



BURSTING at the SEAMS

Impact on fostering services of the rise
of children going into care 2009-10



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the fostering network
the voice of foster care



BACKGROUND

Since the tragic case of Baby Peter's death came to public attention in late 2008 the care system has seen an unprecedented rise in the number of children, particularly those needing foster placements. This rise is the result of a number of possible factors, including the debate on thresholds following this case and a recent legal clarification of the law known as the Southwark Judgement.

By year ending 31 March 2009 local authorities in England had seen a nine per cent rise in the number of children starting to be looked after compared to the previous year. In Wales the picture was similar with a 13 per cent rise. The figure in Scotland, however, remained mostly unchanged.

Although full government statistics are not currently available for the period 2009-10, information is available from sources such as Cafcass¹ and Cafcass Cymru² and a recent report by National Federation for Educational Research³ commissioned by the Local Government Association. Cafcass has reported section 31 applications⁴ going up to a total of 8,684 in a year, a rise of 34 per cent (2,188 cases) on the previous period. Similarly during 2008-09 Cafcass Cymru recorded cases in Wales involving 7,105 children and young people in Wales, a rise of seven per cent (compared to 6,597 in the same period in 2007-08).

Knowing this, during April to May 2010 the Fostering Network undertook a series of short telephone interviews with its members (both local authorities and independent fostering providers (IFPs)). The purpose was to explore if fostering services were experiencing a continuing increase in requests for foster placements as a result of the reported rise of children coming into care in 2009-10. We were also interested to know if they were managing to find the right foster families.

A total of 76 fostering services were interviewed in England, Scotland and Wales (61 local authorities and 15 IFPs). At the same time foster carers were encouraged to respond to a short online survey about their experiences and in particular were asked if they had received requests to look after children more frequently than in the previous year. A total of 307 responses were received from foster carers.

The following is an analysis of both quantitative feedback and the rich source of qualitative information. It illustrates the challenges fostering services are currently experiencing in their efforts to find the right foster families for all children who need them.

¹ News release – Cafcass: Care Applications Continue to Rise www.cafcass.gov.uk

² Further information available from <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dhss/report/091106cafcasscymruannualreporten.pdf>

³ Macleod S, Hart R, Jeffes J and Wilkin A (2010) *The Impact of the Baby Peter Case on Applications for Care Orders* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER.

⁴ This refers to an application for a Care Order by local authorities under the Children Act 1989 (section 31).

IMPACT AND CHALLENGES

The following are key areas of concern highlighted by fostering services during the interviews. This report concludes with recommendations for the governments of England, Scotland and Wales, public authorities and fostering services.

1. Children and young people

Four out of five local authorities (82 per cent) saw a rise in the number of children needing foster homes in 2009-10. One-third reported needing to find families for more than 50 additional children in 2009-10.

For some fostering services the rise in children going into care has meant that the usual challenges of finding families have been compounded – mostly finding homes for older children, but also suitable families for long-term placements, children with very complex needs, children and young people with disabilities, sibling groups and in some areas of the country minority ethnic children and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. In particular, as the rise has been especially marked for children under four, there has been a need to find more families for younger children. This has had a knock on effect on availability of homes for teenagers because children under four have been given priority.

While Scottish fostering services did not report such a significant rise in numbers, the majority talked about the proportion of children whose parents misuse substances and alcohol being particularly high and posing some real challenges. The implications of this are that they have increasingly had to find homes for babies – many of whom will be experiencing the symptoms of withdrawal from the effects of their mother's substance and alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Although the majority of interviews were carried out with service managers or staff with responsibility for finding and managing placements, real concerns were expressed about the capacity of children's social work teams to manage the numbers of children in legal proceedings. A significant amount of staff time is required to manage the process of care proceedings in addition to attending court⁵. Feedback suggests that staffing levels are often insufficient and the time taken up on new cases means that some children are not being visited as required in the regulations⁶.

⁵ For further information on the impact of this rise see Macleod S, Hart R, Jeffes J and Wilkin A (2010) *The Impact of the Baby Peter Case on Applications for Care Orders* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER.

⁶ UK National Standards for Foster Care 1999; The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2002; The Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2003; The Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996; The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.

2. Southwark Judgement

The Southwark Judgement (May 2009) clarified local authorities' responsibility to assess homeless under-18s in England and Wales as children under the Children Act 1989, rather than referring them to the housing authority to meet their accommodation needs. Fostering services in London particularly reported a rise in older children needing foster homes as a direct result of this court ruling. Finding foster families for young people aged 16 or 17 has not been a common occurrence for fostering services so some reported difficulty in finding suitable families to look after them.

3. Court decisions and judges

Some fostering services cited challenges arising from the decisions of their local court, in particular the rise in the number of parent and baby placements. This type of placement has its own challenges and foster carers will need to have specific skills and experience to support very young parents whose parenting skills are being assessed while ensuring their child is safe and well cared for.

4. Children's social workers

Fostering services reported concerns about the workload of children's social workers and the number of cases they are working on, particularly those still in legal proceedings. For some fostering services there were particular concerns raised due to the shortage of qualified social workers resulting in greater numbers of agency staff being used, leading to a break in continuity of allocated social worker for children in care and their foster carers.

5. Managing placements

Fostering services reported struggling to find placements, with a small number saying that it is the worst it has ever been. Over half (58 per cent) of local authorities have found it even more difficult than usual to find the right homes for children with only about a third saying they had been able to find the most appropriate placements.

Fostering services were asked about how they were managing their workforce in terms of allocating placements. Two-thirds confirmed that they were asking foster carers to look after children outside of their approval status⁷ often without formal recognition of this change. Two-fifths had increased the number of exemptions⁸ agreed in the past year. Staff talked about *'taking advantage'* of the good will of

⁷ A foster carer's approval status confirms the number, gender and age of children they are approved to care for along with the type of placement they can offer. All foster carers are notified in writing by their fostering service of their terms of approval.

⁸ The usual fostering limit for a foster carer to look after at any one time is three children in England and Wales unless they are part of the same sibling group. The local authority the foster carer lives in, if required, can grant an exemption on this number if needed. Fostering services might also vary a foster carer's agreed terms of approval to allow children out of the age range, number specified or gender of children for short periods of time.

foster carers as few would find it easy to decline a placement when they knew a child really needed a family to stay with that day or night.

In order to meet this ongoing need to find placements, two out of five fostering services reported that they were working hard to routinely review approval status for foster carers (for example, at their annual review) to see if they had now gained relevant experience and confidence to care for different aged children or children with particular needs.

The availability of foster carers and ability to recruit and retain the foster carers needed is an ongoing challenge and priority for fostering services. This will continue to be the case if the current shortage of 10,000 foster carers across the UK is not filled. Added to this are additional pressures due to financial restraints and cuts to budgets. As one respondent put it:

'I am very worried about our capacity to cope for much longer.'

5.1 Local authority fostering placements

Many local authority fostering services have been successful in maintaining their pool of available foster families but only three said they had been able to meet all placement needs in 2009-10 from their current pool of inhouse foster families. A recent report⁹ by the Fostering Network found that two out of five fostering services had failed to meet their recruitment targets in 2008-09 which could have affected their ability to find the right foster homes the following year.

5.2 Family and friends

Many fostering services (at least half) reported a rise in the number of family and friends foster carers being approved which raised several challenges. Fostering services highlighted a particular need for improved assessments for this type of foster carer. It was suggested that children's social workers would benefit from training to improve the ways in which they identify potential family and friends foster carers to better understand what needs to be offered and available from a foster placement.

There was also concern that there were insufficient staff with the required skills and knowledge to understand the unique situation of family and friends foster carers and offer them the support they need.

5.3 Independent fostering providers (IFPs)

All the IFPs that we spoke to reported very high numbers of referrals during 2009-10. As a result they had been increasingly unable to offer children foster carers who could entirely meet their needs. All IFPs talked about actively recruiting during this time to meet placement needs but were finding that they were often still unable to offer a suitable family.

⁹ Clarke H *Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future* (The Fostering Network, 2010)

This shortage of available placements resulted in at least a quarter of local authorities, even those with a preferred providers list and regional commissioning arrangements, considering new or expanded arrangements outside of their usual pool of IFPs, relying on colleagues at other fostering services to make recommendations or making their own fresh contacts.

5.4 New approvals

Due to the ongoing shortage of foster families there were increasing instances when foster carers were asked to take more challenging children for their first placements than they might have been asked to in the past. This means that they may not have been given the time to build up their confidence, skills and understanding of their role as foster carers and it is more likely they will be unable to meet all the needs of the children in their care.

'The real issue is confidence for new foster carers to take on teens. We offer a lot of support if they try a new type of placement (such as teenagers) for a bit. This gives them time to consider if they like that age group, and some do, so we convert their approval and others stay as they were'.

A few fostering services highlighted how they were concerned about the ability of newly approved foster carers to meet the needs of the children first placed with them, at a time when the needs of children going into care were getting more complex and as a result they were exhibiting far more challenging behaviour.

5.5 Placement support

In general, there was acknowledgement from all fostering services that they were expecting more of their foster carers (placements outside of approval status, sibling groups and children with very challenging behaviour). They needed to improve and increase the level of support available. In general, they felt they had been successful in doing this. However, foster carers who responded to the survey reported varying degrees of satisfaction with the support they received from their fostering service¹⁰.

6. Areas of particular shortage

Fostering services reported a continued struggle to find placements for teenagers. As mentioned above more 16 and 17-year-olds have been fostered as a result of the Southwark Judgement. IFPs reported being increasingly asked to find foster carers for younger children which has reduced the pool of foster carers able to take 16 and 17-year-olds. As a result, fostering services said that they have had to, in some instances, place young people in residential care when it has been identified that their placement should be with a foster family. A small number of older children have also had to remain at home due to no foster family being available.

¹⁰ For a fuller explanation of the quality of support available to foster carers see Clarke H *Getting the Support they Need* (The Fostering Network, 2010)

Some fostering services also reported seeing a rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and refugee children needing placements. It continues to be a challenge to place larger sibling groups together which results in siblings who would prefer to be living together being separated.

7. Long-term foster care and permanence

Fostering services talked about how finding long-term placements was particularly challenging and there were discussions about how people willing to do this type of fostering could be found and encouraged to make long-term commitments. There was recognition from fostering services that this is a type of fostering that can be difficult to find families to do and that many when first approved do not understand that this could be an option for them and what it might entail.

Fostering services also mentioned wanting to know more about how the need for children requiring long-term placements could be promoted or advertised (possibly in the local community) to find and approve a particular family for them.

8. The skills and experience to look after and meet the needs of children in care

Although not part of the survey there was a general recognition that children in care had increasingly greater needs and more challenging behaviour than in the past. It was felt that more had to be done to help foster carers to develop the skills to meet the varying needs of children going into care. This was also the case when foster carers were looking after children outside of their approval range, in some instances short break carers looking after children full-time, for example.

It was acknowledged that a lot was being expected of foster carers and that they are doing a very stressful role. One in five fostering services reported increased levels of stress in their foster carers over the past year.

9. Planning and predicting

The thoroughness of planning differs from one fostering service to another but many reported being unprepared for the rise of children coming into care. Some fostering services predict trends on a three-year cycle which is linked to budget allocation. This therefore meant that there was not always enough money allocated to cover the costs associated with meeting the needs of this greater number of children. As a result over two-thirds of fostering services reported their costs being greater than they had budgeted for in 2009-10.

Managing the conflicting needs and resources within a fostering service remains a challenge. As one manager put it:

'There are different rhythms that you have to manage - crisis versus assessment versus ongoing support.'

It was clear from many of the fostering services that they were just about coping. Running an effective fostering service is always challenging. Without substantial investment and increases in resources, children are going to continue to be placed with families that do not fully meet their needs, putting a strain on the foster family, the child and the relationships, and increasing the risk of placements failing.

Placement breakdown and instability have been directly linked to poor outcomes for children and young people in care. Moreover, the impact on foster carer motivation and confidence can be very damaging.

CONCLUSION

The Fostering Network believes that prior to the unprecedented rise in the number of children going into care, fostering services had been making real progress in recruiting more foster carers and finding children the right foster family.

Fostering services are now working harder than ever to find the right foster family for every child, but with such a shortage of foster carers they are faced with a huge challenge. In some areas there are simply no spare beds. Children are being sent further away from their schools and friends, and sometimes to foster carers who do not have the skills and experience to deal with the child's specific needs. Some local authorities have said it is the worst it has ever been and it is vital action is taken immediately.

In April 2011 local authorities in England will be required to have a plan for how they will meet the recently announced sufficiency guidance¹¹. These should enable fostering services to make sure they have sufficient foster care placements to meet their needs locally. Although there will be an immediate challenge in the context of budgetary constraints it is hoped that this guidance will result in better forward planning and an improved service for children.

Earlier this year the Fostering Network published *Update to the Cost of Foster Care*, which showed that fostering is already a drastically underfunded service and that a further £580 million is required across the UK to develop a properly resourced fostering service. In the long term investment is required to ensure we can develop and maintain a foster care workforce that is properly trained, assessed and supported and is able to meet the needs of children in foster care.

The Fostering Network makes the following recommendations in order to improve the availability of foster carers with the skills required to care for children who need them now and in the future.

¹¹ Sufficiency: Statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children (HMSO, 2010) available from www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/childrenincare/careplanning/careplanning/

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government must ensure investment in foster care remains a priority and that funding to local authorities takes account of the increased numbers of children in care.
- Fostering services must ensure that the level of pay and allowances to foster carers is sufficient to recruit and retain enough people with the right skills and qualities.
- Public authorities must ensure children are placed with foster carers who can meet their needs.
- Public authorities must ensure all foster carers are given the information they need about a child to be able to care safely for that child and others in the household.
- Fostering services must ensure that foster carers have access to high quality 24-hour specialist support.
- Fostering services must provide access to ongoing learning and development opportunities for foster carers to enable them to provide the best quality care for children.