

CoramBAAF 3,000 Children Consultation Response

Local Authority Coordination

1. What are your views of the amendments to the Immigration Bill with regards to the dispersal mechanism?

CoramBAAF do not think that a voluntary or compulsory dispersal scheme through local authorities will be effective. Local authorities are already struggling with the demands on them, and adding new demand (that for many will be a new but small part of their work) is not efficient or likely to result in best practice.

We think that the best chance of addressing this challenge will come through setting up an organisation that can fully concentrate its efforts in this area. It is unfair and unrealistic to think that local authorities can deliver this alongside all the other demands on their time and resources.

2. Do you believe that there should be a coordinated national system to disperse unaccompanied minors? How do you believe this would best work? Are either of the two models proposed above favourable and viable?

Yes. CoramBAAF favour a coordinated national system for dealing with unaccompanied minors with a third party organisation given responsibility for this. We see this as the most viable option, but believe the following criteria need to be in place:

- a) The organisation needs to be given exactly the same powers and responsibilities as a local authority. This means that they will need to have all the duties and responsibilities of local authorities in respect of the young people they are responsible for. (The organisation may or may not choose to set itself up as a fostering service).
- b) Funding needs to be provided to fully cover both the infrastructure of that organisation, and allow for the commissioning of placements (that could be foster care or other placement types) in the usual way. This cannot be emphasised strongly enough. Without proper funding it will not be possible to properly meet the needs of the additional 3,000 children, although it should be noted that funding a third party organisation does not constitute additional costs. Rather, it is diverting costs from what would otherwise be the responsibility of the local authority.

A central organisation will still need to disperse young people across the country and will have to think about how best to do that in a way that ensures they are not isolated and are appropriately supported. This will need to include statutory social work support as well as local support where they are placed, and will most likely be achieved for selecting a number of regional 'bases' from which to operate.

It will also be necessary to explore whether there are opportunities to locate this third party organisation within local authority provision if that would be helpful in relation to IT and HR costs and the like. It will be necessary to look very carefully at the detail of any proposals in relation to this third party organisation.

We are told by CoramBAAF members that there is existing capacity in the IFP sector, with potential for increasing that capacity if there was the demand. In other words, there are some foster carers who would be willing and able to take unaccompanied young people now, and IFPs tell us that they could recruit more foster carers for this group of young people if there was a demand for this, backed with funding.

3. What can be done to ensure that local authorities with long histories of caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children share best practice?

A coordinated national system run by a third party organisation will quickly be able to replicate best practice from local authorities and others, through the staff it chooses to employ, and through partners that it chooses to work with. This question ignores the fact that some IFPs, universities, and third sector organisations also have considerable expertise in this area, and could be a part of the solution.

Funding

1. Is the funding available to local authorities sufficient?

The cost of each placement needs to be fully funded, and to include social work costs, organisational infrastructure, placements costs, and additional costs linked to medical needs including therapeutic services. Calculations for funding need to reflect the cost of currently caring for this group of young people, and recognise that many of the young people will need placements in the IFP sector.

2. Does the funding model as currently structured provide the necessary stability to local authorities to enable them to plan and budget?

We do not think that local authorities are best placed to take on this responsibility, although it may be that they were in a position to offer fostering placements in a system that meant they would be financially recompensed for so doing.

Fostering

While we agree that the availability of foster carers is crucial to taking in and caring for these children, some of the information to the preamble in this section is potentially misleading if taken out of context.

- Fostering Network estimates about the need for 9,000 more families is in the context of needing carers for specific groups such as teenagers, sibling groups, and others with particular needs, as well as allowing children to be fostered closer to their homes. There is not a simple numerical shortage of carers, and all children who need a family have one.
- There are some fostering services (especially in the independent sector) with spare capacity. It is hard to know the extent of this spare capacity as official data does not interrogate the reasons for placements being unused. (For example, a carer may be approved to care for three children, but in fact can only care for one because of the needs of that individual child).
- Suggestions that there are ten thousand people wanting to be assessed as foster carers for unaccompanied children should be treated with caution. Of those who express an initial interest in fostering about one in ten will go on to be approved; the majority either dropping out when they find out more about what is involved, or being assessed as very obviously unsuitable.

- There are existing established and effective systems in place for the safe recruitment, assessment, training and approval of foster carers. National minimum standards require the process from inquiry to approval to not exceed eight months; some fostering services complete the process in 4-5 months.

1. Given the refugee crisis and the outpouring of generosity, should there be a fast-track process for those who have expressed an interest in becoming a foster carer? How would this work?

No. The national minimum of eight months was set for good reason. Foster carers can be approved in 4-5 months, but to try and short cut the process further is unsafe and will contribute to more placement breakdowns. Caring for unaccompanied children is no less demanding than caring for other children – in some cases more demanding. It would be unfair if foster carers were not properly prepared for this task, and that takes time. The best way to speed up recruitment, assessment and approval is to create a genuine demand for placements.

2. What are the pros and cons of training up existing foster carers to care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children? What is the estimated cost for this additional training per foster carer?

If carers were being assessed specifically for asylum seeking children it would be possible to adjust existing training to focus on this particular client group. An additional day of training would cost about £50 for each foster carer.

3. Should there be a national register of foster carers?

There are arguments for and against a national register but these are not relevant to this discussion, and it is unclear why this has been raised in relation to the issue of unaccompanied children. There is currently nothing to stop a local authority social worker placing a child with a foster carer from another local authority. This already happens, sometimes through consortium arrangements and sometimes for other reasons. Even if a register was deemed a good idea, it is unlikely that this would be achieved quickly.

4. How can current foster carers be retained?

This is a complicated question that runs much wider than the issue of unaccompanied children. It will not be resolved through this consultation.

5. Do you believe that when an existing foster carer moves from one fostering service to another should they have to be re-assessed and approved? Why?

Yes. It is essential that a fostering service is confident in the knowledge that their approved carers have met the required standards within their service, and also understand the expectations of that service. Different fostering services operate to different standards and expectations (as is evident from OFSTED reports) and approval standards in some services would be considered entirely inadequate by another. A re-assessment can use existing material and in any case the movement of carers between fostering services does nothing to increase overall capacity.

6. What is your assessment of the existence and operation of independent foster care services?

It is unrealistic to think that the challenge of recruiting more foster carers can be entirely met from the already hard pressed local authority sector. Any solution to the issue needs to involve the independent fostering providers who are often best placed to act quickly and flexibly to meet new demand, and could potentially offer placements across England/ the UK. They will only do this if proper funding is available to commission these placements.

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