

# Minutes

**24 January 2024 | 10.30am – 2.30pm**

**Charter Room, Coram Campus, London**

*Chair: Hanan Al-Najjar*

## Present (in person)

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	JAB
Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	HAN (co-chair)
James Bury	CoramBAAF	JB
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF	GC (minutes)
Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	CJ (co-chair)
Steven O'Reilly	TACT Care	SOR
Rebecca Pacy	South East	RP
Shada Panjabi	Waltham Forest	SPa
Sam Penny	Devon	SP
Darryl Pottinger	Greenwich	DP
Melanie Stubbs	Shropshire	MS
Fiona Trewartha	East Riding	FT

## Present (online)

Dawn Elliot	North Yorkshire	DE
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	EF
Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	NG
Nicky Lockett	West Midlands	NL
Alastair Scott-McKinley	Northern Ireland (West Region)	ASM
John Simmonds	CoramBAAF	JS

## Apologies

Adam Dalal	Blackburn and Darwen	AD
Lisa Little	Hull	LL
Catherine Lucas-Smith	Surrey	CLS
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	JR

## 1. Welcome and introductions

1.1 CJ welcomed everyone to the meeting. Extended introductions were made due to having several new members. Members were asked to highlight one strength and one challenge in their fostering community.

1.2 Most reported positive relationships with their supervising social workers. Other strengths included:

- Effective communication with fostering services
- Foster Carer recruitment
- Council tax reductions
- Team around the child
- Men in Fostering group (Greenwich)
- Carer networks and well attended support groups, including Mockingbird
- Advocates

***Action: Men in fostering groups to be discussed at a future meeting.***

1.3 Issues raised included:

- Schools communicating with social workers and not with foster carers
- Foster carer retention
- Fostering services not knowing legislation/entitlements
- Lack of opportunities for foster carers to come together
- Lack of consistency (payments, social workers etc.)
- Social worker pressures and work loads
- Poor LA communication
- Lack of preventative vs. reactive support
- Exemption difficulties
- System not supporting the efforts of individuals
- Court delays due to high staff turnover

## 2. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

### **Family time facilities for disabled and neurodiverse children**

2.1 MS shared their experiences of taking a disabled child to family time when the environment is not suitable for his needs. MS expressed the view that all local authorities should have designated spaces where children with additional needs can have safe fun with their families. Issues identified included:

- Lack of suitable furniture
- Lack of suitable sensory objects
- Lack of practical activities
- Family time itself lacking a focus, with no support or guidance available to make interactions count
- Reduced floor space for wheelchairs

2.2 HAN questioned the equality legislation in place to address these issues. JAB acknowledged that although facilities could be labelled suitable from a legislative perspective, this does not

necessarily mean they are appropriate for an individual child's needs or that they create a positive environment for family interactions. Further complications arise where multiple children are involved, partly due to staffing restrictions.

- 2.3 CJ added that not all activities and environments are suitable for children with trauma induced behavioural difficulties.
- 2.4 RP suggested standards put in place for adults in the workplace don't translate well to children in this scenario, as they are designed more with the structure of a building in mind as opposed to the quality of experience. The importance of equity was highlighted, along with the potential for capable environment assessments.

**Action: CoramBAAF to check with the Advice Line to see if similar queries have been raised; also with the Information team and Coram Voice to see if current research exists in this area.**

**Action: EF and GC to talk with CoramBAAF Legal Consultants about related legislation.**

- 2.5 ASM suggested individual local authorities may have policies that can be influenced. MS noted that underfunding and lack of available venues and provision are continuous obstacles. SP emphasised how local authorities have a social responsibility not to prevent children from fully accessing that time. HAN questioned how standards expected within fostering homes could be extended to family time venues.

**Action: EF and GC to take this topic to the CoramBAAF Fostering Advisory Committee.**

**Action: EF and GC to add general family time to a future agenda. Members to volunteer for a smaller sub-committee to take this further.**

**Action: The accessibility of Mockingbird for families with disabled children (including birth children) to be discussed at a future meeting. CoramBAAF to ask The Fostering Network for more information on this.**

## Other EDI updates

- 2.6 The Black Care Experience Conference is taking place on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February in Ilford.
- 2.7 EF working on a practice note to support foster carers with neurodiversity.

**Action: Members to contact EF and GC if interested in proof reading the draft document.**

## 3. Fosterlink Advisory Group (FLAG) update

- 3.1 EF provided an overview of the government funded Fosterlink project, run by Mott MacDonald in collaboration with Coram. The project will work with 35 volunteer local authorities to look at how recruitment and approval of foster carers could be improved. Diagnostic data will be collected between February and April 2024 via self-report surveys and consultant field visits. Between April 2024 and March 2025, these findings will be shared with local authorities and bespoke improvement plans put in place. Recommendations are to be cost-free, however Coram are optimistic that this process can encourage positive practice to be shared. None of the local authorities involved are part of a regional recruitment or retention hub.
- 3.2 CoramBAAF set up a Fosterlink Advisory Group (FLAG) to discuss the project as it progresses. One meeting has occurred so far, with two more due in March and April. Members include fostering practitioners, foster carers, DfE, Mott MacDonald and Coram. CJ had a positive experience at the

first meeting and felt encouraged by the questions raised. SP agreed having foster carers in attendance highlighted some key gaps that will now be considered.

**Action: CoramBAAF to keep this as a rolling agenda item for regular updates.**

## **4. Two-carer households – case examples and potential solutions**

- 4.1 SOR shared a presentation on two-carer fostering households and their impact on retention. Case examples highlighted the issues faced when one carer is unable to meet certain fostering commitments due to employment responsibilities. SOR questioned how, since single foster carers can be approved, two-carer households could be pushed out of fostering due to one of them no longer being available for 'extra bits' (training, meetings etc.). This is the case even when the other remains a full-time stay-at-home foster carer.
- 4.2 Members discussed whether both carers in a couple should have to meet the same requirements and how this differs from back-up carers.
- 4.3 EF acknowledged this is not the first time this issue has been brought to CoramBAAF's attention. The prominence of this issue on social media is also increasing.
- 4.4 SOR suggested two possible solutions:
  - Allow solo carer approval within co-habiting relationships
  - Allow two-carer households to be approved where only one must commit to all training, meetings, supervisions etc. Carer Two would still go through the same safety checks (i.e. DBS and medical) but would not have to commit to all these 'extra bits.'
- 4.5 CJ highlighted the importance of fostering services being flexible with training. Members discussed how the system is already set up to allocate a primary vs. secondary carer, so implementing these solutions should not be too complicated. It was noted that adult birth children and grandparents living in a fostering household do not need to be approved foster carers, so such arrangements are possible.

**Action: GC to share SOR presentation slides with the committee.**

**Action: To be discussed again at a future meeting in relation to retention and reality vs. safeguarding. Members to volunteer for a smaller discussion group to take this further.**

## **5. Delegated Authority – Fostering Advisory Board update**

- 5.1 DfE have set up a Fostering Advisory Board, which HAN and EF sit on. A second foster carer was also put forward by The Fostering Network. DfE have requested that minutes from these meetings not be shared, however a summary is available for members to feedback to their networks. Board membership includes Ofsted, The Fostering Network and other fostering/child service professionals.
- 5.2 The first meeting was held on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023. HAN read out the summary of that meeting to the group. DfE are looking into delegated authority by default, whereby foster carers are automatically authorised at the point of matching to make day to day decisions on a child's behalf without seeking consent from birth family. This issue is being discussed as part of the overall recruitment and retention programme.
- 5.3 DfE have requested committee feedback on this proposal. DfE are currently in favour of delegated authority by default, which gives birth parents options to opt-out. EF highlighted the

need for guidance to be robust enough to protect foster carers from additional scrutiny if this proposal is implemented. HAN summarised the pros and cons of different options, as outlined by DfE. Members were invited to share their thoughts on these.

- 5.4 HAN and EF felt the existing delegated authority system is effective in theory, but lacks sufficient implementation strategies.
- 5.5 DE shared the importance of being able to make medical decisions quickly, particularly for emergency placements who arrive late at night or at weekends (when making contact with services is more difficult). Approved foster carers should automatically be deemed fit to make certain decisions regarding a child's welfare. HAN noted DfE have not specified their definition of 'day to day' decisions.
- 5.6 JS agreed delegated authority has a responsibility to prioritise the welfare of the child and of other people within the foster home. JS emphasised the importance of having open conversations with everyone involved in a child's care and of encouraging DfE to think about their definitions of delegated authority.
- 5.7 SPa asked how delegated authority would impact Mockingbird hub home carers and whether the same system of opt-in/out would apply. JAB similarly questioned whether respite carers would have the same delegated authority as the foster carers, particularly in emergency situations. It was noted that, in life or death scenarios, medical professionals automatically have delegated authority in all cases. SOR provided an example of respite carers not being allowed to consent to medical treatment (where there was no threat to life) as they were not the full-time foster carers of that child. Hospitals having an awareness that all foster carers have delegated authority by default could cause a significant shift in practice. How hospitals would be aware that an opt-out was in place remains unclear.
- 5.8 HAN suggested DfE have not fully considered the implications of parental responsibility. JAB highlighted how obscure situations also require consideration (e.g. when a birth family lives outside the country or cannot be contacted by phone or email.)
- 5.9 Overall, members were in favour of the opt-out proposal. SOR suggested justification be required from birth families in situations where they have opted out, to ensure decisions have not been made maliciously.
- 5.10 DE expressed how the social care system always look for a scape goat when problems arise (e.g. the child has an allergic reaction.) Foster carers should not be left open to scrutiny due to unclear regulations, either from birth families or social services. HAN acknowledged that by giving delegated authority by default all responsibility is taken away from the corporate parent and placed on the foster carer, therefore protections must be in place.
- 5.11 MS queried how delegated authority works for kinship carers and whether this should be the same. EF confirmed conversations with CoramBAAF Kinship and Legal Consultants are taking place.
- 5.12 ASM explained why delegated authority would not be desirable in certain situations, particularly where risk assessments have changed for a particular child and social workers can override decisions. This risks an increase in allegations.

**Action: Members to contact HAN or CoramBAAF with any additional points on delegated authority.**

## 6. Thank you John

- 6.1 John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF, is leaving the organisation at the end of March 2024. The committee thanked John for all his contributions to the group and wished him the best of luck for the future.
- 6.2 JS emphasised the value of hearing from lived experience and thanked the committee for sharing their expertise, which continues to positively influence CoramBAAF's work within the sector.

## 7. Respite care

- 7.1 HAN introduced the common issues experienced by foster carers in relation to respite care. Members shared their experiences of last minute respite arrangements, which caused stress to the foster carers and added trauma to the child.
- 7.2 CJ acknowledged the misleading advertising around foster carer respite, which in reality has a multitude of caveats. HAN explained how Waltham Forest carers are expected to find their own respite. ASM highlighted how even short breaks specified within their placement agreement only occur 40% of the time. No formal process or policy exists for applying for respite and addressing this on a case by case basis does not work well with such a high staff turnover.
- 7.3 JAB raised the issue of respite placements not being suitable for children with disabilities. Staffing issues at specialised venues have forced carers to agree to have strangers coming into their own homes. By consenting to this, carers are left open to blame if anything goes wrong.
- 7.4 MS felt official timeframes should be in place for fostering services to arrange respite, especially if holidays have been booked before a placement is made and the service has been made aware of this in advance. Social workers should have a set number of days within which they have to respond to respite requests.
- 7.5 SPa recognised respite networks as a positive aspect of the Mockingbird model. As a Hub home carer, SPa is the first port of call for carers in her constellation. However, they are struggling to arrange their own respite. Support should work both ways so that Hub home carers receive the same benefits as other Mockingbird families (e.g. weekend breaks).
- 7.6 Members acknowledged that foster carer networks change and decrease over time, which can make sourcing their own respite care very difficult. Other carers in their area are likely to be at capacity or unavailable. If a child presents with challenging or violent behaviours, some carers may be reluctant to put other friends or family at risk.
- 7.7 CJ suggested a national register would enable foster carers from different agencies to offer each other respite care.

## 8. Any other business

- 8.1 The FosterTalk survey on allegations is now live. This follows the success of their previous survey on the cost of living, which received a hugely positive response rate. Members can still complete the survey before the end of January.
- 8.2 CoramBAAF are revising the Form F, which will be shared with members at the next meeting.
- 8.3 Northern Ireland's regional policy on allegations is under review for the first time since 2015.

**Action: ASM to contact EF about this.**

- 8.4 A discussion was had on foster carer insurance and how members are covered. HAN shared The Fostering Network handbook on delegated authority, which contains a section on insurance and states the responsibility of fostering services to protect its carers from legal action.

***Action: CoramBAAF to circulate Fostering Network legal policy document to the group.***

***Date of next meeting: 17 April 2024***