

CoramBAAF

Advisory Committee – Fostering (ACF)

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12 July 2022

10.00 – 12.30 via Zoom

Present:

Jenny Alexander Brown	Expert by experience/ Member of ACFC	(JAB)
Hanan Al-Najar	Expert by experience/ Co-Chair of ACFC	(HAN)
Linda Briheim	Coram Voice	(LB)
Sarah Carter	Essex County Council	(SC)
Lucy Croxton	Together Trust	(LC)
Nazeema Gill	Expert by experience/ Member of ACFC/ Homefinding Fostering Agency	(NG)
Angie Gillies	AFKA Scotland	(AG)
Pal Jandu	Camden Council	(PJ)
Sally Lyst	South Coast Fostering	(SL)
Vivian Okeze-Tirado	West Sussex County Council	(VOT)
Charmaine Orchard	Expert by experience/ The Black Care Experienced Network Steering Team	(CO)
Claire Rogers	Tree House Care	(CR)
Steffi Roth	Brighter Futures for Children	(SR)
Nicola Smith	Barnardo's	(NS)
Liz Spaven	Northumberland County Council	(LS)
Sarah Thomas	The Fostering Network (Wales)	(ST)
Ruth Willetts	Foster Talk	(RW)

In attendance:

Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	(EF) (Chair)
Danielle Sawyer	CoramBAAF	(DS)
John Simmonds	CoramBAAF	(JS)

Apologies:

Karen Devine	Brighton & Hove City Council	(KD)
Samantha Frith-Jones	AFA Cymru	(SFJ)
Cara Jones	Expert by experience/ Co-Chair of ACFC	(CJ)
Sarah McEnhill	The Fostering Network	(SMc)
Rebecca Olayinka	Expert by experience/ Adult social worker	(RO)
Tony Turner	The Fostering Team	(TT)

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced herself
- 1.2 The Chair summarised the history and re-structuring of CoramBAAF Advisory Committees and Practice Forums, explaining the purpose and functionality of the Fostering Committee.
- 1.3 All members introduced themselves.
- 1.4 Apologies were noted.
- 1.5 Members were invited to nominate individuals to join the Committee by emailing EF or DS.

2. ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

- 2.1 The Chair invited members to express their interest in taking on the role of Chair. Members to email EF or DS to express their interest. A vote will be held if necessary. Members to contact EF for further information on this.
- 2.2 The Chair listed the eight CoramBAAF Advisory Committees and explained how they are connected. These are: Adoption, Fostering, Foster Carers, Kinship Care, Health, Legal, Research and BME Perspectives.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 3.1 The Terms of Reference will be kept under review. Questions or comments on the Terms of Reference were invited.
- 3.2 John Simmonds (Director of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF) stated CoramBAAF has strong links with the DfE, Department of Health and Ministry of Justice. This committee will be an opportunity for members to form links with government departments. It was noted that the DfE Fostering Team is changeable. CoramBAAF will do their best to ensure members' views and experiences are communicated to DfE and invite them to future meetings if necessary. The current structure of central government must be considered when taking action, as well as the key people within these departments.

4. THE CARE REVIEW

- 4.1 James Bury (Head of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF) presented an overview of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care which was published in May 2022.
- 4.2 The main themes of the Care Review were: reset children's social care; revolution in family help; just and decisive child protection system; family networks; transforming care;

the care experience; realising the potential of the workforce; system focussed on children and families; and implementation.

4.3 The key recommendations of the Care Review were: scrapping independent reviewing officers and replacing with advocates; creation of regional care cooperatives to commission foster care, residential children's homes, secure estate; making care experienced a protected characteristic; mockingbird model; changes to delegated authority; and National Fostering Recruitment strategy. It was acknowledged that these recommendations could be dismissed.

4.4 A government response is expected by the end of the year, but uncertainty surrounding current government structure must be taken into consideration.

4.5 CoramBAAF will be scrutinising proposals in detail, speaking to members, consulting within the sector and feeding back to decision makers.

4.6 Members broke into groups to discuss key recommendations of the review. Members were encouraged to focus on positives and to provide solutions or alternatives where gaps were identified.

5. FEEDBACK FROM BREAKOUT GROUPS

5.1 Discussions were fed back to the main group. The Chair explained the meeting was being recorded to produce minutes. Members will be able to read the minutes before publication on CB website.

5.2 Retention and recruitment

- Members felt retention of foster carers should be prioritised over recruitment.
- Retention of supervising social workers should also be focussed on, to improve consistency and stability throughout the foster carers' journey. It was suggested the constant turnover of supervising social workers could be addressed by providing better support and decreasing workloads.
- Recruitment strategy should be better tailored towards more diverse foster carers, by revising questions and enabling social workers to better express the benefits of fostering, with a reduced focus on ticking boxes.
- Marketing and advertising should consider the needs of children in specific localities, so recruitment campaigns are directed at people able to meet those needs.
- Many foster carers are recruited through word-of-mouth. Positive messaging around how foster carers are treated and supported should be promoted to people who may consider fostering in the future.

5.3 Protected Characteristics

- Members felt care experienced should be a protected characteristic.

5.4 Regional Care Cooperatives (RCC)

- There were concerns around the consequences of RCCs, including the pressure put on smaller fostering agencies that provide a good quality service but may end up being bought up by larger corporations.

- Members acknowledged how the RAAs have benefitted adoption, but had concerns regarding how this would translate to the vast foster care population.
- There are drawbacks to rolling out national policy based on positive localised examples, which risks creating turbulence in an already precarious system. One size does not fit all.

5.5 The Mockingbird Model

- Members viewed the Mockingbird model positively, providing it does not take away from existing support for foster carers.

5.6 Delegated Authority (DA)

- Overall, members viewed the impact of DA on young people positively. They welcomed DA being more automatic.
- The need for standardised rulings was recognised, due to potential complications for families with children from multiple local authorities.
- There is current discrepancy amongst social workers regarding DA regulations, so further education is required for better understanding.
- Many foster carers already feel vulnerable to criticism, complaints and allegations. When authorised to make decisions, additional protection will be needed to help increase confidence if professionals do not agree with them.

5.7 Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)

- Members noted the role and usefulness of independents was mostly absent from the review. Independents tend to receive a higher percentage of more complex children and yet still manage to achieve good outcomes. In order to get children placed with them, independents have to be good or outstanding. An opportunity has been missed to ask independents how they manage to provide more mentors and support workers and still make a profit. There may be key elements that can be incorporated into LAs to save money and improve services.
- It was noted that when an IFA makes a profit it gets invested rather than distributed.

5.8 Kinship Care

- Members felt the review should have focussed more on children living in informal kinship arrangements, as well as children living in residential care.
- Members noted the importance of thorough kinship assessments to make sure people are not undertaking kinship care for financial gain.

5.9 IROs and Advocates

- Clarity regarding advocates is needed across the whole country to eliminate the post-code lottery.
- Members preferred the opt-out over the opt-in approach, but recognised the advocate role is different to that of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). Advocates are there to be the voice of the child, not to make best interest assessments. Advocates should be working with IROs rather than replacing them.
- It was suggested IROs could be made independent of the LA and its policy. If IROs are now fully funded instead of volunteers they'll be able to get to know children properly.

6. CHILD FOCUSED APPROACH

6.1 Members felt positively about the review focussing on relationships and what is important to children and young people, which is the point on which services should be compared. The importance of thinking about what matters to the current care population was emphasised, with trust highlighted as particularly significant. Trust relates to retention and recruitment, because inconsistency and instability reduces the trust between young people, foster carers and social workers.

6.2 **Wales** - Sarah Thomas stated the importance of asking 'What would we do if this was our child?' It is impossible to be too child focussed and services mustn't become overly process driven. Wales identified that, where a lot of money had been put into recruitment campaigns, it was the consistency between LAs in enforcing child-focussed practice that made the difference. Wales created the National Commitment to ensure all foster carers have the same entitlements. Sarah reiterated how retained, happy foster carers recruit by word-of-mouth. The needs of children in the care system are changing and becoming more complex, therefore foster carers' skills must develop as well. When changing any model it is vital to focus on lived experience to evaluate what difference these changes will make to the children.

6.3 **Scotland** - Angie Gillies stated Scotland are looking at what is happening in Wales, before launching their own recruitment campaigns. They agree with Wales' commitment to providing a consistent support network and the importance of having, for example, the same social worker for up to two years post-approval. Scotland have issued the 'Staying together and connected' guidance on keeping siblings together. Scotland are also moving towards a culture change through The Promise, which focuses on relationship-based practice and ensuring all services are centred on the care experience. This feels like a bottom-up approach, rather than the English top-down approach. The Promise partnership have released a lot of funding for new cultural initiatives, with further 2.5 year funding about to be released for longer projects. All projects are involved with The Promise Design School and Oversight Board, in response to the care review.

7. PLANNING FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

7.1 The Chair invited attendees to suggest any key focuses for future meetings.

7.2 Sally Barnett emphasised the importance of coming to meetings ready to listen and think about what others have said, if they are to be successful.

7.3 John Simmonds stated this conversation could be used to influence the DfE recruitment campaign. Next steps would be to write a brief for DfE outlining the discussion, proposing how members would design their recruitment campaign and address retention issues.

7.4 Lucy Croxton suggested it would be helpful to produce a document on the organisations members belong to, so crossovers can be easily identified. It would also be worth thinking about who their entry person into the DfE could be in terms of foster care.

Members have the potential to influence the implementation of the care review, particularly around retention. It would be good to expand on these ideas for the DfE, in terms of what members would like to see happen.

7.5 Sarah Thomas highlighted how the responsibility for looked after children in England lies with the DfE and not with the Department of Health and Social Care. Sarah would be interested in a group discussion on this, but believes educational needs are secondary to a child's health and social care needs. These needs cannot be fully prioritised as long as children remain the responsibility of the DfE, who will always prioritise education. Wales focusses on health and social care first, which contributes to their success.

7.6 Linda Briheim reiterated the importance of having carers with the right skills and qualities to care for individual children. Lots of information has been collected from young people about what these qualities are, but how can services ensure these specific people are recruited?

7.7 Claire Rogers suggested it would be useful to have representatives on this committee who work directly with looked after children, to help members understand what fostering is about. EF is emailing the President of the Association of the Directors of Children's Social Care, who may be able to suggest some candidates who can bring that perspective.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

8.1 The Chair listed the dates and times for future meetings:

- 15th November 2022, 10:00 – 12:30
- 21st March 2023, 10:00 – 12:30

8.2 CoramBAAF Members Week is coming up in September. There will be an online event on Tuesday 20th followed by an in person event on Wednesday 21st for all committees.. CB to email members with more information.

8.3 There was no other business to report.