

Minutes

09 October 2024 | 10.00am – 12.30pm

Chair: Cara Jones and Steven O'Reilly

Present

Dawn Elliot	North Yorkshire	DE
Cara Jones	Chrysalis Consortium	CJ (co-chair)
Nicky Lockett	West Midlands	NL
Steven O'Reilly	TACT Care	SOR
Sam Penny	Devon	SP
Rebecca Pacy	Time Out (Sussex)	RP
Alastair Scott-McKinley	Shropshire	MS
Fiona Trewartha	East Riding	FT

In attendance

Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF	GC
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	EF
Annie Hughes	Department for Education	AH

Apologies

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Nottingham	JAB
Hanan Al-Najjar	Waltham Forest	HAN
Adam Dalal	Blackburn and Darwen	AD
Nazeema Gill	Homefinding Fostering Agency	NG
Jennifer Roy	Haringey	JR
Melanie Stubbs	Shropshire	MS

1. Introductory warm up: Black History Month

- 1.1** To mark Black History Month, members shared how their agencies were celebrating throughout October. The importance of celebrating culture and race/ ethnic heritage identities all year round was acknowledged. Examples included:
- Newsletters (for carers and for children)
 - Sharing recipes
 - Virtual sessions with black social workers on skin and hair care, culture, food etc.
 - Sharing links to videos, podcasts, online resources etc.

- 1.2 Members recognised the negative impact of reduced time and resources afforded to celebrating and respecting Black History Month. The consensus was that Black History Month (and other events focused on protected characteristics) are not being prioritised the way they were a few years ago. The ethnic diversity of children and foster carers requires focused work to improve the experiences of children and young people and proactively supporting foster carers to do this. Fostering service and agency recognition of Black History Month was felt by some to be more tokenistic than celebratory and overall engagement was lacking, which is problematic.
- 1.3 EF acknowledged the racist riots which occurred across the UK over the summer. These clearly illustrate the continuing presence of racist views and far right activity within society, demonstrating a crucial need for responses of support and guidance. CoramBAAF released a [statement](#) following the racist riots. Other Black History Resources can be found on the [website](#).

2. Allegations

- 2.1 FosterTalk have released a [report](#) on foster carer allegations. Members shared their experiences of the allegations process and discussed the impact of allegations on recruitment and retention. The impact of allegations and the potential repercussions for other family members are a huge reason why foster carers are not recommending fostering to others. Even when foster carers are cleared, the allegation remains on their permanent record to cast the seed of doubt with practitioners. It was articulated that in no other role would someone be considered guilty until proven innocent. This makes fostering a huge risk for people, especially those with other jobs that require a clean record (teachers, police officers etc.)
- 2.2 A lack of communication from agencies means foster carers are often left in the dark regarding the allegations process. Many issues could be solved sooner if fostering services/ agencies were transparent and spoke directly with foster carers at an early stage, to avoid simple misunderstandings.
- 2.3 Allegations have a significant impact on foster carer wellbeing (emotional and financial) and can result in children being removed or new children not being matched. This can leave households in the lurch without any income for months at a time, with no official protection.
- 2.4 The rights of foster carers to their own allegation information was questioned, as well as their ability to make a [subject access request](#). Carers should be able to access any information recorded about them, even if some of the details need to be redacted.
- 2.5 AH confirmed the policy team at DfE are continuing to look at allegations as an issue and are very aware of its impact.

3. Fostering language

- 3.1 Members shared the language/terminology/phrases they thought should or should not be used within the context of fostering. Terms discussed included:
- *Foslings* (a colloquial term for foster children, used by foster carers in informal settings)
 - *Placement* (referring to the actual child as a placement, as opposed to just their living situation)
 - *Foster carer vs. foster parent* (carer implies temporary, but a parent is 24/7)
 - *Respite vs. short breaks/stay over*
 - *Contact vs. family time*
 - *Contact center vs. family centre*

- Using the child's name when referring to care plans, meetings, reviews and visits
- Referring to birth parents by their names in correspondence, to acknowledge them as individuals
- *Registered/ de-registered* (there is no register of foster carers)
- *Corporate parent* (everyone is responsible, which can mean that no-one is responsible)

- 3.2 The difference between child-friendly and practice-based language was identified. Certain words/acronyms used by social work practitioners in professional settings should not be used in front of children. It was recognised that some language is cemented in legislation and could only be changed at a legal level, but this should not affect how young people are communicated with. Members acknowledged their difficulties in making themselves understood by social work professionals when using preferred language, as social workers are not always clear what they are referring to. Ofsted requirements also make changing agency policies difficult.
- 3.3 Where possible, children should be given a say in the language they use and the names they call people. ASM noted that not calling foster carers 'mum' or 'dad' is formally written into some fostering agency policies and placement agreements. Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) have done some language work in Northern Ireland.

Action: EF is attending a meeting with TACT and Ofsted to discuss the Language that Cares document and next steps. EF to feedback on this next meeting.

4. Trauma-informed approach in schools

- 4.1 RP lead a discussion on how care experienced children are treated at school. An overall lack of trauma awareness was identified, with teachers feeling overworked and under-trained. RP shared personal examples of the difficulties faced by her two foster daughters within the education system. The importance of adjusting class activities to fit the needs of individual children was recognised.
- 4.2 CJ and SOR noted how some independent fostering agencies are offering schools free trauma training. Despite agency willingness to be flexible with timings, most schools are refusing this training offer. Members agreed most teachers show a desire to learn, but their knowledge is limited by a lack of training opportunities so they are forced to learn through trial and error. Explaining a child's behavioural responses takes time and energy and can be met with resistance, as foster carer expectations are considered too high.
- 4.3 Members questioned the criteria for schools calling themselves trauma-informed, as well as how aware teachers are of their pupils' life stories. FT suggested implementing trauma training into the PGCE teacher training course, as some staff have never heard of PACE.
- 4.4 It was concluded that research and evidence does not indicate a need for additional spending. Instead, the teachers'/school's understanding and approach can be hugely impactful for the child's learning experience and simple changes can reduce harm. More sensitivity in selecting activities, as well as use of language, can make a significant difference. Regardless of the lack of training available, much comes down to basic humanity and common sense.

Action: The committee to return to this topic at a future meeting. CoramBAAF to consider future actions that could be taken, potentially with involvement from DfE and/Ofsted. Follow-up email to confirm this.

5. CoramBAAF updates

- 5.1 EF summarised the progress of the **Fosterlink project**. Following diagnostic assessments, 35 local authorities are receiving individual reports outlining recruitment recommendations (marketing, enquiry handling, website design etc.) An overall report will outline the key findings across all 35 areas.
- 5.2 The **Form F pilot** has been underway since June. 12 organisations (9 local authorities and 3 IFAs) volunteered to trial the new form. They have been meeting monthly to provide feedback and support each other. It is estimated around 40 new foster families will have been assessed using the new form by the end of the pilot phase.
- 5.3 The **sub-group** of this committee met to continue the discussion on **two-carer households**. CoramBAAF to research the minimum expectations of two-carer households across local authorities and IFAs to assess consistency. Once this has been done another meeting will be scheduled to identify actions going forward.

6. Any other business

Action: GC to send a follow up email with meeting resources, including the new fees report by the Fostering Network.

Action: Members to send in suggestions for future discussion topics, so another voting poll can be set up.

Date of next meeting: 29 January 2025