

# POSITION STATEMENT: FOOD AS A SAFEGUARDING ISSUE

## KEY MESSAGES:

- Complex food behaviours are prevalent among Children in Care
- Supporting children to develop healthy eating behaviours and relationships with food is a far wider issue than simply understanding and preparing healthy food for children
- Food is at the heart of all aspects of care
- There is inadequate statutory resource and support to upskill carers in the importance of food in care

## Children in Care

A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a “looked after child” or “child in care”, the latter to be preferred by many children and young people<sup>(1)</sup>. Most recent data for England shows that there were 72,670 Children in Care in 2017 and North West has the highest prevalence with 13,230 Children in Care<sup>(2)</sup>.

## Scope of the problem

Children in Care are among the most socially marginalised groups in England. They often display abnormal food related behaviours due to their past experience, often involving neglect and deprivation<sup>(3,7)</sup>. Carers face many challenges in relation to food behaviours and often feel isolated and unsupported<sup>(8,9)</sup>. Lack of skills to deal with complex food issues is one of the most common reason for placement breakdown. The number of Children in Care is rising each year, which in addition to drastic cuts to local authority budgets places a growing pressures on the care system<sup>(9)</sup>. Carers are at the centre of the lives of Children in Care and require comprehensive training and ongoing support to provide a healthy environment for the most vulnerable young people in our society<sup>(8)</sup>.

## What does the evidence say?

Food plays a major role in a child or young person’s health and well-being. Children in Care:

- Are more likely to be overweight and obese compared to their peers outside the care system. Research shows that the body mass index (BMI) of 35% of Children in Care increases once they go into care<sup>(5)</sup>.

- Often come into care with a poor nutritional status<sup>(4)</sup> and can suffer with food anxieties caused by their adverse experiences including abuse and/or neglect<sup>(8)</sup>.
- Can develop food issues during care placements due to the stress associated with an unknown environment where they might feel insecure and/or excluded<sup>(6, 8)</sup>. Common behaviours include excessive eating and/or hoarding of food and picky eating<sup>(11)</sup>.

Furthermore:

- Decisions about how food is provided and consumed has a fundamental impact on the relationships and dynamics within a care setting. Food practices have massive potential for creating an environment where children can begin to feel part of a family unit<sup>(8)</sup>.
- Most carers don’t receive any specific preparation in relation to nutrition and the social aspects of meals and eating<sup>(6)</sup>.
- Children not eating can cause adults distress, creating an anxious pre-occupation<sup>(8)</sup>.
- Aberrant eating behaviours are found as one of the main concerns for carers<sup>(11)</sup> and result in 14% of foster carers leaving their roles<sup>(9)</sup>.
- 1 in 3 Children in Care will fail to achieve a long-lasting placement and may experience frequent placement moves. 11% of young people in care have three or more placements during a year<sup>(15)</sup>.
- Challenging child behaviours which impacts the ability to build a trusting relationship with the young people are the most common reasons for placement breakdown<sup>(11)</sup>.
- Young people crave stability and disruptions in placements may undermine their well-being and feelings of self-worth<sup>(14)</sup> and impact their psychological, social and academic outcomes<sup>(15)</sup>.

## Regulatory landscape in the UK

The most recent review (2016) of nutrition policy and guidance and the current practice regarding food provision in children's care settings highlighted a number of gaps and recommendations<sup>(11)</sup>:

- There is a need for nutrition to be explicitly mentioned in updated statutory guidance on promoting the health and welfare of Children in Care, along with physical, emotional and mental health.
- Practical programmes and support are required.
- There is limited availability of, access to, and coverage of food and nutrition training available to carers.
- It is important that local authorities also have policies and clear pathways (processes) to help corporate parents access suitably qualified professionals to obtain food and nutrition advice.
- An audit of current local authority practices and a local needs analysis on nutrition for Children in Care could be used to inform the development of the practical guidance and/or training packages.
- There is no routine, universally-reported information on weight status of Children in Care and limited information on other health outcomes linked to nutrition.
- No specific references to food or good nutrition are included in the framework or inspection handbook run by Ofsted<sup>(11)</sup>.
- Incomplete/unavailable health information about e.g. immunisations, medications and allergies are a prevalent issue in children's care sector<sup>(16)</sup>.

## Our Position and what we will do

**Advocacy:** We developed an innovative Food in Care (FiC) programme responding to the need for additional information and support for carers of children and young people on healthy diet, nutrition and food behaviour issues. The programme comprises of digital resource ([www.foodincare.org.uk](http://www.foodincare.org.uk)) and training package. Evaluation of FiC programme has demonstrated that food needs to be given the priority it deserves<sup>(8,12)</sup>. The ability to understand the origins of food behaviour issues impacts positively on relationships within a care setting and promotes placement stability. 53 FiC champions have been trained across the North West in 2018. Champions highlighted the importance of implementing the FiC course into mandatory 'Skills to Foster' training<sup>(12)</sup>. Going forward, we will continue to deliver and expand FiC work to other areas and settings.

**Policy change:** The importance and key role of nutrition and positive food practices in care are currently underestimated and not effectively highlighted in social care policies. Therefore, we are developing a 'Food in Care charter'. Our next step is to work with local authorities and leading organisations working with carers and children and young people in care - to encourage adoption of the charter to tackle poor health outcomes of Children in Care. The charter will call for more attention to be given to food practices, during foster carers annual reviews and during the placement and ongoing support. It will also include guidance to support the provision of healthy food by foster carers and residential home's staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is an urgent need to adapt strategy and practice to ensure that food and nutrition including the broader psychological aspects of food is included in all aspects of caring for Children in Care.
- It is essential that children's services and policy makers take a whole systems approach to create a healthier environment for Children in Care.
- Working together to implement Food in Care charter is a first step in raising the profile of food and nutrition as safeguarding issues.

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