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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

This guide builds on best practice for conducting foster carer reviews.

In recent years, the United Kingdom's (UK) four nation governments have tried to improve the experiences of and life chances for foster children. A key mechanism for improving the quality of foster care is through foster carer reviews. They are conducted in order to evaluate a foster carer's practice and offer the opportunity for improving the quality of foster care. Since the publication of the first edition of this Good Practice Guide, BAAF published a further guide to collecting and analysing information for foster carer reviews (Adams, 2014), advising on best practice when using the BAAF Form FR (England). This publication and the Adams publication can be helpfully considered together.

Foster carer reviews are governed by regulation and require an assessment of whether or not a foster carer and their household remain suitable to care for foster children and if their terms of approval are still appropriate. They provide a formal arena to consider: the quality of each foster carer's care of individual foster children; how the foster carer's development can be enhanced to enable them to improve their practice; and how a fostering service provider (FSP) can support them to undertake their complex work. The foster carer review is a symbolic and practical representation of the relationship between the foster carer and their FSP. It acts as a vehicle for improving an individual foster carer's support, supervision and practice.

Improving the quality and stability of foster care is of paramount importance given that the majority of looked after children in the UK live with foster carers. In England on 31 March 2014 there were 51,340 children placed with foster carers, 75 per cent of the total looked after children population. On 31 July 2014 in Scotland that number was 5,533, 36 per cent of the looked after children population. In Wales it was 4,407, 77 per cent of the looked after children population, and in Northern Ireland it was 2,156, 75 per cent of the looked after children population (BAAF, 2015). Given the high percentage of looked after children who are placed with foster carers across the UK, ensuring that foster carers'

practice is as good as it can be and that foster carer reviews are effective is critical.

STRUCTURE

Chapters 2–4 set out knowledge informing good practice. Chapters 5–8 cover the detail of the review process itself. The first substantive chapter (Chapter 2) outlines the current legal and policy frameworks for foster carer reviews within the four nations of the UK. Understanding the legal mandate for foster carer reviews is fundamental to good practice and I therefore cover this at the start of the guide. Chapter 3 considers recommendations and findings arising from inquiry reports and serious case reviews involving foster carers. These reports are important because they remind us of the serious nature of the professional judgements involved regarding whether a foster carer continues to be a suitable person to care for looked after children as well as enabling learning from the case studies that each inquiry represents. Chapter 4 looks at social work knowledge underpinning assessment and review processes. Chapter 5 moves on to look at the practicalities involved in foster carer reviews and addresses necessary administration enabling reviews to be effective and undertaken within the regulatory timeframes and requirements. Chapter 6 covers information gathering for foster carer reviews including who might be approached to provide evidence about the quality of a foster carer’s work.

In consulting with people across the UK when preparing this guide, it became apparent that not all FSPs undertake an annual review meeting with the foster carer and their supervising social worker (SSW), where the paperwork prepared for the review is properly scrutinised, separate from the fostering panel process. I argue in this guide that good practice dictates that a review meeting should be held for every foster carer review. Chapter 7 addresses the review meeting’s purpose, content and process. Chapter 8 discusses foster carer reviews and their relationship to fostering panels.

EXPLANATIONS

This guide is written for all the nations of the UK. Chapter 2 outlines the legal, policy and regulatory frameworks for each of them. Fostering regulations, guidance and standards are regularly in a state of flux so this guide tries to grasp essential best practice irrespective of the current state of fostering guidance and regulation. When I refer to

standards and regulations, other than in Chapter 2, I am referring to those of England, for ease of reading. As stated elsewhere, this guide focuses on good practice within a legislative framework but not on the legislation itself.

Throughout the guide I have used the term fostering service provider (FSP) to cover both local authority fostering services as well as independent fostering providers (IFPs).

I refer to the review administrator in the guide. However, some FSPs do not have a designated administrator for foster carer reviews. Where there is not a review administrator, the tasks will need to be covered by other staff members of the FSP.

Different terms are used for people employed by a FSP who supervise foster carers; they are usually referred to as SSWs in the UK. In this guide I just use the term “SSW” to denote the role of the foster carer supervising social worker.

In the guide the term “reviewing officer” (RO) is used for the person who chairs the foster carer review meeting. I use “RO” whether or not that person is employed by the FSP or is independent. “Independent reviewing officer” (IRO) is used here for the person who chairs a foster child’s looked after children’s review.

I refer to a foster carer’s “own children” to mean children who are: born to them; adopted by them; who are subject to a special guardianship order or a child arrangements order. In other words, a foster carer’s own children refers to all children for whom a foster carer has responsibility other than the foster child.

Throughout I refer to a “foster child” and a “foster carer” in the singular. When I use the term foster child, I am, by the use of that term, including fostered young people.

When I refer to “foster care”, I am encompassing all types of foster care in its varied forms governed by fostering regulations, including family and friends foster care.

SUMMARY

There is surprisingly little published about foster carer reviews other than that which is within regulations, standards, guidance and codes of practice (Adams, 2014; Brown, 2014a, 2014b). Mehmet is one of the few people who has written about foster carer reviews in her book about the UK National Standards for Foster Care (UKNSFC) (UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care, 1999a) and the then Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (DH, 2002) (Mehmet, 2005). Like Mehmet, this guide

draws on the UKNSFC which have weathered the sands of time and although dated and not legally binding, still have helpful things to say about good practice for foster carer reviews.

I am mindful when writing this guide of the excellent social work and foster care practice there is across the UK. In writing a good practice guide the author inevitably can sound a little pompous and over directive. In preparing this guide I have remained respectful of the experience and excellent practice that there is and hope I do not seem as if I am teaching grandmothers/grandfathers to suck eggs. However, there is currently some variation between FSPs regarding foster carer reviews in how they are undertaken and the degree of rigour expended. This guide is therefore one contribution towards trying to establish what we might mean when we talk about foster carer review best practice.