

Minutes

17 April 2024 | 10.00am – 12.30pm

Chair: Cara Jones

Present

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	JAB
Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	HAN (co-chair)
Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	NG
Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	CJ (co-chair)
Lisa Little	Hull	LL
Nicky Lockett	West Midlands	NL
Steven O'Reilly	TACT Care	SOR
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	JR
Rebecca Pacy	South East	RP
Shada Panjabi	Waltham Forest	SPa
Darryl Pottinger	Greenwich	DP
Alastair Scott-McKinley	Northern Ireland (West Region)	ASM
Melanie Stubbs	Shropshire	MS
Fiona Trewartha	East Riding	FT

In attendance

James Bury	CoramBAAF	JB
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF	GC
Nadia Damda	Department for Education	ND
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	EF
Becky Loftus	Department for Education	BL
Thomasin Miller Freeman	Department for Education	TMF
Anna Robson	Department for Education	AR
Hannah Williams	Department for Education	HW

Apologies

Adam Dalal	Blackburn and Darwen	AD
Dawn Elliot	North Yorkshire	DE
Catherine Lucas-Smith	Surrey	CLS
Sam Penny	Devon	SP

1. Welcome and introductions

- 1.1 CJ welcomed everyone to the meeting and checked in with each attendee.

2. Minutes from the last meeting and matters arising

- 2.1 A poll was held in the Zoom chat to select which topic would be taken forward with a subgroup committee. Two carer households received the most votes.

Action: CoramBAAF to set up a sub-group committee meeting to discuss two carer households

3. CoramBAAF Updates

- 3.1 *Form F*: Work continues on the development of the revised Form F.

Action: CoramBAAF to arrange a separate meeting for foster carers to see and feedback on the new form.

- 3.2 *Fosterlink*: CoramBAAF and Coram-i are working with Mott Macdonald looking at recruitment and retention in local authorities. This project is funded by DfE and involves 35 local authorities who are not participating in any existing regional recruitment and retention hubs. Each LA has completed a self-survey and been visited by a field consultant. Data collected will influence the recommendations made for improving services. A Fosterlink Advisory Group (FLAG) was formed to assist project progress. Committee members fed back their experiences of sitting on this group. Key points addressed included the financial sustainability of Mockingbird and its effectiveness in reducing crisis intervention costs. CJ also noted the limited demographic of mystery shopper phone calls. Overall, members were positive about the project but felt its focus was too narrow. FT took part in the East Riding field visit and shared how none of the five foster carers interviewed would recommend their LA to others. LL agreed this was the same in Hull. Many foster carers are conflicted about the recruitment aspect of their role, due to poor support provided by their services. Fosterlink is focussed on recruitment not retention, but foster carers thought it impossible to address one without the other. Both require sufficient financial support packages, such as council tax exemptions and free school meals.

4. Recruitment and retention discussion

- 4.1 High social worker turnover was identified as a wider key issue that needs addressing, as well as high transfers from LA to IFA services.
- 4.2 Waltham Forest are part of a regional retention and recruitment hub which is launching during foster care fortnight. HAN highlighted how Mockingbird is the solution the government views as most cost effective, since Hub home carers get paid less than a social worker. Members reflected on how all government investment is going in the Mockingbird model, but some local authorities have designed their own versions to avoid paying brand fees. Overall, Mockingbird is positive but lacks sufficient funding to sustain in the long term under increasing pressures and hub home carers are not receiving the necessary resources.
- 4.3 Other obstacles to recruitment and retention were identified as:
- Lack of support post 18
 - Discrimination of mockingbird against children/families with additional needs

- Lack of communication from social workers and over-reliance on hub home carers
- Lack of support for the whole family (e.g. for birth children) when young people move on
- Foster carers lacking professional status, therefore their views are not valued
- Competition between LAs and IFAs

5. Supporting care leavers: DfE presentation and breakout groups

- 5.1 Colleagues from DfE customer experience and design team, as well as the care leaver policy team, presented on their Care Leavers Project. The project questioned *'How might we ensure that young people know all the options and support that are available to them across the journey of leaving care (approaching leaving and having left care?)'* It is running from January to June 2024.
- 5.2 AR explained the research timeline, aims and objectives and research methods.
- 5.3 Members split into two breakout rooms to discuss this project in more detail and share their views. DfE asked *'thinking about the care leavers you have supported, what are the biggest difficulties faced by them when leaving care?'* (Ranked from least to most difficult). Key points fed back to the main group included:
- Understanding universal credit and help getting work
 - Different support in different local areas
 - Financial stability
 - Knowing about further education or training options
 - Awareness of basic rights
 - Grants to help with education and training
 - Who to turn to for support
 - Budgeting/saving/debt management
 - Awareness of local offer
 - Access to suitable accommodation
 - Support for additional needs or disabilities
 - Timescales – knowing what to expect when/having early discussions starting age 16

6. Allegations

- 6.1 The DfE Fostering Team are looking into what support can be offered foster carers during allegations. Hannah Williams asked members to share the biggest issues with allegations currently, as well as their views on where solutions should be prioritised. Key issues identified were:
- 6.2 *Timescales*: These are unclear and the process often takes months, which can have financial implications depending on area. This has a significant impact on recruitment and retention. MS suggested timescales would be improved if fostering services were obliged to uphold payments throughout the process.
- 6.3 *Risk of bias*: Need for independent case analysis to avoid bias amongst colleagues, as allegations often come down to one practitioner's opinion. Independent support should also be available for foster carers, with carers having the right to choose their own representation.
- 6.4 *'Pre-trial' meetings*: Separate meetings should be held in advance of the investigation meetings/processes starting to determine whether allegations can be substantiated or whether there's

been a blatant misunderstanding. Many cases are unfounded and could have been resolved much earlier.

- 6.5 *Guilty until proven innocent*: Foster carers are assumed guilty until proven innocent, whereas in other situations when working with children it would be the other way around. There is a disparity between how foster carers are treated during allegations compared to other local authority employees. Payments should continue throughout the process, or else reimbursed once the carer has been cleared.
- 6.6 *Equality screening and file records*: Research shows that male carers and disabled carers are more likely to face allegations. All allegation policies should be screened with regards to protected characteristics. Allegations remain on a foster carers file forever, regardless of the outcome. This creates a continuous shadow of doubt, even when claims were completely unfounded, with carers constantly needing to defend themselves. Australia now remove all records of unfounded allegations from files, due to discrimination against aboriginal carers.
- 6.7 *Information sharing and GDPR*: Members questioned their rights regarding subject access requests, as well as their ability to rectify incorrect information that is on file. JAB suggested investigators often operate by common practice rather than law, due to a 'what if?' attitude. Clearer guidance is needed on this.
- 6.8 Social work practitioners sometimes lack understanding of the differences between allegations, concerns and complaints and the processes which follow each one. There is an overall lack of information sharing, with foster carers often being kept in the dark about what is happening and what they can or cannot do.

Action: DfE to discuss allegations at the next Fostering Advisory Board meeting.

7. Any other business

- 7.1 Thank you to everyone who fed back on CoramBAAF's neurodiversity practice note. Suggested edits have been made and it is getting closer to publication.
- 7.2 There is a WhatsApp group for this committee. Anyone who wishes to join can email their phone number to EF.
- 7.3 The revised Form F is about to go out for pilot. GC will set up a meeting next month for any members who wish to see the fully revised pilot form.

HAN will be stepping down as co-chair of this committee after 3 years, but will remain an active member. EF and GC will contact members regarding the appointment of a new co-chair, who will join CJ from July.

Date of next meeting: 10 July 2024