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Minutes

Fostering Advisory Committee

2 July 2024 | 10am - 12.30pm

Present

Hanan Al-Najjar	Foster carer – LA	HAN
Corrie Biddle	The Fostering Network	CB
Florence Chiwetu	Independent consultant	FC
Sam Frith-Jones	AFKA Cymru	SFJ
Nazeema Gill	Foster carer – IFA	NG
Angie Gillies	AFKA Scotland	AG
Pal Jandu	Camden	PJ
Cara Jones	Foster carer – IFA	CJ
Julie Macer-Wright	Essex County Council	JMW
Charmaine Orchard	Konnected	CO (chair)
Claire Rogers	Treehouse Care	CR
Steffi Roth	Brighter Futures	SR
Liz Spaven	Newcastle LA	LS
Nicola Smith	Barnardo's	NS
Matt Taylor-Roberts	Proud 2B Parents	MTR
Sarah Thomas	The Fostering Network	ST (vice chair)
Ruth Willetts	FosterTalk	RW

In attendance

Charlotte Andrew	Proud 2B Parents	CA
James Bury	CoramBAAF	JB
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF	GC
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF	EF

Apologies

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Foster carer - LA	
Sally Barnett	South Coast Fostering	SB
Linda Briheim-Crookall	Coram Voice	LBC
Jacqueline Cassidy	The Fostering Network	JC
Rebekah Pierre	BASW	RP
Anthony Turner	The Fostering Team	AT

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1. Welcome and introductions

1.1 CO welcomed members to the meeting and initiated introductions.

1.2 The minutes of the last meeting were accepted as an accurate reflection of discussions.

2. Equality, diversity and inclusion: Pride Month

2.1 Charlotte Andrew, Proud 2B Parents, delivered a presentation on LGBTQ+ foster carers. The importance if organisations continuing these conversations post-Pride Month was recognised.

2.2 Charlotte and Matt (MTR, Proud 2B Parents) are assisting CoramBAAF with some practice notes, including one on recruitment and assessment of LGBTQ+ foster carers. Expertise shared in this session will help inform this practice note.

2.3 CA summarised the current landscape and challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community during recruitment and assessment. Statistics show the increase of LGB adopters since 2007. This data does not include transgender adopters. Data for foster carers is not yet available, but should be soon.

2.4 Members were split into breakout groups and asked 'What should the recruitment process look like to be inclusive?' The following questions were discussed.

- How can foster care agencies better raise awareness within the LGBTQ+ community about the need for foster carers?
- What specific concerns or fears might LGBTQ+ individuals or couples have about becoming foster carers and how could these be addressed early in the process?
- What inclusive practices or policies should foster agencies have in places to support LGBTQ+ foster carers?
- How can agencies ensure their initial contact with potential LGBTQ+ foster carers is welcoming and affirming?
- What language and terminology should agencies use to ensure communication is respectful and inclusive?
- How can agencies train their staff to be sensitive and responsive to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and couples?

2.5 Each breakout group fed-back on their discussions. Highlights included:

- Agencies sharing success stories
- Social worker self-awareness of social graces
- Having courage to talk about differences and recognise different lenses
- Learning from past experiences
- Need for appropriate training courses and for LGBTQ+ awareness to be woven into all training
- Imagery on advertisements not being tokenistic
- Support services and resources
- Community engagement at Pride events
- Practitioners assuming that everyone knows about fostering
- Community engagement officers/event coordinators for open communication and building trust
- Men in fostering groups

2.6 MTR noted how things have changed for the LGBTQ+ community over the last few years. The focus now is on equity, so creating spaces where people feel safe and supported is really important, especially when sharing experiences. Changes to practice and services are still needed to reach full inclusivity and ensure individuals can be fully themselves when accessing them.

Action: Members are welcome to contact CA to continue this conversation. They are keen to talk to any LGBTQ+ carer groups to co-produce the practice note: charlotte.andrew@threecirclesfostering.com

Action: CoramBAAF to invite Proud 2B Parents back to a future meeting to update on practice note progress.

3. Barriers to recruitment and methods for increasing applications

3.1 Members discussed specific barriers to recruiting new foster carers, as well as the retention of existing ones, which could be addressed by policy changes.

3.2 MTR identified a potential trend of foster carers moving to SGO arrangements. Members questioned whether this was down to an assumption carers and young people could get more support.

3.3 AG summarised the work being done in Scotland on recruitment and retention. A national brand is being developed for Foster Scotland which all local authorities can use. Key issues for Scotland include lack of fee consistency, housing, support and responding to initial enquiries. Foster Wales is a good example of what they would like to achieve, though less resources are available.

Action: AG to give an update on Foster Scotland next year.

3.4 CB noted retention and recruitment of foster carers cannot be separated from that of social workers. 'Here to stay' interviews (as opposed to exit interviews) have helped maintain a 98% permanent social work staff in one LA. This could potentially be applied to foster carers, by learning what encourages them to stay in post.

3.5 NG recognised the lack of spare bedrooms as being a particular issue in London. Carers need help to bid for bigger houses, as children have to move on when they get too old to share a room. Some existing carers may be open to taking more than one child if assisted with acquiring more space. CJ suggested house extensions could keep siblings together and might save money in the long term. ST emphasised how constancy and creativity are key. Local authorities could put adult birth children of prospective foster carers on priority housing lists, same as with care experienced young people, in order to free up spare bedrooms. However, many LAs do not have the budget to be creative. A Welsh retention research project on independent exit interviewers is in progress. A recruitment good practice tool kit is also in the making. The Fostering Network published a report in May 2023 on recruitment and retention of foster carers in England. Key findings and recommendations here.

3.6 A financial safety net is needed when children are not in placement, as other jobs continue to give payments when workers are made redundant. More carers would come in if better financial support and assistance with self-employment was provided. CA questioned how many foster carers leave agencies to join another fostering service, since inconsistent support means people move to get better offers. Guidance needed on how services ethically communicate with carers about services they provide, to ensure transparency.

3.7 HAN acknowledged how most foster carers have other incomes, as foster carer fees are not enough to live on. The government must decide to give professional salaries over tokenistic payments. Housing for existing carers is not a long term solution, but definitely would help younger prospective carers. Some foster carers choose not to take more children for various reasons, even if they do have the space.

3.8 Barnardo's were approached by DfE following the decision not to house unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels. They are now recruiting foster carers specifically for UASC and released a policy report as part of Refugee Week, where experienced foster carers were consulted regarding the challenges faced and how the government could help.

3.9 Current trends in retention include:

- Foster carers moving to SGO arrangements
- Foster carers reaching retirement age
- Foster carers downsizing, which reduces the number of spare bedrooms
- Increase in younger people working from home, using spare bedrooms as studies

Action: More time to be allocated to this topic at a future meeting, to include breakout group discussions.

4. Form F pilot update

4.1 EF provided an update on the Form F pilot. 12 organisations (9 LAs and 3 IFAs) volunteered to trial the new form between June and December 2024.

5. Future planning

5.1 Members suggested topics for future meetings. Ideas included:

- FosterTalk allegations report
- Best practice for supporting and assessing prospective transgender foster carers
- Supporting children in care who identify as LGBTQ+
- Muslim Foster Network
- The Black Care Experience
- Advocacy for young people and foster carers
- Mockingbird programme – early practice issues and how to resolve them
- Trauma informed education, neurodiversity and school exclusions

5.2 *Transgender applicants*: CoramBAAF's practice note is currently under review. CA nominated a researcher who could be invited to present on this topic.

5.3 *LGBTQ+ young people*: Resources are available at LGBTQ+ Youth in Care. CA noted a general lack of knowledge and understanding by practitioners, with foster carers often being asked to 'prove' a young person's identity. There is no guidance available for professionals outlining what is and is not appropriate to ask. Organisations are reluctant to publish their stance on this due to the current political climate. This has caused issues in the sector around sexualisation of children and linking identity with trauma. A child-focussed approach is lacking in this area.

5.4 *Advocacy:* Coram Voice and/or NYAS could be invited to speak on this. Members questioned England's advocacy standards and how this has changed following the Care Review. Fostering services find communicating with advocacy services challenging and meetings difficult to manage.

Foster carer unions and other independent workers also cause difficulties at panel. The importance of advocacy for marginalised communities (both children and foster carers) was particularly emphasised.

Date of next meeting: 5 November 2024