

London Borough of Hackney, Children and Families Service response to the Education Select Committee report on fostering and Department for Education report on Foster Care in England

Context

In December 2017, the House of Commons Education Committee published a report on fostering. The report found that the system is under pressure, foster carers are not valued enough and children are experiencing too many placement moves. A summary can be found at Appendix A.

In February 2018, the Department for Education (DfE) published the fostering stocktake report undertaken by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Ows. The report made 36 recommendations for government, local authorities and independent fostering agencies. The recommendations focused on the parenting aspects of fostering, birth family contact, matching and placement stability, and support for children at the edge of care and can be found at Appendix B.

In July 2018, The DfE published the government response to the Foster care in England report and the Education Select Committee's inquiry into fostering. The priority areas identified include improving the experience of children in foster carer and greater stability for children in care.

Hackney Children and Families Service sets out its response in this report to Corporate Parenting Board to complete one of the recommendations made following the Children and Young People Scrutiny Review of Fostering in October 2017.

The government response to the Education Select Committee reporting into fostering and Foster Care in England (July 2018)¹

Below is a summary of key findings, recommendations and Hackney Children and Families Service's response to these:

Experiences of children and young people in foster care:

Findings

- Children and young people describe stable placements as a chance to “stand still” and be normal, with most stating the best thing about care was their foster family.
- Young people do not always feel listened to or involved in care planning decisions. Consultation with children was variable or often tokenistic.
- Profiles too often reflect the risks posed by the child's experience and circumstances, but do not adequately reflect who they are and their needs.
- Children report they are not provided with adequate information about carers prior to placements commencing.
- Contact with family (particularly siblings) continues to be one of the most important issues raised by looked after children.

¹ The full government response can be found here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/727613/Fostering_better_outcomes_.pdf

- It is identified that children are rarely encouraged to keep in contact with previous foster carers.

Recommendations

- The Corporate Parenting Principles (Children and Social work Act 2017) should guide local policy and practice.
- Local authorities should explore routes to make better use of data on the experiences of children and young people, and use this to drive improvements
- All looked after children and their carers should have clear information about how to access advocacy support.
- Social workers should always talk to children about who is important to them, particularly former foster parents and foster siblings and, unless it is not in their interests, they should encourage and facilitate that contact. Where possible, ongoing contact should be facilitated if this is what the child has requested.

Hackney's response:

- Hackney's multi-strand placement stability strategy has led to improved performance over the past year. It has promoted the importance of placement stability with staff, encouraging them to build a 'team around the placement' which aims to identify placement fragility early on in order to devise a response to make placements more resilient and prevent break down. The percentage of looked after children with three or more placements in one year has decreased to 11% in 2017/18 from 18% in 2016/17.
- Hackney's Children in Care Council (Hackney Youth Care Council) provides looked after children with an opportunity to share their experiences of the care system and increase their ability to influence and improve the service they receive. Young people have been involved in staff recruitment panels, delivering "Skills To Foster" training to potential foster carers, and provided feedback about services.
- The Children's Rights Service offers children and young people access to confidential and impartial support on issues concerning the support they receive.
- The format of looked after child profiles in relation to placement matching is undergoing a review by the Fostering and Placements Service to improve the way information is captured and will include a greater focus on the child's personality.
- Revised policies on placement planning and placement breakdowns have been implemented to support placement planning for young people and foster carers before placement moves takes place.
- The format of Hackney Looked After Child Review meetings has been designed to ensure that they are child/young person focused and gather information about what is important to the child/young person including contact arrangements.

Stability and permanence:

Findings

- High quality, and early care planning and decision-making are crucial in promoting placement stability.
- The impact of the introduction of long-term foster care as a legal definition is not yet fully understood and national data is patchy.
- 64% of those returning home experienced at least one failed return home and a third 'bounced' between care twice or more times, indicating children were being returned home too early, without the support they needed.

- Foster Care in England heard frequently about foster carers who would welcome the greater certainty and permanence that an SGO would bring, but cannot afford to care for the child without the financial support fostering provides.

Recommendations and proposals

- The government will introduce a training package to support the continuous professional development of social workers in local authorities to promote permanency.
- For local authorities to consider the potential benefits of fostering on the edge of care or 'shared care'.
- For local authorities to think how Fostering for Adoption could be more widely used.
- For local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies to discuss Staying Put with young people and foster parents at an earlier stage.

Hackney's response:

- Improving placement stability remains a priority and there has been a recent review of the procedures around placement moves. All placement move requests must be presented at the Care Planning Panel before a move occurs. In addition to this, a "stuck/unstuck" forum has been established to support social work units reflect on cases and receive support from senior managers to support placement stability. Training around placement stability is in place for staff and performance is closely monitored via management oversight, including monthly performance reporting as well as the cross-service Placement Stability Working Group.
- Hackney has seen a decrease in the percentage of young people becoming looked after for the second or subsequent time, with a figure of 9.2% for 2017/18, compared to 11.8% for 2016/17.
- The Rapid Support Service went live at the end of January 2018. The service provides rapid, intense interventions with young people and families at the point of crisis with the clear aim of keeping vulnerable adolescents safe while they remain in their family context and preventing them entering the care system.
- 'Shared care' in partnership with parents is identified as an option to explore, for children where this is appropriate through the weekly Children's Resource Panel.
- In Hackney, we continue to identify children for whom adoption may be the plan arising out of care proceedings at the earliest possible stage.
- Staying Put is discussed from the age of 14 as part of planning for children at their Looked after Child Reviews.
- Permanency planning meetings take place for all children in the early stages of court processes. The Permanency planning meeting explores parallel planning.
- Fostering and adoption arrangements have been used more frequently over the past year and is actively considered whenever possible.
- All long term matched placements are presented at the Care Planning Panel. Foster carers are invited to attend to ensure they are included in the care planning and decision making to promote placement stability.

Supporting foster families:

Findings

- Foster parents report feeling taken for granted and not having any control or input into what happens in their own home. There is still reluctance to delegate day-to-day decisions to foster parents. This directly undermines the ability of the carer to parent.
- The department remains unconvinced that a national accreditation or foster carer qualification would be meaningful or helpful.
- Poor handling of allegations can result in disruptions to the whole foster family.
- Any change to the employment status of foster parents to professional would have a fundamental impact on the family-centred nature of fostering.

Recommendations and proposals

- The government will revise guidance to make clear that foster parents must be involved in all decisions and reviews, unless there is a legitimate reason not to.
- The government will work with the sector to consider whether the Training and Development Standards for foster parents are still fit for purpose.
- The government will promote a revised and strengthened Foster Carer Charter.

Hackney's response:

- Foster carers are encouraged to take an active role in the 'settling-in meeting' and input on the day-to-day decisions about what happens in their home. Hackney will welcome the government's revised guidance on foster carers being involved in all decisions and reviews.
- Hackney welcomes the review of the Training and Development Standards for foster carers particularly for those foster carers who may have completed aspects of their training through their profession.
- Hackney welcomes the government's revised and strengthened Foster Carer Charter.
- Hackney works to ensure that foster carers who are the subject of allegations or concerns have access to independent support through the Hackney Foster Carers Council (HFCC) and the Fostering Network, as well as support from their supervising social worker
- Hackney will be implementing the Mockingbird model, pioneered in England by the Fostering Network, which is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model which provides respite care and peer support. The model aims to improve stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationship between carers, young people and children's social care

Practice Improvement:

Findings

- There are many areas of good practice across the country, in different aspects of fostering.
- Both reviews, however, highlighted a number of concerns where guidance was silent or unclear, or where practice was not following guidance or the legislative framework.
- Continuation of concerns regarding the amount of changes in social worker and periods of time without contact from the social worker.
- Children report that there are many people involved in their care and they are not always clear about who these people are or what they do.

Recommendations/proposals

- The government will revise, in particular, expectations on delegated authority, physical affection, the role of foster parents in reviews and meetings, value and respect to foster

parents, contact with birth families and siblings, referral information and quality of preparation for transitions.

- Creation of a network of Fostering Trailblazers to work with other partners across the country.
- The government will work with organisations representing Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and LAs to consider how the role of IROs can be put to best effect in the current system and under existing legislation.

Hackney's response:

- Hackney welcomes the government's revised expectations on delegated authority, physical affection, the role of foster carers in reviews and meetings, value and respect to foster carers, contact with birth families and siblings, referral information, and quality of preparation for transitions. The introduction of the Mockingbird Model in Hackney will give the Fostering Service opportunity to reflect about delegated authority of foster carers.
- Hackney welcomes the creation of a network of Fostering Trailblazers to work with other partners across the country.
- Hackney welcomes the government's suggestions that LAs consult on how the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IROs) can be put to best effect in the current system and under existing legislation. In Hackney the IRO Service works closely with social worker units providing support and challenge in care planning. Looked After Child reviews have been developed to ensure their children and young people, and carers are fully engaged through the use of creative medium to contribute to planning but also develop the child's life story.

Sufficiency and Markets

Findings

- The amount of approved family and friends carers increased, however there remains a steady decrease in the number of approved foster carers and there are fewer actual places for children.
- The supply and capacity of foster parents and the way in which foster placements are identified and matched with children continue to be challenged to ensure the most appropriate placements for children.
- Nationally, a larger proportion of 'harder to place' young people were still being placed in Independent Fostering Agency rather than local authority placements.

Recommendations and proposals

- Encourage local authorities – and Independent Fostering Agencies – to consider joint recruitment efforts.
- Government will develop tools, resources and approaches to help local authorities better understand the cost of their fostering services and placements.

Hackney's response:

- Hackney is part of the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium (NLAFC) and works together with the other five authorities in the consortium on foster carer recruitment and sharing information about in-house vacancies. Specialised recruitment and advertising campaigns have been created, targeting potential foster carers with specialised skills or experience. The number of foster carers recruited in Hackney 2017-18 was 17, similar to previous year at 18 and higher than the most recently

published statistical neighbour average of 7 (for 2016/17). The Service is working to further increase the number of new foster carers recruited.

- An extensive training programme is currently provided to Hackney in-house and connected persons foster carers and is reflective of our looked after child population's needs.
- Hackney welcomes the government's intention to develop tools on better understanding the cost of fostering services and placements.

The report calls for the Department for Education and its associated governing bodies to:

- initiate a national recruitment and awareness campaign to improve capacity in the system
- give accurate and relevant information to foster carers and young people prior to the commencement of a placement, and sufficient notice in advance of a placement change
- consult on national minimum allowance levels, to investigate the level of funding needed to match rises in living costs and allow carers to meet the needs of those they are caring for;
- review and update current taxation rules for foster carers
- support local authorities and foster care providers in piloting new ways of working, especially through more early intervention and prevention
- ensure all young people in foster care are meaningfully engaged, have full access to advocacy services and where possible are placed with their siblings
- establish a national college for foster carers, which will work to improve working conditions

The full report can be read here:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/340/340.pdf>

Appendix B: **Department for Education, Foster Care in England (published February 2018)**

The Fostering Stocktake made a number of recommendations – these are set out below:

1. Foster carers must be treated professionally
2. Statutory guidance should be changed to ensure foster carers involvement in review meetings is the default position
3. Department for Education (DfE) to urgently remind all Local Authorities (LAs) that the delegation of total authority for all category one decisions should apply automatically, unless, for exceptional reasons, such delegation is inappropriate
4. DfE and LAs should recognise that automatic delegated authority of category one decisions must also apply to voluntary accommodated children
5. DfE to clarify in future guidance the issue of physical affection
6. LAs should be able to decide on an individual social worker who is best placed to offer support to a foster family in long-term placements
7. LAs should be able to dispense with the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and re-invest savings in frontline staffing
8. There needs to be an assessment and consultation with the sector and carers on the effectiveness, cost and value for money of fostering panels. DfE are urged to commission this
9. LAs need to ensure DfE guidance on allegations is followed in all cases and carers need to be reassured that they will be supported through the process
10. All fostering services should consider introducing structured peer support for carers.
11. The stocktake endorses tiered approaches to paying fees, linked to the skills and experiences of carers
12. Payments to carers are not inadequate, nor an obstacle to recruitment
13. Government and LAs should resist any move to award foster carers employment status.
14. There is great merit in a national register of carers, the DfE is urged to evaluate the costs and advantages of this
15. There should be greater regional cooperation on recruitment and as such, LAs should consider combining recruitment efforts
16. DfE should consider rebranding and relaunching First4Adoption to improve foster care recruitment. This would need substantial funding from DfE. LAs and IFAs might also be expected to contribute as it will help to reduce their own marketing spend
17. All LAs and IFAs are urged to review and improve the way they handle initial enquiries, with greater use of mystery shopping to monitor the quality of response
18. LAs and IFAs should invite a much larger proportion of resigning/ retiring carers to take part in exit interviews
19. The perception is that there is more poaching from IFAs to LAs, where this happens IFAs should be compensated. It is suggested the transfer protocol, produced by the Fostering Network, is amended to reflect this.
20. LAs should share framework contracts, the secrecy and variation in prices only benefits providers
21. LAs should come together to create about 10 commissioning consortia, the benefits of critical mass has the potential to reduce spend on fostering
22. The consortia should appoint national account managers for larger IFAs to help reduce the likelihood of consortia competing against each other
23. Larger LAs or consortia should consider becoming self-sufficient in carer recruitment or partner with one or more IFA to provide the complete fostering service.
24. All LAs should use Bright Spots, or similar, to regularly and systematically measure children's experiences of fostering relative to other LAs

25. Statutory guidance that children should know their rights to advocacy and how to access such services should be reinforced. DfE should work with the Children's Commissioner and voluntary sector providers of advocacy services to ensure this is done
26. LAs should monitor the quality of referral information
27. Carers should, wherever possible, be able to play a proactive role in matching. Adapting adopter-led family finding techniques to help find suitable long-term fostering placements should be piloted in a number of LAs
28. Children must be routinely better prepared for a placement
29. If the proposed register of carers were not to be introduced, at the very least a vacancy management system should be established.
30. DfE is urged to remind all LAs of the change in the law with regard to contact and the need for professionals to ensure that this only takes place where it is in the best interests of the child
31. When moving placement, children should be routinely consulted about the adults and children who are important to them and, unless it is not in their interests, contact should be encouraged and facilitated
32. LA should review the environments in which family contact takes place and the way it is supervised
33. As part of the assessment process when siblings enter care, individually or simultaneously, LAs should not presume that keeping groups together is in the interest of all children. The individual needs of each child should be considered along with the ability of one set of carers to meet the developmental demands of the full sibling group.
34. Children on the edge of care and their families should receive earlier access to foster care. DfE and a select number of LAs should explore the potential of 'support foster care'
35. The priority must be to convert more fostering placements to arrangements that will last forever, either adoption of special guardianship, not least through longer term guarantees of financial support
36. The work of the Adoption Leadership Board and the Residential Care Board should continue and similar arrangements should be made to implement the recommendations of the fostering stocktake. Overseeing these boards, Ministers should establish a permanence board under the chairmanship of the Director General for Children's Social Care, with the purpose of delivering permanence to more looked after children, and a sense of belonging.

The full report can be read here:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/679320/Foster_Care_in_England_Review.pdf