



Department
for Education

Fostering reform

Government consultation response

June 2026

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Introduction

In February 2026, the government launched [Renewing Fostering: homes for 10,000 more children](#), an ambitious action plan to address the sharp decline in foster carers and reform the foster care system.

The action plan sets out a clear approach to reverse the decline in the number of foster carers, strengthen support for foster families and modernise fostering so that it works alongside everyday life. It proposes national action, regional collaboration, stronger support for foster families and a simpler rulebook that puts trusted relationships first.

Alongside this action plan, we launched:

- a consultation on the use of panels in foster carer recruitment and assessment and on the handling of allegations against carers. The findings from this consultation and government's response are set out in this document
- a call for evidence, asking for innovative ideas and views on further possible reforms and how we can improve the foster care system. The response to this has been published separately

Proposals

The consultation sought views on two key proposals:

Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

The current foster carer assessment and approval process can be lengthy and inconsistent, creating delays in approving suitable carers at a time when there is a national shortage of foster carers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that fostering panels often repeat scrutiny that already takes place and may not always add value proportionate to the time and resources required. In the consultation, we explored whether the system can be streamlined without weakening safeguards for children, by seeking views on proposals to:

Remove the mandatory requirements for fostering panels in the initial approval of foster carers and the first annual review.

Strengthen quality assurance requirements elsewhere in the system, particularly the role of the agency decision-maker (ADM), to ensure decisions remain robust, consistent and well evidenced.

Retain the role of panels in decisions about a foster carer's suitability.

The full proposals can be found here: [Foster care reform - proposed changes to assessment and handling of allegations of abuse - consultation](#)

We wanted to understand whether individuals and organisations in the fostering sector, or with lived care experience of the foster care system, felt that fostering panels add value that is proportionate to the time and cost involved, whether alternative quality assurance arrangements could provide equal or better safeguards and whether, overall, the proposals contained in the consultation would genuinely speed up approvals while maintaining child safety.

Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

Whilst the safety and welfare of children must always remain the paramount consideration in any safeguarding or allegations process, we know there are concerns in the sector about inconsistent and disproportionate practice which leads to unnecessary escalation, prolonged investigations and avoidable placement moves which cause significant distress for both children and carers.

As part of our commitment to create a simpler rulebook for fostering, we will shortly be consulting on an updated set of national standards and fostering guidance, which will include new sections on the handling of allegations and standards of care concerns. In advance of that process, we sought views from the sector on three areas where we propose to strengthen current guidance:

Setting out clear distinctions between allegations and standards of care concerns.

Providing support for children and foster carers who are experiencing an allegation

Making the allegations process fairer and more transparent.

The full proposal can be found here: [Foster care reform - proposed changes to assessment and handling of allegations of abuse - consultation](#)

Purpose of this document

We are grateful to everyone who submitted a response to the consultation. We have carefully considered the responses received and the range of views expressed. We analysed the free-text responses with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI). We have managed the risks around using AI by validating the analysis with a team of data scientists. Full information on our use of AI can be seen in the methodology statement in Annex B.

This document summarises the consultation findings and sets out the government's response.

The executive summary provides an overview of the key points raised and the government's position. This is followed by a more detailed analysis of responses to each proposal, highlighting the key themes identified during the consultation. A fuller account of the government's response is provided alongside this analysis. The annex includes a comprehensive breakdown of responses by question.

Executive summary

The online consultation was hosted on GOV.UK and ran for a period of six weeks, from 4 February 2026 to 17 March 2026. The Department for Education (DfE) received a total of 645 responses to the online questionnaire, and an additional 14 written responses.

The majority of responses submitted online came from individuals (87%) with a much smaller proportion of responses on behalf of organisations (12%). The largest proportion of individual responses were from current foster carers (30%). Other large groups included fostering panel members (20%) and local authority (LA) staff (18%).

A breakdown of all the subgroups of respondents can be found in Annex B.

In addition, the DfE:

- held and attended a series of virtual and in-person events to discuss the proposals with hundreds of foster carers and practitioners.
- invited children and young people (CYP) with lived experience of foster care to share their views and experiences in a separate questionnaire, which asked CYP to share their thoughts on how the foster care system currently supports them and how it could be improved. A total of 33 CYP responded to this questionnaire.

Main findings from the consultation

Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

Responses showed strong support for retaining panels to ensure independent oversight. Most respondents considered panels to add value, particularly in: safeguarding, assuring assessment quality and providing diverse and independent perspectives into decision-making.

However, other respondents agreed with the proposal to remove panels – with criticisms of panels including that they can introduce unnecessary delay and duplication in the assessment process; they do not always operate effectively in practice, and they can vary in quality. There were specific concerns raised about the suitability of panels to assess kinship carers.

There was support for improving or reforming the way panels are used to ensure panels are proportionate, efficient, and focused on where they add most value.

Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

Respondents strongly supported the proposals to improve fairness, transparency and support for both children and carers when an allegation is made against a foster carer. The current process for handling allegations was widely described as slow, inconsistent and distressing, with lasting negative effects on carers' wellbeing and on the retention of carers.

There was a strong consensus on the need for more proportionate and consistent approaches to the handling of allegations and better support and communication for foster carers whilst investigations are ongoing.

Overview of government response

Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

We will not proceed with the proposal to remove panels at initial assessment and review. Instead, the government will focus on improving the operation of panels through non-legislative means, including timeliness, quality, and practice.

The government will work with services to reduce the risk that panels and wider checks slow down assessments. The new national fostering standards and guidance (to be published later this year) will begin to set out what good panel practice looks like.

Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

The government will strengthen national fostering standards and guidance to enable allegations to be handled in a more timely, proportionate and transparent way. This will include clearer expectations on timeliness, support and pay, improved communication with children and carers, and a stronger focus on minimising unnecessary disruption to placements.

Reforms will aim to ensure consistent support for children and foster carers throughout the process, including access to independent advocacy and continued financial support for carers during investigations.

Updated national guidance will clarify the roles of fostering services, local authorities and the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), with a strengthened focus on proportionate decision-making. Training and clearer processes will support practitioners and foster carers to manage concerns effectively, while maintaining strong safeguarding.

Analysis of proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that panels add value proportionate to the time and resources required to operate them, while 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed. While this demonstrates overall support for panels, responses also consistently highlighted that the value panels provide varies across services and depends on how effectively they are implemented. Respondents agreed much could be done to streamline panels to reduce delays and duplication, and to improve the quality assurance process they currently provide.

Respondents generally opposed removing oversight arrangements that operate independently of fostering agencies' internal management structures, or which decrease the diversity of views on an assessment, seeing these as important parts of quality assurance and safeguarding.

This position is demonstrated in the responses below. All quotations have been drawn directly from the consultation and represent a range of sector voices:

“Independent Fostering Panel scrutiny of assessments is essential in terms of safer recruitment to the fostering role. Scrutiny comes from a range of personal and professional perspectives and not just social work.”

“Without (panels) there would be a risk of there being no oversight of Agency business at an independent level which would leave room for inappropriate decision-making which may be made at a commercial level rather than the best interests and safeguarding of children.”

“ADMs and panel advisers reported that panels frequently surface issues not fully explored in assessments and that the discipline of getting cases 'panel-ready' is itself a quality lever.”

“They exist to introduce independence, shared accountability, and constructive challenge into decisions that carry lifelong consequences for children and families.”

Current and former foster carers were more likely to question the value of panels. Issues raised included that panels can feel intimidating, duplicative of existing assessment processes, and unclear in purpose. Some fostering services also reported that panels can be risk averse or inflexible and can create a significant administrative burden, particularly for smaller services, which can result in delays in approving foster carers. These concerns underline that although panels are broadly supported in principle, there are significant issues in how they operate in practice.

“While there are many positives around the panel process, ... there is a tendency for ‘group think’ and for panels to tend to agree with the assessment of the social worker, which limits the robustness of the process.”

“Attending panel often feels like a rubber stamp exercise with members struggling to formulate meaningful questions because the submitted reports are so thorough – a group with oversight of assessment reports might be less intrusive/stressful and cost saving.”

Support for panels was often qualified by recognition that panels would benefit from streamlining and reform. Respondents generally agreed that there is inconsistency in practice around panels and variance in how much value and insight they provide, depending on factors including: who sits on panels, what training the panellists receive, and whether services use panels as part of their general quality assurance and learning (or if they provide views only on individual cases at the end of assessment).

“I think that panels lack well trained members who fully understand the process of assessment, the rigours of assessment and the full nature of the role of foster carers.”

“There are parts of panel which can be done away with, mainly the actual panel meeting, but ultimately we still need individuals independent from the fostering organisation to read and assess strengths and vulnerabilities of fostering applications.”

“Panels could be streamlined to reduce unnecessary delays. Quoracy could be reduced from five to three members for efficiency without losing independence. Virtual or more frequent panels could improve timeliness.”

If panels were to be removed, most respondents thought that some form of alternative independent quality assurance would need to replace them.

Respondents also suggested that other areas of the assessment process, particularly DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) and medical checks, are causing more significant delays in foster carer approval than panels.

It is well understood that kinship carers often step in during family crises with little preparation, motivated by an existing relationship with the child rather than a planned commitment to fostering. As a result, kinship carers may already be providing stability under temporary arrangements by the time formal approval is considered, and panels sometimes operate while care proceedings are ongoing. The consultation highlighted that these realities can sit uneasily within systems designed for mainstream fostering, with one respondent saying:

“I don't feel that fostering panel is always appropriate for kinship foster carers... Their processes vs the processes of the courts is contradictory at times and causes barriers for planning for children, if panel do not feel kinship carers should be approved.”

Whilst a small number reported positive experiences, where panels were respectful and proportionate, kinship carers' views were broadly more negative, with panels described as distressing, misaligned with their lived realities, and as a source of delay that could destabilise children.

A full breakdown of questions and responses relevant to Proposal 1 is available at Annex A.

Analysis of proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

Across all responses to questions relating to allegations, there was a strong consensus that current allegation processes are one of the most challenging and distressing aspects of fostering. One respondent stated that because of the allegations process:

“Children lose their homes, carers lose their good name and society loses good foster carers.”

74% of respondents agreed with our proposed changes to national fostering standards and guidance to provide greater support to children and foster carers experiencing an allegation, and 75% agreed with the proposed changes to standards and guidance to make the allegations process fairer and more transparent.

Respondents repeatedly emphasised that allegation handling is often slow, inconsistent, and lacking transparency, with foster carers describing significant emotional, financial, and practical impact. While respondents agreed that allegations must be taken seriously to safeguard children, they also highlighted the need for proportionate, evidence-based processes, clearer thresholds between minor concerns and serious safeguarding issues, and much greater consistency nationally. Across the consultation, there was widespread support for clearer guidance, statutory timelines, improved communication, and greater independent oversight to ensure fairness and maintain foster carer confidence.

“They need to be evidence-based and proportionate, carers need formal support provided via the LA [local authority]. Investigations should be robust and timely and not based on personality and pre-judgement. There needs to be more understanding of why children make allegations and support for children to make sense of what has happened to them.”

Consultation events highlighted that although allegations are relatively rare, a large proportion of foster carers will face one at some point in their fostering journey given that many carers foster multiple children over their time as a foster carer. The way allegations are handled can have a lasting impact on a foster carer’s behaviour, confidence and ultimately their likelihood of remaining as a foster carer. Some foster carers spoke about a culture of fear which stops people from coming forward, especially if they work with children – as an allegation could impact not only their fostering but also their employment.

“When an allegation is made, foster carers often receive very little practical or emotional support. During investigations, all children are typically removed from the home. While safeguarding is essential, this process can be highly distressing and disruptive for children who have not made any allegation and who may already have formed strong, trusting attachments. Removing them can retraumatise children and undo months or years of stability. At the same time, carers’ payments are often reduced or stopped during investigations. This creates significant financial hardship, placing families at risk of debt, housing insecurity, and in some cases forcing them to leave fostering altogether and seek alternative employment.”

“Allegations are incredibly stressful for foster carers. They are judged, treated badly and unsupported and this leads to them leaving.”

Respondents stated that processes are not always clear and that decisions can be made without the right professionals present. Some foster carers raised that they were not made aware that they had been subject to an allegations process. Others pointed out that once an allegation is made, services can raise other concerns which the carers are not aware of which build a negative picture about them.

“Allegations tend to be a time to witch hunt, to seek out other things the carer has done wrong. Simple things can then be added to the allegation to make it look like it is larger and much worse than it was initially. When I went through an allegations process another complaint was found – I had supposedly rolled my eyes during a meeting with professionals. This was added to my file to show that I was unable to be a professional.”

Foster carers reported a culture of fear created by bad handling of allegations, which drives defensive behaviour by carers and can lead to the differential treatment of children in care. For example, some services put out blanket bans on hugging children without others present or a ban on sharing blankets or beds, and foster carers expressed fear about letting an older teenager they care for have access to their house after school unless they are present. Respondents spoke about how the focus on children’s emotional needs and lasting loving relationships can be lost.

“Fostering services are risk averse and instead of putting in support for carers, as they would parents to maintain the household, they move children unnecessarily.”

“Sometimes the response is not in line with the risk. Families can be torn apart and looked after child has to leave the home when this is often not necessary, causing child more trauma. Safeguarding should always be critical however it should also be proportionate.”

Respondents spoke about the rare but tragic instances of abuse within foster homes and the fact that sometimes children are not listened to enough.

“I know of children who are in homes where the care is, in my opinion, not good enough, but the situation is tolerated as the LA [local authority] have no other option. The view is 'any home is better than none'.”

They also highlighted how complex and subtle it can be to handle allegations effectively, as well as the significant impact of doing so with skill.

“Holding a placement can be hard, but enabling a fostering family to work through an issue (depending how serious it is) with a child/ young person can also be extremely healing. Conflicts and points of difference are part of normal family life and foster carers' parenting styles do differ. It requires experience and professional confidence and competence as well as a good deal of availability for the SSW [senior social worker] to support and "hold" fostering families through periods of difficulty.”

A full breakdown of questions and responses relevant to Proposal 2 is available at Annex A.

Government response to the consultation

Response to proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

We heard strong support from stakeholders for retaining panels and understand the need to proceed with caution. However, we also heard that the current operation of panels is not working optimally. In light of this feedback, we will not proceed with the proposal to remove panels. Instead, the government will retain all existing functions of panels but focus on improving their operation through non-legislative means, including timeliness and quality.

Based on the findings, we are clear that effective panel practice should:

- Provide a level of independent oversight of initial assessment of prospective foster carers and first review.
- Incorporate lived experience voices of foster carers and children in care and care leavers into the assessment process.
- Draw on a diverse and relevant range of specialist views to identify risks and support needs.
- Provide a quality assurance mechanism to ensure fair and well evidenced analysis and decision-making in assessments and across the service generally.
- Operate in a proportionate and focused way, without introducing unnecessary delay or duplication.

We do not think the way panels are set up currently always serves these aims well enough. The new national fostering standards and guidance, to be published later this year, will set out what good panel practice looks like, explicitly addressing:

- The purpose and appropriate use of panels.
- Expected timescales for panels taking place, to support timely decision-making.
- Roles and responsibilities.
- The skills, experience and training required of panel chairs and members.
- The composition and size of panels to ensure effectiveness without unnecessary duplication and burden.

Respondents also highlighted that other parts of the assessment process, particularly DBS and medical checks, are causing more significant delays in foster carer approval than panels. As a result, we are looking into the medical checks process to understand what is causing the delays in different services, how the medical assessment process can be

made more efficient and robust, and what solutions are feasible. We will share our advised approach through regional hub-led best practice forums in summer 2026.

Based on the findings, it is clear that panels do not always work in the optimal way for the approval of kinship arrangements.

The Law Commission is soon to publish a consultation following their review of the legal framework underpinning kinship arrangements, which will include questions on proposed reforms. The proposed reforms are likely to include the development of a new legal order for kinship carers and processes designed around kinship care.

It is important that we await the final report (due to be published autumn 2027) so that we can address the wider issues in the system for kinship carers effectively.

In the meantime, the standards will also address how panels should work for kinship foster carers, for example by requiring kinship expertise on panels, and recommending training for all members on kinship care and the flexible application of national standards.

This approach aligns with evidence from the National Kinship Care Ambassador's engagement with local authorities, which shows that panels can function well for kinship carers when members understand kinship contexts and apply statutory guidance flexibly.

Response to proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

We will act on the proposals set out in consultation and we will use the national fostering standards and guidance to set clear expectations on:

- Timely investigations of any allegations made. We will be clear about the impact delay has on children in placement as well as the wider cohort waiting for the right foster placement.
- That any delays can and should be escalated through the LADO to safeguarding partners and relevant regulators.
- The importance of clear roles, transparent processes and regular information sharing and updates for children and foster carers during any investigation.
- Using proportionate judgement to decide if an allegation needs investigation or whether issues can instead be addressed through a strength based, relational standards of care approach.
- That placement disruption should be avoided whenever appropriate
- The importance of ongoing support by the children looked-after social worker and supervising social worker for the fostering family.

- The importance of the provision of independent advocacy for children and foster carers during any allegations process.
- That foster carers should have the right to choose the independent support they want wherever possible.
- Continued payment for foster carers undergoing an allegation investigation.

The safety of all children, including children in care¹, is paramount. However, we need to ensure that the processes we follow in the name of children's safety are effective and truly make them safer, both physically and emotionally.

We consistently hear that what matters to children in care most is having someone they can talk to and trust, who sticks with them. We must protect children's enduring relationships whilst at the same time balancing that with the need to keep them physically safe.

We know that risk aversion can cause systems to be overly focused on blanket processes and rigid rules which do not enable foster carers to form strong relationships with children and undermine the extent to which a foster home feels like a family. Risk aversion and a culture of fear and blame is also highly damaging to foster carers' confidence, well-being and long-term retention. Most importantly, risk aversion does not create safety as unnecessary escalation of issues creates noise and workload, which limits services' capacity to deal with real dangers.

We are clear that practitioners go above and beyond every day to support foster families and many services engage in excellent, evidence based, proportionate decision-making in strength-based and relational cultures.

We recognise that the national minimum standards and guidance are outdated. We will re-write the fostering standards in a way that challenges risk aversion and encourages services and practitioners to work in strengths based and relational ways with foster families. We will make it clear services and practitioners need to always consider the emotional and physical safety of children in care with a strong focus on protecting a child's enduring relationships. In time, we will reflect this in other relevant documents, including the [Children Looked After Planning, Placement and Review guidance](#).

We will also work to update the [Working Together to safeguard children](#) guidance section on LADO decision-making to ensure responses are proportionate and all actors are clear about the role of the LADO.

¹ While the legal term is 'looked after children', this document uses 'children in care', reflecting the terminology preferred by children themselves.

We will ensure that training for foster carers covers allegations in a nuanced and sensitive way, helping carers understand what could constitute abusive behaviour, why investigations are sometimes necessary, why children or adults in their lives may make an allegation, how relationships can recover from an unsubstantiated allegation and what support will be available to them if they are impacted.

We will help foster carers understand what recourse they can take if they do not feel a conflict, concern or allegation was handled in the right way. Foster carers can already make complaints to the service and the local authority ombudsman and can have their de-registration case overseen by the service panel and the Independent Review Mechanism. We have heard that foster carers do not feel these systems currently work well enough.

We will:

- set higher expectations for the training and oversight provided by panels during any standard of care discussions in reviews and de-registration considerations.
- explore ways we can strengthen process to give carers more confidence that they will not face any retribution from raising concerns or complaints, including any mishandling of standards of care or allegation issues.
- test how any escalation of disagreements can be handled by independent panels and bodies at regional level.
- work with Ofsted to ensure the social care common inspection framework and inspecting local authority children's services framework drive proportional decision-making and nuanced safeguarding responses across services.

Annex A: Consultation responses by question

The tables below contain a breakdown of responses for each question asked in the consultation. The analysis of text responses highlights key themes that came up throughout the consultation (where questions enabled free text responses), setting out the number and percentage of responses in which each theme is mentioned. Within the text responses, respondents may have highlighted multiple key themes and therefore the sum of the percentages exceeds 100%.

Questions 1 to 8 of the consultation asked for personal details from the respondent and therefore are not included in this breakdown.

Questions concerning Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

Question 9: To what extent do you agree that panels provide value that is proportionate to the time and resources required to operate them?

Answer	Total	Per cent
Strongly agree	295	45.74%
Agree	139	21.55%
Neither agree nor disagree	48	7.44%
Disagree	92	14.26%
Strongly Disagree	59	9.15%
I don't know	12	1.86%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Analysis of text responses to question 9 follow-up statement: If desired, please explain your response (free text)

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Panels Ensure Safeguarding and Oversight</p> <p>Panels play a vital role in safeguarding children by providing independent, multi-disciplinary scrutiny of fostering assessments and decisions. They ensure robust quality assurance, identify risks, and protect the welfare of children by preventing unsuitable placements.</p>	341	69.3%
<p>Panels Promote Accountability and High Standards</p> <p>Panels act as a mechanism to identify gaps in assessments, challenge weak analysis, and hold agencies accountable for their decisions. This ensures adherence to high standards, encourages reflective practise among social workers, and supports better outcomes for foster placements.</p>	270	54.9%
<p>Balancing Resource Use with Value Added</p> <p>Panels are resource-intensive in terms of time, cost, and personnel involvement, raising concerns about whether their benefits justify the investment required. Streamlining processes or limiting panel involvement to complex cases could enhance efficiency without compromising safeguards.</p>	237	48.2%
<p>Diverse Expertise Improves Decision-Making</p> <p>The inclusion of individuals from various fields and individuals with care experience enriches panel discussions with diverse perspectives. This approach ensures balanced, child-centred decision-making that is fair, transparent, and reduces unconscious bias.</p>	200	40.7%
<p>Foster Carers Need Supportive Processes</p> <p>The formal nature of panels can be intimidating or stressful for foster carers due to perceived over-scrutiny or unclear expectations. Creating a supportive atmosphere with clear communication can improve their experience while maintaining transparency.</p>	97	19.7%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Reforming Panel Processes for Modern Needs</p> <p>The formal nature of panels can be intimidating or stressful for foster carers due to perceived over-scrutiny or unclear expectations. Creating a supportive atmosphere with clear communication can improve their experience while maintaining transparency</p>	81	16.5%
<p>Standardisation Needed Across Local Authorities</p> <p>Variability in panel composition and processes across local authorities leads to inconsistent outcomes and delays in assessment timelines. Clearer national guidelines could standardise practises to enhance fairness while maintaining proportionality.</p>	50	10.2%

Question 10: What would you see as the advantages or disadvantages of removing fostering panels from initial assessment and the first annual review process? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Risk of Compromised Safeguarding Standards</p> <p>Panels provide an essential layer of independent scrutiny that ensures transparency, accountability, and safeguarding in decision-making. Their removal could lead to inconsistent assessments and increased risks to child safety.</p>	488	75.8%
<p>Loss of Diverse Perspectives in Decisions</p> <p>Panels bring together individuals from various disciplines and individuals with lived experience who offer valuable insights into fostering decisions. Without this diversity, evaluations may become one-dimensional, potentially overlooking critical concerns.</p>	378	58.7%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Streamlining Approval Processes</p> <p>Removing fostering panels could simplify and accelerate the approval process, reducing administrative burdens and operational costs. This may allow resources to be redirected to better support foster carers and children.</p>	284	44.1%
<p>Need for Robust Alternative Oversight</p> <p>If panels are removed, it is crucial to establish strong alternative mechanisms that ensure quality assurance through independent oversight, diverse practitioner input, safeguarding measures, and platforms for service user voices in decision-making processes.</p>	215	33.4%
<p>Overburdening agency decision-makers</p> <p>Shifting all decision-making responsibilities to agency decision-makers could overwhelm them with additional tasks, leading to rushed or less thorough decisions due to time constraints or operational pressures.</p>	195	30.3%
<p>Negative Impact on Foster Carer Retention</p> <p>Panels provide foster carers with opportunities for feedback, recognition, and validation during reviews while holding agencies accountable for their support obligations. Removing panels might reduce foster carer confidence in the system and harm retention rates.</p>	173	26.9%
<p>Reducing Emotional Stress for Applicants</p> <p>Eliminating panels may make the fostering process less intimidating and more accessible, particularly for kinship carers or those new to fostering, by alleviating the emotional pressure associated with panel reviews.</p>	129	20%

Question 11: What changes (if any) would you seek to make to standards and guidance to ensure that effective quality assurance takes place throughout the assessment process? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Implement Independent Quality Assurance</p> <p>Introduce independent quality assurance mechanisms at every stage of the assessment process, including mandatory management oversight, midpoint reviews, second-opinion visits, peer reviews, and multi-disciplinary panels to ensure objectivity and robust decision-making.</p>	331	52.9%
<p>Establish National Quality Standards</p> <p>Create consistent national standards and transparent quality assurance frameworks to reduce variability across local authorities and agencies. Include clear timelines, evidence requirements, and reporting mechanisms to ensure uniformity, accountability, and child-centred assessments.</p>	246	39.3%
<p>Prioritise Child-Centred Outcomes</p> <p>Focus on achieving positive outcomes for children by prioritising their needs over administrative targets or procedural compliance. Ensure the child’s voice is central at every stage of the assessment process while maintaining robust safeguarding measures.</p>	188	30%
<p>Strengthen Training for Assessors</p> <p>Provide comprehensive training for assessors and key roles on trauma-informed care practises, safeguarding expertise, evidence-based analysis, unconscious bias awareness, reflective supervision techniques, and high-quality report writing to enhance assessment standards.</p>	157	25.1%
<p>Foster Carer Collaboration in Assessments</p> <p>Actively involve foster carers in the assessment process through transparent communication about requirements or delays. Incorporate their insights into decision-making with regular updates and mentorship opportunities during probationary periods.</p>	104	16.6%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Develop Kinship Care Standards Create tailored national standards for kinship foster carers that address their unique challenges while prioritising child safety. Simplify processes where appropriate without compromising safeguarding practises.</p>	49	7.8%
<p>Promote Equality and Address Biases Enhance equality, diversity, and inclusion by addressing biases against marginalised groups through cultural competence training for assessors. Ensure diversity factors such as culture, trauma history, socioeconomic background, identity factors (e.g., race or disability), and lived experiences are fully integrated into assessments.</p>	45	7.2%

Question 12: If panels were not required for approvals, how would we strengthen the role of the agency decision-maker or other processes to ensure objectivity and rigour? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Independent Quality Assurance Measures Implement robust quality assurance mechanisms such as independent audits, peer reviews, second-opinion reviews by qualified practitioners, or external moderation to enhance transparency and accountability in decision-making.</p>	302	47%
<p>Ensure ADM Independence Safeguard the independence of agency decision-makers by separating their role from fostering agencies, local authorities, and assessment teams. This could involve creating standalone roles or employing external practitioners to prevent conflicts of interest.</p>	268	41.7%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Multidisciplinary Collaboration in Decisions Integrate input from a range of practitioners such as foster carers, care-experienced individuals, social workers, health practitioners, legal advisors, and psychologists to ensure comprehensive evaluations prioritising child welfare.</p>	199	30.9%
<p>Alternative Oversight Models for Rigour Consider alternative oversight structures like dual agency decision-maker systems or smaller review boards with multiple practitioners to enhance scrutiny while maintaining efficiency. Include safeguards such as second-line reviews for complex cases.</p>	185	28.8%
<p>Adequate Resources for ADM Role Allocate sufficient time and resources for agency decision-makers by creating full-time positions with reduced operational duties. Address capacity issues through additional staffing or redistributing workloads to enable thorough assessments.</p>	148	23%
<p>Evidence-Based Decision-Making Frameworks Develop structured tools for decision-making that include clear documentation protocols, risk-benefit analysis guidelines, safeguarding thresholds, diversity considerations, and supervision processes to ensure consistency and fairness.</p>	121	18.8%
<p>Mandatory Training for ADMs Establish compulsory, standardised training for agency decision-makers on fostering regulations, safeguarding practises, trauma-informed care, unconscious bias, and decision-making frameworks. Define national competency standards to ensure consistent expertise.</p>	80	12.4%

Question 13: To what extent do you agree with the proposal to maintain the use of panels for recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers?

Answer	Total	Per cent
Strongly agree	358	55.50%

Answer	Total	Per cent
Agree	128	19.84%
Neither agree nor disagree	53	8.22%
Disagree	42	6.51%
Strongly Disagree	53	8.22%
I don't know	11	1.71%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Question 14: [For panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers] what are your views on the number of panel members that should be required to conduct panel business?
Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Balanced Panel Size for Decisions A panel size of 4–6 members is ideal as it ensures diverse perspectives, expertise, and efficiency while remaining manageable. An odd number of members, such as 5, is preferred to avoid tied decisions and ensure clear outcomes.</p>	331	51.6%
<p>Diverse Expertise in Panel Composition Panels should include a mix of practitioners such as social workers, health practitioners, legal experts, and individuals with lived experience (e.g., foster carers or care-experienced individuals). This diversity ensures comprehensive and balanced decision-making.</p>	244	38%
<p>Independence Ensures Impartiality Independent panel members are crucial to maintaining impartiality and transparency. Members should have no affiliations with fostering agencies or local authorities to avoid conflicts of interest.</p>	186	29%
<p>Expertise Over Quantity in Panels The qualifications and experience of panel members are more important than the number of participants. Members should have relevant expertise in areas like safeguarding, child welfare, or fostering to make informed decisions.</p>	143	22.3%
<p>Flexible Panel Size by Case Complexity Panel size should adapt to the complexity of cases, with smaller panels (3 to 4 members) for straightforward matters and larger panels (6 to 7 members) for complex or high-stakes decisions requiring broader expertise.</p>	132	20.6%
<p>Transparent Processes for Foster Carers Panels must ensure fairness by allowing foster carers to present their views during discussions while maintaining transparency through clear communication about decisions and thorough documentation.</p>	112	17.4%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
Addressing Recruitment Challenges Smaller services may struggle to maintain a consistent pool of trained panel members due to infrequent meetings or large membership requirements, which can affect the quality and independence of decision-making processes.	30	4.7%

Question 15: [For panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers] what are your views on the type of experience or qualifications that panel members should have? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
Diverse Practitioner Expertise Panels should include practitioners from various fields such as social work, education, healthcare, legal services, and mental health to ensure a well-rounded understanding of fostering and safeguarding issues.	435	67.7%
Inclusion of Lived Experience Panel members should include individuals with direct experience in the care system, such as foster carers or care-experienced adults, to provide practical insights into fostering challenges and the impact of decisions on children and families.	383	59.6%
Safeguarding and Trauma-Informed Knowledge Members must have strong expertise in safeguarding practises, child protection laws, trauma-informed care, child development, and risk assessment to prioritise the safety and well-being of children in care.	183	28.5%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Independence from Agencies</p> <p>Panel members must be independent from fostering agencies or local authorities to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure unbiased decision-making that focuses on the best interests of children.</p>	117	18.2%
<p>Diversity in Panel Representation</p> <p>Panels should reflect the diversity of the communities they serve by including members from varied cultural backgrounds, age groups, genders, fields of practice, and life experiences to ensure inclusive decision-making that respects identity and cultural contexts.</p>	96	14.9%
<p>Comprehensive Training for Members</p> <p>All panel members should receive thorough initial training on fostering regulations, safeguarding practises, trauma-informed approaches, unconscious bias awareness, legal frameworks related to foster care, along with ongoing practitioner development.</p>	65	10.1%
<p>Strong Leadership for Panel Chair</p> <p>The panel chair must possess excellent leadership skills with expertise in fostering or children’s services to guide discussions effectively while ensuring accountability, procedural fairness, and adherence to regulatory standards.</p>	56	8.7%

Question 16: [For panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers] what are your views on the level of

independence that panel members should have from the fostering service? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Full Independence of Panel Members</p> <p>Panel members should have no employment, financial ties, or personal relationships with the fostering service to ensure impartiality and prevent conflicts of interest. This approach builds trust and ensures fairness in decision-making.</p>	400	62.3%
<p>Predominantly Independent Panels with Expertise</p> <p>Panels should be composed mainly of independent members, with a majority (e.g., at least 50% + 1) bringing diverse expertise in areas such as safeguarding and fostering practises. A minority of members with fostering service experience can provide valuable context without compromising objectivity.</p>	148	23.1%
<p>Strict Conflict-of-Interest Policies</p> <p>Clear policies must be in place to identify and manage potential conflicts of interest among panel members. These safeguards are essential for maintaining transparency, credibility, and impartiality in the decision-making process.</p>	137	21.3%
<p>Independent Leadership for Fair Decisions</p> <p>The panel chairperson or other leadership roles must be fully independent to ensure neutral oversight, balanced discussions, and unbiased decision-making free from organisational influence.</p>	135	21%
<p>Balancing Independence with Fostering Knowledge</p> <p>While independence is crucial for objectivity, panel members should also possess a sufficient understanding of fostering services to make decisions that reflect the realities faced by foster carers.</p>	120	18.7%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Inclusion of Expertise and Lived Experience</p> <p>Panels should include individuals with specialist expertise in fostering, safeguarding, or child development alongside those with lived experience in care or fostering. This combination ensures well-rounded and informed decisions.</p>	84	13.1%
<p>Regional or Centralised Panels for Objectivity</p> <p>Establishing regional or centralised panels serving multiple local authorities can enhance independence by reducing local authority influence on recommendations while promoting consistency through external oversight mechanisms like Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs).</p>	33	5.1%

Question 17: What other changes to the requirements for panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers would improve the process? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Fair and Transparent Decision-Making</p> <p>Panels must ensure fairness by providing foster carers with full access to evidence well in advance of meetings. Decisions should be based on robust evidence linked to national fostering standards, accompanied by clear written rationales and opportunities for formal appeals to build trust and accountability.</p>	232	38.5%
<p>Timely Decision-Making Processes</p> <p>Implement strict timelines for all stages of the process to reduce delays that cause stress for foster carers and disrupt children’s stability. Introduce fast-track panels for urgent cases while ensuring thoroughness in decision-making.</p>	129	21.4%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Nationally Standardised Guidelines Develop consistent national guidelines for panel processes, including clear thresholds for deregistration decisions, standardised documentation templates, evidence requirements, timelines for decision-making stages, and post-panel communication protocols. This ensures uniformity across local authorities.</p>	119	19.8%
<p>Comprehensive Support for Foster Carers Provide foster carers with access to independent advocacy or legal representation at no cost throughout the deregistration process. Offer emotional support mechanisms alongside financial assistance during investigations or allegations to alleviate stress.</p>	109	18.1%
<p>Diverse and Expert Panel Membership Panels should include members with diverse backgrounds and relevant expertise, such as experienced foster carers, child psychologists, legal practitioners, safeguarding specialists, and individuals with lived experience in fostering. This ensures balanced and informed decision-making that reflects the needs of children and carers.</p>	90	15%
<p>Prioritising Children’s Best Interests Panels must prioritise children’s safety, stability, emotional well-being, and trust in the care system by conducting structured child impact analyses during deliberations. Involve care-experienced individuals or child advocates to provide insights into how decisions may affect children’s lives.</p>	58	9.6%
<p>Mandatory Training for Panel Members Require comprehensive training on fostering issues such as safeguarding practises, trauma-informed care, implicit bias awareness, cultural competence, procedural fairness, proportionality in decision-making, and challenges faced by foster carers. Include input from care-experienced individuals to ensure well-rounded perspectives.</p>	54	9%

Question 18: Are there other mandated parts of the fostering approval process that should be changed to clarify responsibilities, ensure robust checks and speed up approvals? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Streamlining Statutory Checks Delays in statutory checks, such as DBS and medical assessments, hinder the fostering process. Centralised systems, standardised procedures, stricter timelines, fast-tracking mechanisms, and digital tracking tools can improve efficiency while maintaining safeguarding standards.</p>	258	41.1%
<p>Prioritising Safeguarding While Expediting Approvals Efforts to speed up the approval process must not compromise child safety. Comprehensive assessments should balance efficiency with robust safeguarding measures through thorough background checks and evaluations of applicants' suitability.</p>	226	36%
<p>Strengthening Stakeholder Collaboration Improved coordination with external agencies such as police and GPs is critical to addressing delays in statutory checks. Clearer guidance on roles and responsibilities, mandatory file sharing during transfers, accountability measures for third-party delays, and prioritisation of foster carer-related tasks are necessary.</p>	211	33.7%
<p>Ensuring National Consistency A national framework with uniform standards for assessment templates, statutory checks, timelines, roles, and decision-making processes is essential to eliminate inconsistencies across local authorities and agencies. This would promote fairness and reduce duplication.</p>	152	24.2%
<p>Reducing Administrative Burden Simplifying forms, reducing documentation redundancy (e.g., Form F), combining tasks from different assessment stages, and delegating administrative tasks to non-social work staff can minimise bureaucracy without compromising quality or safeguarding.</p>	132	21.1%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Foster Carers During Assessment</p> <p>Clear communication about expectations, pre-panel preparation meetings, mentoring by experienced carers, structured support during the first year of fostering, and second opinion visits can better prepare prospective foster carers while reducing delays.</p>	95	15.2%
<p>Adapting Processes for Kinship Carers</p> <p>Kinship carers require tailored assessment processes that consider their unique circumstances while ensuring safety checks are upheld. Extending Regulation 24 timescales or creating a separate national framework could address their specific needs effectively.</p>	33	5.3%

Questions concerning Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations of abuse and standards of care concerns against foster carers

Question 19: To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to our standards and guidance for providing greater support to children and foster carers who are experiencing an allegation?

Answer	Total	Per cent
Strongly agree	270	41.86%
Agree	209	32.40%
Neither agree nor disagree	84	13.02%
Disagree	19	2.95%
Strongly Disagree	24	3.72%
I don't know	39	6.05%
Not Answered	0	0%

Analysis of text responses to question 19 follow-up statement: If desired, please explain your response (free text)

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Provide Comprehensive Support for Foster Carers</p> <p>Foster carers require robust emotional, financial, legal, and practical support during allegations. This includes access to independent advocacy services, trauma-informed care, financial assistance like retainer payments, and post-investigation recovery support to alleviate stress and isolation.</p>	198	62.3%
<p>Ensure Timely and Transparent Allegation Processes</p> <p>Allegation processes should be streamlined with clear timelines, regular updates, and transparent communication to reduce stress and uncertainty for foster carers and children. This ensures fairness, accountability, and efficiency in resolving cases.</p>	172	54.1%
<p>Minimise Disruption to Children’s Lives</p> <p>Children’s emotional well-being must be prioritised by avoiding unnecessary placement disruptions during investigations. Decisions should be guided by holistic risk assessments that consider attachment needs, safety, and stability.</p>	102	32.1%
<p>Develop Clear Definitions and National Standards</p> <p>Clear distinctions between serious allegations requiring formal investigations and minor standards-of-care concerns are essential. Consistent national guidance with standardised processes across local authorities is needed to ensure clarity in roles, thresholds, timelines, and decision-making protocols.</p>	97	30.5%
<p>Address Foster Carer Retention Through Systemic Reforms</p> <p>The current allegation process contributes significantly to foster carer attrition due to stress, financial insecurity, and perceived unfair treatment. Systemic reforms are necessary to address delays in investigations and improve support structures for retaining experienced carers.</p>	97	30.5%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Establish Independent Oversight in Investigations</p> <p>Investigations should be conducted by independent bodies or specialised teams to ensure objectivity, fairness, and consistency. Involving experienced practitioners or regional hubs can enhance expertise while reducing conflicts of interest.</p>	79	24.8%
<p>Prioritise Children’s Voices in Allegation Processes</p> <p>Children must feel safe when making allegations without fear of reprisal. Independent advocacy services tailored to their needs should be provided alongside holistic support for all household members affected by the process.</p>	60	18.9%

Question 20: To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to our standards and guidance for making the allegations process fairer and more transparent?

Answer	Total	Per cent
Strongly agree	273	42.33%
Agree	214	33.18%
Neither agree nor disagree	75	11.63%
Disagree	17	2.64%
Strongly Disagree	25	3.88%
I don’t know	41	6.36%
Not Answered	0	0%

Analysis of text responses to question 20 follow-up statement: If desired, please explain your response (free text)

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Transparent and Open Communication</p> <p>Clear and transparent processes are essential, including timely disclosure of allegations, access to evidence, clear role definitions, and regular updates to reduce stress and build trust.</p>	144	55%
<p>Comprehensive Support for Foster Carers</p> <p>Foster carers need emotional support, financial stability if children are removed from their care, access to independent advocacy or legal advice, and recognition of the mental health impact during investigations.</p>	98	37.4%
<p>Balancing Safeguarding with Fair Treatment</p> <p>Safeguarding children is paramount; however, it is vital to address malicious or unfounded allegations fairly while ensuring child protection measures remain robust. Serious allegations must be clearly distinguished from minor concerns for proportional responses.</p>	86	32.8%
<p>Timely and Efficient Investigations</p> <p>Delays in investigations cause stress for foster carers and disrupt children’s stability. Clear timelines, efficient case handling, regular updates, and accountability are necessary without compromising fairness or thoroughness.</p>	78	29.8%
<p>Presumption of Innocence for Foster Carers</p> <p>Foster carers should be treated as "innocent until proven guilty" during investigations to prevent unfair stigma or penalties, while maintaining a balanced approach to safeguarding children.</p>	65	24.8%
<p>Independent Oversight for Fairness</p> <p>Independent oversight mechanisms are crucial to ensure impartiality in investigations and address concerns about bias or conflicts of interest from local authorities or supervising social workers.</p>	57	21.8%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which include the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
National Standards for Consistency A standardised national framework is needed to address inconsistencies across local authorities and fostering agencies in processes, investigation thresholds, decision-making criteria, and inter-agency coordination.	45	17.2%

Question 21: Do you have any additional suggestions to improve the allegations process? Analysis of text responses

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which included the theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
Timely and Transparent Allegations Handling Establish clear, nationally standardised timelines for all stages of the allegations process to reduce delays and stress for foster carers, children, and stakeholders. Ensure regular updates, written explanations of decisions, and opportunities for input from all parties to maintain transparency.	207	46.2%
Holistic Support for Foster Carers Provide foster carers with financial stability during investigations along with access to independent advocacy services, legal advice, emotional support, mental health resources, and peer networks. Assign dedicated advocates or points of contact to guide them through the process	166	37.1%
National Standardisation of Procedures Develop a national framework with consistent policies across local authorities, fostering agencies, designated officers, and police that clearly define roles, responsibilities, thresholds for action, evidence requirements, timelines, and procedures for handling allegations effectively.	137	30.6%

Theme identified through AI analysis of free text responses	Total number of responses which included theme	Percentage of responses which include the theme
<p>Proportional Responses to Allegations Implement clear guidelines to ensure responses to allegations are proportionate to the evidence and severity of the situation. Avoid unnecessary disruptions such as automatic suspensions or child removals unless absolutely necessary, using risk assessments and threshold matrices as decision-making tools.</p>	133	29.7%
<p>Independent Investigations for Fairness Ensure allegations are investigated by independent practitioners or bodies with no prior involvement in the case to uphold fairness and transparency. Introduce external oversight mechanisms to assess thresholds, address bias, and ensure consistency across regions.</p>	126	28.1%
<p>Child-Focused Advocacy and Support Prioritise children’s welfare by ensuring their voices are heard through age-appropriate communication methods and access to independent advocacy services (including those trained in special educational needs). Minimise placement disruptions while addressing their emotional needs through tailored support plans.</p>	75	16.7%
<p>Training on Prevention and Fair Processes Require comprehensive training on trauma-informed care and procedural fairness for all stakeholders involved in the allegations process-foster carers, social workers, designated officers-while promoting proactive measures like safe care training and early intervention strategies to prevent escalation into formal allegations.</p>	64	14.3%

Annex B: Methodology statement

Analysis of free-text responses

AI is becoming more common across government; to improve efficiency, the free-text responses were analysed with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI). The analysis was fully validated by a team of data scientists.

All responses to the 25 free-text questions in Fostering for the Future and 12 free-text questions in Fostering Reform were analysed using AI. This approach produced a thematic output for each of the free-text questions and respondent groups.

Specific subgroups of respondents for Fostering for the Future:

- (1) Individual
- (2) Organisation
- (3) Individual type: Care experienced person
- (4) Individual type: Current foster carer
- (5) Individual type: Former foster carer
- (6) Individual type: Fostering panel member
- (7) Individual type: Independent fostering agency staff
- (8) Individual type: Kinship carer
- (9) Individual type: Local authority staff
- (10) Individual type: Organisation or charity staff who regularly engages with foster carers and/or children and young people in foster care.
- (11) Organisation type: Independent fostering agency - not-for-profit
- (12) Organisation type: Independent fostering agency - profit making
- (13) Organisation type: Local authority
- (14) Organisation type: Organisation or charity who regularly engages with foster carers and/or children and young people in foster care.

Specific subgroups of respondents for Fostering Reform:

- (1) Individual
- (2) Organisation
- (3) Individual type: Care experienced person
- (4) Individual type: Current foster carer
- (5) Individual type: Former foster carer
- (6) Individual type: Fostering panel member
- (7) Individual type: Independent fostering agency staff
- (8) Individual type: Kinship carer
- (9) Individual type: Local authority staff
- (10) Individual type: Organisation or charity staff who regularly engages with foster carers and/or children and young people in foster care.
- (11) Organisation type: Independent fostering agency - not-for-profit
- (12) Organisation type: Independent fostering agency - profit making
- (13) Organisation type: Local authority
- (14) Organisation type: Local authority - Recruitment Hub
- (15) Organisation type: Organisation or charity who regularly engages with foster carers and/or children and young people in foster care.

For each of the free-text questions, we used an iterative and zero-shot prompting approach with Azure OpenAI's GPT-4o large language model (LLM) to:

- Identify key themes in the responses
- Refine those themes
- Determine which themes were discussed in each response

This enabled us to calculate how frequently each theme appeared per question.

Zero-shot means the model does not require prior training or subject-specific knowledge to generate insights. We refined the prompts through iteration to optimise the output. Access to the LLM was provided via Microsoft's Azure OpenAI Service, which does not share data with third parties. The analysis was conducted using DfE computers.

Because LLMs can only process a limited number of words at a time, responses were split into equal-sized batches. Each batch was passed into the LLM to identify all the themes discussed in the responses per question and per respondent group. These themes were compiled into a single list, which was then condensed into a final list of distinct themes per question and per respondent group through further iterative processing. Finally, the responses for each question and respondent group were re-analysed in batches to determine which themes were present in each response, allowing us to rank the themes by frequency for each question and respondent group.

Validation of AI analysis

All AI-generated themes were reviewed by a team of data scientists to try to ensure they accurately reflected the consultation responses. They also performed quality assurance on the theme rankings.

Once the AI analysis was complete, policy officials conducted a validation step by comparing the themes against a representative sample of responses. This cross-check confirmed the relevance and accuracy of the themes and ensured that key insights were not missed.

Differences between respondent types

All free-text questions were analysed for all respondents. To explore differences between respondent types, we examined whether individuals (and respective subgroups) responded differently than organisations (and respective subgroups).

To identify respondent types, we used the following questions:

Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation? - Individual or organisation response

If you are responding as an individual, how would you describe yourself? - Respondent type

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, which of the following best describes who/which part of the sector your organisation represents? – Organisation

Strengths and limitations

Whilst we have put in measures to reduce these risks, conducting human validation of responses, there are inherent risks in using AI that should be acknowledged:

Hallucinations: The LLM may misinterpret responses and present incorrect information confidently.

Spelling errors: If consultation responses contain misspellings, the model may not correct them, especially if the misspelling could be a proper noun (e.g., a company name).



Department
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