

16 June 2017

By email to: [Stocktake.FOSTERING@education.gov.uk](mailto:Stocktake.FOSTERING@education.gov.uk)

## ADCS response to the national fostering stocktake call for evidence

### Introduction

1. The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the independent call for evidence as part of the national fostering stocktake. ADCS is the professional association for directors of children's services (DCS) and their senior management teams. Under the provisions of the Children Act 2004, the DCS is the chief officer responsible for the discharge of local authority functions with regard to education and children's social care and champion for children across wider children's services.
2. ADCS welcomes the commencement of the long-awaited national fostering stocktake and looks forward to working with Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers. ADCS members are clear that there should be no hierarchy in forms of permanence for children. For too long, the government has promoted adoption as the gold standard for permanence and continued to develop narrowly focused policy based on placement type, i.e. adoption, foster care, residential care etc. The debate needs to take a broader focus, fully recognise the value of all forms of permanence and consider the care system as a whole. It must also recognise that a significant number of children in care return home. ADCS believes that a national children in care strategy is needed, reflecting the needs of all children in care, wherever they live.
3. It is clear that foster care plays a vital role in the child protection system. According to DfE data, as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, there were 70,440 children in care. Of these, 51,850 (74%) were in foster care placements. There is much to celebrate about the care system, recent research undertaken by the Rees Centre and the University of Bristol (2015) has shown that care is a positive protective factor: for those children that need to be in care, the longer they are in care the better their outcomes. However, there remain some complex issues within the system which must be addressed. ADCS submitted evidence to the Education Select Committee late last year outlining both the strengths and challenges within the system. Much of the evidence remains relevant and is therefore included in this submission to the fostering stocktake.

### Building placement capacity

4. There is not enough capacity within the fostering system. The Fostering Network estimate that a further 5,900 foster families are needed in England alone to ensure appropriate provision. For some time, ADCS has been calling for a national foster care recruitment campaign to address the shortage of foster carers in a strategic way and help build capacity to deal with the upward trajectory of children coming into care and any unexpected placement demands such as the increased numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking

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children arriving in the country last year as a result of the clearance of the camps in Calais. Any increase in capacity must, however, be linked to the profile of children in care, there is a need to recruit more foster carers who are willing to care for older children, sibling groups and those with complex needs. The fostering stocktake may be interested in the North West region's co-ordinated campaign to recruit more foster carers. The campaign, 'You Can Foster' has been successful in increasing the number of local authority foster carers due, in part, to the collaborative marketing approach adopted by all local authorities in the region. ADCS understands authorities from outside the North West have also bought into this campaign suggesting a clear need for a coordinated, national campaign.

5. There is an uneven geographical spread of foster carers across the country, with concentrations in the north and areas where affordable housing is available and of a size that can accommodate foster children. Local authorities can struggle to recruit foster carers in areas with high property prices, in areas with typically small housing stock e.g. two bedded terraced housing, or high levels of deprivation. Local authorities and partners face particular challenges in areas where there is a high proportion of children in care (both their own and those who have been placed out of area by other local authorities), particularly in relation to education and health services. Any recruitment campaign must be mindful of these pressures and targeted towards those areas where increased capacity is most needed.
6. As more young people take advantage of the opportunity to stay with their foster carers into early adulthood, the availability of foster care placements has declined as those offering Staying Put placements are often unable to accept new foster care placements. Whilst this positive policy is welcomed by ADCS, it does add to capacity issues within the system. We would therefore urge the reviewers to consider Staying Put as part of the stocktake. Supported lodgings also has a role to play in supporting vulnerable young people who are leaving care, however it receives little recognition or attention at a national level. This too should be considered as part of the fostering stocktake, particularly in relation to the recruitment and retention of supported lodgings providers.
7. Sufficiency of foster carers is key to improving outcomes for children and young people, this allows a social worker/ placement officer to choose the best placement to meet the needs of the child. This choice should be the result of an effective matching process supported by comprehensive information sharing and where possible, planned introductions, allowing the child and carer to establish a relationship prior to placement.

### **Having the skills to meet children's needs**

8. Foster care supports children and young people with a range of needs and there are many different variations, including short-term and long-term foster care, along with more specialist services such as parent and child fostering, remand fostering, and concurrency planning to name but a few. Many children in residential care will have experienced foster care prior to their residential placement. Step up and step down placements (pre and post residential care) provide graduated support to young people in an attempt to address the escalation of risky behaviour, or integrate them back into a family setting. This strengthens the case for addressing all forms of care placements in a strategic and holistic way rather than individually as is currently the case.
9. The fostering stocktake provides a timely opportunity to consider if the care system could better meet the needs of young people on the edge of care by being more responsive to individual situations and needs via the ability to support young people and families with part-

time, flexible care without the label and administrative requirements of Looked After Child status.

10. Although there are a range of foster care services, some more specialist than others, ADCS members would caution against central government driving further specialisms within foster care for particular children and / or vulnerabilities, e.g. unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Good foster care provides children with a safe and loving home where they can establish positive relationships with trusted adults, perhaps for the first time. The core purpose of foster care does not change depending on the particular background or vulnerabilities of a child. If greater specialisation is introduced, this will deplete capacity and flexibility within the system.
11. Foster carers are not, nor do they need to be, social workers. They do not need to be full time carers, nor do they need specific qualifications. Foster carers need to offer good quality 'ordinary' parenting and advocate for the children they care for. Children in care often say they do not need another professional in their lives, they need carers with whom they can develop strong and trusted relationships. Many adoptive families have benefited from services funded through the Adoption Support Fund, such as therapeutic parenting courses, helping to build children's resilience so they can overcome their earlier experiences of trauma and neglect. Foster carers and the children in their care could also benefit from a similar approach and there are some strong examples of such arrangements from which learning will be possible.
12. The training and support available to approved foster carers could be more structured, this would benefit both carers and children and may help improve stability of placements. Further, foster carers need effective support to sustain their care of children who may have very differing needs and circumstances. Retention of carers can be challenging and the right support systems are crucial to address this issue. Regular good quality supervision along with flexible support, such as out of hours support, is critical to this. The concept of partnership parenting, where health, schools, colleges and other partners understand and accept the part they play in contributing to the corporate parenting role of the local authority is key. It is also essential that these partners include foster carers, like they would any other parent, in discussions about the child's progress and outcomes.
13. Both national and local government must be alive to any risks and potential perverse incentives associated with the over-professionalisation of foster carers and the unionisation of the workforce. In the context of reduced resources and increasing demand for services, establishing foster care as a profession would significantly increase costs to local authorities. Crucially for ADCS members, it remains unclear what the benefits of such a move would bring for those children and young people in care.
14. ADCS members would not support the creation of a national register of foster carers. It is right that, wherever possible and appropriate to their care plan, children should be placed near to their family and friendship networks. This allows local authorities, as corporate parents, to discharge their duties more effectively, taking a partnership parenting approach. It also allows children to maintain the connections and relationships that are meaningful to them such as with teachers and health professionals, and including contact with birth parents and wider family members where this is appropriate. These relationships are so important to children, particularly if they are in care for a short period of time and subsequently return home. While it is acknowledged not all children are placed within their local area, most children in foster care are placed within, or in close proximity to, their home

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local authority. This is what makes foster care so successful: the ability to place children in a family environment which remains local and familiar to them.

15. The fostering stocktake should consider the possibility of increased portability of foster carer approval with the appropriate checks and balances in place such as references and DBS checks. This would bring foster care in line with arrangements for adopter approval. Increased flexibility in this regard may also help to retain more foster carers. The introduction of quality standards for foster care, as has happened for the residential care workforce via the Children's Homes Regulations, may be helpful in promoting to other partners the valuable role foster carers play in partnership parenting of children in care. This may also aid the portability of approved status by providing an increased level of confidence.
16. The fostering stocktake should consider specialist foster care placements for children with complex needs, including the definition of 'therapeutic' provision. The costs of therapeutic placements are significant yet there are huge variations in this provision. More could be done to clearly define the basic requirements of a therapeutic placement. This would help to ensure children's needs are met and local authorities are achieving value for money in relation to these high cost placements. ADCS members would stress that this issue is not limited to foster care, it is also evident in residential care.

### **Independent fostering agencies and regulation of the market**

17. ADCS would welcome further discussions with both the reviewers and the government about the regulation of this vital market. The shortage of affordable placements has been exacerbated by a surge in demand due to the rapid arrival of hundreds of vulnerable young people from camps on the continent last year. Our members reported that in response to this, some independent fostering agencies significantly increased their prices not only for foster care placements, but also for the provision of supported lodgings, in some cases local authorities were charged double, if not more, during this period.
18. ADCS members remain concerned that a small number of larger agencies appear to be making substantial profits from fostering, largely as a result of the increased fees charged to local authorities. Sir Martin Narey's review of children's residential care highlighted evidence of £41m in profits from eight commercial fostering agencies in 2014/15. ADCS members believe it is immoral that such significant private profit is being made on the back of vulnerable children and young people. Such a level of profit making cannot be justified at a time of reduced budgets across the public sector. Legislation in Scotland prevents fostering agencies which are profit making from approving, reviewing or terminating the approval of foster carers. Only a local authority, or voluntary agency acting on their behalf, can do this. ADCS members would welcome the stocktake exploring if similar legislation is possible in England.
19. While ADCS members will always work in cooperation with independent fostering agencies to secure the best outcomes for children and young people, our members are concerned about the practice of a small number who offer financial incentives for experienced foster carers to transfer away from their existing provider, often a local authority or not for profit agency. This practice does nothing to increase capacity in the wider system and can add significant on-costs to local authorities via increased fees charged by the new provider. IFA placements can often cost local authorities double, if not more, when compared to the cost of a local authority in-house foster care placement.

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## Hearing children's voices

20. It is essential that children and young people have a strong voice in decision making around their own care arrangements, and that this is heard by all parties involved in the process. Children in care have access to independent advocacy services which provide support, advice and assistance to young people who may want to discuss any aspects of their care arrangements.
21. ADCS looks forward to meeting with Sir Martin and Mark on 27<sup>th</sup> June to explore some of these issues in more detail.

For further information, please contact Esther Kavanagh Dixon, ADCS Policy Officer, [esther@adcs.org.uk](mailto:esther@adcs.org.uk).