18 is not very different to looking after an 18-year-old. Yet foster carers lose their status - and often cannot access the same support from their agency - when a child turns 18. Staying Put foster carers should retain their status and still be eligible for support from their local authority or independent fostering agency (IFA).

Increasing Staying Put placements can mean that councils have less space for younger children coming into care and so have to use more expensive IFA placements.

This can create perverse incentive to not promote Staying Put. Local authorities should be set and expected to reach clear targets for the number of placements.

There are very few children in foster care who would not benefit from a Staying Put arrangement."