

ADCS response to Foster Care in England

1. ADCS welcomes the publication of the independent review of foster care, [Foster Care in England](#). Foster parents provide stable, loving homes to the vast majority of children and young people in care and the love and support they offer can be transformative. As the report shows, there is much to celebrate about the foster care system - overall children's views about fostering are positive and many children feel their lives are better in care. ADCS does, however, recognise improvements can be made to the system which would benefit both children in foster care and their foster parents.

Helping foster parents to make fostering more effective

2. Foster parents have a unique relationship with the children in their care which should be recognised and supported. They absolutely should be treated 'professionally' in that they should be valued, supported and listened to as a key part of the team around the child.
3. The focus on parenting as opposed to caring is welcome, this supports the ADCS view that the vast majority of foster parents need to offer good quality 'ordinary' parenting and advocate for the children they care for, while recognising that some offer very specialist care. Children in care often say they do not need another professional in their lives. Over professionalisation and professional standards for foster parents could potentially discourage people from coming forward who are willing to provide a warm, loving and stable home but may feel they are not 'qualified' to be a foster parent.
4. Children in care need carers with whom they can develop strong and trusted relationships, therefore it is heartening that the reviewers have recognised the importance of physical affection between foster parents and the children they care for. Key to developing trusted relationships is being able to make day-to-day parenting decisions in the best interests of a child, again this is about good quality ordinary parenting and the care planning, placement and case review regulations are clear in this regard.
5. The report identifies three possible areas where increased flexibility could be introduced in relation to the oversight of fostering placements, these are: independent reviewing officers; dual oversight of stable placements by social workers; and, fostering panels. While we welcome the proposals, ADCS members would want to ensure that a child's right to request his/her own social worker remains in place. While some of the recommendations may require legislative change, in principle it is right that LAs are given the flexibility to put in place arrangements that best suit local children, recognising that not all LAs would use such flexibilities. Many LAs would welcome the opportunity to reinvest potential savings from these areas into other parts of the business according to local needs and priorities.

Financial reward and compensation for foster parents

6. The report supports the view that the current payment levels to foster parents are not inadequate, this is welcome. ADCS supports the endorsement of tiered approaches to paying fees. Fees should be based on a clear and consistent framework, linked to the skills and experience of foster parents.
7. ADCS strongly welcomes the recommendation that the government and LAs should resist any move to award foster parents employment status. As mentioned earlier, ADCS absolutely recognises the vital role foster parents play, they should be treated professionally and with respect, and routinely consulted alongside the child about decisions affecting the child. ADCS is of the same opinion as the reviewers, we see no benefit for children and young people in granting foster parents employment rights.

Recruitment

8. ADCS members are not convinced of the benefits of a national register of foster carers or a vacancy management system as a means to match children. While we acknowledge that there are capacity issues within the system, a national register would not address this. Where pressures do exist, local authorities and local independent fostering agencies must work together to ensure that, wherever possible, a child is placed locally so there is as little disruption to their wider networks, including their education placements and any involvement with health professionals. The concept of a national register does nothing to acknowledge the importance of maintaining the connections and relationships that are meaningful to children in care, including contact with birth parents and wider family members where that is appropriate, nor would it address the underlying supply shortage of suitable foster parents.
9. It is easy to draw parallels with the Adoption Register but foster care and adoption are intrinsically different in both their nature and volume. Children who are adopted are often placed outside of their home local authority for obvious reasons. Adopted children very rarely return to their birth parents, therefore less emphasis is placed on the importance of maintaining local connections and relationships. During 2016/17, 1,311 adopters were referred to the Adoption Register¹, in comparison, on 31 March 2016, there were, 44,320 fostering households². Creating and managing an accurate, real time register would be a huge logistical task and require significant ongoing funding which would be better invested in services to support children and young people directly.

¹ <http://www.adoptionmatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Annual-report-2016-2017.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2015-to-31-march-2016>

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10. There may be benefits in collecting management data in relation to foster parents and their characteristics which could then be used to identify such things as geographical shortages and help target recruitment campaigns around the needs of children in care, however, there remains a fundamental question about value for money. Many of the barriers prospective foster parents face are closely linked to issues outside of the control of a local authority, such as affordability and suitability of housing, welfare reforms etc.
11. ADCS submitted evidence to the fostering stocktake and suggested that consideration should be given to the possibility of increased portability of foster care 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 and the increased flexibility may also help to retain more foster parents. It is disappointing that the stocktake did not consider this issue.

Commissioning

12. The report rightly points out that more could be done in relation to the strategic commissioning of placements to lower costs and improve quality, there is currently too much variation within the system. ADCS will consider if there is any learning from the work on memorandums of understanding on agency social workers that could be applied to LA use of IFA placements.
13. As a result of Sir Martin's review of residential care homes, the DfE's Innovation Fund is supporting a number of projects to further explore sub-regional/ regional commissioning. It will be important that any learning from these projects is considered in relation to fostering services and applied where appropriate.
14. The issue of 'in-house first policies' has recently been the subject of judicial review which determined this practice to be legal: ADCS welcomes the reviewers view that such an approach is not only legal but also entirely sensible for LAs to adopt.
15. ADCS members remain concerned that a small number of larger agencies appear to be making substantial profits/ surpluses from fostering. It is even more disappointing to learn that two of the larger charities are also guilty of charging inflated prices for foster care placements. Such practices, whether for private profit or to increase surpluses to prop up other aspects of an organisation's business, are immoral and cannot be justified at a time of reduced budgets across the public sector. ADCS members would call on government to replicate the Scottish legislation which prevents fostering agencies which are profit making from approving, reviewing or terminating the approval of foster parents.

Matching

16. Sufficiency of foster parents in the right locations and with the right skills 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 the views of the child, comprehensive information sharing and where possible, planned introductions, allowing the child and carer to establish a relationship prior to placement.
17. It is not always possible to make a child's first placement the right placement, however, moving children to the right placement should be done as quickly as possible. It is disappointing to read that often children were not informed why their placement was ending and why they were moving to a new placement. Where it is appropriate, children should be involved in discussions about moves and matching, this in turn will help to prepare them better.
18. The report highlights the importance of independent advocacy for children in care. Further investment in independent advocacy services may be one area where a local authority chooses to invest savings made from the flexibilities recommended by the independent reviewers.
19. As explained earlier, ADCS would not support the development of a vacancy management system. Similar systems have been used by regional consortia for residential care and welfare placements in secure children's homes with limited success. Any investment proposed for a vacancy management system would be better spent on front line services.

Contact and siblings

20. Decisions around contact between a child and their birth family should always be made in the best interests of the child. The principle that, where possible, a child is best brought up by their family is enshrined in law and it remains the case that the majority of children in care return home to their birth families. During a period in care, parenting responsibilities are shared between parents and the state until a child returns home or leaves care via an SGO or adoption. This construct of shared parenting allows a local authority to work with the wider birth family in a restorative approach to help them to look after themselves and their children. Given this, it may be counter-intuitive to cut off all contact from birth families unless such contact poses a risk. New and more effective ways of supporting contact should be developed to ensure that where it is appropriate, successful contact can take place and be maintained.
21. It is right that children should be able to maintain contact with people other than their birth family, such as previous foster parents and children with whom they have been in placements. Maintaining relationships with previous foster parents can not only support the reintegration of children back into their family home, it can also help to provide a sense of stability and continuity once a child is at home.

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Permanence

22. Whilst the majority of children in care return home to their birth families, the report raises important questions for government around the role of the care system and local authorities' capacity to support families at the earliest opportunity to make positive changes in their lives and to stay together. There has been a lack of focus and investment from government in reunification to date.
23. ADCS members would welcome trialling 'support foster care', a more flexible model for families on the edge of care which does not involve the legal status of 'looked after child'. This would allow birth families to access additional support and respite opportunities at times of crisis, while also avoiding the need for children to enter the care system. The Safer Families work in Nottingham City is a good example of a partnership approach to supporting families on the edge of care, not only by offering voluntary respite care, but also identifying community-based solutions to the pressures parents are experiencing.
24. As more young people take advantage of the opportunity to stay with their foster parents 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, the potential impact of increased Staying Put placements on local fostering sufficiency must be acknowledged and addressed.
25. The reviewers state that *"there are a number of children in care and being fostered who could safely leave the care system if they were given a longer-term commitment to financial support"*. Statutory guidance on special guardianship sets out the circumstances in which financial support may be paid, while financial support to adopters is discretionary. Decisions around financial support are made on a case by case basis and informed by need, this approach is appropriate and ADCS members would resist the introduction of standardised payments or allowances to special guardians or adopters.
26. The ADCS position paper, [A country that works for all children](#), highlights tensions in current public policy, including the impact of austerity and an increasingly fragmented approach to public services, overlaid with rising levels of child poverty that are cumulatively having a negative impact on children and families. The pressure and stress, created by these wider societal determinants, are a key cost driver in children's services as more families turn to our services for help and support. It remains that if all families themselves were better supported by the state, many children may not enter the care system in the first place.
27. The recommendation to establish a Permanence Board is welcome, however, as part of the process of establishing such a board, ADCS would urge the DfE to consider the role and function of other boards such as the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board, Residential Care Leadership Board and the proposed high needs national leadership board.

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