

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption and Fostering

Co-Chairmen: Craig Whittaker MP, Tom Harris MP

Secretary: Jessica Lee MP; Treasurer: Lisa Nandy

10th December 2012. 16.00 pm in the House of Commons Committee Room 10.

In Attendance: N.B. Includes only those that signed the attendance sheet

Craig Whittaker	MP for Calder Valley
Francis Hare	Independent Member of the House of Lords & Vice
Earl of Listowel	Chair APPG for Children in Care
Harvey Gallagher	NAFP
Anna Sharkey	Adoption Focus/Father Hudsons
Chris Smith	CVAA
Christine Prickett	CVAA
Michelle Cuffe	Excel Fostering
Clive Birkhamshaw	Royal Greenwich
Sue Lucas	Assist
Lucia Hodgson	Parliamentary Assistant
Valerie Wigfall	Children's Family Trust
Grace Wyatt	Nexus Fostering
John Collins	Nexus Fostering
Alan Fisher	Supported Fostering Services
Lynda Gilbert	Independent.
Joanne Alper	Adoptionplus
Louise Heron	Fostering Solutions
Nathan Whitley	Fosterplus
Helen Oakwater	Independent Trainer
Emily Harte	Action for Children
Wendy Beaumont	CVAA - Minute Taker

Apologies:-

Baroness Thornton	House of Lords
Andrea Leadsom	MP
Peter Sandiford	PAC
Natasha Finlayson	The Who Cares? Trust
Sue Jones	Family Care Notts
Andy Stott	BAAF
Sally Heaven Richards	Action for Children
Marion Hundleby	Independent
Jean Hasnip	Cornerstone NE
Norman Goodwin	Adoption Matters NW
Elaine Dibben	BAAF

1.	The meeting's start was delayed until 4.30 to allow for the difficulties of attendees gaining entry due to a large Sikh convention.
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2	The Earl of Listowel opened the meeting at 4.30pm and after apologising for the late start welcomed those who had arrived. He said that Craig Whittaker had also been unavoidably delayed but would be joining the meeting.
3	E.o.L welcomed those in attendance and introduced the theme of the meeting "Child-centred care planning in times of austerity: Investing in stability" . A presentation followed, by Harvey Gallagher, CEO of Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers. <i>[CW arrived a few minutes into the presentation.]</i>
4	<p>Child-centred care planning in times of austerity: Investing in stability presented by Harvey Gallagher. Please see attached.</p> <p>HG stated that the focus of this meeting will be to explore how, working together, we can be brave enough to make the right plans for placing children, making use of all the options available including long term fostering and children's homes because, in these times of cutbacks and austerity, the challenge to maintain decision-making that is truly child-centered is greater than ever. Also there is a significant pressure on local authorities, perhaps more than anyone else, to make shorter term, finance-led decisions.</p> <p>HG went on to cover the following areas within this debate-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Permanency/Long-Term Foster Care/Special Guardianship Orders ○ Issues From Practice ○ Working Together : Principles of Good Practice
5	Francis thanked HG for his presentation and invited CW to take the Chair.
6	CW took the chair and introduced Anna Sharkey from Father Hudson's Society that provides foster carers and is linked to Adoption Focus.
7	<p>AS began by summarising her role as Family Placements Manager at Father Hudson's Society and CE at Adoption Focus. She also shared her experience growing up in a family which provided foster care and also adopted her youngest sister 40 years ago.</p> <p>She then outlined the Recurring themes in the public debate relating to looked after children that include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ High numbers of children in care ○ High numbers of children waiting for adoptive placements ○ High numbers of placements experienced by children in care ○ A significant shortfall in the numbers of foster placements ○ Concerns about residential care (both historical abuse; and children being moved to parts of the country where care is cheaper) ○ Poor outcomes for formerly looked after children in terms of educational achievement; physical and mental health; criminal behaviour; employment prospects

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Processes in respect of the recruitment criteria and assessment of foster carers and adoptive parents are too long, too PC, and lacking in good common sense which puts perfectly good people off ○ Social workers intervene in family life too quickly/not soon enough <p>Anna went on to examine:</p> <p>What motivates people and providers of child care services? So what does it cost? How can the care be provided?</p> <p>AS concluded that children need security and stability, and have a right to family life. Those who find themselves in public care have already experienced insecurity and change. We have a duty to ensure that this is not exacerbated by the care provided once they leave their birth families. Foster carers and adopters all care about children. The contribution made by foster carers in providing permanent and good care for children and young people must be recognised. Adoption offers a legal option which secures the child's permanent status. The quicker that this can happen for a child, the better. This means that Local Authorities must be able to consider VAA placements at the same time as they consider their in-house provision. Removing children from their birth families is a huge responsibility. It is as important a responsibility to ensure that the care they are provided with as an alternative, is properly planned and adequately supported. That costs money and time.</p> <p>However, we do know that there is an increasing demand for children's care [<i>source: DfE published data re England LA's looked after children (25th September 2012)</i>].</p> <p>AS ended her presentation with the following thought ... when she was training, one of the essential texts she was required to read was the 1973 research '<i>Children who Wait: a study of children needing substitute families</i>' by Jane Rowe and Lydia Lambert. In brief, chapter 10 argued that in the short term there needs to be greater recognition of the situation, and commitment of staff and resources of all types. In the long term there needs to be more effective family diagnosis, decision-making and implementation; there needs to be a range of substitute families available, accompanied by greater recognition of issues relating to good quality foster care. More emphasis needs to be placed on both pre- and post-placement services. Even though adoption is often regarded as cheap and fostering more expensive, both require effort and investment.</p>
8	<p>CW thanked Anna and invited questions both for the speakers and to take forward to the Minister. A number of views were raised and questions asked:</p>
9	<p>Frances Emily. Adoption for Children</p> <p>The qualifications of foster carers are not spoken about much. The majority of FCs are dedicated and do fantastic work - but is the bar lower than it should be in order to attract recruits?</p> <p>AS responded that there are strict regulations that govern recruitment and Anna does not feel the bar has been lowered to let anyone through the door as this would not be safe for children. In 1973 research highlighted there were children in care who had no placement plans. This does not happen</p>

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	<p>now. Panels have the role of quality assurance.</p> <p>HG said that it is all about understanding the data. There are reported vacancy levels from Agencies but it is not clear. Is the data easy to understand? It's also about matching and how you plan to have a good match. Do we have a shortage of FCs?</p> <p>CW shared an experience from Calderdale, Yorkshire where 100 families applied to be foster carers but only 1 family was accepted. The reasons for rejection were not reflective of the real world. He recently visited a children's home recently for children aged 8 to 18 years. It was clearly providing a good experience but it was not offering permanence and thought that strategic thinking for children's homes is required.</p> <p>HS added that we do not have a full picture of the true costs. With residential care, market forces dictate the fee. Within Local Authorities, where their own services are used, it is often oversimplified and they do not have a full understanding of their costs, whereas independent providers are clearer about their costs.</p> <p>There is a danger of short term budget planning and LAs often look at where they can save money in the current year without taking the longer term view.</p> <p>E.o.L asked about the success of same sex foster carers and adopters.</p> <p>AS reported that some recent research presented by BAAF indicated positive outcomes for children placed in same sex relationships. It found there is not the same sort of grief reaction at being unable to have birth children and therefore relationships are more open and equal.</p> <p>Regarding children's homes, Anna agreed that there are certainly some children for whom living in a family is too difficult. But many children need a longer time to feel secure rather than move placements and providing opportunities for children to stay put past 18 years needs to be developed.</p>
10	<p>Joanne Alper. Adoption Plus</p> <p>Do the structures in the system help with long term planning? Investment in the right services at the right time prevents problems.</p> <p>She suggested the same amount of money could be spent but should be focused on what the child needs and setting up services for long term therapeutic support at 18 years. The offer of the right support when it is needed is key.</p> <p>She added as a Child Care Team Manager she has seen breakdowns in FC placements which end up in expensive residential placements.</p>
11	<p>Louise Herron. Fostering Solutions</p> <p>LH stated that LAs often make placements for 28 days. This puts a tremendous pressure on the child and the foster parents. Also the cost to society is not taken into account. She wondered whether all LAs had an understanding between commissioning and procuring.</p>
12	<p>Chris, Foster Carer. Somerset.</p> <p>Has noticed that most therapeutic work can only be done with children in permanence. No treatment and counselling is offered until the child is in a</p>

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	<p>stable placement, so a damaged child potentially receives no treatment or counselling. Foster Carers give children love and the knowledge that they can expect love but the children are often unaware they have value and they lack self esteem. Also, abused children do not understand why abusers within their birth family are not prosecuted.</p> <p>AS responded that one of the difficulties about the 28 day emergency placement process is we do not know how long a child will be in placement. They could go down the SGO route but this may not be the right option for those children.</p> <p>E.o.L added that therapeutic intervention can help to develop enduring and reliable relationships with children. It needs supporting along with mental health services.</p> <p>HG added that procurement as opposed to commissioning works against children getting the services they require.</p> <p>CW said that LAs were always trying to "catch up" with their budgets which did not assist the situation. LAs had to find money to put into looked after children's services. We need to understand what is really needed in base budgets.</p>
13	<p>CW asked those present what were their concerns that should be taken to the minister. He added the new Children's Minister Edward Timpson has a better understanding than many others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is he attending to these needs for adoptive parents and foster carers? • Will he ring fence some money for Looked After Children's Services? These services need a reliable source of funding. <p>CW added that he would also ask ET to respond to the list of priorities listed from the last meeting.</p>
14	<p>Alan Fisher, BAAF Trustee</p> <p>AF endorsed all earlier comments, and thought there needed to be some debate about how procurement is distorting key elements. Such a debate needs to be put into context of the whole system of childcare within LAs.</p> <p>HG commented that procurement worked against getting children help. Local Authorities group children as being the same, which does not allow for and acknowledge differences of need and catering for their individual children's needs.</p> <p>Helen Oakwater , Adoptive Parent and Independent trainer</p> <p>HO said that there is the perception that the love of a family is enough – it is not. Placing deeply traumatised children with loving families is not enough. Carers need a lot of therapeutic support so that children can make sense and move forward. The pre-supposition from some Ministers that a loving family is enough needs to be challenged.</p> <p>From the floor</p>

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	<p>As Foster Carers we give children love and build self esteem but sometimes we are too close. They need therapeutic input and we recognise children need outside counselling. Please take this to the Minister. We found a recognised need for several children but we cannot get the LA to recognise it. With therapeutic support children can be set up well for adoption or permanence.</p> <p>HO stated that research shows trauma in pre/post birth can change the chemistry of a child and how they see the world. Therapeutic care needs to be right all the way through to manage that change in society.</p>
15	<p>CW asked Panel for any further views.</p> <p>AS agreed that simplistic views are not helpful and there needs to be a thorough assessment process. Chair A common sense approach is better, referring back to his experience of 100 families applying as FCs and only 1 accepted. It is about identifying what is right for the child.</p> <p>HO agreed the individual child's needs had to be assessed but the impact of trauma for the child is not being understood which leads to more placement breakdowns.</p> <p>E.o.L The language used is important. Children's development varies widely, some have delays and it is a real problem the language around this is not more precise as it can be misleading. A much better understanding of child development and trauma is the beginning of a culture of better understanding.</p>
16	<p>Michelle Cuffe. Excel Fostering</p> <p>MC asked do Ministers really understand professionals and the criteria used when children come into care? The criteria are so high that children are already damaged and traumatised. Therapy should be a given.</p> <p>CW responded that thresholds were different around the country and he suspected that resource issues were driving this. He asked if the money is being spent, why are the outcomes not better?</p> <p>Joanne Alper. Adoptionplus JA There needs to be a common sense approach alongside the recognition of knowledge learned through experience. This is not being taken forward. Shortening assessments is putting some people off. There is so much parents need to understand and they will not be properly prepared with a 4-month assessment. The reality is a thorough in-depth assessment properly addresses the impact that an on-line assessment cannot replicate. She hopes the Minister takes into consideration the importance of all this knowledge and experience.</p>
17	<p>CW asked about the impact of the Munro Review and were recommendations starting to take hold quickly enough for Social Workers on the front line?</p>

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	<p>AS responded that the key message from Munro is that people have become risk averse, there is much more emphasis and responsibility put on SWs. Having a process where individuals are held personally responsible makes it very difficult. The review says the right things but in a way the services are considered by outsiders.</p> <p>AF stated that from his experience of working with children in care the Munro Review has made very little difference as yet. Social Workers say it is a very procedural approach. It was more an exercise in getting the Review done and less about the quality that is supposed to go into it. There is excellent legislation which is not being put into practice. All sorts of other pressures are the reason; pressure from the media and from Government. Government is increasingly critical of what SWs do, which naturally makes them risk averse.</p>
18	<p>From the Floor</p> <p>Returning to the title of today's meeting: <i>"Child-centred care planning in times of austerity: Investing in stability"</i> there needs to be acceptance of this. If we are still making placements for 48 hours at a time, how can we mean stability. We need to challenge to look for better financial placements. When is there going to be acceptance that LAs are probably not cheaper?</p> <p>AS agreed.</p>
19	<p>CW confirmed to the Clerk that by the next meeting he will have the Ministers answers from the meeting before last. The Clerk confirmed these replies can go out with the calling notice.</p>
20	<p>Chair sincerely thanked speakers and said it was a pity that not more people had been able to be present . To all those in attendance he wished them a happy Christmas.</p>
21	<p>The meeting closed at 6.05 pm.</p>

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