

Local Government Association (LGA)

Westminster Hall Debate on foster care

House of Commons

14 March 2018



Key messages

- There are a wide range of care options available for children and different placements will work for different children. Adoption, fostering, kinship care, residential care or special guardianship arrangements can all provide positive outcomes for different children in different circumstances. A significant proportion of children will return to their families after a period in care, and a range of agencies will work with children and their families to help make this possible.
- Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our children's services are under increasing pressure. Facing a funding gap of around £2 billion by 2020, demand for these services has also increased dramatically. On average, 90 children entered care every day last year, which also saw the largest annual increase in care numbers since 2010.
- The narrative around foster care is too often negative, seeming to suggest it is a second class form of care compared to adoption. This needs to change. Evidence has clearly shown that being in care, particularly for longer periods of time, leads to better educational outcomes than for those children in need who remain outside the care system, largely thanks to the stability and support provided by excellent foster families.
- We support the Government's efforts to improve support for care leavers through the Children and Social Work Act, but we are concerned that funding will be provided for just 20 per cent of eligible care leavers to access personal advisers up to age 25, with no additional money for councils to provide any of the follow-up support needed. This added funding pressure may have a significant impact on other services for vulnerable children and young people if councils are forced to cut provision elsewhere to fund this new duty.
- An independent fostering stocktake, commissioned by the Government, was published on 6 February 2018. We welcome the stocktake's emphasis on the positive impact of fostering on most children in care, and the excellent work of foster carers, although we are disappointed that the stocktake fell short of the ambitious vision for the future that we and many in the sector were hoping for.

Briefing

Background

Rising demand

The Department for Education's most recent figures show there were 72,670 children in care in England on 31 March 2017. Of these, 53,420 were cared for in

a foster placement, including 8,830 placed with family or friends. 2,520 were placed for adoption, representing 3 per cent of all looked-after children.¹

There are a wide range of care options available for children and different placements will work for different children. Social workers must always look for the best solution to meet the specific needs of individual children. Although adoption may provide a stable and caring home for many children and young people, the importance of fostering, residential care or special guardianship arrangements should not be downplayed.

A significant proportion of children will return to their families after a period in care, and a range of agencies will work with children and their families to help make this possible. 31,250 children ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2017.² Of these, 32 per cent (9,980) returned home to live with parents or relatives, while 14 per cent (4,350) were adopted and 11 per cent (3,690) were placed in a special guardianship arrangement.

90 children come into care every day,³ and over 7,000 new families will be needed to ensure that appropriate placements are available for all children and young people who need them in the next 12 months alone.⁴ We have called for the Government to commit to a national campaign to encourage more people to come forward to provide this vital service. In particular, there is a need for more carers able and willing to work with those children who are most vulnerable or have the most complex needs, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

Funding pressure

Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our children's services are under increasing pressure.. Despite measures in the Autumn Budget and the Local Government Finance Settlement, the funding gap facing children's services still stands at around £2 billion.

Councils have worked hard to protect budgets for essential child protection services, but funding pressures have led to difficult decisions elsewhere, often leaving children and young people unable to access support until they reach crisis point. Government funding for the Early Intervention Grant has been cut by almost £500 million since 2013. It is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020.⁵

Personal advisers

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 included a number of measures aimed at improving support for children in care, including a new duty on councils to provide personal advisers for care leavers aged 21 to 25, to support their transition to adulthood.

The LGA supported these measures, arguing that providing personal advisers to

¹ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, year ending 31 March 2017*. For further information, please see: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/90-children-day-entering-care-urgent-cash-injection-needed-childrens-services>

⁴ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/recruitment-targets>

⁵ LGA, *Bright Futures*, https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LGA_Bright%20Futures%20key%20stats%20and%20summary_November%202017.pdf

all care leavers up to the age of 25 was an opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of these young people, helping to provide welcome support to care leavers as they move towards independence. We have been disappointed to learn that the Government intends to provide funding for just 20 per cent of eligible care leavers to access this new provision, with no additional money for councils to provide any of the follow-up support that a young person might request. This support could range from short-term financial assistance for help with travel, food or bills for example, to more significant requests for accommodation to prevent a young person becoming homeless.

This added funding pressure may have a significant impact on other services for vulnerable children and young people if councils are forced to cut provision elsewhere to fund this new duty.

The Government needs to go further than simply resourcing councils to provide an extra person for care leavers to speak to, and should also provide the funding necessary for them to effectively carry out their role by providing reasonable additional help and support that young people request. At the very least, the Government must commit to a full review of the funding provided to support these provisions within one year, and on an annual basis going forward. This potentially life changing initiative must be fully funded if the Government is serious about improving support to our most vulnerable children and young people

Mental health support

Foster carers and families provide the stable, loving and supportive care needed by children and young people, but they need to be able to access professionals including those supporting mental health. We have concerns about the availability of mental health services for all children, in particular those in care who are four times more likely than their peers to have a mental health difficulty.⁶ Early intervention is key, and it is not right for any child to have to wait a long time for treatment. However, funding for children's mental health services currently accounts for just 6 per cent of the NHS mental health budget.⁷ Children in care are some of the most vulnerable in our society and they need to be able to access services to support them recover from earlier trauma or emotional distress.

Role and status of foster carers

The narrative around foster care is too often negative, with senior figures in central government seeming to suggest it is a second class form of care compared to adoption. This needs to change, and the significant positive role of foster carers in improving the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and young people must be acknowledged.

Evidence has clearly shown that being in care, particularly for longer periods of time, leads to better educational outcomes than for those children in need who remain outside the care system, largely thanks to the stability and support provided by excellent foster families.⁸ We need to cultivate a more positive

⁶ Children in care: emotional wellbeing and mental health, NSPCC
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/children-in-care/emotional-wellbeing-of-children-in-care/>

⁷ NHS England evidence to the Health Committee inquiry on children's and adolescents' mental health and CAMHS
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/healthcommittee/childrens-and-adolescent-mental-health-and-camhs/written/7703.pdf>

⁸ The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England, University of Oxford and University of Bristol,

narrative and celebrate success to help attract more foster carers, particularly those who are willing to support harder to place young people with complex needs.

Fostering stocktake

An independent fostering stocktake, commissioned by the Government, was published on 6 February 2018. We welcome the stocktake's emphasis on the positive impact of fostering on most children in care, and the excellent work of foster carers, although we are disappointed that the stocktake fell short of the ambitious vision for the future that we and many in the sector were hoping for.

We agree with many of the findings of the stocktake, in particular the importance of treating foster carers professionally, delegating decision-making and providing appropriate support. The report argued against the professionalisation of foster care, but was clear that carers should always be treated in line with other professions involved in the child's care, echoing our own position.

Independent Reviewing Officers

The authors of the stocktake reflected on the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), concluding that while there was some excellent practice in some areas, 'there is little to recommend the IRO role'. It recommended that councils should be able to dispense with it and reinvest the savings in front-line staffing. While we recognise that any changes in this area would require primary legislation, we do feel that there would be value in allowing councils the flexibility to test different approaches to fulfilling the functions currently performed by IROs. However, we are clear that the best interests of the child, including the opportunity to have their voice heard, should always be paramount.

Commissioning

The report criticises the quality of local authority commissioning, and recommends the establishment of around ten commissioning consortia to pool expertise, allow greater purchasing and negotiating power, and better understand commissioning requirements. We acknowledge that commissioning could be improved in some areas, but feel that this recommendation falls short of the nationally co-ordinated recruitment and retention campaign required to address fundamental concerns. There are existing areas of good practice in commissioning that could be built on, and would be keen to carry out further work with the DfE to identify whether commissioning consortia would be the best approach and what more can be done to recruit the additional carers that are so urgently needed.

National Register

The stocktake suggested that DfE should consider the establishment of a national register of foster carers, to make it clearer where additional carers were needed and to improve matching. We are concerned that a national register would be costly to establish and maintain, and almost impossible to keep up-to-date, while risking more children being placed further from their homes. The time and money that would be spent on a register would be better invested in improving recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Staying Put

We were disappointed that the review did not consider in more detail the Staying Put initiative, which is very positive for many care leavers but currently underfunded and under capacity.

In February 2015, ADCS surveyed 46 local authorities on the cost of delivering the existing Staying Put requirements, and found an estimated shortfall of £3,896,000 within these councils alone. Extrapolated across the country, this would have equated to a funding gap of well over £13,000,000 – just six months into the policy. We are also aware of concerns raised by the Fostering Network on the financial impact that the policy can have on carers.⁹ Allowances for Staying Put are typically lower than for fostering, while potential for fostering more children is affected as the number of bedrooms available for fostering is reduced.

This limits the extent to which it can be fully rolled out to young people. We are keen for further conversations with DfE on this programme to make sure that young people who are in foster placements can choose to stay with their carers when they reach 18 to help them as they move into adulthood.

Independent Fostering Agencies

The stocktake made a limited attempt to investigate the wide cost disparity between Independent Fostering Agency and in-house placements. The report suggests that, when factors such as overheads and complexity of cases are taken into account, IFA placements are more expensive than in-house placements but only by a 'relatively small amount', though this will clearly vary from case to case and the detailed analysis to support these suggestion was limited. It was, however, agreed that "in-house first" policies are appropriate. We would have welcomed a more in-depth look at these issues and a consideration of the impact of factors such as higher pay rates by some IFAs, which were suggested as a factor in the higher overall price of IFA placements but with limited consideration of the impact that these increased costs will have on the ability of councils to recruit and support their own foster carers. Disappointingly, there was only very limited discussion, and no recommendations, about profit-making by private IFAs.

⁹ Staying Put: What impact has it had?, Community Care
<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/10/22/staying-put-concerns-funding-implementation-overshadow-popular-policy/>