

Minutes

19 April 2023 | 10am- 12.30pm

Present:

Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	(HAN) (chair)
Dawn Elliot	Leeds	(DE)
Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	(NG)
Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	(CJ) (chair)
Lisa Little	Hull	(LL)
Steven O'Reilly	TACT	(SOR)
Darryl Pottinger	Greenwich	(DP)

In Attendance:

Jasmin Bhimani	Department for Education (DfE)	(JB)
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF (CB)	(GC) (minutes)
Eva Elks	Department for Education (DfE)	(EE)
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF (CB)	(EF)

Apologies:

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	(JAB)
Sam Penny	Devon	(SP)
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	(JR)

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND POSITIVE PRACTICE EXAMPLES

- 1.1 The Chairs welcomed everyone to the meeting and facilitated a round of introductions. Members were encouraged to share one example of positive practice they had experienced recently. This is set to become a running agenda item, highlighting positive developments which members can take to their own agencies.
- 1.2 CJ has a contract with their supervising social worker, clearly stating the expectations of both their roles and clarifies their relationship. This contract has been personalised to meet CJ's specific needs to ensure these are met.
- 1.3 NG's IFA provide a monthly list of available training sessions. The organisation paid for NG to attend a requested training course, even though it was not on this list.
- 1.4 Leeds City Council have adjusted and simplified their fees and emergency payments system. All foster carers are now paid two weeks leave upfront every April, whether they take holiday or not.



- 1.5 DP has learnt about bridging placements, where children temporarily move foster families. DP recently witnessed a situation where a foster carer's family recognised it was in the children's best interests to remain with their current foster carer, so agreed to offer her extra support. This foster carer subsequently withdrew her notice, demonstrating how extra support can improve retention.
- 1.6 SOR's IFA employ dedicated specialists from the fields of education, health and law. They are available to support carers with issues around mental health and other medical needs. They can assist with communicating with schools and the obtaining EHCPs, as well as any law related matters.
- 1.7 Hull City Council has a new marketing manager who views foster carers as VIPs and is focussing on recruitment and retention. She organised a free Easter Egg Hunt for foster families in the area to provide a social opportunity.
- 1.8 Waltham Forest are very good at recruitment, as they are quick to answer initial expressions of interest and kick start the process. Quick responses are essential for effective recruitment and for ensuring prospective foster carers go with their local authority.

2. INVITATION TO NUMBER 10

- 2.1 EF announced ten members of the Foster Carers Advisory Committee had been invited to attend an event at Number 10 Downing Street during Fostering Fortnight (15th-28th May 2023.) The date and time are still to be confirmed. EF recognised this invitation as an acknowledgment from DfE of foster carers' value and of the positive impact they have on society. Members to contact GC if they are interested in attending, pending confirmation of the details.

3. MINUTES FROM THE LAST MEETING

- 3.1 The minutes from the last meeting (19th April) were accepted as an accurate record of discussions.
- 3.2 GC reminded members these minutes will eventually be published on the CoramBAAF website. Members to contact GC within the next month if any amendments need to be made before publication.

4. CARE REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

- 4.1 The government response to the Care Review was published in February. EF presented slides from DfE outlining the key points for fostering. Deadline for the formal consultation is 11th May and CoramBAAF will consider members' views when submitting their feedback.
- 4.2 EF summarised the six missions within pillar four of the strategy: 'Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care.' The group discussed their initial thoughts and questions surrounding this.
- 4.3 *Mental Health Support*- members were pleased with the proposed commitment to mental health, but expressed concerns around the practicalities of achieving this within a broken system. There



are wider structural issues that need fixing before any changes can be made, such as the current shortage of mental health practitioners and subsequent CAMHS waiting lists. Most schools do not have a counsellor and those that do employ part time workers who are overwhelmed. There is currently a 2-3 year CAMHS wait for children experiencing suicidal ideation across the whole country, not just within fostering. SOR struggled to get mental health support for their youngest child, because he didn't meet the urgent threshold for CAMHS and the local authority didn't have the budget to pay for private therapeutic care. The system requires nationwide improvement that goes beyond the remit of fostering, so members were skeptical about DfE's ability to implement their ideas.

- 4.4 *Corporate Parenting*- has the potential to be controversial, as increasing corporate parenting powers will in turn decrease the powers of birth parents. This would be helpful in cases where moving placements or returning to birth family would not be in the child's best interest. Sweeping statements are positive but members would like specifics. The importance of building relationships between local authorities and the Home Office was emphasised.
- 4.5 *Staying Put*- SOR explained mission 5 is at odds with his current experience. Their staying put placement has recently been told to pay £265 per week towards his care, when he is in full time college and only receives £63 per week in benefits and entitlements. This £265 will be deducted from their foster carer allowance, which will reduce from £400 to £130 per week. This implies the staying put offer is getting weaker. Staying put offers are important for reducing homelessness amongst care leavers and improving their post care outcomes. Young people cannot afford the amount of money they're being asked for. Birth children do not leave home at 18, so all care leavers should be supported financially until they turn 25. Young people who go to university have to vacate their accommodation during the holidays, meaning care leavers with no support system need to find somewhere else to live.
- 4.6 *Recruitment and Retention*- Increasing foster carer allowances and support would assist with both recruitment and retention. Money should be put towards existing carers who already have the required training and experience and would be willing to take on more children if the appropriate resources were provided. It costs more to train new carers who exhibit a high fallout rate after their first placement, because the reality of fostering is not what they were pitched. Hull has a very low retention rate because carers cannot afford to foster anymore. Retention is more important than recruitment, as safe and supported foster carers will recruit via word of mouth.

5. **FINANCE PRESENTATION**

- 5.1 Waltham Forest provide foster carers with a handbook that breaks down how they should be spending their allowance each week. HAN presented a breakdown of their household weekly spending compared to these recommendations. This breakdown showed HAN to be out of pocket by the end of every week, despite their recent 1.75% fee increase and the fact they are already above the government's new national minimum allowance. People from corporate environments listen to data more than to stories.
- 5.2 HAN noted the monthly cost of a child's mobile phone was not included in the recommended spending. Foster carers with black children will also face additional costs of specialised hair and skin care. School uniforms were not included in the clothing allowance. It was acknowledged that



teenage boys eat more than £40 worth of food per week and the cost of school dinners must also be considered.

- 5.3 Young people can often apply for bursaries to help with college costs (public transport, dinners, educational resources etc.) SOR noted bursaries do not cover the full cost of a college course (depending on the subject).
- 5.4 Household expenses have gone up significantly in recent months. However, allowances only cover the child's portion of the heating, water, gas etc. so costs must be divided by the number of people in the house. Additional birthday, Christmas and holiday allowances are provided. However, holiday allowances do not cover school trips or the cost of acquiring a solicitor to produce the paperwork necessary for taking a foster child out of the country.
- 5.5 Members recognised a huge number of foster carers are losing money through fostering, as they are forced to use their own savings to cover cost differences. Costs vary depending on the local authority and the age of the child. Some carers will benefit from the increase in national minimum allowance but many will not. Some carers receive additional fees for being specialised or taking children with additional needs.
- 5.6 **Action:** HAN to share finance document with CoramBAAF to circulate to committee members. HAN is looking to produce a similar document for supermarket expenditure and the increase in food costs over one year.

6. Q&A WITH THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

- 6.1 Eva Elkes from the Department for Education attended the second half of the meeting to address members' queries regarding the government implementation strategy. All points recorded in section 4 were raised, as well as the following additions.
- 6.2 *Foster Carer Fees and Allowances-* DfE attended the previous Foster Carers Advisory Committee in January and HAN reported feeling energised after that event, as it felt as though members were being listened to. The increase in national minimum allowance was very welcome, as was the increased tax relief threshold, as this demonstrated collaboration between government departments. However, the majority of foster carers will not be affected by either of these. Members expressed disappointment at not getting a consistent national fee for all foster carers. Foster Carers are moving around local authorities and IFAs to be with the ones that pay more. This costs more time and money to facilitate the necessary paperwork and could be prevented if there were equal rates for everyone. EE noted DfE were not of the opinion there should be a consistent national allowance, because different areas operate under different circumstances. However, the intention is for rates within each region (i.e. support hub) to be the same.
- 6.3 *Support Hubs-* Members requested more information on support hubs. EE explained these are designed to provide consistent support to new foster carers from their first expression of interest, by assigning dedicated staff to respond to their queries and help them understand what fostering entails. The people running these support hubs would preferably have experience of fostering, such as retired or existing foster carers. By ensuring the right people are recruited retention will be improved. IFAs will not be included in this, as the purpose is to boost local authority capacity



and the government cannot fund recruitment within independent organisations. However, the importance of IFAs has not gone unrecognised and the hope is that local authorities and IFAs will be better able to collaborate.

- 6.4 *Professionalisation of Foster Carers*- Members were disappointed no mention was made of giving foster carers professional status. Foster Carers argued that they should receive a minimum wage and a pension like everyone else. The government are missing an opportunity to formalise Foster Carer Associations and make them mandatory in all local authorities, to help with recruitment and retention.
- 6.5 *Mockingbird Model*- EE acknowledged Mockingbird only supports a handful of families at a time and does not work for everyone. It has been confirmed that a large proportion of funding and focus will go towards Mockingbird, because a strong evidence base suggests it helps with retention which in the long run will save a lot of money. Most aspects of running the Mockingbird Model are not that expensive, but there is an initial process which local authorities need to go through to partner with The Fostering Network. Once this process is complete, the cost of adding additional constellations is low. Funding will go towards paid support workers and hub home carers who have budgets for days out, training etc. The government intends to fund the larger initial costs so local authorities are then able to fund the less costly aspects themselves.
- 6.6 *Regional Care Cooperatives*- These will eventually be absorbed into recruitment and retention hubs. The aim is to move existing services rather than create new ones, so RCCs are designed to eventually remove some functions from local authorities. At the moment, social workers with caseloads are answering initial fostering enquires meaning these calls are not prioritised. By centralising this service and assigning dedicated staff to this task it frees up social worker capacity.
- 6.7 *Funding allocation*- EE acknowledged there is no getting around the fact that the Care Review asked for £2 billion and this strategy has allocated nowhere near that amount. In order to ask for more money, an evidence base needs to be built that can be taken to the treasury after the spending review is complete. The current strategy is designed to last until the next election and the outcomes will be used to influence further developments after this.
- 6.8 *Wider sector response*- Overall, the response from the fostering sector has been positive. Some challenges have been raised which reflect the concerns of this committee, but the fact this strategy has gone beyond throwing money at advertising has been very well received. Some regions feel this strategy is not right for them, due to similar services already being in place. DfE do not often have access to foster carers, so EE emphasised the value of attending this meeting.
- 6.9 **Action:** EE has taken notes on mental health and staying put concerns, which she will pass on to the leaders of those areas.
- 6.10 **Action:** CoramBAAF to continue inviting DfE to future meetings.



7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 7.1 EF to send members further information on the Number 10 event.
- 7.2 EF to send members information on a research opportunity regarding foster carers and therapeutic support.

Date of next meeting: 19 July 2023