

Minutes

29 January 2025 | 10.30am – 2.30pm

Coram Campus, London

Chair: Cara Jones and Steven O'Reilly

Present – in person

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| Jenny Alexander-Brown | Nottingham | JAB |
| Hanan Al-Najjar | Waltham Forest | HAN |
| Cara Jones | Chrysalis Consortium | CJ |
| Steven O'Reilly | TACT | SOR |
| Rebecca Pacy | Time Out, Sussex | RP |
| Melanie Stubbs | Shropshire | MS |
| Fiona Trewartha | East Riding, Yorkshire | FT |

Present – online

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| Nicky Lockett | West Midlands | NL |
| Shada Panjabi | Waltham Forest | SP |
| Jennifer Roy | Haringey | JR |
| Alastair Scott-McKinley | West Region, Northern Ireland | ASM |

In attendance

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| James Bury | CoramBAAF | JB |
| Georgina Coope | CoramBAAF | GC |
| Emma Fincham | CoramBAAF | EF |
| Chris Senior | Department for Education (DfE) | CS |

Apologies

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| Adam Dalal | Blackburn with Darwen BC | AD |
| Dawn Elliot | Leeds | DE |
| Nazeema Gill | Homefinding Fostering Agency | NG |
| Lisa Little | Hull | LL |
| Sam Penny | Devon | SP |
| Darryl Pottinger | Greenwich | DP |

1. Welcome and member updates

1.1 SOR and CJ welcomed members to the meeting, initiating a round of updates.

- 1.2 Members took it in turns to share how they were doing, as well as any recent celebrations or current challenges.

2. **Equality, diversity and inclusion**

- 2.1 *Foster carer equality, respect and wellbeing* – Members shared their own experiences of fostering in terms of foster carer wellbeing, as well as the experiences of other foster carers in their networks. Particular focus was given to child-to-carer violence, with members expressing distress at the lack of concern shown by social work professionals for their physical and emotional wellbeing. The importance of balancing the needs of the child with the needs of the foster carer was discussed.
- 2.2 Foster carer wellbeing is a gap in the system; no protocols in place to deal with these situations, like there would be in all other jobs. Follow-up processes exist to help the child, but not the carer.
- 2.3 EF questioned the role of the supervising social worker in these instances.
- 2.4 Pressure from social workers for foster carers to continue caring for children after violent episodes. (Child-to-carer violence).
- 2.5 SP recognised the role of the Hub Home Carer in providing emotional support to foster carers that other fostering professionals don't offer.
- 2.6 NL shared an experience where a birth child was attacked by a foster child. The family were provided with trauma support and clinical psychologists, but this still affects them as an adult. Watching parents continue to experience violence can be distressing for birth and adult children, especially when the fostering system does not respect their rights. The potential long-term impact on foster families requires greater consideration, as permanent damage can be done to family relationships and dynamics. NL recommended writing a list for social workers of behaviours that will not be tolerated in the house (biting, kicking, door slamming etc.)
- 2.7 ASM noted social worker tendency to automatically operate in child protection mode. The issue of incident forms not having space to record carer injuries causes frequent problems, as they are only designed to record how the child experienced the incident. Foster carers have been actively discouraged from recording serious injuries and there are no violence/aggression policies that apply to them.
- 2.8 MS noted how violence can extend towards family pets, with potential to result in animal deaths. In these instances, no support or compensation has been offered by the service even though birth children have been deeply traumatised the incident.
- 2.9 Foster carer wellbeing goes beyond the impact of physical violence and members emphasised the importance of considering all aspects of foster carer wellbeing, in the same way we would a child's wellbeing. There was a consistent feeling of 'nobody cares.' (For example, hospitals not having appropriate beds for disabled children, resulting in foster carers losing sleep over keeping them safe; or Institutional trauma from constant risk of accusations.) Members recognised a reluctance to share the extent of this emotional impact with social workers, due to the fear of being perceived as not coping. The lack of support available when babies move on to adoption was also highlighted.
- 2.10 JR questioned where the duty of care towards foster carers lies. At the moment, no one is held accountable if information about a child is not shared. It was agreed that transparent information sharing is important, since specialist carers do exist who can best manage violent behaviours. The

matching process is only as robust as the information fed into it and it is important to consider mental health history of the child as well. Members also considered the wider impact on retention, as experienced carers are leaving and refusing to recommend fostering to others. It was concluded that the fostering system needs to re-evaluate the best interests of the child, as they are the ones who ultimately suffer.

3. Previous placement history

- 3.1 Members discussed the lack of transparency of a child's previous placement history and the impact this can have on placement success. If the level of violence exhibited previously by a child was shared accurately, foster carers would be better placed to make an informed decision as to whether they could deal with it (especially when there are other children in the household who could be at risk.)
- 3.2 Foster carers are not getting accurate information, even though fostering standards specify it should be shared. Multiple examples were shared of children whose previous placements had broken down due to violence, where this information was not disclosed. Members agreed that a lack of awareness of violent tendencies results in them not being prepared to manage behaviours.
- 3.3 Members expressed frustration around incident recordings and social workers preventing them from being honest. Violent incident reports are often censored, with social workers forcing foster carers to downplay aggressive behaviours and avoid blunt language. One explanation for this is due to fear of the child reading these reports in later life.
- 3.4 Members expressed hurt at foster carers getting blamed for placement breakdowns, when these could have been avoided (or better managed) if the system allowed information to be shared. This could affect the availability of future placements, if services deem carers to not be coping. Members recognised the social worker fear of foster carers refusing a child based on their behavioural history, which will not aid the sufficiency issue in the long-term. It was noted how information is often disclosed strategically, once a child is already in the home, or after a repeat incident has occurred. SP questioned who is to be held accountable for this practice.

4. Lack of support over Christmas, weekends and out of office hours

- 4.1 Members discussed the impact of social work staff being absent during holiday periods and out of office hours, in particular the lack of support available during a crisis. Emergency Duty Teams have also proven to be unreliable and ineffective. It was emphasised that emergencies do not stop for holidays and weekends. In no other public sector service would all staff be allowed to take leave at the same time, but it is common for every department in a local authority to shut down for a full week over Christmas.
- 4.2 CJ described experience of child-to-carer violence as being further complicated due to it happening over the Christmas period, due to supervising social workers not being available. JAB experiences lack of support over the summer holidays – child had to remain with them for 3 weeks before they could find a residential placement, during which time they exhibited violent behaviours every day. Advice given was foster carers were not allowed to restrain the child or call the police. A third foster carer was eventually sent in to help (after their own insistence), to act as a witness and provide support whilst caring for other children in the home. Recognise the need to not criminalise children at an early age, but can cause difficulties if not other support available.

- 4.3 SP questioned who is responsible for covering or supporting the Hub Home Carer during emergency or respite periods. This is a gap in the Mockingbird model. Hub Home Carers also provide out of hours support for their constellations, but are open to criticism from social workers for the advice they give.
- 4.4 Members acknowledged the high number of placement breakdowns that occur over Christmas; a particularly triggering time for children and young people. It was thought that this pattern should be acknowledged by social services by ensuring sufficient support staff are available during this time.
- 4.5 SOR recognised the impact of social worker availability on family time arrangements and the difficulties that arise from prioritising staff working hours over the child's best interests. Members discussed the issues faced when raising complaints/concerns with their agencies, due to inconsistent or ineffective procedures.
- 4.6 RP noted how, in other areas of health and social care, out of hours support services are staffed by trained professionals who do this as a full/part-time job. EF acknowledged the difficulties of this with regards to fostering, due to the current workforce shortage. EF suggested employing current or former foster carers to run this service could be a solution, but members expressed reservations.

5. **DfE asks**

- 5.1 CS (DfE) acknowledged the shocking practice being carried out and suggested the role of government would be to implement better guidance. Members were asked where the gaps were in terms of legislation and regulations and how these could be filled. Alternatively, if the guidance does exist but is not being followed (i.e., the issue is awful local practice) then how can this be addressed?
- 5.2 Key issues:
- Lack of local violence and aggression policies in local services
 - Lack of employee rights, so not supported on a national level
 - Lack of disclosure around previous violent behaviours, drug use, self-harm, sexual offences, educational history etc.
 - Current retention figures do not reflect the number of experienced carers who are fulfilling their long-term commitments to children already in their care, but are not taking any new children.
 - Whistleblowing policies do not cover foster carers, meaning there is no safe way to flag poor practice.
 - Guidance is not the law and can be interpreted as optional.
 - Out of hours services not being sufficient
- 5.3 Suggestions:
- Accurate information being shared in a timely manner, without being filtered through a 'child-friendly' report. Reduce social worker fear of recording factual information.
 - Provide more training/guidance on how foster carers can record factual information in a way that is accurate but won't shame a child later in life.
 - Enable different fostering households to communicate with each other when a child is transferred from one home to another.
 - Making sure every fostering service has a Foster Carer Handbook; up to date and accessible.

- Clearer guidelines/templates on how to make recordings and who the intended audience should be (not the child.) Recordings need to be made with the assumption they will be used as evidence in court. Social workers should not be allowed to censor the language or dilute factual information.
- Make previous placement paperwork available for foster carers to see (such as PEP meeting records).
- Design templates to enable key information and behaviours to be captured, rather than making foster carers feel they have to omit certain details.
- Involving foster carers in the production of fostering policies.
- Staff out of hours fostering services with experienced fostering professionals who have access to fostering records. If foster carers were employed to run this service, they would need protection from blame and conflicts of interest. If this service is run by children's social workers, make this a specific role and design a rota which covers all times of year equally.
- Offer support for all members of fostering households after children/babies have moved on to adoption/another home.
- Facilitate communication between foster carers in local areas.

5.4 CS asked the group to respond to the following questions:

1. Where are the gaps in existing regulations and guidance and what specifically needs to be added/ amended to address these gaps?
2. Where regulations and guidance are available, can you identify why these are not translating to best practice within your local services?
3. Do your fostering services have written policies/guidance that address foster carer wellbeing, child-to-carer violence and/or child placement history? If so, is this guidance adhered to in your experience?

Action: Members to email their responses to GC and EF.

Action: CS and The Minister to be invited to a future meeting to continue this discussion.

6. Experiences at panel

- 6.1 CoramBAAF are hosting a [conference](#) for panel chairs and advisors, on Monday 3 March 2025. The focus will be on panel processes and how they can run effectively, as well as diversity of panel members, with input from Coram Voice sharing perspectives of young people.
- 6.2 Conference attendees will be participating in afternoon workshops, one of which is on the experiences of applicants/ approved foster carers at panel. EF asked members for their ideas on how fostering panels could improve, to inform the content of this workshop.
- 6.3 Thoughts and experiences included:
 - Feeling as though the panel have already made their decision before the applicant/foster carer enters the room, therefore the panel experience is merely a formality
 - Inappropriate questions still being asked to LGBTQ+ applicants
 - Panel members not receiving written documents far enough in advance
 - Each panel member only being able to raise two points for discussion, not allowing for all vulnerabilities (or strengths) to be explored
 - Foster carers wanting a stronger focus on their strengths, rather than just a long list of 'failures'; the potential for turning an annual review into a celebration of the year.
 - Panel chairs (or other fostering agency staff) holding the role of independent support worker

- Power imbalances and conflicts of interest amongst fostering agency staff
- An appreciation of panel questions being shared with applicants/ foster carers weeks in advance (which does not retract from the panel itself feeling performative.)
- Questioning panel purpose and autonomy; lack of foster carer ability to influence it.
- Panels blocking foster carers' attempts to discuss their concerns
- Lack of transparency around the purpose of panel and the information panel possess about applicants/foster carers
- Feeling like panel is being used as a punishment, e.g., following an allegation or standard of care investigation.

Date of next meeting: 26 June 2025 (online)