

Minutes

22 October 2025 | 10am – 12.30pm

Chair: Steven O'Reilly

Present

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	JAB
Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	HAN
Adam Dalal	Blackburn with Darwen BC	AD
Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	NG
Nicky Lockett	West Midlands	NL
Steven O'Reilly	TACT	SOR
Rebecca Pacy	Time Out, Sussex	RP
Melanie Stubbs	Shropshire	MS
Fiona Trewartha	East Riding, Yorkshire	FT
Shada Panjabi	Waltham Forest	SP
Alastair Scott-McKinley	West Region, Northern Ireland	ASM

In attendance

Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF	GC
Ellena Diamond	Department for Education	ED
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	EF
Millie Roberts	Sex Education Forum	MR

Apologies

Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	CJ
Lisa Little	Hull	LL
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	JR

1. Welcome, minutes from the last meeting and matters arising

- 1.1 SOR welcomed members to the meeting. Minutes from the last meeting were accepted as an accurate record of discussion.
- 1.2 *Matters arising – social worker interactions with children:* RP raised the issue via email of how social workers present themselves to, and communicate with, children when they know that relationship will be temporary. RP highlighted the need for openness regarding the longevity of social worker roles, particularly during this time of high staff turnover. Members recognised the negative impact on children's wellbeing when social workers give the impression, they'll be in their life long-term, but then leave after a few weeks or months. This is particularly frustrating

when, upon meeting a child for the first time, said practitioner already knows their role will be short-term (e.g., they are changing jobs or going on maternity leave). This creates the sense that social workers expect transparency from everyone else whilst not leading with that themselves, making both children and foster carers reluctant to trust and engage with other practitioners in the future. Equally, social workers should be honest about what they can and cannot deliver within their timescale, as families would rather be met with kindness and clarity than empty promises. HAN noted how DfE are only interested in tangible quick fixes and MS suggested a 'Code of Conduct' document be produced, outlining social worker (and foster carer) responsibilities and consequences for not adhering to these. This should include a note on honesty and acting with integrity, as well as a mechanism for foster carers to raise poor practice safely.

Action: EF to raise issue with the Fostering Advisory Committee for a discussion on social work culture and best practice.

2. Equality, diversity and inclusion

2.1 *Black History Month:* SOR shared how TACT circulate information about Black History Month for carers to share with children. Children also receive their own newsletter with games, activities and recipes to celebrate Black culture. It was acknowledged that most fostering services do not provide these types of resources.

2.2 *Impact of the far right on children and families – what support is available/needed?* EF acknowledged recent events including hate crimes, Unite the Kingdom march, Operation Raise the Colours flag flying campaign, increasingly hostile immigration environment, riots of last summer, and increase in far-right narratives becoming more normalised. As part of a running EDI agenda item across all practice forums and advisory committees, attendees discussed the following:

- Thinking about the impact on families, what experiences are you hearing about in your networks?
- And similarly, thinking about the impact on practitioners/workers, what experiences are you hearing?
- Are there any initiatives or is there any support in your networks that would be helpful for others to know about? Potentially to counter and challenge the narrative, but also to support families?
- Is there anything else you would like to see CoramBAAF doing to support you as practitioners?

Action: Members to please email EF and GC with any further thoughts or information on this topic. CoramBAAF to collate responses from all practice areas and consider next steps.

2.3 Please note the points raised during this discussion which are recorded below reflect individual member's first-hand experiences of racism and discrimination and contain upsetting details:

- One agency invited foster carers and staff to a virtual safe space meeting, to talk about what's happening and how it is affecting them. This was appreciated.
- Attending in person meetings in central London can feel scary and certain areas need to be avoided.
- Black and Brown people are afraid to be out on the streets during protests etc.
- CoramBAAF could create safe (virtual) spaces for members to talk to each other and create plans of support.

- One member has always felt safe, welcome and at home in London until recently. Now they've suddenly been made to feel like a burden to society, as though they shouldn't be living here.
- People are being reminded of difficult school years when racism was sadly experienced as 'the norm'. Kids in the UK today have grown up feeling part of society, so it's harder for them now than for the adults who grew up with experiences of racism/ discrimination.
- Fostering services/groups which are predominantly white are not impacted by this situation, so it is easy for them to acknowledge how terrible it is then move on. Some local authorities have very little cultural diversity. To a majority of social workers (and foster carers) the activity from the far right is something happening on TV and therefore 'in the background', so they feel like they don't need to worry about it in great detail. They don't appreciate the day-to-day impact on Black and global majority/ ethnic minority people who have to evaluate their safety every time they leave the house. Akin to conversations Black families have in America around what to do if stopped by the police, there are always thoughts of 'what if?'
- Blackburn has a very diverse community, yet every mini-roundabout has had a St George's cross painted on it and the number of flags are increasing.
- Nobody is asking foster families how they or their children are feeling. Social workers don't need training in order to ask someone how they are feeling. All that's needed is empathy.
- Members were reminded of the poem First They Came by Martin Niemöller *'First They Came'*
- Bystander training was highlighted as a valuable way of supporting what to do when witnessing racist or misogynist acts. This course talks though ways individuals can speak up and intervene safely, to de-escalate the situation and support those targeted.

3. **Relationships and sex education training for foster carers**

- 3.1 Millie Roberts (Sex Education Forum) gave a presentation on their Caring Conversations relationships and sex education (RSE) training for foster carers. Sex Education Forum are a charity working to ensure that all young people access high-quality and inclusive RSE. Young people are surveyed every year via poll, to gain their views on the quality of their RSE. Evidence on the positive impact of good RSE can be found on the SEF website.
- 3.2 Their long-term vision is: *'We want to create a generation of foster carers for whom addressing the RSE needs of the children in their care is a norm, and for cared for young people to find that informal RSE is available from their foster carers and other trusted adults.'*
- 3.3 The [Start Talking: Relationships and sex education – a guide for foster care](#) can be accessed for free on the SEF and Fostering Network websites.
- 3.4 MR had two key questions for members:
1. How can we boost recruitment for these training sessions?
 2. Do you prefer physical or online resources?
- 3.5 JAB queried the support available for foster carers around RSE related allegations. For example, if a parent or social worker disagreed with the support foster carers were giving a young person in relation to sexual or gender identity. This was recognised as reason for schools are not delivering effective RSE, and foster carers are even more vulnerable. MR recognised that, as part of the [RSHE guidelines](#), all schools must cover LGBT+ content. Whilst vague and not specific to fostering, this can be used as a justification for inclusive conversations within the home. Additionally, this training does recognise trans young people in its content.

- 3.6 HAN highlighted the added complexity of birth families whose views may differ from foster families, or who feel RSE is not in a foster carer's remit. Any training must take this into consideration, particularly for social workers who need to support young people stuck between two opposing sides. As a school governor, HAN recognised the biggest safeguarding risk in secondary schools to be the rise of misogynistic behaviour in boys. This issue can be particularly challenging to navigate with foster children, depending on their experiences with birth family.

Action: *MR to circulate slides to members after the meeting, via GC. For further information, members can contact millie@sexeducationforum.org.uk*

4. Questions for DfE discussion

- 4.1 Members considered the following questions from DfE in advance of them joining:
- How can we create a system of regulations and guidance which provides the right level of support to children and carers, minimising burdens for carers (and social workers), without risking diluting the entitlements of children in care?
 - What would you have needed over the last 6-12 months to be the person fulfilling the trusted long-term relationship for the child in your care? (Fine to give different responses for different children.)
 - What are the core things I need to keep being the best foster carer I can be?

5. Conversation with DfE

- 5.1 Ellena Diamond joined the meeting from the looked after children placements division at the Department for Education. Members shared their thoughts regarding the above questions.

5.2 *Guidance, regulations, legislation and policies*

- Stop using the word 'guidance' when it is really important to fulfil what is required. Labelling information as guidance is an invitation for services to ignore it, as guidance implies optional. It is written in such woolly language that it is open to interpretation to suit the needs of the reader. A simple change of language would make a big difference.
- All foster carers need access to clear handbooks in which all policies are factually correct and regularly reviewed/updated. Handbooks should be mandatory and reviewed during Ofsted inspections.
- Mockingbird needs clear guidance and some legislation. There should be National Minimum Standards for Mockingbird, as too much is left up to LA and IFA interpretation and manipulation.

5.3 *Family time*

- When it comes to family time (aka contact), the child's wellbeing and best interests should be prioritised over birth parents' needs and wishes. It is difficult for foster carers to advocate for stopping contact when a child does not want to attend, if birth families can make allegations as a result.

5.4 *Training*

- Quality and accessibility of training needs improving. In person trainers are often not experts in the topic and cannot answer questions. Watching a generic trainer read from a PowerPoint does not feel like a valuable use of time.

- In many instances, foster carers are more knowledgeable than the trainer because of their lived experience.
- Training quality (and investment) should reflect the needs of looked after children and recognise their vulnerability in society.
- Training should be regulated and standardised by Ofsted, with a mechanism for evaluating its effectiveness. There are too many 'off the shelf' products with uninformed trainers.
- Initial training sessions should be in person, with follow-up sessions available online for increased flexibility and self-paced learning. This would save time and money and improve consistency of content quality, as everyone would receive the same information and resources. Certificate could be downloaded at the end for proof of completion. Materials could be outsourced to the National College to host an online portal.
- Schools and social workers should have access to the same (mandatory) trauma-informed training as foster carers.

5.5 *Short breaks*

- Respite/short-breaks must be available for foster carers to enable them to provide the high level of care a child deserves, especially when a child has a disability or other complex needs and conditions. However, foster carers of disabled children are less likely to get a break due to the lack of suitable respite facilities. Where such facilities do exist, they often prioritise children living with birth families over looked after children. Short-break criteria is set out in agency policy, but in practice this is inaccessible. Many foster carers are resigning because of this, as their role is not sustainable without a break. It was suggested that all newly approved foster carers could start as short-break carers (akin to a probation period) before taking on a full-time position. Additionally, fostering services should recruit specifically for short-break only carers and put effort into preserving this role. Foster carers who do not use their short-break allowance should also be paid for that time.
- The LA/IFA should be responsible for arranging short break carers. Currently, foster carers are expected to find their own. Regulations are often unclear on whose responsibility it is to arrange respite care.
- One solution would be to mandate a minimum of two-week paid annual leave for foster carers and for the payment to still be made to foster carers who choose not to take this leave in a given year. This would be the fee element of payments, which is minimal, but would go a long way to help foster carers feel valued.

5.6 *Communication*

- Legislation needs to include deadlines/timescales for how long the corporate parent has to reply to foster carer messages (even if the response is just a brief acknowledgement or holding email). Social workers are claiming ignorance during meetings when foster carers have made multiple attempts to inform them of an issue.
- Timely responses should be the expectation of everyone in the network (foster carers and social workers). It is professional courtesy to provide sufficient and robust answers, so that a child is not constantly waiting for answers. This is imperative for a child's trust in the system.
- Innovative uses of technology (such as a messaging app) could facilitate frequent communication between parties, enabling practitioners and families to efficiently check-in with each other.
- Social workers should be held accountable for not carrying out actions, even if these were agreed by their predecessor.

- Foster carers should be invited to feedback on their social workers during annual reviews. This would enable consistent issues with individual social workers to be identified and addressed by management.
- Social workers contacting foster carers when they are known to be on holiday, with or without the children, in non-emergency situations. Often, foster carers require respite from social services rather than from the children, so should be granted the professional respect of uninterrupted annual leave. Contact requests should be made via the supervising social worker, who can decide whether or not it is appropriate to get in touch. Such contact attempts should be recorded and justified.

5.7 Professionalism

- Giving foster carers employment status would resolve many issues by giving them clear rights and responsibilities, including accountability from authorities. Having an official professional title would combat disrespect and highlight them as equals in supporting the child. Tackling the ambiguity of foster carer status (i.e., whether they are workers or service users) would improve collaboration within the team around a child.
- A national registration body that holds foster carer approvals would help with professional status, as well as ease agency transfers, to aid consistency and emphasise collaboration over foster carer scrutiny.
- Written agency agreements outlining what is expected of the supervising social worker, the child's social worker, the foster carer and the young person. This would make it easier to point out gaps in practice and hold each other accountable. Code of conduct. Unions are being utilised in the absence of foster carer HR departments.
- Give all foster carers LA/IFA email addresses (which transfer with them). This is essential to uphold GDPR and protect children's information (which is still identifiable even if anonymized.) Additionally, organisations should not be able to disable email accounts during allegations so that foster carers cannot access the evidence they need for self-defense (such is an issue within the NHS).
- Use secure messaging portals to send recording logs and any sensitive information/documents.

5.8 Two-carer households (primary and secondary foster carers)

- Retention would be improved by more flexibility for two-carer households, where one person is the primary carer and the other has a full-time job outside fostering. Whilst both carers fulfill as parental role, it should be acknowledged that primary carers are responsible for admin and appointments and that the secondary carer will be less available for meetings and training etc.

5.9 Allegations

- Should be included in the regs/standards/code of conduct, with clear timescales and guidelines for foster carer involvement and updates.
- Remove attitude of guilty until proven innocent.
- Have foster carer rights in writing, including which meetings they should be at and what they need to know when, as well as how they should be informed of the outcome. This would make the process more transparent.
- Regulations should include an official process for challenging allegation outcomes, to give foster carers a voice in the process.

5.10 Staying Put

- Remove the 'one-size-fits-all' policy to better reflect the circumstances of individual young people. Allowances/fees are not tenable and are preventing young people from entering into staying put arrangements with families who otherwise would be happy to continue caring for them. At the moment, staying-put is a deterrent which increases strain on universal credit and social housing. Clarifying and tightening up Staying Put regs/guidance would save the government money.

5.11 Medicals

- GP appointments and medical delays. Can this approach be more bespoke? Not everyone needs to re-do a full medical.

6. **Any other business**

6.1 Future agenda item: Impact of fostering on relationships

- Relationship breakdowns and accessing support, such as couples therapy, and how this is viewed as a weakness
- Terminations of approvals
- Being re-assessed as a single carer

Date of next meeting: 4 February 2026, London