

# Minutes

**18 January 2023 | 10.30am – 1pm**

## Present:

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	(JAB)
Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	(HAN) (chair)
Dawn Elliot	Leeds	(DE)
Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	(CJ)
Lisa Little	Hull	(LL)
Steven O'Reilly	TACT	(SOR)
Darryl Pottinger	Greenwich	(DP)
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	(JR)

## In Attendance:

James Bury	CoramBAAF (CB)	(JB)
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF (CB)	(GC) (minutes)
Eva Elks	Department for Education (DfE)	(EE)
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF (CB)	(EF)
Chris Senior	Department for Education (DfE)	(CS)
John Simmonds	CoramBAAF (CB)	(JS)

## Apologies:

Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	(NG)
Sam Penny	Devon	(SP)

## **1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

- 1.1 HAN welcomed members to the meeting and introductions were made.
- 1.2 Minutes were accepted as an accurate reflection of the last meeting.

## **2. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION PRESENTATION**

- 2.1 CS and EE gave an overview of DfE current structure and priority issues.
- 2.2 Claire Coutinho is the new Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing. Claire has demonstrated keen interest in prioritizing fostering and recently attended a roundtable discussion with foster carers (including HAN) which was positively received.



- 2.3 Formal government response (implementation strategy) to Josh Macalister's Care Review recommendations is due to be published imminently, but no exact date yet. DfE looking to explore different approaches to foster care recruitment and retention to develop a support package. Specific approaches to be trialed in specific areas before rolling out across the country (depending on trial success.) HAN noted retention not mentioned in Care Review, so glad DfE acknowledged this as an issue alongside recruitment.
- 2.4 EE recognised Care Review showed recruitment to be about more than advertising, but also nurturing prospective foster carers through the application process. Focus needed on what applying to be a foster carer feels like throughout the process and EE interested in members' thought on this.
- 2.5 SOR, HAN and JAB identified biggest issue during recruitment processes as antiquated and unnecessary questions posed to them as same sex couples. As a panel member often required to ask such questions of others, SOR recognised this as a procedural issue stemming from LA requirements. JAB been through four form F and asked several times who male role-model will be. Social Worker documents are outdated in terms of wording and unnecessary tick boxes. EF noted CB currently revising Form F and wording to be carefully considered. Confidence, skillsets and capacity of social workers also need addressing.

### **3. RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

- 3.1 Members identified the cost of living crisis as a significant contributor to the retention issue. Some foster carers have been forced to take on other employment, which takes away time from training, meetings, supervisions etc. This disrupts on going skills development and leaves carers less equipped for dealing with challenging situations. SOR noted that, if fostering were a 9-5 job, it would equate to around £3.74 per hour. Many carers forced to leave after a few years having used all their savings.
- 3.2 Solutions that would help negate costs include free school meals and free school transport for all foster children, which would save around £1000 per year per child. This should be consistent practice across all LAs and IFAs. Members aware government does not have limitless funds, but possible to support carers financially without percentage increase in fees. DE identified significant pay inconsistencies between LAs. National best practice guide required to negate this.
- 3.3 CJ noted any alternative LA solutions must include IFAs. Inconsistencies between LAs and IFAs cause tension between foster carers who are all doing the same job for different benefits.
- 3.4 DP agreed foster carers absorb many hidden costs which aren't reimbursed, e.g. educational resources not recognised in PEP report. DP received LA support with council tax. HAN noted tax free threshold not reviewed in years.
- 3.5 CJ emphasised retention more important than recruitment. It is the experienced, well trained carers who are being lost. Vital that 9000 new carers recruited are the right people. Key to recruitment is honesty. New foster carers do not have accurate expectations because recruitment process does not tell them the truth; that reality is low funds, little support and a system which



doesn't respect you as a professional. Misleading prospective carers is not beneficial in the long term.

- 3.6 HAN recognised younger people have no incentive to choose foster caring as a career, because requires sufficient savings which most 20/30 year-olds don't have. Foster carers need long term security and a pension.
- 3.7 LL confirmed Hull struggling with recruitment and retention. Put lots of money into huge marketing campaign but failing to attract the right people. Existing foster carers leaving due to huge financial burdens and not being treated as professionals. Carers should be asking for same pay rises as everyone else. LL agreed children should receive free school meals and council tax compensation should be available across board. School trips not specifically funded, so must come out of 1 week holiday pay. If school trip places limited foster children should get priority. Hull County Council stated school trips cannot come out of PEP fund. JR noted their school was able to use PEP for this.
- 3.8 Members agreed professional status vital for Foster Carers. Many come from other professional roles and have skills, knowledge and experience essential for wellbeing of child. Foster Carers not allowed to advocate for child because not a professional. Should be able to attend important school meetings about the child, as know child better than social worker or teacher. Sick pay and holiday pay should be available to all carers.
- 3.9 JAB noted Nottingham County previously ran system where foster carers could be employed by LA and receive same pay conditions as all other LA staff, plus extra therapeutic training. Excellent system but disbanded due to expense. JAB recognised foster carers can receive small discounts with certain apps/ cards, but these also available to many other professionals.
- 3.10 Members identified allegations process as possible factor affecting retention. Allegations are stressful and not enough support given. Lack of communication around timescales and nature of allegation. Foster Carers have no rights to defend themselves and children can be permanently moved, resulting in loss of all financial support. Allegation records remain in paperwork even if cleared, so LAs less likely to place another child with you. Foster Carers can be deregistered after a certain number of allegations, even if all proved false. Damages reputation of all household members, as partners must inform own employers. Prospective carers may have reservations due to fear child will make allegation against them.
- 3.11 Allegation process needs official timescale, consistent across all LAs and IFAs. SOR suggested providing a time sheet which breaks down process day by day. EE noted timescales very difficult to get right and there's a difference between setting one out and making it happen.
- 3.12 LL stated foster carers in Hull City Council receive mandatory allegation training as part of pre-approval training, which outlines full procedure and breaks down timescales so carers know what to expect. Existing carers must also take this course. HAN noted Waltham Forest also has allegation training, but doesn't address specific procedure.



- 3.13 JR highlighted emotional support needed. Allegation processes never easy and must be recognised as a trauma. Potential to damage trust between foster carers and supervising social workers. Important to ask carers how they feel.
- 3.14 DE identified significant pay inconsistencies across LAs as another factor affecting retention. National best practice guide required to negate this.

#### **4. MOCKINGBIRD MODEL**

- 4.1 DP recognised Mockingbird as a strength of their LA. Support for Mockingbird is strong and positive feedback received from foster carers regarding Hub carers providing respite care for each other. Expectation that families be available for respite 3 of 4 weekends per month does create some additional pressure.
- 4.2 CJ felt Mockingbird makes foster families responsible for the support which should already be in place for them. Concerned Mockingbird puts additional pressure on foster carers to be available for respite. It can be a struggle to attend all your own meetings without additional responsibilities of Mockingbird. Peer mentoring also creates extra work for foster carers. CJ noted Mockingbird doesn't work for everybody, as families specialised in violent children cannot provide respite for others if children placed with them.
- 4.3 HAN very positive about Mockingbird in Waltham Forest, but recognised respite expectations could be stressful for families who have children placed. Suggested smaller constellations be established for specialised families. Waltham Forest foster carers very positive about respite, as time off reduces strain on family relationships and provides wider family network for child. However, spare bedrooms are required to provide respite which not everyone has.
- 4.4 JAB used to belong to IFA with very successful Mockingbird model. Hub carer volunteers were paid to stay vacant in order to provide respite care whenever necessary. JAB's current LA do not have Mockingbird and lost many foster carers last year, whilst only two recruited. Agreed Mockingbird networks provide auntie/uncle figures for children and can be huge support for carers, so in favour of model becoming more widespread.
- 4.5 JR noted Haringey has one Mockingbird Hub and is hoping to open a second. Agrees with JAB that model very successful. Existing Hub run by volunteer family who are paid a fee and don't have their own children placed.
- 4.6 JS highlighted importance of acknowledging expertise which comes with caring for a looked after child 24/7. Social workers cannot replicate this and utilising lived experience is vital for support services. Mockingbird recognises this and has huge advantages, but mustn't become a burden.
- 4.7 DE recognised inconsistencies within Mockingbird model between LAs, e.g. whether Hub carers do or don't have own children placed. Some Hub carers salaried, some volunteers. If rolled out nationwide needs to be consistent.



## 5. **IMPACT OF TEMPORARY MOVES**

- 5.1 A Guardian article on temporary moves over Christmas was shared with members prior to the meeting. CJ noted numbers are higher than article states.
- 5.2 Many children go into care for the first time over Christmas, due to it being a time of high tension for families. Christmas can therefore be triggering for children in care, inducing high trauma behavioural responses which foster carers may struggle to deal with.
- 5.3 Some foster carers put children in respite over Christmas. Temporary moves contribute to continuous cycle of trauma. Carers and schools require better training to improve understanding of triggers and behavioural responses. Not enough capacity for support.
- 5.4 LL noted respite care a prerequisite of taking her foster daughter, as couldn't take her out of school during term time to go on holiday. Child goes to respite care once per year when LL takes birth daughter on holiday. Would prefer same respite carer each time for consistency but not always possible. LL recognised importance of time away to mentally recharge. Carers not paid when foster child not with them, so respite detrimental to finances. LL receives no fees if foster child away for more than one night.
- 5.5 DP does not use respite, but has family member come to house whenever backup care needed. This preserves routine and provides consistency. Greenwich provides annual break from caring fee to supplement respite, but not received unless carers take time off. DP noted child's immigration status impacts abroad holidays. Would like increased engagement between LAs and Home Office. DP's family holiday in UK and take foster children with them.
- 5.6 DE takes foster children on holiday with her. Once booked a holiday before children placed and didn't get permission to take them, so had to put them in respite for ten days. At placement end oldest child said worst part was when DE left them to go on holiday, so never done it since. DE recognised being short term carer provides natural breaks between placements. Leeds City Council about to pay foster carers two weeks holiday per year to be used however necessary, so carers' holiday not lost.
- 5.7 CJ does use respite. Recognised that in no other job would employees not get a holiday and foster carers work 24/7. CJ specialises in caring for complex children who present with violent behaviours which is exhausting. Gets 3 weeks respite per year and loses half their money each time they use it. Noted carers in some LAs penalised for taking breaks, as if sign they aren't coping and should consider quitting. Some foster carers view not taking respite as matter of pride, but no one is superhuman and burn out has negative effect on children too. Discouraging respite does not help retention. Negative impact of temporary moves can be reduced if properly planned and facilitated (e.g. meeting respite carers ahead of time.) Respite can be beneficial for children, as creates wider family networks that represents grandparents, uncles/aunties etc. CJ noted trauma unavoidable, regardless of situation, so long term benefits should be prioritised. Respite builds trust as proves to child you will come back for them. CJ fosters with therapeutic IFA that puts respite plans in place for children and does not question or critique requests for breaks, but aware this not the case everywhere. Although respite plan in place, not always enough respite carers available to carry out these plans.



- 5.8 SOR never used respite, but has supportive extended family. Children enjoy temporary moves to grandparents' houses as acts as a holiday and grandparents have active, consistent roles in their lives. TACT allow two weeks respite without penalty, but offer 50% pay for not taking it. One of SOR's foster child's birth siblings has moved placements 7 times, once being over Christmas, which has impacted him very negatively. SOR believes many moves result from foster carer burnout, because appropriate support services not in place. Took SOR two years to get CAMHS support for child requiring ongoing therapeutic intervention, then told to reapply after 6 weeks if wanted more. JS noted adopters receive adopters adoption support fund which largely replaced CAMHS, but same not available for foster carers.
- 5.9 CJ noted that some new carers give up on children quickly as they don't receive appropriate trauma training beforehand. Need thorough understanding of trauma influence on behaviour and how to use this knowledge to inform response. Shouldn't be down to therapeutic agencies alone to provide this service. All care experienced children have trauma so all carers should receive training. Mental health first aid training should also be mandatory.
- 5.10 DP raised need for therapeutic and counselling services to support foster carers with secondary trauma. Must be confidential and without consequences. JR agreed foster carers need additional support with challenging children. New carers often very stressed due to high workload and short timeframes. Supporting carers in first year vital for retention. Time to detox and reflect crucial, or crisis point reached. Changes must be made to reach required number of foster carers.
- 5.11 HAN agreed many carers lost in first year who are very competent. Suggested extended respite periods or standardized mentoring scheme could be introduced for carers in their first year. Recognised Mockingbird may not have capacity to hold every family.

## **6. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

- 6.1 December webinar with Proud 2B Parents very successful. Recording available to watch on CoramBAAF website.
- 6.2 The Black Care Experience Conference coming up in February. In person event; will not be recorded. The conference theme is the Culturally Competent workforce and DP is sitting on the workforce panel, this will be an informative and positive event, building on the success of last year's conference. Everyone encouraged to sign up to the Black Care Experience Network – as an individual and/ or as an organisation. [About — The Black Care Experience](#)

## **7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

- 7.1 CB to begin revising Form F this year. Further information coming soon.
- 7.2 Members hope DfE can take away their ideas to inform practice. DfE welcome to attend future meeting to continue discussions after Implementation Strategy published.
- 7.3 CJ would like to focus on positive practice examples at future meetings. Members to look out for examples from own agencies that could be beneficial to share with group.

**Date of next meeting: 19 April 2023**