



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR CHILDREN

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APPG for Children inquiry into children's social care

Call for written evidence

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) has launched a new inquiry to address local arrangements for the delivery of children's social care services in light of changes in resources and demand, a new inspection framework and diversity in performance and outcomes. While the focus of the inquiry will be on services in England, the inquiry will seek to draw upon evidence of challenges and effective responses across the devolved nations in order to share examples of practice across the UK.

To inform the inquiry, the APPGC is calling on stakeholders across the children's sector to submit written evidence on the current state of arrangements for the provision of children's social care, including services for safeguarding children and for helping looked after children and children in need. The Group would also welcome hearing about the delivery of early intervention services which enable children to remain with their family.

Evidence indicates that, over the past five years in England, overall demand for children's social care services has increased, while English local authorities' spending power has decreased. The nature of children's need has also change, with greater concerns, for example, about radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. In addition, children's social care services are implementing a range of reforms following recent changes to the legislative framework, such as those relating to special education needs and disability and adoption. These are taking place at the same time as the implementation of reforms to social work practice led by the Chief Social Worker for children and families.

In light of these ongoing and emerging challenges facing children's social care services, the APPGC has decided to conduct an inquiry to:

- bring together evidence about the current resourcing of children's social care services and changes in the nature and level of demand
- explore the impact (or potential impact) of these changes on the delivery of children's social care services and on children and young people
- build a picture of the key elements of a successful children's services department and the challenge facing areas that are struggling to improve, and share examples of good practice

- assess whether changes are needed to policy and legislation in order to improve the delivery of children's social care services and in turn outcomes for children
- identify any learning that can be shared from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Local authority leaders and service providers from across the United Kingdom will be invited to present examples of good practice in the delivery of children's social care services, and to outline the barriers to improvement they are facing. The inquiry will also hear directly from children and young people about their experiences of children's social care services.

Oral evidence sessions will be held in Parliament between April and July 2016, and findings from the inquiry will be published by early 2017.

Deadline for submissions is Monday 7th March 2016 – please see call for evidence form below.

APPG for Children inquiry into children's social care: call for evidence form

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children would welcome written evidence from a range of stakeholders including:

- Directors of Children's Services
- Children's social services managers and practitioners
- Chairs of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards
- Children's services providers – including the private and voluntary sector
- Children in Care Councils
- Organisations representing the voices and interests of children and young people

Written submissions will inform the setting of oral evidence sessions, which will be held between April and July 2016. The questions below cover a range of issues relating to the delivery of children's social services. Please feel free to answer only those which relate to your area of expertise.

Contact details

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Please indicate if you would be prepared to give oral evidence: Yes

The Fostering Network's response: Introduction

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are a charity and a membership organisation which brings together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75% of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

The Fostering Network's response to the APPGC's Inquiry will be focused on looked after children services and specifically foster care with regard to changes in resources and demand. To inform our response we sent a short survey based on the Inquiry's questions to our foster carer members who are part of our campaign and policy group. We had an overwhelming 730 responses from foster carers. We restricted the survey to those who have been fostering for 3 years or more so they could assess the impact of changes in funding and demand on fostering services. We have incorporated key messages from this survey into our response below and we have also attached a separate report which provides a detailed analysis of the survey results.

1. Changing demand and funding for children's social care services

How has demand and funding for children's social care services in England changed? What changes are expected in the future?

Demand for children's social care services in England

The Fostering Network is deeply concerned that the increased demand for children in care services coupled with drastic cuts to local authority budgets due to austerity measures has placed a growing pressure on the care system in England.

The number of looked after children is now at its highest point since 1985 and is rising year on year. In England 52,050 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2015. This is nearly four-fifths (79%) of the 66,030 children in care looked after away from home. Therefore with the vast majority of children and young people in care living with foster families any change to the demand and funding of looked after children's services will impact heavily on fostering.

With a record number of children coming into care and more than 12% of the foster care workforce retiring or leaving every year The Fostering Network estimates that fostering services in England need to recruit at least 7,600 families in England in the next 12 months alone. There is a particular need for foster carers to look after teenagers, disabled children, sibling groups and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

In recent years there has been a shift in the numbers of children using other routes to permanence. In the last two years there has been a marked decrease in the numbers of children placed for adoption and the number of placement orders granted, this trend has been linked to the high profile court judgements (Re B and Re B-S). At the same time there has been a marked increase in the approval of friends and family foster carers, and other Connected Persons, for orders such as Special Guardianship.

There has also been an increase in young people living with their foster carers under 'Staying Put' arrangements, 1,790 young people staying put in 2014-15 which was a 2% increase on the previous year. The Fostering Network fully supports the new duty on local authorities in England which came into force in 2014 but we are concerned that the policy could be undermined by a significant lack of funding. We believe there needs to be continuous monitoring of the implementation of this policy at a local level to ensure practice is in line with national policy and guidance.

Funding for children's social care services in England

The Fostering Network is concerned that the Government's political focus and investment in adoption is creating a hierarchy in care with adoption being viewed as the gold standard. This political focus is not being replicated across other children's social care services. The Government will invest an additional £200m over this parliament to support adoption and we would like to see a similar financial commitment to and belief in fostering, given that the majority of children in care are living with foster families.

At a time of increased demand and financial pressure it is vital that the state, as corporate parent, ensures children and young people coming into the care system have stable and secure placements which allow them to rehabilitate from past abuse and neglect and realise their full potential.

2. The impact of changes on the delivery of children's social care services

What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding and demand on the delivery of children's social care services?

The impact of cuts to local authority funding and the increased demand for children in care services has impacted heavily on the children's workforce, including foster carers, and ultimately on the quality of services and the outcomes for children and young people themselves.

Through consultation with our staff and members it is clear that funding cuts have already had the following impact on children's social care services:

- **Increase in numbers coming into care and change in care threshold:** Through our contract with local authorities across England and feedback from foster carers we believe there could have been a shift in the threshold of when children are removed from home. This is anecdotal evidence but it has been reported to our organisation that the threshold is higher and children are being left in family homes for longer than they may have been in the past. The impact of this change is that children's services, and especially children's social workers, are living with a higher degree of risk. It would appear that this evidence cuts against the 16% increase in care order applications over the past year. However, it poses the question as to whether the increase in care order applications reflects a significant rise in the number of children living in poverty and experiencing neglect (since 2010 the number of children living in absolute poverty has increased by 0.5million, CPAG). So in this case it is possible to have increased thresholds and an increase in the numbers of children needing to access the care system.
- **Restructuring of social work teams:** The Fostering Network works closely with local authority fostering services across England. Over the last few years we have seen many local authorities having to restructure their children's services, including their fostering teams, often resulting in the widening of responsibilities of existing staff and reducing or cutting funding for specialist posts and teams. The impact of this type of restructuring is increased, and often unmanageable, caseloads for social workers, reduced direct contact time with children and reduced access to social workers for children and foster carers. The resulting high stress levels and low morale amongst social work teams leads to high turnover of staff and a lack of consistency in support for children which is damaging to both fostered children and foster families. This was a strong theme in our foster carer survey, see attached report.
- **Impact on the delivery of foster care:** In addition to the increase in numbers of children coming into care there is also an increase in children with complex needs and disabilities. These factors combined with a continued reduction in early intervention services results in children entering the care system with complex needs requiring specialist support. However, a National Audit Office report (Children in Care, 2013) stated services are not being commissioned based on thorough assessments of the child's needs but rather based on costs. The consequence of this is placements are being measured on cost rather than improving outcomes and too many children are not being placed in the right placement first time. Foster carers have reported to us that they are being asked to take children outside their approval range and without the specialist training to meet their complex needs. At the same time social worker time and support is being removed due to the funding pressures on social work teams, leaving foster carers unsupported. The purpose of the care system should be to protect the child from further harm, offer an environment where the child can rehabilitate from past harm and neglect and improve the outcomes for the child so they can realise their potential. It has to be asked whether we are achieving this for our current population of looked after children and young people. See the attached report for an in depth analysis of foster carers' views of the impacts of the funding cuts.

Continuation of response to Question 2: The impact of changes to the delivery of children's social care services:

- **Change in permanence options offered:** As referred to above there has been an increase in the use of special guardianship orders (SGOs) over recent years. We believe that SGOs are most effective when there is an established and positive relationship between the child and the prospective Special Guardian, and the quality of the relationship is the determining factor as to the likely successful of the order. The Fostering Network convenes regional forums of fostering services and in recent times feedback from these forums has led us to be increasingly concerned that the consideration of permanence planning for children in care is being misapplied. Within the independent fostering sector there has been a steady flow of reports of foster carers being pressurised by local authorities to apply for a SGO if they wish to offer a long term placement. We believe that the argument that this is in the best interests of the child is undermined by the unwillingness of local authorities to commit to maintain the level of funding to the foster carer.
- **Reduction and cuts to early intervention services and specialist posts:** We believe the cuts to local authority services have led to a severe reduction in early intervention children's services. A new report from NCB and other children's charities (*Losing in the long run*) finds Government funding for early intervention services is expected to be cut by 71% from more than £3.2billion to less than £1billion between 2010 and 2020. Early support services prevent problems from escalating and risks being identified at an early stage. As this type of support is cut so drastically we are left with a situation of crisis intervention which often results in children and young people entering the care system with severe emotional and behavioural problems and requiring specialist support.
- **Budget driven placement decisions:** A recent National Audit Office report (*Children in Care*, 2013) highlighted that the current economic climate means local authorities base decisions about children's placements on short term affordability rather than what is in the best interest of the child. There is a need to move away from this type of service delivery to focus instead on quality of placements and interventions that will have a long term cost benefits. We are aware that some local authorities are trying to reduce their expenditure on placements with the independent sector which results in a tension in the relationship between local authorities and independent fostering providers (IFPs), and can result in decisions being made that are not in a child's best interests.

3. The impact of changes on outcomes for children and young people

What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding, demand and service delivery on children and young people?

As part of The Fostering Network's survey of foster carers we asked whether carers felt the changes to funding and demand had impacted on children and young people. The majority of respondents felt the funding cuts to local authority budgets had impacted negatively on children and young people. 231 respondents commented on this section and below is a summary of the key themes:

Cuts to mental health services: The key theme was the impact of the cuts on children's mental health services. Respondents felt access to CAMHS was increasingly difficult for fostered children because of long waiting lists and high eligibility thresholds. Both of these issues cut against early intervention for looked after children and often led to deteriorating mental health problems and crisis intervention. Others reported that only children in long term placements were able to access CAMHS preventing those in short term placements accessing specialist support which would allow them to move to a long term, stable placement.

"Mental health issues are prevalent in our children but access [to services] is only usually forthcoming after either a serious incident or placement breakdown, which in turn makes things more traumatic and ultimately more expensive." (Foster carer)

"Mental health services can't be obtained even when the situation is desperate." (Foster carer)

Lack of access to children's social worker: Many respondents felt that the heavy caseload of children's social workers leads to high turnover and results in the child not only having a lack of consistency in support but spending very little direct contact time with their social worker. This prevented a relationship of trust building between the child and their social worker.

"Children do not have time with their social worker to go through things thoroughly or frequently because of other demands. Things are missed and left out because there is no time and paperwork has become a priority." (Foster carer)

Cuts to early intervention services: as stated above the short sighted nature of cuts to early intervention and support services lead to crisis management.

Reduction in respite services: Respondents commented that respite services for foster care were reduced or non-existent, with some foster carers being told to seek respite from their own family and friends networks. This lack of respite can place extra pressure on relationships and could contribute to placement breakdown.

"Local authorities are not prepared to offer respite for even the most demanding placements."

Children's placement choices are being financially driven: There has been a hierarchical approach to care provision to making the child needs fit the resources available rather than the resources meeting the child's needs.

"Children being shunted to inappropriate placements to save money and get a case 'off the desk'."

The Fostering Network believes a key impact of the cuts is a reduction in the ability to hear the wishes and needs of the child at an individual and collective level. Children in care councils have the ability to bring about positive changes if the funding is in place to support the structure and participation workers/teams. We are currently running a project, Inspiring Voices, designed to raise young people's and foster carers' awareness of, and engagement with, children in care councils in England. Through this work we have run regional consultation events for young people across the country. The themes that have emerged from these events align with the themes set out above. The project has exposed a great variability in provision. There is a direct link between well-resourced structures and young people being able to influence the design and delivery of services.

4. The role of the local authority children's social care services

What are local authorities doing to respond to changes in demand and funding? What barriers do they face to meeting these challenges? What distinguishes the best performing children's social care services from those that are not performing so well?

In the fostering sector local authorities have increased the use of the consortia approach to respond to some of the challenges faced by increased demand and reduced funding. Whilst the consortia model can help share good practice and joint working around placement matches it can also change the relationship between local authorities and IFPs as it can lead to a greater emphasis on commissioning.

With a steady increase in the number of children coming into care in England there is a need to focus on foster care recruitment and retention. More than 12% of the foster care workforce retire or leave foster care every year and we have an ageing foster care population. In England there is a need to recruit at least 7,600 families in the next 12 months, in particular to support adolescents, disabled children, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and sibling groups.

We believe the following are all factors which underpin best performing fostering services:

- Stability of the workforce
- Investment in services
- The workforce, including foster carers, and the recipients of services, in this case children and young people, being involved in service development and delivery
- Foster carers being valued as equal members of the team around the child and being respected and treated as professional child care expert
- Ensuring the child or young person has a strong voice in all decisions which affect their care.

5. The policy and legislative framework

Is the current and developing policy and legislative framework sufficient to enable children's social care services to meet children's needs in the current context? How could it be improved?

The legislative and policy framework for children's social care services needs to reflect the current landscape, for example, child sexual exploitation, living in the digital world, emotional health and well-being, increased levels of child poverty and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

There have been a number of changes to policy and legislation for children's social care services in recent years and more planned in the forthcoming year but there remains a challenge around implementation and funding of new policy i.e. Staying Put. In 2014 a new duty was introduced for local authorities in England to support care leavers to stay with their former foster carers after the age of 18. A key obstacle to successful implementation of this duty is a lack of adequate financial support for Staying Put carers. Foster carers' income reduces dramatically when they move to support post-18 arrangements even though their input often increases to support the young person in managing their transition towards independence. The Fostering Network would like to see an introduction of national fee and allowance framework that properly reflects both costs involved in supporting young people post-18 and the skills and experience required to be a Staying Put carer. Foster carers should not be deterred from taking a Staying Put placement for financial reasons and they should never be out of pocket. Alongside adequate funding for the policy a simple set of standards and framework for fostering services would have avoided the variation in eligibility criteria and quality of provision which is now emerging. The Fostering Network would like to see adequate monitoring of policies, such as Staying Put, to ensure practice is in line with national policy and guidance.

There are also cases where changes to legislation may not fully address the root cause of the problem. For instance, the recent amendments to the SGO regulations to strengthen the assessment process of prospective special guardians do not address the issue of the 26 week care proceedings timetable compromising the ability to carry out adequate assessments on those prospective guardians who are identified later in timetable and who may not have a pre-existing relationship with the child.

The current approach to policy and legislation for children in care tends to be piecemeal and focused on individual routes to permanence i.e. adoption, special guardianship. We believe there should be a shift to adopt a whole-system approach with the starting point addressing the needs of the child and improving outcomes for children in care. However, even where sufficient resources and focus exists, a challenge remains to tackle engrained attitudes and a sometimes tick box approach.

6. Learning from the devolved nations

Are national and local authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales facing similar challenges? How are they responding to these challenges? What learning and examples of effective responses could be shared across the UK?

The Fostering Network is a UK wide organisation which allows us to share and learn from policy and practice responses in each of devolved nations. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales face similar challenges to those highlighted but fostering is a devolved issue in the UK and therefore legislation and policy about care and foster care varies across the UK. Below we have highlighted some of the different policy and practice responses in each of the devolved nations which could be transferrable to England.

Scotland: Two of the key differences in children in care policy and practice in Scotland are permanence orders and the recent changes to leaving care services. Permanence orders were introduced by the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and can only be applied for by the local authority and are designed to safeguard a child who will not be returning home. The order lasts until the child reaches the age of 18 years and allows foster carers, or others caring for the child, to have some or all of the parental responsibilities needed to make day-to-day decisions affecting the child. The permanence order secures the child's welfare throughout their childhood within the care system, and so maintains all the support and entitlements of a looked after child and care leaver, while providing permanence and stability.

Changes introduced by the Children and Young People Act 2014 which came into force in April last year mean that young people in care reaching the age of 16 will now be given the option to remain in their placement up until the age of 21 years. Unlike England this applies to all young people in residential, foster or kinship care. This is in addition to the support from the Scottish Government until the age of 26 for care leavers to help the transition into independent living, and to the introduction of new corporate parenting responsibilities for public bodies. The other policy introduced by the Scottish Government which supports young people in their transition to independence is the ability to return to care up until the age of 21 years.

Wales: Wales face very similar challenges to England in terms of fostering: the number of children coming into care is at its highest point and is shifting to more adolescents; there are recruitment difficulties especially for older children and many local authorities do not have budgets or resources for skilled or specialist areas of work. In response to these challenges the Welsh Government has provided funding to develop a National Fostering Framework which will develop a collaborative approach to addressing the concerns around the overall effectiveness and sustainability of fostering services. The Fostering Network will play a key role in developing the framework; some of the aims are set out below:

- Improvements in permanency planning for children and quality of placement provision;
- Greater transparency about the performance of fostering services and the efficient use of resources;
- More shared service planning and commissioning; and
- Consistent use of best practice models for recruiting and supporting foster carers.

The strategy will introduce a planned programme of changes with a focus on early intervention and preventative action aimed at supporting families to stay together and providing flexible high quality placements that meet the diverse range of needs of the children who do come into care. A key aim of the strategy will be to clarify what services should be operated at which level- national, regional and local.

The Fostering Network welcomes the development of the National Fostering Framework in Wales and we believe a similarly collaborative approach in England could be an effective response to the challenges currently faced in fostering.

Continuation of response to Q6: Learning from devolved nations:

Q6) Northern Ireland: Last year The Children's Services Co-operation Act received Royal Assent. The Act places a legal duty on government departments to collaborate to achieve the six high level outcomes established as part of the *Strategy for Children and Young People*. Importantly, it includes a duty to share resources and pool funds to improve well-being for children. The Act has just commenced so it is too early to assess the impact at this stage.

7. Sharing good practice

Finally, we welcome examples of good practice from across the United Kingdom, and in particular examples relating to one of more of the following themes:

- improving local arrangements in the delivery of children's social care services including:
 - services for children in care and adopted children
 - safeguarding and child protection services
 - services for disabled children and children with special educational needs
 - early intervention services including for example family support, housing, and public and mental health services
- collaboration across cities/areas/regions in the delivery of children's social care services
- the use of evidence (e.g. on local need/demand) and best practice in informing the commissioning, configuration and delivery of children's social care services
- securing effective leadership

The Fostering Network runs a number of innovative programmes and projects which seek to improve outcomes for fostered children and young people. The learning from these programmes supports the organisation's objectives to innovate so that our members are able to respond to the changing world of fostering and allow us to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care and leaving care. The programmes we are currently delivering are nearing completion and are in the process of being independently evaluated. Below we have given early messages from the evaluation but the full evaluations will be available in the next few weeks.

The first programme, **Head, Heart, Hands (HHH)**, explores the impact social pedagogy can have on outcomes for children and young people in foster care. While social pedagogy is a well-established and proven approach to caring for children in many European countries, HHH is the first major look at what it has to offer foster care in the UK. Social pedagogy puts building and maintaining positive relationships at the heart of fostering, with an emphasis on making decisions that enable relationships to flourish. The programme is working with seven fostering services across England and Scotland for three years. Over 280 foster carers and social workers have completed a 10-day course on social pedagogy and are embedding the approach within their practice.

The programme is currently being independently evaluated. The full evaluation will not be available until later this year, but early evidence suggests social pedagogy is improving stability, enhancing the quality of care and improving outcomes for children and young people. The programme is now in its final stages and is focused on securing sustainability and translating learning and evidence from the programme into resources.

Continuation of response to Q7: Sharing good practice

Q7) The second programme, **The Mockingbird Family Model**, is an innovative, yet intuitive, model of foster care. It uses the concept of a 'constellation' which is where 6 to 10 families of foster carers live in close proximity to a dedicated hub home of specially trained foster carers offering respite care, peer support and regular joint planning. Relationships are central to this model and the hub approach empowers foster families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate and destabilise the placement. Through the Mockingbird Family Model we are hoping to find new ways of addressing challenges such as lack of placement stability and placement options, poor foster care retention and the status and authority of foster carers and kinship carers. The programme has one year of Department for Education funding from March 2015. Working with local authority partners and an independent evaluation team, we are aiming to have a fully tested, replicable model with a package of support for implementation in fostering services across England by March 2016.

Finally, The Fostering Network has just finished a two year programme called the **London Fostering Achievement (LFA)** which aimed to improve educational outcomes for looked after children across the capital. LFA aimed to increase the knowledge and confidence of foster carers to engage with education and to improve school staff awareness of the challenges facing looked after children. The programme is currently being independently evaluated. Early findings indicate a positive impact as a result of peer support and training, and some foster carers feeling more confident and able to influence the allocation of the Pupil Premium Plus and to advocate at education meetings.

Through delivering these programmes clear themes have emerged which we believe can be used to improve local arrangements in the delivery of foster care services:

- **Peer support:** All of the above programmes are based on the central principal of peer support. Peer support can increase the knowledge and confidence of foster carers and prevent problems from escalating which offers children a more positive and stable care experience. Peer support can also be a cost effective intervention.
- **Foster carers valued as equal members of the team around the child:** We believe it is essential that foster carers are respected and treated as a skilled co-professional, and are recognised as part of the team working with the child. Often the foster carer is the person who knows the child best. In order for foster carers to be respected as a professional child care expert they need to be given all the information on each child, be fully involved in decision making and empowered to make appropriate day to day decisions concerning the children in their care.
- **Involvement in decisions:** Children and young people should be involved in all decisions made about them, particularly when it involves placement moves or contact arrangements.

The deadline for both written evidence submissions is **Monday 7 March 2016**. For queries or further information please contact Heather Ransom, clerk to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children – hransom@ncb.org.uk 020 7843 6013

Completed forms should be returned to hransom@ncb.org.uk by Monday 7th March. Submissions received after this date will still be considered, but may not inform oral evidence sessions.

