

Summary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Wednesday 25th October 2017

5:30pm – 7:00pm

Attlee Suite, Portcullis House, Palace of Westminster

Chair: Steve McCabe MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Panel: Sir Martin Narey

Tim Loughton MP, Co-Vice Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Topic: Fostering Inquiry

Introduction

The meeting opened with a welcome from the Chair

Sir Martin Narey briefly summarised his experience in the sector and interests in the care system and adoption. Sir Martin recently completed a review into children's residential care and is currently undertaking a similar review for fostering. The consultation process is still open and he is happy to receive thoughts and opinions by email. He expects to make recommendations by end of the year.

For context Sir Martin stated that at 31st March 2017, 53,000 children in England were living with foster families, which is around 75% of children in care, 44,000 foster families and around 78,000 placements. Research shows that fostering does a reasonable job. Currently the government spends approximately £1.5 billion on fostering, Sir Martin believes that we can spend this money better and improve the system.

He said that the four main things that foster families tell him are:

- 1) They feel that they need more discretion to make day to day decisions on behalf of foster children, for example take them for a haircut.
- 2) There needs to be more consistency in social worker support. Although most support is steady, social workers can change frequently and this can cause problems.
- 3) They want more peer-to-peer support and more support with mental health
- 4) Many foster carers don't feel that they are listened too, if a child is finding contact with their birth families distressing.

He said that the four main things professionals tell him about fostering are:

- 1) Recruitment of foster carers is difficult, almost impossible. While every child will get a foster carer, this is not necessarily the right sort of foster carer, in the right place. Sir Martin suggested that an initiative like First4Adoption could be started to recruit more foster carers.
- 2) Independent Fostering Agencies don't provide same quality of foster carers as the Local Authority carers. Sir Martin found little evidence of this but highlighted that IFAs charge more. Sir Martin suggested that the voluntary sector could play a bigger part in the recruitment of foster carers.
- 3) There is a problem of poaching of Local Authority foster carers to Independent Fostering agencies and vice versa and this can be disruptive to children.
- 4) Without better pay and allowance, it would be difficult to retain on foster carers.

He said that the main things he heard from children were:

- 1) They have too little say about where they live
- 2) They have too little preparation on where they are going
- 3) They want to be treated as a member of the family and at school they don't want to be identified as a foster child, or have LAC or pupil premium after their name
- 4) Matching and being put with the right carers can be done better. Children think this can be done quicker and they should play a role in the matching process.

- 5) Some children have experienced carers who are in it for the money. Sir Martin said he hadn't personally come across this and research at University of Bristol states that satisfaction is quite high among foster carers, however he acknowledged that there must be cases of this

Sir Martin concluded by saying that fostering needs to be more stable, there needs to be fewer breakdowns in placements and children must be able to stay in a placement beyond 18. While Staying Put was a great advance, childhood doesn't end at 18 or at 21; childhood is forever. We need to find a way to for children in care to have permanence forever.

Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)

Resources

- One young person raised the issue of funding and limited resources for fostering on the Isle of Wight highlighting that there was only one LAC nurse and social workers had large caseloads. He suggested that a board could be created which devises a spending plan stating what LAs should spend money on.
- A young person told the meeting about how funding cuts had detrimentally affected her local walk in centre. The centre had provided her with a sense of stability throughout various placement changes.
- Steve McCabe said that we need to look at how we are funding this type of provision. Sir Martin echoed this, stating that it was regrettable funding for this informal provision has been cut. He thinks we need to look at how money is spent, highlighting that not all money spent on fostering is spent well. He also thinks that we need to look at how we can improve system – for example, Local Authorities might be able to work together to save money.
- Tim Loughton pointed to a study which shows huge differences between how local authorities operate. For example, in Blackpool a child was nine times more likely to come into care than in Richmond. He thinks need to work out what local authorities are doing well and replicate this. Tim thinks this is more to do about leadership than spending more money.
- A young person asked whether there was a link between lack of social workers and lack of foster carers in terms of costs saved. Sir Martin said there may be a link, but he doesn't think there is correlation between quality of children's services and money spent – he thinks this is more to do with leadership.

Sibling contact

- A young person said that she only saw her siblings four times a year and that this wasn't enough.
- Tim Loughton responded by saying that keeping siblings together should be the starting point, but this might not be possible in every case. He highlighted a common problem of siblings being split up simply because a suitable placement could not be found. Tim said that the system need to be smarter and more flexible about keeping young people together.
- Steve McCabe said that he often came across this issue as a social worker and he thinks we need we need consider how best to accommodate children who come into care with a range of different ages.
- Sir Martin acknowledged that it can be hard for foster carers to look after sibling groups and they may need support to do this. He said that the presumption should not be made the siblings should be kept together, sometimes it might be better for siblings to live in separate homes but we should make sure they see each other more often as this could afford them a better chance of thriving. He urged professionals to look at each case on its merits and not to make assumptions about which relationships were important, stressing that contact must be reasonable and in the best interest of the child. He said social workers should ask children who they wanted to see, and foster carers and non-biological children should be asked this as well. A participation worker said that non-biological siblings are often a positive influence on a young person's life and blood can be overrated.
- A young person shared with the meeting how the Mockingbird Project in Doncaster acts as a hub which brings ten families together to have regular contact. Sir Martin praised the project as a good and imaginative scheme showing how that local authorities can do things differently.

Savings

- Concerns were raised about young people being unable to access savings and the general lack of cohesiveness of the system which means that money gets lost.
- Sir Martin agreed and said the issues need to be resolved so that children in care have access to their savings.

Cultural matching

- A young person raised the issue that there is an overemphasis on placing children with foster parents of the same cultural background. She shared her experience of having to spend a long time in residential care while she awaited placement which disrupted her education. This was because her local authority insisted she was placed in a foster home with the same cultural match.
- A social worker said that she thinks that it is more about empowering foster carers to handle cultural differences and mentioned that she had written a book to help with this.
- Sir Martin said that while carers need to be culturally competent, there is no evidence that the placement will break down because child and carers are from different cultures. He highlighted the recent Tower Hamlets case and suggested that while a match on religion, nationality and race is a bonus, it should not be a requirement if all things are equal.

Social worker retention

- A young person asked the panel why he had five social workers in the space of a year?
- Tim Loughton acknowledged that young people in care need stability and reassured the young person that the frequent change in social worker he had experienced was not down to anything he had done. Tim said that social workers are stretched too thin – there aren't enough of them and their caseloads are too high so they often crash and burn.
- Sir Martin added that young social workers coming into the profession tend to move on quite quickly.
- A social work student asked why are social work bursaries being cut, especially as it has been acknowledged that there are not enough social workers. She said that there is not enough help and support for those training to be social workers.
- Sir Martin was unable to comment on the bursaries but said that we train too many social workers, and many don't stay in the profession for long. He emphasised the need for fewer social workers who are better trained, highlighting that social work class sizes are too large and there is a huge disparity in quality among different training providers.
- Tim Loughton added that there were not enough people entering social work for the right reasons. He said that half left the profession within 18 months and it was right to be more selective. Tim also said that social workers need to have more face-to-face time with children and be trusted to use their professional judgement more.

Foster carer support and retention

- A foster carer said that he feels the support group he runs for foster carers is underutilised.
- Another foster carer said that she had only had 20 minutes of supervision last year and felt that local authorities need more direction from the government on how best to support foster carers.
- Sir Martin agreed that foster carers are an untapped resource and said that they are often not consulted when decisions are made about a child in their care. He gave the example of foster carers feeling that their voices are not heard when they tell social workers about the effect of birth family contact on a child.
- Tim Loughton said that we need to look after foster carers better and they need support from people appropriately trained during challenging times. He talked about creating the foster carers charter which sets out the rights and responsibilities foster carers can expect. Tim said that supporting foster carers better would mean a better result for children and save a lot of money.

- Rob from the Fostering Network said that only 64 local authorities have a charter. On the issue of foster carer pay he was interested to hear what the panel considered reasonable pay.
- Sir Martin felt foster carers should be paid a reasonable wage and above costs, however he said that talk about wages and foster carers as professionals appears to go against what foster carers are about.
- Steve McCabe said his personal view was that foster carers are people dealing with difficult situations and their pay should reflect proper reward – this should be more than the living wage. He was conscious that this could be more about workers' rights.
- A foster carer said that more needs to be done to retain foster carers. She gave the example that over the past year in her local authority 53 foster carers were recruited but 52 had left. The local authority did not conduct an exit survey to find out why.
- Sir Martin said he hadn't come across figures quite as bad as those before. He feels it is essential that we need to look at the reasons why we are losing foster carers as they may be leaving over small things that are easy to put right.
- It was asked whether the fostering stocktake would cover the recent Birmingham case where the local authority was held vicariously responsible for abuse by foster carers. Sir Martin stated that he had asked for legal advice on this case.

Mental health

- A foster carer said that transition services for 18-21s need to be looked at, especially CAMHS.
- Sir Martin acknowledged that more mental health support is needed and while he cannot directly address this in the review, he is aware that elsewhere the government is looking at the way we prioritise mental health. He knows that foster carers feel that it would be helpful if they could chase up appointments and referrals directly, rather than having to go through the social worker all the time.
- Tim Loughton feels that we need to do better with mental health and act quicker. He mentioned that the green paper on mental health has a section about perinatal mental health and a section on children when they enter the care system.

Accommodation

- A care-leaver raised the issue that most post 16 accommodation is inadequate, and cost is a huge factor in accommodation choice for local authorities. He feels that local authorities only address problems with substandard semi-independent living accommodation if it receives an Ofsted report.
- Sir Martin said that sometimes children are guided towards bad decisions at 16. Many leave care as they are excited to have their own place but no one tells them how lonely it will be. He stressed that there needs to be better residential care and we need to have greater success with staying put.
- A social worker asked if this review will look at the perceived hierarchy between foster care and residential care, raising that children's homes are not as good as foster homes. She spoke about a child who had had 13 foster family placements but now they were thriving in residential care with daily therapy available. Sir Martin said that some young people do not want to live with a foster family. He said that residential homes do a brilliant job and many staff work tirelessly for the children they support.

Closing remarks

Steve McCabe reiterated that Sir Martin is happy to receive views via email: narey.martin@gmail.com. The Chair thanked everyone for coming.

Next meeting: TBA

Appendix: Vote

- A vote was taken during the meeting on the question: 'should foster carers be paid?'. The majority voted 'yes', with four votes for 'no'.