

Children and Young People Committee

AD21

Inquiry into Adoption

Submission of Evidence from the Fostering Network Wales to the Children and Young People Committee inquiry on the placement of children into care

Summary of our response

There should be greater focus and emphasis given to the quality of the relationship between a looked after child and their carer and that where possible the continuity of care is preserved.

A care planning framework for all looked after children is introduced which places the need for permanency at its heart and which explicitly states that there is no hierarchy of legal status and that in each case what is right for the child or young person must determine the decision.

Guidance is issued which requires local authorities to delegate all day to day decision making regarding things such as health, education and leisure to foster carers unless there are particular reasons against this.

Fostering Network Wales

The Fostering Network is the voice of foster care and the UK's leading charity for all those involved in fostering. All our work is focused on improving the foster care experience, making a positive difference for children and young people in and leaving foster care. We achieve this by working together with foster carers and service providers.

The Fostering Network was established in Wales in 2002 and now has a strong membership base, including all local authorities, nearly 90 per cent of fostering households and the majority of independent fostering providers. We currently have 4,780 foster carer members in Wales providing 2,700 fostering households. We are therefore uniquely placed to engage all stakeholders in consultation and policy development, and to build consensus on the developments required to improve life for children who are fostered.

Amongst our staff are foster carers, registered social workers and other experts from across the spectrum of foster care, including those that have been fostered themselves. Together we have many years' experience and unrivalled expertise.

Our strategic objectives are to:

- Engage with our members and stakeholders through discussion, debate and regular communications in order to understand their needs and priorities, and to enable them to learn together and from each other
- Support and empower our members, their families and the foster care workforce – foster carers, social workers, other professionals working with children in care – so that children and young people in care can grow, be valued and contribute positively to society
- Influence at national and local level in order to achieve change and continually improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care and leaving care
- Champion foster care in order to raise the profile of foster carers and the vital service they provide to children and the value of this to wider society
- Innovate so that our members are able to respond to the changing world of fostering and the challenges and opportunities that it faces.

The Fostering Network Wales response draws on the research evidence and discussions with, and information from all sections of our membership base including foster carers, looked after young people, local authority fostering staff, managers and staff of independent fostering providers.

Looked after children and young people in Wales – their need for permanence

Every looked after child should be able to grow up in an environment that nurtures them, meets their needs and helps them reach their full potential. It is important that we do not consider one type of placement as being the 'gold standard' and any better than another.

There were 5,415 children looked after by local authorities in Wales on 31st March 2011. 80% of them are cared for by approved foster families. The total number of children in care has been rising steadily for at least the last eight years. So too has the number of children living with foster carers. The number of children fostered with a relative or friend has also increased although the proportion (about 20% of all children in foster care) has remained steady. The total number of children placed with independent fostering services has also been increasing, both as a total and as a percentage of all foster placements. In 2011 there were 1,250, almost 30% of all children in foster care, were children living with foster carers provided by the independent sector.

For all children living with foster carers, it is the quality of their relationship with their foster carers that will be critical in helping them to achieve their potential. .

When a child or young person becomes looked after, there must initially be a consideration of whether they can live with their parents and if possible every effort must be made to ensure that rehabilitation is successful and permanent. If this is not possible, it is essential that every effort is made to see if it is possible for them to live with a family member or friend. If this is possible, consideration will need to be given to the most appropriate legal status of the placement. The carers might be foster carers, special guardians or hold a residence order.

If it is not possible for a child or young person to live with their own family or a relative, it will be important to try to find an adoptive family or foster family who can offer them a home for as long as they need.

For children who come into care as babies it is likely that adoption will be the preferred placement but this may not always be the case if such a move entails separation from their siblings, for example. For older children it is less likely that they will want to be adopted and long term foster care is likely to be the preferred option.

The Fostering Network contend that we must give far greater emphasis on securing a permanent family for all looked after children and young people rather than focus on securing adoption for the few children for whom this is a possibility.

In 2010/11 5,415 children started to be looked after, of these 4,000 or 74% were 5 or over and over 50% were over 10. A focus on adoption rather than securing permanence increases the risk that we will continue to fail too many children who become looked after who need permanence but not necessarily adoption.

Research evidence and the experience of our members

The research evidence on kinship care (Nixon 2008 and Hunt 2006) confirms that outcomes for children living with kinship carers are similar to outcomes for children in public care. The research also shows that kinship carers tend to be less well supported financially and emotionally. The children and young people living with kinship carers generally report higher levels of satisfaction and are more likely to feel loved. The findings of Farmer and Moyers 2008 also suggest that greater efforts could be made at an earlier stage to identify relatives who could offer a home to a child.

Outcomes for children in long term foster care (Thoburn et al) are broadly comparable with adoption when other factors are held constant – in particular the child's age on placement and what happened to them prior to the placement, i.e. nature and extent of any abuse or neglect suffered by the child.

Long term fostering can be a positive choice for some children and should not be viewed as a less desirable outcome than adoption. In our view greater emphasis should be placed on permanency planning for children in foster care. The plan for long-stay children in the care system must be positive, planned, provide security, and promote wellbeing, helping children reach their full potential (Schofield et al, March 2011). Research shows that good social relationships promote self-esteem, performance at school, employment prospects and health and well being. Any placement must ensure children have lifelong positive relationships with people who can support them.

Our members tell us that there is not enough emphasis on ensuring continuity of relationships and established relationships are broken when children are moved for administrative reasons. Our members tell us that there can be a reluctance of local authorities to confirm placements with foster carers in the independent sector as permanent and there is a perception that financial considerations are a significant factor in such decisions.

Another issue frequently raised by foster carers is the lack of delegated authority they are given, even when children are in long term placements. This can result in children missing out on opportunities such as engaging in extracurricular activities like school trips, or being able to stay overnight with friends. The lack of authority given to foster carers can also prevent them from providing a child or young person with a 'normal' experience of family life.

We are told that often children 'drift' into long term placements rather than adequate planning taking place, leaving children feeling unsure what is happening to them.

There are many examples in Wales where permanency planning works well and we need to ensure this is the case for all children in Wales.

Some local authorities will approve foster carers for specific children only, meaning no other children can be placed with those foster carers. This supports children, fostering families and birth families to know this is a long term placement into adulthood. This gives children a sense of security in knowing what the plan for them is, it allows planning of services, but doesn't break the link to birth families. It gives children stability.

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In 'What works in adoption and foster care?' (Sellick, Thoburn, Philpot, Barnardos 2004) the authors identify the key findings from their research into permanent placement, including:

- Long term placement with relatives or friends ('kinship care') , and short term placements that become permanent, have been found to be more successful for the full range of children rather than placement with families not previously known to the child ('stranger carers').
- When age at placement and other variables are held constant, there are no differences in breakdown rates between adoptive placements and placements with permanent foster families. Qualitative studies find that some children prefer to be fostered and others prefer to be adopted.

We still hear from foster carers who are concerned that children in their care are being required to leave before they are ready. We understand the predicament of local authorities who are reluctant to continue to fund an arrangement which would allow a young person to remain living with their foster carer after their eighteenth birthday, but some young people in care need and would benefit from this.

Summary and recommendations

There is a greater focus and emphasis given to the quality of the relationship between a looked after child and their carer and that where possible the continuity of care is preserved.

A care planning framework for all looked after children is introduced which places the need for permanency at its heart and which explicitly states that there is no hierarchy of legal status and that in each case what is right for the child or young person must determine the decision.

Guidance is issued which requires local authorities to delegate all day to day decision making regarding things such as health, education and leisure to foster carers unless there are particular reasons against this.

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