

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Fostering](#), HC 681

Wednesday 1 March 2017

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 1 March 2017.

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair); Ian Austin; Michelle Donelan; Marion Fellows; Suella Fernandes; Lilian Greenwood; and Catherine McKinnell.

Questions 82-153

Witnesses

I: **Iain Anderson**, Representative, Children's Services Development Group and Group Chief Executive, National Fostering Agency; **Andy Elvin**, Chief Executive, The Adolescent and Children's Trust; **Harvey Gallagher**, Chief Executive, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers; and **Andrew Ireland**, Corporate Director for Social Care, Health and Wellbeing, Kent County Council.

II: **Dr Ruth Allen**, Chief Executive Officer, British Association of Social Workers; **Jon Fayle**, Vice Chair, National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers; **Rachel Harrison**, Lead Officer for Schools and Foster Carers, GMB Union; **Dave Hill**, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services; and **Councillor Richard Watts**, Chair of the Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Children's Services Development Group](#)
- [National Fostering Agency](#)
- [The Adolescent and Children's Trust](#)
- [Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers](#)
- [Kent County Council](#)
- [British Association of Social Workers](#)
- [National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers](#)
- [GMB Union](#)
- [Association of Directors of Children's Services](#)
- [Local Government Association](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Iain Anderson, Andy Elvin, Harvey Gallagher and Andrew Ireland.

Q82 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the second session of our inquiry into fostering. Last time we met for the inquiry, we heard from foster carers and foster carer organisations. That was a particularly interesting set of sessions. Today, we are going to be looking at local authorities and independent and voluntary fostering providers. We want to get a clear understanding of the relationships, the set-ups and structures behind those organisations. I would be grateful if you said who you are and which organisation you represent.

Andy Elvin: Hello. I am Andy Elvin, chief executive of The Adolescent and Children's Trust, TACT. We are the UK's largest dedicated fostering and adoption charity. We have been around since 1993.

Andrew Ireland: Hello. I am Andrew Ireland, corporate director for social care, health and wellbeing for Kent County Council.

Harvey Gallagher: I am Harvey Gallagher, chief executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, which is a not-for-profit organisation that campaigns on behalf of independent and voluntary sector fostering organisations.

Iain Anderson: Good morning, Mr Chairman. I am Iain Anderson. I am here to represent the Children's Services Development Group, but I am also chief executive of the NFA group, which looks after 5,500 young people, between our schools and residential homes, with 4,500 in fostering.

Q83 Chair: Welcome to you all. We should be in this session for about an hour and we have five or six themes we want to pursue.

The first theme is the "them and us" culture there appears to be around local authorities and independent fostering providers. How are the current relationships between local authorities and independent providers going? What is the overall direction of travel? Iain, would you like to comment?

Iain Anderson: The honest answer is that it is mixed, depending on which part of the country you are working in with local authorities. We find that some local authorities are very proactive in wanting to be innovative around working with independent fostering agencies, and we find that others are perhaps not so forthcoming in terms of wanting to work together, which from our point of view is a shame because we genuinely believe there is an opportunity within the fostering sector to have both local authority public sector and the private sector working together. So I would say at the moment it is mixed, but it could be better.

Chair: Okay. Would anyone else like to add to that?

Harvey Gallagher: I agree; Iain summed it up quite nicely. The fact is that children need local authorities and independent fostering providers to work together and to have a positive, collaborative relationship. You see



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that work really well in some parts of the country, but the culture and, to some extent, the procurement often get in the way of that.

The procurement aspect can work well. Local authorities' own services are not procured in the same way; they procure external services from independent fostering providers. And with the current financial pressures on local authorities, if the conversations and the collaboration are only about money, that makes it very difficult to develop services that are genuinely collaborative and will genuinely meet the needs of children. That is one of the sticking points.

Q84 Chair: Andrew, you are attired in the Kent hat. What would you say to that?

Andrew Ireland: Speaking generally, and having worked in a number of local authorities, I would agree with much of what has been said. It is mixed and I think it is incumbent on both sides to make the relationship as proactive and constructive as possible. I agree that procurement, if managed well, can be helpful in taking forward and developing relationships and having sensible arrangements. If managed poorly, it can be very much a "them and us" position.

For Kent specifically, we are in a fairly unique position because of the sheer number of looked-after children resident in the county. We have three very significant blocks of children placed in Kent: our own children in care; 1,000 or so unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people; and about 1,300 children placed by over 100 local authorities in the county. So there is a burgeoning independent sector in Kent—there has been for a number of years—and we have to have a constructive relationship with them in respect of the shared problems of the pressures that that number of children has on other services, with school places, health services and CAMHS as examples.

We feel that equally when trying to get the best back-up and support for children within Kent. We have to manage the issues around children who go missing, the juvenile justice issues that occur and the overall sufficiency issues that that number of children in care within the community creates. That has been an influencing factor on our relationship with our local agencies, many of whom started as Kent foster carers many years ago and with whom we have to work very constructively. Circumstances force us, I suspect, to have a different kind of relationship than perhaps simply a procurement one.

Andy Elvin: I agree with some of what has been said. The real issue is that the procurement and commissioning system does not work for children and it does not work in this field; we will perhaps come on to that a bit more later.

Some local authorities are looking at new ways of doing things. In exactly one month's time, we take over Peterborough's entire fostering, adoption and SGO services and family group conferences. They have contracted the entire thing out to TACT. That is a model of a way forward. Rather than



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procuring with lots of agencies, you procure with one agency, which then becomes the commissioner and the provider. There are eight or nine other local authorities that have already spoken to us, and if this works well, I suspect more will go this way.

It speaks to a systemic problem within local authorities in providing the care system as part of their services. Child protection is all encompassing. It is all the risk and it gets the majority of senior management attention all the time, because it has to. On the care side, care may not be optimal, but it is rarely dangerous. Something that happens in a foster home is unlikely to cost you your job or cause a council member to resign. In child protection, all the risk is there.

Therefore in some local authorities—this is not true across the piece—fostering services are Cinderella services. They are not given the attention they need. The staff are not supported, and there is not someone of sufficient seniority in the council who has a full understanding of the issues in fostering, because people tend to come to management through the child protection route.

You then end up with fostering services and foster carers who are not supported as they might be. That has led to the growth of the independent fostering agency sector, because we are dedicated wholly to supporting foster carers. I do not have to worry about child protection in children's own homes when children are still with their families, because that is not my role. Every part of the organisation is dedicated to the support of foster carers.

Foster carers—particularly those who are being asked to take more complex placements, such as parent and child assessments and older children with complex needs—need a lot of support. They need 24/7 out-of-hours support. They need skilled training. They need very good social workers attached to them to support the placements, and sadly that is not true in all local authorities. It is not local authorities' fault; it is the systemic issue. The other part of their service is so all-encompassing and can be so overwhelming at times that the fostering service does not get the attention it needs.

What is happening in Peterborough may be a model for how it is going forward. If you can contract out to someone who is dedicated only to that part and can more or less guarantee decent Ofsted results, that is going to be very attractive for local authorities. There is also a money issue to that, but I think it is marginal in their case.

Q85 Chair: We will come to the money issue in a minute. The Peterborough model, so to speak, has its advantages in terms of ring-fencing and providing that dedication to the issue at hand.

Andy Elvin: Yes, absolutely, so long as you do it hand in glove. We will be co-located with Peterborough. Our staff will be in the same building as the child protection staff, because it has to work hand in glove with child

protection and family support services. You are all looking after the same children.

- Q86 **Chair:** You alluded to money. There has been a sense that profits in the independent sector might be too excessive or whatever. What is the judgment of the panel on that particular issue?

Harvey Gallagher: In the first place, we need to understand what the evidence says. There is an ethical, ideological element to the argument, and I understand that, but I have not seen any convincing evidence about levels of profit or levels of comparable profit. Any analysis that I have seen is pretty flawed. In the first instance, it is difficult to know what we are commenting about, because the evidence is so weak.

The other issue is that in terms of different kinds of organisations providing care for children—local authorities, small private providers, large private providers, charitable providers and not-for-profit providers—there is not any one sort of organisation that does it cheaper or better or offers better value for money. However the income of an organisation is working behind the scenes and wherever it goes to—that at the moment does not suggest any reflections on how we plan service delivery.

- Q87 **Chair:** Is there any evidence to suggest that profits are too high?

Andy Elvin: It depends what you view as too high. We have a well-stated position that we do not think profit is required in the fostering system, and we do not think it should be allowed. We think that only local authorities, community interest companies, not-for-profits and charities should be providing fostering services, and that is an ethical position. That has nothing to do with the quality of care—let me be clear: the quality of care from foster carers in the independent sector is generally very good indeed. On average, IFAs get more “good” and “outstanding” ratings than local authorities for their fostering services. The quality is there, but it is an ethical question of where the money goes.

On comparative costings, we know from commissioners who share information about costings that we at TACT are on average considerably cheaper than a lot of commercial agencies and some voluntary agencies. Some charities charge what I would consider to be excessive fees. We know what it costs to provide a solid “good” or “outstanding” fostering service and the cost at which we can do that.

We see other agencies that are charging, on particular placements, anywhere from £100 to £500 a week more than we do. We can see no reason for that additional money in the quality of service being offered. There is a very wide variance in price. That is not clearly voluntary to commercial, because some voluntary agencies also charge as much as some of the highest commercial ones, but we know that we are pretty much always at the bottom end of pricing in any tender framework.

- Q88 **Chair:** Andrew, you indicated agreement.

Andrew Ireland: I particularly agree that a huge range of fees is being charged. At the height of the unaccompanied asylum seeker issues in



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2015, we found that we were forced to use agencies that we would not normally look at because we considered that the prices were much higher than we need to pay ordinarily. That had an impact on the overall local market and an escalating impact on prices generally.

The issue generally for me as a director, first and foremost, is that I get a quality fostering experience—that it is a family placement capable of working with the plans for the child effectively and co-operatively and putting the child's interests first. Whether that organisation is profit-making is a secondary concern, provided that the fee is one for which the local authority is getting sensible value.

I do not think we have seen anything dramatically different, other than what I have just described. What we have seen are changes in ownership. We know exactly how those organisations started—many were offshoots from former Kent foster carers—and they are now owned by companies that I have never heard of. That is an interesting development and we need to see what the impact turns out to be in the long term.

- Q89 **Chair:** The Peterborough model, as described by Andy, is clearly almost like a next step agency strategy, with local authorities basically identifying a suitable provider and handing over responsibility. However, there is another angle, which is local authorities co-operating more with other providers. We need to tease that model out a bit and we will do so during our questions. Let us take Iain's view, for example: what do you think about the level of co-operation and collaboration, and how do you think that might be encouraged between local authorities and providers?

Iain Anderson: What I have seen over the last 10 years is a shift away from personal relationships between local authorities and independent providers. What I mean by that is that prior to contract frameworks coming in, you would contract as an independent provider with each individual local authority.

With 155 local authorities in England, we might have 155 contracts, for example, and you would then have relationships with those local authorities on a personal basis between independents and a local authority. Frameworks were introduced—I fully understand the rationale for introducing them—and you then have a disparity in relationships, because you end up having a contract lead being the focal point of contact, and that relationship develops. So you may be dealing with one or two people who are representing 17 or 18—or, in London's case, 36—local authorities.

You therefore don't have the opportunity on many occasions to go and meet the local authorities individually, because they want to meet independents in a group with maybe 10 or 12 people. Then you are heavily relying on that relationship with one or two individuals, in terms of how that framework contract works. That can be quite difficult. Many of our customers have said to us, "We'd like to get back to that one-to-one relationship with you because we don't necessarily agree with the direction of travel of the consortium in the framework." Local authorities do not



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always agree within frameworks about the direction of travel. That has really impacted on relationships, which goes back to your first question.

Too much focus is being put on profit. Let's focus on the young person. Let's focus on quality, and let's also bear in mind that it is the taxpayer who wants value for money for children in the care system. If an independent agency can provide a quality of service with an outstanding or good rating, what is wrong with that? If investment is going into quality of service, what is wrong with that?

The other important thing to mention is that, since the introduction of contract frameworks, many now will not refer to an independent if they are below a good rating. You have to be good or outstanding in many of the contracts. That has an important role in terms of relationships. Profit is a word that people like to focus on. I tend to focus on this: if we can deliver a quality service with good outcomes for young people, is that bad?

Q90 Chair: Do you think the Peterborough model, as described by Andy, is a useful way forward?

Iain Anderson: We looked at the Peterborough model. We had an opportunity to tender for that model within our organisation, and many members of the Children's Services Development Group could have tended for it. We chose not to—not because we didn't believe we could build a relationship and add value. It was, more importantly, about sustainability of managing that contract based on the terms and conditions coming across with it. We did not feel we had the expertise to manage that.

Q91 Chair: But that does not alter whether or not the Peterborough model works for Peterborough and, indeed, for Andy's organisation. Do you think the model works?

Iain Anderson: If you are asking whether I think the outsourcing of local authority—

Chair: That is what I'm asking.

Iain Anderson: That could work, yes.

Q92 Chair: Okay. I have one last question for you, Andrew. This is about not just relationships between local authorities and providers but relationships between local authorities. What is your experience?

Andrew Ireland: We are a large county, and we have one unitary authority within our borders. We work very closely with that authority—the Medway towns authority—in terms of all our fostering strategies. Indeed, we are currently looking at changing our model of procurement and are doing that jointly with Medway. That makes sense in terms of the geography of Kent and is also reflected in our adoption consortiums. That is good.

I have also been a director in London and been part of consortiums with other London authorities. How far those things actually shift in terms of



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management of the market is—certainly when I was there, there was still a long way to go before it was a really effective set of arrangements.

In my experience, most local authorities, other than those that are particularly geographically isolated, recognise the value of good, effective arrangements across borders. Children move across borders, as I have indicated. Through the association, we meet together as regions, and there are a number of areas—fostering and others—where there are regional arrangements, if not formal contractual consortiums. There is a growing recognition.

- Q93 Lilian Greenwood:** May I ask a quick follow-up question about the issue of profit-making services? Iain, you suggested that we shouldn't worry about profit if quality is right. Is it not the case that there are increasing mergers of independent providers, such that the Competition and Markets Authority is looking at it? Shouldn't there be concern that local authorities won't be able to get good value for money if they are not facing a broad market and if there is potentially something resembling a monopoly? Do you think the public are aware of the fact that fostering services are actually being provided by profit-making organisations?

Iain Anderson: If you are referring to the CMA in terms of our situation, it is fair to say that there may be concerns about monopolisation of a market, as you put it. Equally, it is about the quality of service that you can provide for the number of children within that marketplace.

The example to come back to you with would be that we have been approached by a number of local authorities, as have some of the members of the Children's Services Development Group, to ask whether we would be interested in setting up an agency within a particular geographical area because they have either concerns or challenges around the number of looked-after children.

I do not think I actually said to dismiss profit; what I was saying is that profit is always a focus for people, rather than the focus being on the quality and outcome for young people. If an organisation can provide high-quality services where the inspection process and frequency of those inspections is different, in some cases, to what happens in the public sector, and we have to invest heavily to ensure we are providing high-quality foster carers with good outcomes—where we are investing in training and development and in the recruitment of foster carers—that actually does the market a lot of good. It means that, with the growing number of children in care, we are there to service and look after those young people as best we possibly can through the high-quality, dedicated foster carers who provide that.

- Q94 Lilian Greenwood:** I am not disputing that there is some very high-quality care provided in the independent sector, but is it not inevitable that local authorities, who are very hard-pressed for funds and facing a rise in demand for services, particularly care services, are right to question on behalf of their taxpayers whether some of that money should be going into profit rather than being invested in children?



Iain Anderson: Some of the members of the Children's Services Development Group are quite innovative in going forward to try to help local authorities manage those budget constraints that you have given an example of.

One example of that would be young people in residential care, who predominantly do not need to be in residential care and are there at very high cost to local authorities. The other would be that we believe we could work with local authorities to manage that halfway house care—what we call "Bridge to Foster"—where a cost of £3,000 to £5,000 a week to go into a residential home could come into a foster home. If the care plan was appropriate, you could have two-on-one care and probably have a third of that cost.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to have to go straight on to Catherine.

Q95 **Catherine McKinnell:** You talk about profit and there being too much focus on profit. We know that local authorities are hard-pressed. Andy explained quite well how the fostering aspect of child care and protection can often not be the key focus for local authorities. Do you think local authorities are in a position where they have to emphasise price rather than quality when commissioning care?

Iain Anderson: Are you asking me?

Catherine McKinnell: I am asking anybody, but I will start with you.

Iain Anderson: I will respond because I am on the floor now. Sadly, that is the case. Look at the contracts now and the weighting in them between quality and price—we have just won a contract where 70% was on price and 30% was on quality; when I came into the organisation in 2008, it was 50/50. I understand why it has gone in that direction, but I think that it has gone too much in that direction.

My point is that there are ways the private and public sectors could work better and collaboratively together in a partnership-type way so that both the public and private sectors and, more importantly, the children in our care, benefit from that. The specific answer to your question is yes.

Andy Elvin: A couple of things—on profit, my view, as I stated earlier, is that you can have outstanding quality and great foster care without having the profit. It is not actually required. The foster carers are not going to go anywhere; they would go and work for local authorities or voluntary agencies—they are self-employed. There is a systemic problem in local authority funding that causes a lot of problems in this.

I am in the position of charity in which I am looking at three years or five years all the time. If I am fostering services manager or a head of resources in a local authority, I am looking to March 31, because that is my deadline—this year's budget. If I am overspent in December, of course my placement decisions are going to be guided by that. There is no avoiding that.



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While there is this ridiculous world in which you have year on year, one-year-only emphasis in local authorities, which is the fault of central Government, not local authorities, it is very difficult to make multi-year decisions. Of course, when you're placing a child, you are not placing them until the end of March; you want a placement that will last until they're 18 or, with Staying Put, until they're 21, with support up to 25. That is the important thing for the child.

We know, from the number of children that we look after long term, that the saving to local authorities, the health service and to CAMHS services of having long-term, secure and good foster placements are immense. However, those savings are not between when the child is placed and 31 March; they are between when the child is placed and the age of 21. Until there is some freedom to make decisions on that basis—the whole minority of the child and not just this financial year—local authorities are in a very difficult position. It is not a position they have put themselves in; it is a position they are put in.

Andrew Ireland: I cannot wholly go along with my colleagues that decision making is as short term and money-based as that. I think the number of local authorities whose children's social care budgets are under severe pressure and overspending suggests that placement decisions are not entirely governed by cost. However, I work for one of the largest authorities in the country, in contrast to one like Peterborough, and that gives me greater flexibility to be more strategic in my management of resources; I fully accept that.

The initial thing is that there are excessive prices that are nothing to do with you getting anything better, because you can get that quality for less. As I said earlier, only when an authority is under the severest pressure, as we were at Kent two years ago, do they use some agencies that hitherto they had never had any need to pay those prices for. I do not believe that the quality of care that young people received suffered as a consequence of that.

Harvey Gallagher: To answer your question about how important price is in its own right, local authorities have a sequential order in which they find a fostering placement for a child. Indirectly, that has ended up prioritising price—not in any more intelligent way than that; not necessarily even in terms of value for money or whether it is right for individual children.

If a local authority needs a foster placement for a child, they look at their own in-house service that they directly provide first. They then go out to the commissioning services. Commissioning and procurement services, by and large, have various mechanisms for prioritising the cheapest one, whether there are tiers or fixed prices. That has been an effort to try to control the price—I understand that—but the impact it has had, including in the example that Iain gave, has meant that, sequentially, they are looking at the cheapest one first.



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I am not accusing any local authority of trying to squeeze a child into a cheap placement because it is cheaper—I don't think that happens—but the order in which they consider them is the cheapest first.

- Q96 **Catherine McKinnell:** Is there a mechanism for assessing quality across the various services that are commissioned?

Harvey Gallagher: Far too many.

- Q97 **Catherine McKinnell:** Right. Far too many, as in it is difficult to get a clear picture?

Iain Anderson: It is difficult because each framework contract is very different, and the expectations around how they measure that is very different. That is one of the complications: we don't appear to have a common approach in how we could do exactly what you have just asked.

We understand the reasons and the pressures behind local authority budgets, and we know what the challenges are that local authorities have, but sometimes some of the strategic direction of pricing and contracts have gone into a different void, as far as I am concerned. The situation is that, of the 33 framework contracts in the UK right now, nine of those have capped pricing. Capped pricing is fine to a certain extent, but it does not potentially meet the challenges and complexities of what a placement might mean.

If you are looking to tender for a contract that has got capped pricing, independent agencies—generally because they want to ensure they can give good outcomes for young people—if they believe that the type of referrals they are receiving are more complex than the capped price would meet, the two don't go together. The true cost of being able to look after a young person and the support services needed could be more than the capped cost.

What then happens is that independents decide whether they want to be part of that framework. If they don't, they step out. If they step out and there are not enough carers within the framework for those that sign up to that framework with the capped pricing, you end up coming out of the framework, back to the independent sector, where they will negotiate a price based on complexity and need that could be higher than the capped price in the first place.

The whole pricing contracts should be reviewed. There is an opportunity for public and private sector to work together. The private sector understands the challenges around budgets, but it could be done in a more productive way where there is a benefit to both.

- Q98 **Lilian Greenwood:** I want to turn to Staying Put, which everyone seems to think is the right thing for the majority of children but the implementation of it, particularly the resourcing, has not been what is expected. Have the Government accounted for the impacts and the effects of increased pressures caused by the introduction of the Staying Put programme, and the growing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-



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seeking children on the fostering system and on local authorities?

Andy Elvin: Staying Put is a wonderful policy that is very poorly implemented. It has not been resourced properly and the way they have done it is poisoning the well because it is turning foster carers against it.

One big problem is that you are no longer a foster carer. They try to take you away if you work for an agency. They try to register you to the local authority so you lose the support, the training, the link work—the things that supported you in your foster care.

They have also made part of the fee dependent on the child claiming housing benefit. No other children aged 18 to 21 can claim housing benefit. Children in foster care have to, they are forced to. “Welcome to adult life; here’s a benefit form”—that is essentially the message we are giving to our children in foster homes.

I don’t know whether anyone has had the experience of filling out housing benefit forms. I have done it many times over the years for clients as a social worker. They are designed to stop you from getting housing benefit, not to enable you to get housing benefit. The foster carer is always the one who ends up filling it out because the social worker is too busy and the young person can’t.

It delays the money that is coming to the foster carer. They might never get it; they might be refused part of it. They are setting a system where the foster carer is getting less money and allowances to look after the child. A child of 18 years and one month is exactly the same to look after as a child of 17 years and 11 months. That bit has not and will not change, through to their 21st birthday.

The problem could be fixed at a stroke by simply having a write-back from the DWP to the Department for Education. You know how many children are going into Staying Put, you know the average cost of housing benefit. The DWP could write-back the money to the DFE that could then give it out to local authorities that could pay it through allowances to foster carers. The foster carer would not see it; it would be very simple.

We have asked to have many meetings with the DFE. The DWP and DFE just won’t play nicely together; that is the basics of it. Until someone—presumably at the Treasury—knocks their heads together it won’t happen. That is very annoying as is the fact that a lot of foster carers are losing their foster care status, which they don’t want to, just because they are looking after an 18-year-old. They are still the parents. Your status as a parent of your own 18-year-old does not change just because the child turns 18. We should be replicating that in the foster care world.

It is a fantastic policy—absolutely overdue. Is 21 too soon? What is the average age of children leaving home at the moment? Is it 21? I don’t think it is. It would be nice if it was replicated to match what the general population are doing. But there are real problems with the implementation that need addressing.



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The housing benefit issue is not a money issue. It is the same amount of money; it is just the way that it is pushed through the system. It would be a huge benefit to all our foster carers if that could just be done. There would be a huge sigh of relief for them and it would make people more amenable to Staying Put, I think.

It is vital that this works because we know that transitions are where we lose children and outcomes start to go the wrong way. If we can make those transitions as smooth and attractive to foster carers as possible then we will have better outcomes for children as they move on into adult life.

Q99 **Lilian Greenwood:** Harvey, Iain—what are your members saying?

Harvey Gallagher: We did a report on how Staying Put was bedding down about 14 months ago. It is an excellent policy and idea. To some extent foster carers have always offered variations on a theme of that. Foster carers are good people who have caring relationships with the young people who live with them, and they do not cut them off and sever their ties with them when they leave anyway, so an element of that is always there. But by hugely under-resourcing Staying Put, we have placed the strain on the foster carers themselves and relied on their good will rather than the system trying to support them.

We are left with a situation, as Andy described, where people are going to find it difficult to pay their mortgage while they have a relationship with and a commitment to the young person they want to stay with them, because they will not be a foster carer anymore. Where is their income going to come from?

On the benefits system, I have every sympathy with local authorities using housing benefit and supported lodgings and those mechanisms to fund it, because they have not been given enough money to resource it, but that places a whole other set of strains and expectations on the relationship. So, I'm now your landlord or landlady and you're now my tenant. You have to go and claim benefit and pass your benefit back to me—and we're supposed to say the relationship is about love, not money.

Iain Anderson: To be honest, Andy and Harvey have said what I would have said. The only thing I would add is that it was a good initiative when it was brought in, but it is underfunded. We have put £40 million into the Staying Put initiative. For me, that is just not enough money. For probably the first time, I agree with what Andy said. That covers the point on Staying Put from my point of view. There's no point in hogging the meeting to say anything else.

Q100 **Lilian Greenwood:** Andrew, from a local authority perspective—particularly from the perspective of Kent, where unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are a huge pressure—how do you see it?

Andrew Ireland: I agree with a lot of what has been said. It is an excellent policy. We need to see its implementation, in all its aspects, reflect its purpose, which is to smooth the transition from childhood to adulthood for these vulnerable young people to reflect something more



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like a normal experience of moving on from family, which we all know is something that happens several times over these days. I do not think the incentives and the way that regulations and finances flow is entirely consistent with meeting those objectives.

Although they are generalisations, I do not recognise some of what is said about the behaviour of local authorities in mine, but there is an issue that the pool of foster carers also needs to grow to meet increasing demand. A bed is used, whether it is for a post-18-year-old or an under-18-year-old, and there are still children coming in. Staying Put, particularly if it really takes off on the scale that I think many people wish that it would, has an impact on the overall pool of foster care available for children coming into the system at a younger age.

Q101 Lilian Greenwood: There is variation in the application of the Staying Put programme across local authorities. Do you think that variation is because some local authorities have a decent supply of foster carers and some are really struggling to recruit foster carers, or are there other things that account for that variation?

Andrew Ireland: That is partly it in some instances. There is work to be done with foster carers. I am generalising hugely here. As someone said earlier, many would have had these children remain with them before Staying Put, under whatever arrangement, but many foster parents expect to be working and having younger children in their families, and for those children still to be with them into their early 20s is perhaps not what they thought they were signing up for at the outset.

There is work that all fostering agencies, including local authorities, can be doing to spread the word and warm people up to Staying Put and help people through that, and the implementation of that is not helped by some of the issues that my colleagues have flagged up.

The other issue is what some of the alternatives are. How successful are local authorities in getting young people into higher education? How does that work? What is the supply of appropriately supported housing in the locality? We want to see Staying Put not as the answer to every issue, but as a really valuable tool in planning for the care of young people as they move on from care. We should not see it as the answer for every young person—because it isn't. I think it is that wider range of alternatives that have got a key role.

Q102 Lilian Greenwood: One of the reasons why we have seen such a big increase in the number of looked-after children is the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering the care system. What extra support, for the children and for local authorities, do you think is needed to meet those growing numbers?

Andy Elvin: There are a few issues with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Yes, the numbers have grown, but not to an unmanageable level. It is the way it is enacted that has made it unmanageable, because Andrew's authority has taken the brunt of it, and there was no reason for that to be the case.



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I know I and Harvey, and I suspect Iain, have spoken to the Home Office and made the point that we have plenty of vacancies around the country and if they wanted to contract directly with us there could have been a dispersal scheme many years ago. The Home Office have simply refused to engage. When they stood up and said there is no more room it was a lie, and they knew it was a lie, because I have sat in meetings with their officials telling them that on any given day there are hundreds of placements around the UK, if they want them. They just didn't want them. So it was absolutely appalling to come out and say there wasn't capacity in the system, because there was.

It has put a strain on, and in terms of the additional services that are needed they tend to put the price of looking after the young person above the refund to the local authority from the Home Office, which is why some local authorities don't particularly come forward to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

You need good training for the foster carer. Their skills are around helping a child recover from trauma, because the likelihood is that, even if the young person didn't experience trauma in the country of origin before leaving, they experienced it on the journey to the UK. So we have got a number of young people we are looking after who have got quite severe post-traumatic stress disorder; and of course the accompanying health and CAMHS costs of that are simply not covered by the Home Office funding, particularly if as Kent have found you are using an independent agency who cost more than you would wish, because pretty much all the money the Home Office give you is then soaked up in the actual foster fee, leaving nothing for the additional education and support, the trauma support, the health support that the young person is going to need.

So I think largely, though not always, the Home Office have underfunded local authorities' commitments, which has left some local authorities holding more from their own budget than others.

Harvey Gallagher: We haven't seen the numbers of unaccompanied children—we know how well publicised the issue is, but the numbers that we have seen coming in as opposed to the numbers that we thought might be coming in. I think one of the issues for foster care planning is you are probably going to need to place refugee children with your most experienced carers, because of what that child may or may not have been through; and actually it is quite hard to know exactly what they have been through and the impact it has had on them.

You do not know a lot about those children's history or things that have happened to them. So that is going to impact on your sufficiency of foster carers, and who you can place them with. And recruitment campaigns, to that extent, will only backfire, because you are probably not going to be able to place a refugee child or young person with a brand new foster carer. There is an issue there about workforce planning, if you like, for want of a better word.



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Also, on the money side of it, we did a survey of our members just before Christmas. We looked at the availability of placements across the English regions, and we looked at how much they were going to be charging for them. If there is a young person who is a refugee and comes in the care needs of foster care placement and, if you like, their needs can be supported in quite a generic foster care placement, then it is affordable; but any child that is traumatised, who needs extra help—the kind of help Andy was talking about—then local authorities won't be able to pay for that out of the money they are being reimbursed by the Home Office.

So you would ask yourself the question about how many refugee children have low-level needs and how many have high-level needs, and who you are going to place them with, and what is it going to cost. That is where the money starts not to add up.

Andrew Ireland: I think our experience has been—we have been working with unaccompanied asylum seekers in numbers way before the specific issues of a couple of years ago—that many foster carers are very enthusiastic and committed to providing placements to unaccompanied young people, and many of them are hugely successful. We just need to recognise that the age of a large number of those who come in is towards the 16, 17, 15 sort of group, as opposed to many very young children, though that does happen occasionally. That is a factor. But I think it is the ancillary services, and the availability and the recognition of health services locally about the particular issues that may arise. Some young people arrive clearly very stressed, suffering from clear and obvious mental health issues, but for many those will surface later.

It is the ability to access English classes and, for further education in particular, to access the funding to lay on appropriate courses for young people who by and large are highly motivated and highly resourced for young people, because they needed to be to get here. As such, they are really wanting that, and one of the problems is under-occupation because they have not accessed it. At times, and now is one because of the particular influxes, clearly people's immigration status needs to be resolved in a timely way in order for access to anything to be taken forward. Where there are backlogs in that, that creates issues as well.

Andy Elvin: For years, we have been hammering at the Home Office to say that there is no reason to do what they do with the immigration status of unaccompanied children. You should be making a determination as they arrive. No one in the UK is their legal parent. They are looked after under section 20 after the Hillingdon judgment, but there is no parent here; there is no one with legal PR in the UK.

We now have the family drug and alcohol court, so it would be very easy to have a family immigration court to look at the young person's situation. At the point at which those young people become known to the authorities you decide, "Yes, they are staying here, because there are no viable options for them to go back to their home country or to a third country." Often families are dispersed to different countries, so you can end up with relatives in Canada or Sweden, and we have had situations where that has



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been the case. If they are going to stay in the UK, they are given enduring leave to remain—they become UK citizens.

But you do that pre-18, because at the moment you have just got everyone hitting 18 having to apply again, hitting this backlog and going into this grey area where they are not really eligible for some services but they are for others. They cannot access university because they are overseas students, so there are those fees, and they cannot get student finance because they are not UK nationals.

If they were not vulnerable before, they can very quickly become so between 18 and 22, because the majority of them are not going to be deported, and very few of them are going to be detained, so they return to their resourcefulness and living on their wits until such time as they stay here in the grey economy or they get some status to remain, because usually after seven or eight years the Home Office very quietly grants amnesties that it does not call amnesties, letting people stay simply because it has not processed their claims in the last seven years. That happens an enormous amount. The system is completely broken in terms of immigration.

Andrew Ireland: The system recognises clearly that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under 18 are in the care of local authorities, and that brings a whole set of duties and responsibilities. The system, through the Home Office, has not yet fully recognised that they then become care leavers, which also brings a whole series of responsibilities and statutory duties. Those are not funded properly, and it is still a continuing discussion to get that same recognition.

Iain Anderson: Many of our members have seen a slowing down of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We are not seeing many coming to the independent sector at all. I totally agree with Harvey that we have a lot of experienced carers who are used to dealing with those young people. On the refugee situation, we have been asked by the Home Office for our capacity to take refugee children, which we have given through the CSDG.

Actually, we have a huge amount of capacity to take refugee children, but it has not been taken up and there seems to be no evidence that it will be taken up. We then hand-picked particular carers whom we felt had the experience to manage those refugee young children coming in, but as those young people come into the system, when they are placed that then adds additional pressure to have more foster carers coming into the system, which leads into the whole debate around the recruitment and retention of foster carers across the whole sector.

Q103 **Marion Fellows:** I am going to ask about capacity and recruitment. Is there enough collaboration between foster care providers, in terms of recruitment of foster carers? Could a national marketing and recruitment campaign bring benefits?

Andy Elvin: Between IFAs, there is very little recruitment, because we are several organisations in competition with each other. Recruitment is generally done within the bounds of one's own. We have a fostering through social enterprise group; we collaborate with recruitment through that and through some of the not-for-profits and charities, but very rarely do we collaborate, or are we asked to collaborate, with local authorities.

Would a national campaign help? It depends how it was done. It is rather frustrating that the DfE spends a lot of money on teacher recruitment and does not do a similar national thing for foster care. A short-term national TV, cinema and radio thing would be helpful in raising the status of foster care, but it is not our experience that spending money on that kind of thing actually brings you any foster carers. For example, for the last five or six weeks, Action for Children has had adverts on the front pages of some of the Sunday papers. Our experience is that that brings you no foster carers.

If you want something these days, what do you do? You ask Google. If you want to be a foster carer, you do the same: "I want to be a foster carer; I live in Newcastle"—you google it. So if you want to recruit foster carers, you have to be online and on Facebook, because that is where they are. A number of local authorities do not have that capacity, because there is not a dedicated agency; the place in the local authority that would do that is not in children's services, and they are not really geared up for that. You need to have a dedicated resource that is online pretty much 24/7 and that is going after foster carers.

Putting adverts on the backs of buses or in the city centre—first, it does not get you foster carers, and secondly it is extremely insulting to children in foster care, who may be walking through a city centre, doing their Christmas shopping with their foster family, and look up and see something that says "It's hard being in care, but imagine being in care at Christmas." Imagine being the kid who is reading that—it is a terrible thing to see. We should not be doing it that way, for the simple reason that it stigmatises children in care, but it doesn't bring you any foster carers either.

There is a lot more that could be done on recruitment. The DfE could take the lead with an awareness-raising campaign about the need for more foster carers. That would benefit local authorities and it would also benefit IFAs.

Iain Anderson: There are a number of factors relating to support around the whole process of care and recruitment that are important to take into account. The Fostering Network will regularly indicate that there is a shortage of 9,000 or 10,000 foster carers each year in England; I have been saying that for quite a long time now. Last year, within England alone, 21,000 foster carers came into the care system, and there were 15,000 deregistrations. The net effect of that was that there were around 6,000 carers who actually came into the system.



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Foster carers want to have a choice of who they foster and where. What is important to them is the support they get and the communication, dialogue and relationships that they build up, particularly with the local authority or the independent provider and the social worker. We do many surveys of the independent sector about foster care, and there are two key things that regularly come out of them from foster carers.

First, they want 24/7 support, so that if they ring someone at 2 o'clock in the morning, they are going to get the social worker or the support worker—a voice that is recognisable and that belongs to someone who understands the young person and who they can feel confident will be able to help them with whatever the issue might be.

The second thing is training. We know that investment in training is critical to being able to support foster carers, particularly with the challenges and complexity that there are now, and the increase in challenging young people coming into the system. Equally, the complexity and the challenge of young people coming into the system is one of the reasons why we are losing foster carers: because there have been really challenging behaviours that they have to deal with, and potentially after two or three bad experiences, they decide that this is not for them.

As part of our recruitment process, we involve foster carers. We have them there at the selection process to work with carers coming into the system. We have children in the care system, within our organisations, who are part of the interview process and who will recruit and support those foster carers. But once you have got those foster carers in, it is making sure that you value them.

The investment that goes into the care recruitment process is quite extensive, as you can imagine. But I think Andy or Andrew made the point earlier that we are all fishing in the same pond, and that is a challenge in itself. So, would a national campaign be beneficial? My response to that is: it is doubtful. Could it be something to be explored? Why not? Let's have a look at it. But, more importantly, response to inquiries is crucial.

Most of our success in the independent sector is because we respond very quickly to an initial inquiry to see if a foster carer, or potential foster carer, is really interested and has real values around being able to foster. That is where we have got to try to tease out and prise out the benefits of a genuine foster carer coming into the system, doing this for the right reasons.

There is no question but that, despite all the other challenges in the system, foster carer recruitment is probably one of the biggest. That is something that we really heavily focus on. If you have good-quality foster carers, local authorities get to know them by name and what they can do with young people. They build a reputation for themselves and become the first port of call if there is a match that is appropriate for that carer.

Independent agencies and members of the CSDG will recruit and invest in recruitment. There is a lot happening in the marketplace now about golden



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hellos, which I am completely against and I think many of our members are against, where local authorities and independents are offering sums of money for carers to transfer across. Ethically, I think that is wrong, because we only want foster carers who want to foster for the right reasons, not monetary reasons. That is really important. I think golden hellos should be banned completely; they should not be allowed to be part of the sector. We absolutely detest it and think it is totally wrong.

Andrew Ireland: There is some potential merit in a national campaign, although I would agree with much of what has been said, because everything needs to be well co-ordinated with the local response and to work together. But I do think it would have a value in opening people's eyes to the potential that foster caring could be for them and to demythologise a bit.

Expectations management is hugely important here. There are people coming in and out of the system all of the time, many of our foster carers are well into retirement age—I am sure that applies to many other agencies as well—and the nature of the young people coming into the care system is changing as well. There are many more who are older when they come in and have many clear behavioural, mental health-related issues and autism spectrum disorder-related issues and can be extremely challenging.

There is a need to work effectively with other agencies and to make sure that we have the right expectations of schools and so on—that these children are in school. All these things are really important in getting people psychologically lined up and their expectations right. And I do think a national campaign could have a role in that, well backed up and followed on by the response that people can get locally: good information at a local level and making the process of that initial contact and getting a response as easy, straightforward and multimedia as possible—I entirely take Andy's point around that. That is a way in which the Government could assist what is a growing problem.

Harvey Gallagher: If it is not too obvious, you need to recruit the foster carers for the children who need foster carers, so a recruitment campaign will only work if that is what it does. There is no point in recruiting a foster carer and going through all the application procedure, with the agencies approving them, and then they sit there and there is not a child who they are right for. Because it is a child-led service, they have to meet the child's needs. The system now has a lot of vacancies in it—maybe 15,000 across the country. They are not all real vacancies, in a sense, because you are not, unless there is a really good reason to, going to place a child from Plymouth in Newcastle. That does happen now and again, but on the whole you will try to avoid things like that.

You need a certain level of vacancy within the system to have a choice. Lots of local authorities will tell you that they feel they have no choice at all. So perhaps, oddly enough, we don't have enough vacancies in one sense. But of course, the vacancy level is not paid for. In terms of making the whole system economically effective, the incentive is to try to fill it up,



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but by filling it up you give yourself less choice about where to place a child.

One thing that could really make a difference is placing children more locally. One of the problems we have—we are talking to three or four local authorities about this—is that the pool of foster carers in any one given local authority's area probably includes lots of children from lots of other local authorities, placed with IFP carers in their borough. By and large, that is not about the children's needs; it is about the way we have chosen to organise and administer the system.

If local authorities worked with their local independent providers to be much more on top of the question of, "Who are your foster carers locally? Over time, can we place our children with your foster carers who live in our borough?" that would be a much better and more effective use of the system.

Chair: We are going to move on to the next question.

Q104 **Marion Fellows:** It has been recognised—you have all said this—that there is a need for more carers of young people who have specialist or more challenging needs. What can be done to meet that need?

Andy Elvin: Iain said it: training and support. If you have the right potential foster carers coming through, give them the right set of training that meets their need to look after the child and keep supporting the placement—the 24/7 thing is vital. They need to know someone is there with them. Foster carers can withstand an awful lot if you hold them and have a framework around them.

Andrew Ireland: I would add openness to respite and all agencies playing their part, so that there is good access to CAMHS, children are in schools and normal family life can continue.

Q105 **Michelle Donelan:** We will have to steam through these questions. How are local authorities coping with the reductions in budgets? In your opinion, is that going to have an adverse effect on foster carers and the children in the care system?

Andy Elvin: Yes, it is, and it already has. We have seen some local authorities look to cut foster carers' fees and allowances because they felt they had to. Some of them backed off when they realised they were going to lose foster carers to independent agencies or lose them altogether. There is no doubt that, however much you try to ring-fence and protect children's services, the continual cutting of budgets at a time when you have a rise in care applications and a rise in children coming into care—the two don't match. You cannot do more with less in this situation; you will end up doing less. It is inevitable.

Q106 **Michelle Donelan:** Do you all agree?

Andrew Ireland: The squeeze is absolutely real. Most local authorities will put a high priority on this area of activity at the expense of others, inevitably. None the less, it is being felt. Things are not all pushing in the



right direction to assist. There are other financial pressures that are creating this. Most local authorities have managed to hold the position really well but not do all the things they would want to do, and feel they might need to do, to address the growing level of need and some of the ancillary things we have been discussing.

Iain Anderson: As an outsider looking in and seeing the changes that have taken place over the past five or six years, there is a very clear sense that the pressure local authorities are under now is tremendous. We are seeing a number of foster carers leave. We are seeing a number of staff being made redundant in local authorities, at senior and director level, and authorities cutting back on resource, staffing costs and other areas to try to reduce the budget.

All that has a massive knock-on impact, with a growing number of children coming into the system. Managing that budget within the envelope you have been given must be very, very difficult for them. I don't envy them. I can see that it has put a lot of pressure on local authorities, which adds more pressure into the whole system in terms of care for young people.

Q107 Michelle Donelan: A report by the Fostering Network said that 40% of foster carers feel that their costs do not even cover their expenses. It was then worked out that, given that it is a 24-hour-a-day job, people are really paid just £1 an hour, so the pay is very low even to afford to keep a child. How is the interaction and communication between providers and carers? How is that all fed back? Do you think there is a strong enough link, so that those concerns can be echoed?

Iain Anderson: I am not going to argue with the figures that have been quoted, because they are what they are, but I would say that the foster carers that I have experience of—we have 3,300 within our company—want to foster not for monetary reasons, but because they want to look after young people.

Q108 Michelle Donelan: But there is a difference between doing it for financial gain and doing it and making a loss.

Iain Anderson: I totally agree. I think it is important to try to make sure that foster carers feel valued by ensuring that the allowance they are given by whoever—whichever agency or local authority—covers the costs that you have outlined in order for the young person to be in a safe home and a loving, caring environment. Let us not forget that the allowance is split between money for the young person and money for the foster carer looking after those young people.

It is a big challenge—there is no doubt about it—and the numbers that have been quoted can fluctuate in the independent sector. Foster carers may get paid more and it is entirely up to each member of a CSDG to decide what allowance they want to give foster carers. The knock-on impact of that is complexity. Foster carers who have a really complex young person might have to have a higher allowance because of the complexities and challenges that that brings.



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You made the point that it is a 24/7 job or role—whatever you want to call it, it is a 24/7 commitment to that young person. That is a lot to ask people to do, which is why it is important to look at how we can reward people with appropriate respite arrangements, so that they can have a break. It is a 52-week-a-year commitment—a total commitment—for whatever length of term that young person is with them.

Q109 Michelle Donelan: Can you tell us a bit more about how the money is split between carers and the young person? That question is for anybody—anybody other than Iain.

Andy Elvin: It depends on your fees and allowances, but essentially all the money goes towards the young person in the end because it is spent on household expenses.

Q110 Michelle Donelan: But it is meant to be—we haven't got proof that it is, but it is meant to be.

Andy Elvin: It is meant to be split—some is for clothing, some for heating and so on—but as a foster carer, you get an amount of money.

Q111 Michelle Donelan: Just for my personal knowledge, Iain said that a proportion is given directly to the child, but I thought—

Andy Elvin: Not given directly to the child—

Q112 Michelle Donelan: So what do you mean by that?

Iain Anderson: A portion goes towards the child in care—for example, for health and wellbeing, toiletries and pocket money. There is a specific breakdown of what the young person gets.

Q113 Michelle Donelan: And then the carer has to allocate that money according to the breakdown.

Iain Anderson: Correct.

Q114 Michelle Donelan: Is that checked or regulated, or is it based on trust?

Andy Elvin: Partly it is based on trust, but it is overseen through the placing social worker, through the independent reviewing officer service, through reviews and through what the child is getting in terms of new clothes, the requisite health care and, if you like, the extracurricular, horizon-broadening activities.

Q115 Michelle Donelan: To make sure that they are not disadvantaged.

Andy Elvin: Precisely.

Q116 Michelle Donelan: What percentage is that normally?

Andy Elvin: It is difficult. It is like your own household income—you probably do not split it up in that way. If you are looking after a child, the money you are getting is going towards the running of the household.

Q117 Michelle Donelan: But you said it already is split up.



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Andy Elvin: As you receive it, there is an allowance for each individual bit.

Q118 **Michelle Donelan:** I was asking what the specific allowance is that is not allocated—that just goes to the carer. How much is the unallocated portion that they just have the freedom to decide how to spend?

Andy Elvin: That can vary, but it can be about a third of all the money that is going on—a quarter to a third.

Q119 **Michelle Donelan:** So a third is free for them to choose and the rest is directed.

Andy Elvin: Yes. Essentially, that is paying for their time, for want of a better word, because they are self-employed.

Q120 **Michelle Donelan:** We have heard a lot in evidence about them feeling a lack of respect. There are a great deal of problems with that in terms of morale, recruitment and retention. If you are stipulating every line of the money they are getting, do you think that adds to those problems?

Andy Elvin: I am not sure that how they receive the money would make a difference. The overall package of money should be higher generally. I have no qualms about that—it should be—but that is delineated from the money that comes down to local authorities.

The other thing about being respected is a different issue, and it is a problem. Every foster carer is the expert on the child that they are looking after; apart from the child themselves, and probably the birth family, they know more about the child than anyone else. They are often excluded from important meetings about the child. Family courts very rarely hear from the foster carer—the one person who knows more than anyone else whether the outcome or proposed care plan for the child is likely to fly or not is not spoken to.

We need to start seeing foster carers as the experts on their child, and for every major decision and in every major meeting, you should go through them. In the same way that schools or hospitals would never bypass the birth parents of a child, sometimes they bypass the foster carers. That happens too frequently, and it should not. That is the respect bit, I think.

Q121 **Michelle Donelan:** We have received a lot of evidence around professionalisation of carers. Are you saying it should be more like parentisation, rather than professionalisation?

Andy Elvin: Precisely. Professionalisation is difficult; a lot of foster carers would not view themselves as professionals and would rather baulk at that word. They see themselves as, along with the parents, the expert on the child they are looking after. That is the respect they should be given. We should be trying to treat them, so far as possible, as if they were general population families. We should accord the same respect to foster parents as we would to parents. If we can get to that, I think some of the respect and feeling involved parts would begin to be felt more keenly by foster carers.



Q122 **Michelle Donelan:** Quickly, because I think we are running out of time: do the rest of the panel agree, or are you keener on professionalisation?

Iain Anderson: I would disagree with Andy on the point of professionalisation. I can only talk from my own experience. I was at a foster carer forum yesterday, I would say that the majority of the foster carers that I have met—probably around 1,800 in my association with our organisation—would see themselves as professionals. They don't see themselves as being professionals in terms of having a full-time employment role. They do it because they want to make a difference to young people, they see it as vocational and they want to do it.

Many foster carers in the system now will have some form of income—or one of them will if it is a household with two carers—so will not have to rely purely on the allowance they get from fostering. Others will do that, because that is their choice and they can afford to, based on how they have done in their previous career.

The other point I would like to come back on is the allowance for young people. It will be a recommendation, not a stipulation. The stipulations are done by each individual contract, so whatever contract you sign up to, there will be a different recommendation as to what that young person should get. Each independent agency and each local authority can then decide on what allowance the carer should get based on the need of that young person. It is not one glove fits all; it is very different.

Andrew Ireland: In that discussion about professionalisation—I support much of what my colleagues have said—we cannot afford to lose the essence of what fostering and family placement is all about and what that brings to the child. You can overdo it, in terms of breaking down what income is for and so on.

I entirely agree with Andy about the issue of value, both from the agency, which demonstrates its value by providing a number of things that we have talked about and giving that level of support, and also the wider system and the wider community. We talk a lot about the corporate parenting responsibilities of all manner of people above and beyond a social care agency. That commitment to the child will inevitably need to involve valuing the foster carer, who is the key individual for many of those children at that point. I think there is work for us all to do around increasing and making more obvious the value we place on foster carers.

Chair: I thank the panel for answering our questions; this has been very illuminating. Let us switch over to panel two, because we are a tad pressed for time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Ruth Allen, Jon Fayle, Rachel Harrison, Dave Hill and Councillor Richard Watts.



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Chair: Good morning, and welcome to the new panel; it is good to see you all here. You know the purpose of the inquiry: it is basically to examine the fostering system to see how it might be improved, recalibrated or whatever. Starting with Richard, would you like to first say who you are and the organisation that you represent?

Councillor Richard Watts: Thank you. I am Councillor Richard Watts. I am chair of the children and young people board at the LGA.

Jon Fayle: Hello. I am Jon Fayle. I am a working independent reviewing officer, and I am vice-chair of the National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers. I am also, as it happens, the chair of trustees of TACT, but I am here with my IRO hat on.

Dave Hill: Good morning. I am Dave Hill. I am the president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. When I am not doing that, I am the director of children's services at Essex County Council.

Dr Ruth Allen: Hello. I am the chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers.

Rachel Harrison: Hi. I am Rachel Harrison from the GMB trade union, representing foster carers across the country, nationwide.

Q123 **Chair:** Great. Thank you very much. There are lots of chiefs of different organisations among you, which is good. The question that arises is: do we need a specific group of people representing foster carers?

Councillor Richard Watts: Clearly, there are major strains in the foster care system. The voice of foster carers in helping find a way through some of those would be very welcome. There are a number of organisations, some of which are on this panel, that do a pretty good job of representing the needs of foster carers. It would be a pretty daft local authority or fostering agency that did not listen very carefully to their foster carers, because there is a pretty competitive market out there, and people would just leave if they did not listen. I do think, however, that as we try to negotiate the challenges of the system, hearing that foster carers' voice is pretty critical.

Q124 **Chair:** Jon, would a national register or a college for foster carers help?

Jon Fayle: Yes, I think it would. I think it would be very helpful for a national register to be able to help foster carers move geographically, if they happen to move—at the moment, they need to be reassessed from the beginning—or between agencies or local authorities. I think that would be helpful, but I agree that some kind of organisation that represented foster carers in a more formal way to Government, local government and others would be a helpful development.

I am interested in the development of the trade union and how that might address that need. I would like to talk at some stage—tell me if it is not the right time to do it—about the extent to which independent reviewing officers can help represent the interests of foster carers.

Chair: I'm sure we will slot that in.

Jon Faye: Okay; I'll come back to that.

Q125 **Chair:** Dave, what are your thoughts about the idea of a register, college or some other structure?

Dave Hill: I've got no strong views either way. I was thinking as colleagues were talking that we need to work out what we are trying to achieve. What is the problem that we are trying to answer? What is the exam question? I think the exam question is that we continue to have too many foster carers who are not listened to and who feel that their voice is not heard. I think, as Richard has said, that that gives us all sorts of issues about recruiting and retaining good foster carers.

I suppose this slightly links to Jon's comments, but I spend half my working life listening to the point that we do not listen to children and young people enough, either. There is an interrelationship between whether foster carers are heard and whether our children are heard. There might be a relationship between those two things. So if there is a structural solution—a register, a body, a college or whatever it might be—we would have to be very thoughtful about what we were trying to achieve with that solution.

Q126 **Chair:** Ruth, your area of expertise also involves thinking about colleges—you were involved with a college—and so on. What do you think about this question?

Dr Ruth Allen: I think that the fragmentation of the delivery of fostering services probably speaks increasingly to the importance of there being clarity about where the collective voice is coming from. Obviously, the trade union representation is absolutely crucial to foster carers; there is no doubt about that. The other side of it, which obviously overlaps but is perhaps a bit different, is what the learning and development needs are of foster carers.

All the things that I have been reading in preparing for this and hearing other evidence show that there is a big gap in the learning and development opportunities for foster carers. One of the other crucial things is that some collective recognition, whatever we might call it, would provide a way for foster carers and professionals to learn together and to share skills, because it is also coming through quite strongly that there is a kind of division, in terms of foster carers not being able to share their expertise in all the forums where they could be—the courts or wherever. But there is also a division in terms of the skills that professionals have—health, social work and social care—and the skills that foster carers might need. There is a huge overlap that could be addressed.

Q127 **Chair:** Rachel, who exactly do you interface with most often in your work?

Rachel Harrison: With regard to foster carers?

Chair: Yes.



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Rachel Harrison: The foster carers that we represent are predominantly local authority foster carers. We do have some from private agencies, but the majority of ours at this stage are local authority foster carers.

On the question about whether there is call for a national register, I think a national register is crucial. It is addressed and recognised that there is a shortage of foster carers and an inability to place children in the correct placements—

Q128 **Chair:** You are emphasising a register rather than a college or other structure. Is that deliberate?

Rachel Harrison: Yes—a national register, like a national database of foster carers. At the minute, foster carers are limited to one agency or to one local authority that they can foster for. A national register would open that up completely. It would help us address where the shortages are; give foster carers and fostering providers the freedom to see where the vacancies are and where they can best match the children; and allow authorities in local areas to work better together to meet the needs of the children. I think it would just make the whole fostering system a lot more efficient.

Q129 **Chair:** Okay. Jon, you are the most emphatic, I think, about having some sort of structure. How do you think it would work, and what would it look like?

Jon Faye: Well, I would echo strongly what we have just heard about the register. Having a national, coherent overview of the whole foster care workforce would be terribly helpful, but I also think some sort of representative body, like a college or a trade union, that was independent of Government and could challenge Government, is greatly needed. I don't have any well developed ideas about how that might be structured or put in place, but I feel strongly that it would be very helpful.

Q130 **Chair:** Richard, do you have any thoughts on this?

Councillor Richard Watts: Yes. I can see the arguments for a register, although I think that it would have to be quite carefully done. Often, the last thing that's needed in relation to children's social care issues is a top-down, national solution to them, because it tends to be time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic, but things to facilitate local sharing of knowledge about where vacancies may exist, particularly for very specialist placements, may be helpful.

My worry about the college, in so far as it goes, is that it plays very much into the question of professionalisation. We have national colleges for professions. It is unclear to me how foster carers at the moment would respond to being classed as a profession rather than, as is often the case, people seeing themselves as good people trying to do very good work in their community.

Q131 **Chair:** The question of professionalisation, as you put it, is my next question. It is hard to see how you could capture everybody who is a foster carer as a professional, because of course this is about family life



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first and foremost, isn't it? So how would we square that circle?

Dave Hill: Could I have a go at decoding that? I think we do ourselves a disservice in getting caught in this issue that in order to have influence and be important in front of the court or influential in a child's review, you have to be a professional.

Those of us who have sat in professionals' meetings all our careers know that in those rooms, there are professionals and there are professionals. I do not think the answer, in a crude sense, is to say, "Call someone a professional. If you call them a professional, they will be listened to, ergo everything will be fine." I simply do not buy that. People on the first panel talked about what I would broadly call vocational commitment to being a foster carer.

Possibly controversially, I think nurses see themselves as having a vocation, but they also see themselves as professionals. I think social workers often think that their job is a vocation as well as a profession. If we simply said, "We'll professionalise the foster care workforce, ergo everything will be fine," I think we would be misleading ourselves.

I wrote as the president of ADCS to every children in care council in the country about a year ago and asked them for their comments about the experience of being in care, and I was overwhelmed by the response. I can make that available to you if you would like to see it. I would say that three quarters of all the comments that came back were about the influence that the foster carers had had on the improvement in those children's lives.

Q132 **Chair:** Ruth, I think you want to say something.

Dr Ruth Allen: Yes. I want to echo in some ways what Dave said. When you talk about the professionalisation of anything, you actually mean very different things—each profession has a different culture, and it has arrived at that point through a whole different set of routes.

My thought would be: what is it that foster carers are saying would help them? In the same way that we ask, "What do children say they want?" we should ask, "What do foster carers say would be a helpful way of having a collective voice? What do they think would give them greater visibility when they need it?"

Is the answer professionalisation? I am sure there are a lot of different views among foster carers, but what are the different ways in which foster carers are coming together at the moment to be heard, and could those be supported to augment that voice so there is greater collectively? Could we let it emerge in that way and support that grassroots process? That would also enable the differences that you might need in representation in different parts of the country and so forth, because you might get regional groupings. So I think it would be helpful for this to be much more kind of grassroots and generative out of what foster carers are saying.

Q133 **Michelle Donelan:** The foster care system relies on relationships and



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interactions between several different organisations and individuals. Do you believe that these relationships are as strong as they should and could be? How would you improve them?

Rachel Harrison: I think it links in with the professionalisation that we have just been discussing. There are some good relationships. We have areas where it is working, and it all comes down to foster carers being listened to and the lines of communication being there. Whether people agree on whether they should be called a profession or not, foster carers are professionals. Look at the skills and training that they are expected to participate in and all their years of experience. They are already professionals. s

The way to strengthen the relationships across the whole fostering teams in the public sector is—they now deserve the respect and the recognition for the job that they are already doing. It comes down to support, and that varies vastly from area to area. We have a lot of work to do change the culture around the perception of what a foster carer does and what value they bring to the child. They are looking after the most vulnerable children in society and they are reforming their lives. They are sending them out into society to have a decent life. I do not think it is given the recognition it deserves at all.

I am supported here today by some of our foster carers. All they ask for is to be treated as an equal part of the fostering team. They want to be listened to. They don't want to be excluded from meetings. They know what is best for the children, and it is important that that is respected. Just to finish up on that, we are seeing that local authorities are facing cuts, which is putting more of a strain on relationships.

So, there is some work to be done, but we have got places where it is working. One of our authorities, in Leeds, have got fantastic open communications, meet regularly with the foster carers, listen to what they have to say, and any changes are done through consultation and negotiation. That is all that foster carers are asking for.

Q134 **Michelle Donelan:** Okay. Anybody else?

Jon Fayle: To go back to the professional thing, I think the argument, "Are they professionals or not?" is semantic and perhaps not the crux of the issue. It seems to me that we are looking for from our foster carers is to treat the children they care for as members of their own family—the way we would fight for our own children, with passion and determination through thick and thin, is something I personally value greatly when foster carers display it.

We also expect them to be cool, analytic, detached, dispassionate and able to analyse problems and so on. How do you square or balance those conflicting needs? That is an impossible question. For me, the passion of fighting for the welfare of the child you are responsible for through thick and thin is something I value greatly. They are the expert on the child and should of course be listened to very carefully.



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Dave Hill: Children that are in our public care are the most important thing we should be concerned with. Every local authority worries about roads and housing and everything else. In my view, the services we offer to this group of children who we are parenting, as their parents, is the most critical thing we do as local authorities. If you buy that argument, and I cannot see why anybody wouldn't, the foster carers we support are therefore the most important people we have to interface with. I know there are some carers here and I have to declare I have also been a foster carer, so I have been on the other side of the situation as well.

In Essex we have got unbelievably good foster carers. They are pretty difficult and stroppy, and I like it because the kids they are looking after need difficult, stroppy people to stand on their behalf, argue their case, advocate for them and sometimes say to power, "You're doing the wrong thing. You're not listening to the child." They do not always need to do that for the child because sometimes, frankly, the children and young people can do it for themselves. I think we have got great foster carers in this country. The truth of the matter is that we need more, and the question for me is how we grow the numbers of these incredible foster carers that we need.

Q135 **Michelle Donelan:** Both of you mentioned that they have to be in a position to fight and to want to stand up for their child, but what if they are excluded from meetings and feel like they have not got the level of respect? A lot of the things we have looked at show that, and we mentioned it in the panel before. Terms like "glorified baby-sitter" have been referenced by carers. In my mind, that is unacceptable; it does not put them in that position and it limits their empowerment to make decisions on behalf of the child. Do you feel that there is a lack of respect?

Dave Hill: Well, I think it is circular. When you have a fantastic foster carer in a meeting who is arguing very strongly that everybody is going to do the wrong thing by the child or young person, being passionate, driven and using your relationship with the child as the most important thing is sometimes quite difficult to square with being professional. Sometimes when you are in that situation you have to say and do things that are quite hard for other people to hear. I think there is a bit of a circular thing going on here.

You cannot not have foster carers in the room because they are, as many people have already said, the people who know the children and young people better than anyone else. The children and young people tell us that they are the most important people in the system and if that is true, they absolutely have to be in the room.

I agree about the professionalism. I have already made this point, but to remake it, I think the issue is how we value our foster carers and not whether we put a label of "professional" on them and think that it will all neatly fall into place—I do not think it will.

Q136 **Michelle Donelan:** So in your opinion the issue is the respect and value



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that is placed on foster carers.

Dave Hill: Yes.

Q137 **Michelle Donelan:** Richard, you wanted to answer.

Councillor Richard Watts: The direct answer to your question is that the national picture is mixed. The Fostering Network survey showed that two thirds of foster carers say they receive good quality support and help from their local authority. That is not enough—it clearly should be everyone.

Clearly, though, in a system which is experiencing enormous increases in demand at the same time as very significant cuts to its budget that becomes harder. I think the evidence is actually local authorities have enormously prioritised protecting children's services over almost every other element of what it is they do in the light of the spending reductions they face. So you are better off in children's services than you are if you are a librarian, say. You cannot get away from the fact there is both significant growing demand and significant cuts to funding that make that job harder.

Dr Ruth Allen: I suppose foster carers are doing a broad range of types of caring roles with children with all sorts of different kinds of needs, and I guess the degree of professional knowledge, if you like, or the knowledge that shades into professional, depends on the type of fostering and the types of placements that the foster carer has. Just picking up on a third of foster carers saying they don't get enough support, I don't know whether that falls to those who are looking after children with particularly higher levels of complex need.

You were asking about relationships with services, and one of the things that I think is very interesting to explore is the mental health services for children and the mental health knowledge that is available to foster carers—induction into both the system and the ideas and skills in relation to the mental health of children; and the inadequacy of children's mental health services and, often, what has been—I think maybe there are shifts on this—the inadequacy of the understanding of mental health issues among children's social workers, because there has not been enough training. So I think there is something around that whole theme—that is for teenagers and children coming into care later, and the particular kinds of mental health needs we see in young people that really need to be understood, and the support needs and skill needs of foster carers in that context.

Q138 **Michelle Donelan:** Rachel, you mentioned before examples of good practice in the interaction, so I take it that there are different mechanisms in different areas up and down the country, for foster carers to be listened to. Do you think that there needs to be more work, then, to emphasise those best practices, from learning from one another within the country?

Rachel Harrison: Yes, definitely. We have already started doing it, or assisting our foster carers in doing it. We have helped, or are currently in



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the process of helping them, with a forum for foster carers. What that is assisting them to do is to network with each other; so they regularly meet up with each other and share best practice ideas: "This is how we have resolved this issue in our authority; this is what we have done." That is then enabling those foster carers to take that back to their authorities and put suggestions on the table.

You have got some authorities that are more than willing to sit down with the foster carers and listen to them, and others that need a bit more coaxing and encouraging; but I think if we can share the best practice ideas and show what is working somewhere, and working well—ultimately where you have got happy foster carers they will stay, and it is a retention issue we have got, not just a recruitment issue. So foster carers will stay; and your best recruitment tool for new foster carers is existing ones, so your happy foster carers will then go out and encourage others to come on board as well. So I think it is fundamental that we are sharing those things that are working.

Q139 Michelle Donelan: So would you all agree it needs to be joined up a bit better nationally, rather than patchy in different areas?

Councillor Richard Watts: I always caution against thinking there is a single model that can be applied that works in a small inner city borough, like minister, and in a big county. I think it would be more effective to do it as Rachel suggested—about sharing best practice and encouraging networks of professionals, of service directors, and that kind of thing, rather than having a single model of how local authorities should do it.

Dave Hill: But where it works well, it works well locally. There is inconsistency. As Richard, I think, said earlier, in response to the previous question, having a "from high" national system does not work. It never works with anything, in my view. What works well is the commitment of the local area to really communicate with the foster carers. I think we could do better at making those points, but what we don't want to do is lift it out of the localities and say it is a big national system, because our experience is that that is not the right way.

Q140 Chair: That is not inconsistent, is it, with a national register?

Dave Hill: No, I don't think it is, except that I wondered whether what was being said earlier was you have a national register of foster carers and anybody could then access them. That, it seems to me, would open up a whole load of issues, wouldn't it, about their training and support, and who was placing who with them, and so on and so forth. It seems to me that might need a bit of thinking through; but a national register that told you how many, and how long have they fostered for, and what kinds of people are they, and how could that allow you to think about how you could get more great people, would have real merit, of course.

Michelle Donelan: I think Rachel wanted to come in on that.

Rachel Harrison: I want to put a bit of clarity on that. The national register is about allowing foster carers to work between authorities,



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agencies or whatever it is. It is about meeting the needs of the child. What we are currently facing, with local authorities having different budgets and there being a shortage of foster carers in some areas, is placements being made incorrectly. Children are being placed with foster carers that are not necessarily right for them, which ultimately leads to breakdown in placements. That certainly does not benefit the foster carers—more importantly, it in no way benefits the children.

A national register to allow better matching of placements is what we are campaigning for and, in line with that, to bring it back to the best practice in one area. It is national standards we are looking for. Inconsistencies at the minute between areas come down to a monetary issue. What one child deserves—it should all be equal. It should not come down to what one local authority can afford to provide; it should be fair and equal right across the country.

Chair: I think Dave is going to contest that.

Dave Hill: I am so implacably opposed to that. That seems to me a world gone crazy. What works is placing children in your local area. We want that for all of our children. When you don't do that, it raises a whole set of issues about missing children, child sexual exploitation and so on. What works well is a good local authority or a good private agency supporting foster carers locally. The idea that there might be a national register, which I am glad you clarified, against which anybody could place a child—I just cannot see in a million years how that would work.

Chair: Okay. Thanks, Dave. Ruth, quickly.

Dr Ruth Allen: Briefly to support that, it is about developing services locally and maintaining local networks that also support local contact with birth parents or wider family, where that is relevant.

Q141 **Chair:** I would like to hear from Jon on the subject of independent review officers, given the exchange we have just had.

Jon Faye: As I am sure you all know, the job of the independent review officer is to scrutinise the care plan of the local authority for every child on a statutory basis; in particular, to listen strongly to the voice of the child and what they think; and, if necessary, to challenge the local authority if they feel they are not doing the right thing for the child.

One of the difficulties about the role is that we are employed by local authorities, so there is a tension about biting the hand that feeds us. But that is not what this Committee is about. It seems to me we have a very critical role in supporting and collaborating with foster carers, particularly when there is disagreement or dispute between the local authority and the carers and perhaps the IRO.

Q142 **Chair:** Are you happy to rest on the assumption in Dave's observation that good local authorities or good independent organisations are best placed?



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Jon Fayle: Of course I am happy to rest on the proposition that we want to find local solutions for children. We don't want to send them up to the other end of the country because we think that is the best match. I don't see that local solutions are necessarily inconsistent with saying we also want to have national standards that apply to everyone and to bring more consistency to the process. Those things are not contradictory.

Q143 **Marion Fellows:** It has been recommended to the Committee that there needs to be a nationally accredited and standardised training and development programme for foster carers, developed in collaboration with others in the sector. What do you all think?

Dave Hill: I think it sounds like a jolly good idea. There are some really good things going on around the country; we know that. We are back to the inconsistency point. If there were a national programme that allowed foster carers to have expectations about training—it is both training and support—that sounds like a jolly good idea.

Q144 **Marion Fellows:** Would it need to be accredited?

Dave Hill: Of course.

Councillor Richard Watts: I agree. Done with a light touch nationally, I think it has a lot going for it. What I would always caution against, as I have said about three times already, is big, national, top-down schemes that become very expensive and quite bureaucratic quite quickly. These things can be done with a light touch; that would work quite well.

Jon Fayle: I strongly agree with Richard. I think there is a lot of merit to the idea, but if it becomes a strangulating, over-bureaucratic thing that is driven from the top, it could do more harm than good. In principle I think it is a good idea.

Dr Ruth Allen: I think foster carers are often invisible in local, inter-disciplinary training plans. Things that clarify the importance of that as part of the local workforce in the wider sense—a strategy that really supported that, which could then be locally delivered—is very important.

A wider point I want to make is that, from the view of our association, foster carers absolutely need to have a higher profile as a core part of society's response to the needs of children—and to the needs of birth parents, who may struggle to care at a point in time.

The importance of fostering as part of the support to birth parents, who may in the long term be able to either continue to parent or to have viable contact with their children, is crucial. That narrative is lost. We are doing things to raise the profile—including the visibility—of foster carers in local areas, helping them learn together and share skills, sharing their knowledge with others and receiving that from others.

Rachel Harrison: I think there should be national training. It is fundamental that foster carers play a direct part in deciding what sort of training it is that they need; they can identify their training needs, and



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that can be rolled out. The reason I think it is important that it takes on a national structure is that, as we are seeing now, local authority cuts are being made and the training being offered is what councils can afford to put on.

As their union, we are constantly being approached by foster carers who say that they can't get on this training course. We have been assisting foster carers in accessing training that they have not been able to get through their authorities. I think nationalised training would make the access to that fair right across the country.

Q145 Marion Fellows: Does there need to be a greater emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in the training of social workers and other individuals? We have already touched on that when discussing delivering care for foster children.

Dr Ruth Allen: Yes, I think, obviously, we want to keep training social workers better and better in all aspects. We want to make sure that social workers who are working in children's services are receiving the right kind of support. We feel that, as I said, the narrative and some of the practices promoted around giving more primacy to adoption routes, rather than fostering routes, maybe needs to shift. Social workers need to be properly skilled so that they can make absolutely the right choices around the types of permanence or care during the life course of the child in relation to that.

I think there is something about ensuring that social workers are trained to include foster carers. It is not just about training; it is about conditions of working and the time that social workers have, both in terms of making initial placement decisions and ensuring that follow-up support is there.

The IRO service is crucial to ensuring there is national consistency in that follow up for the placing social worker as well. They need the time, the ongoing CPD and the ongoing training to really understand, through their relationship with the foster carer as well as the child, what is happening in terms of the quality and nature of that care. Yes, it is training, but it is also about the conditions of work and supervision and so forth.

Marion Fellows: Does anyone else have anything to say on that?

Chair: Are you finished? Lilian, you are going to talk about the Children and Social Work Bill, but you are also concerned about authorities versus registers. I would like to probe that, too.

Lilian Greenwood: I want to come back on a question we were dealing with previously, which was about the issue of a national register versus developing that relationship with your own local authority or provider. I can imagine a situation in which, perhaps, Nottingham City Council cannot find a suitable placement but, perhaps, Nottinghamshire County Council or Derbyshire County Council have someone who would fit it perfectly. Does that happen through collaboration between local authorities, or is there another way in which that can happen, particularly



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when lots of local authorities are working in a tight geographic area?

Councillor Richard Watts: A lot of those regional or sub-regional networks already exist. As leader of a north London borough, we work with all the other north London boroughs, particularly around those specialist foster placements.

The point I want to make strongly through all of this is that all the evidence from the authorities who have come unstuck on their Ofsted and a whole range of other academic evidence suggests that the success of the broader children's social care system—with fostering as a critical part of that—is wholly based on the strength of the local work on the ground. Actually, top-down national intervention into failing authorities slows improvement down. Instead, actually the only thing that has been shown to work so far in authorities that are struggling is a concerted local effort to push up standards. In that sense, the local system is all that matters in the quality of children's lives.

A lot can be done through those networks. Most local authorities should be expected to provide, for want of a better word—forgive me for being crude—mainstream placements. It is for where there are specialist placements that people are going to have to do some of that looking about.

Dave Hill: I think the position is that every local authority is required to produce something called a sufficiency statement for their placements. I can tell you now that if you were to take every one of the 152 in the country, what people are looking for is not available because there are not enough foster carers. That position will have been severely tested during October, November and December, when we had lots of children arriving from the Calais camps. There was a great response from foster carers up and down the country to that group of children's needs, but that will have placed even more pressure on the system in terms of available placements.

The best guess: the National Fostering Agency think we are about 7,500 foster carers short up and down the country. That will vary from region to region. I happen to know Nottingham city and Nottinghamshire and the directors there very well, and I know that they have very good local collaborative arrangements. Having said that, you would think it a bit odd— wouldn't you?—if Nottingham city were looking for a placement in Essex or Essex was looking for a placement in Nottingham city. That is where my worry falls about the national register, because actually most children are best off placed very local to their home.

Q146 **Lilian Greenwood:** It was just whether there was the option for those very close geographic links—

Dave Hill: Yes, as Richard said, I think mostly they are quite solid already.

Q147 **Lilian Greenwood:** Coming on to the Children and Social Work Bill, the Fostering Network has been a critic of some of the clauses in the Bill that



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pertain to fostering. At our last session, we heard from Professor Harriet Ward, who described the issues around delegation as dangerous. Dave, you recently came out in support of the exemption clause, so do you see a way for the Government to reconcile their wishes to enable innovation, while maintaining children's rights and levels of protection? Help us understand.

Dave Hill: I thought I was so careful in my comments. Let me just clarify the position. I articulated ADCS's position, as you said, in a number of different places. It is interesting that, at the moment I did it, I got tweeted as being both in support and against. Let's clarify the situation. We understand and support the notion that being able to innovate is a really important thing. We can see good examples of innovation around the country that have really worked and led to new ways to practise. We support that.

Do we support innovation at any cost without proper evaluation of whether it is making a difference, without being very clear at the outset about what it is you are seeking to resolve or sort out or improve? No, we do not. I thought I was very careful to be qualified in my support, really.

I think we do see the possibility of innovation being a helpful thing. Having said that, we completely and utterly understand the constitutional position if you took it out of the Children Bill, with Ministers having the authority to alter—albeit for a limited period of time—primary legislation. We completely understand why that is difficult for people, too. We have tried to strike—I hope—a sensible balance between the one and the other.

Q148 Lilian Greenwood: So there is already that innovation out there that operates inside the current legislation. Is granting freedom from that legislation necessary? If so, why?

Dave Hill: Yes. Let me give you a concrete example—that might be the best way to illustrate it. There has been a deal of discussion up and down a number of local authorities about the issue of particularly teenagers who have got into real difficulties in their own families and need a period of respite in order for there to be some work done with the family.

There has been a suggestion that instead of bringing those children into care, with all of the things that go with being in care, it might be better to allow for a short period of respite care, maybe up to a month, in order to allow that child to go back home—for the work to be done without considering that child formally to be in care. That is a really good example of something innovative that could help, because all of the baggage about being in care is not always helpful for teenagers and their families. It would need some freedoms to be applied in order for local authorities to be able to do that. That is a really good example of a freedom that could flow from that part of the Bill. I can also think—I won't go into them—of many "bad" freedoms that I would also want to defend, because they are primarily about protecting children.

Q149 Lilian Greenwood: That's really helpful. John, I think you wanted to come in.



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Jon Faye: Yes. NAIRO's position is much less nuanced than that. Of course we all agree with innovation and thinking of new and better ways of doing things, but we believe that that doesn't require tampering with primary or secondary legislation in an arbitrary way. We have heard no compelling examples—forgive me, Dave; I don't find that example terribly compelling—for tampering with primary or secondary legislation to promote innovation. We don't think we have heard many examples of that.

Certainly, from the IRO's point of view, many of the examples that have been put forward as to how we could make the IRO system more effective and efficient—perhaps if not every child had to have an IRO or perhaps if IROs weren't involved in all the meetings; we have heard examples like that—we think would be terribly dangerous. We think the constitutional position of Ministers being able to escape from the obligations of primary legislation, albeit for a short time with certain safeguards, is absolutely the wrong way to go. We strongly oppose these exemption proposals.

Q150 **Lilian Greenwood:** Ruth, you've obviously got a view.

Dr Ruth Allen: Yes. We are also not at all nuanced on this. We do oppose the opt-out clauses. It is not about opposing innovation. If there had been proposals for particular limited aspects that are probably knowable now—about reductions in particular bits of bureaucracy that are perhaps just not needed that are tying people up in knots—that had come forward concretely, they could have been considered. This is an open door to all sorts of potential changes.

Although there are these layers of safeguard that are being offered, it is still far too much of an open door to unpick, in a piecemeal way, legislation at both primary and secondary level, and it is not coming forward with cross-party, whole parliamentary support, which has been the tradition in developing children's protective social care legislation. So we are very concerned about it.

We need to have a different discussion about innovation, whether it is about fostering or something else. We need to be able to have that discussion about innovation also within a framework of good constitutional practice and excellent human rights. That is the kind of discussion we need to have about great innovation in children's services.

Lilian Greenwood: Does anybody else want to add anything quickly, or has that covered it off?

Chair: Okay. Last but not least, Suella.

Q151 **Suella Fernandes:** I want to look at the status of fostering. We have received evidence and it is widely recognised that fostering suffers from negative portrayal and lack of status; it is seen as a poor relation to adoption. How do you think we can change the narrative to make it more positive?



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Councillor Richard Watts: There are a couple of things. One of the welcome things about other elements of the Children and Social Work Bill is that it starts to move away from the narrative we have seen for a number of years, which is that adoption is the best form of permanence. That was always crude. A recognition that foster caring is the right option for many children in the system is welcome.

There are a lot of status issues. We were talking earlier about how we can ensure foster carers feel listened to in the system and how their contribution is valued. I did not get to answer the question earlier because other people have said stuff that I agreed with, but a lot of the stuff about how we can provide more of a voice for foster carers in the lives of the children they care for will make an enormous difference to the foster carers I speak to and how they perceive the trust that the professionals have in them.

It would be an enormously powerful signal to them that they were valued people who were the experts in the children they were looking after and whose views were taken really seriously. It is about the day-to-day operations of how case conferencing works and about professional practice among social workers and others. Training to allow the voice of foster carers in the system is enormously important to people's perceptions of work-life quality.

Dave Hill: We in ADCS would strongly advocate a much stronger national campaign on the recruitment of foster carers—not about how those people will need to be assessed and supported locally, but I do not think we are doing enough to talk about how foster caring is a great thing. We do not do enough about social work, either, or about the fantastic research that the Rees Centre did last year, which is that the longer you stay in foster care as a child, the better you do. Our narrative about care is that it is terrible and that your life is blighted if you are in care, but all the evidence suggests that the longer you stay in foster care, you do better at school and in terms of your life's outcomes.

Richard is right. We have obsessed about adoption for reasons that are entirely understandable, and adoption for many children is a great thing, so it is not an anti-adoption position. It is a more balanced position about saying foster care and what we broadly call kinship care—children who are able to live in their extended families—are all really good things, and there is not one golden bullet that ought to be applied to all children. I do not think we have done enough nationally to talk about what great foster carers do. I think that would produce the 7,500 that we need to come forward. We could do more of that.

Councillor Richard Watts: I have one example. I continue to think it is odd that the bedroom tax is applied to bedrooms that foster children live in. It is an incredibly strange signal to send through the system for something that will be financially peanuts for the Government.

Rachel Harrison: I agree with the issue around the emphasis on adoption. Adoption is great if that is what is best for the child. It brings it



back to what is best for the child. Fostering is sometimes the best route. There is a lot of work to be done around raising the status of the foster carers. That is why one of the things that we have been campaigning for is national standards and terms.

Some foster carers are entitled to paid annual leave. Some might get two weeks; some might get 28 days. There is the issue of access to respite. General standards and terms right across the country will do a lot to lift the status of foster carers, and that in turn will attract more foster carers into the profession. If you are seriously considering giving up paid employment to become a foster carer, you are not doing it for the money.

Foster carers are not in it for the money, and that is certainly not the reason they stay. They are there for the kids, but they need some sort of job security or income security if they are going to be able to continue doing it. They need to put a roof over the children's heads. They need to heat their homes and put food on the table. So I think a lot needs to be done around status, whether that is work status or an option for there to be some sort of work status, and national standards generally.

Dr Ruth Allen: Ensuring that foster carers are rewarded in a proper way consistently in different parts of the country is really important. I think that has been said. Fostering is such an important part of our national societal response to children who have needs and families who have needs where children need to be removed for at least a period of time.

As has already been said, it is very welcome to have a new focus on fostering. It is such an important part of what we do as a society, which is complementary to what we need to do if we need to follow an adoption route. That has been an over-dominant discourse. Other countries, of course, have much less non-consensual adoption than we do. A greater sense of how fostering or good kinship care can support continuity in a child's life, as well as providing permanence through the developmental stages, is crucial.

This is a slightly different point, but transition—when children come to the end, as they approach 18—has been raised several times. The role of a long-term foster family in continuing to support a young person from age 18, through Staying Put, and in making that work is crucial. Talking about and showing the benefit that it brings us as a society not to have children in care go off a cliff edge at age 18—all those things raise the profile of the crucial part fostering can play in a healthy society.

Jon Fayle: I want to make a slightly broader point about measures that can be taken to enhance the reputation of the care system generally. Something like 80% of children in care are in foster care, and it seems to me that there is a perception and a narrative from certain think-tanks and certain sections of the media that the care system is a disaster and you have to keep children out of it at all costs, because if you let them go in, their education will suffer and they will become criminals and ne'er-do-wells. Of course, nothing is further from the truth.



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Goodness knows, there are a lot of flaws in the care system and we should not be complacent, but most children benefit from being in it. We should be able to publicise more clearly and effectively that care, for most children, is a good thing. Our main task—this is the fostering bit, I suppose—is to provide troubled children with a relationship with a trustworthy, empathetic, committed, feisty adult who is there for the long term. At the end of the day, that is what it is about. That is what really helps children: to be provided with those relationships. It seems to me that the reputation of the care system generally is something that we all, and Government in particular, could do something to combat.

Q152 Suella Fernandes: Looking at the wider care system, how would you say it is currently dealing with the pressures of the introduction of the Staying Put programme and the increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children?

Dave Hill: The broad position, as I said earlier, is that if for perfectly reasonable humanitarian reasons we want to look after more asylum-seeking children, I have not found anyone who thinks that that is a bad idea, because these are children in real need. I have not heard anybody say that the idea of staying put with your foster carer is a bad idea. It is clearly a really good idea.

None of us—well, maybe some people, but not many—says to our children at 18, “Off you go and survive the world as you see it.” Having said that, if we are already 7,500 foster carers short, every asylum seeker and every child who stays put simply puts some more pressure on a system that has not got enough foster carers. That is not a reason not to do those things, but it is a reason to sort ourselves out with the recruitment of more high-quality foster carers.

Q153 Suella Fernandes: This is my last question. The Government has announced that it is doing a stocktake of foster care. That is a good start, but what is obviously needed is a fundamental review that looks into the wider care system. What is your opinion of the idea of carrying out a fundamental review of the care system? What do you think the Government should focus on?

Councillor Richard Watts: The question is, what are you trying to solve with that? There are enormous numbers of challenges to do with the care system. We have seen more than a doubling of section 47 inquiries in 10 years, at a time of significant funding cuts. In three years’ time, there will be an almost £2 billion gap between what we think the system will need to spend to carry on as it is, and the amount of money that will be available to it. That strikes me as the overwhelming challenge.

There are lots of questions—Dave and I have had a number of conversations about this—about why a quarter of authorities are deemed to be inadequate under the new Ofsted guidance and what the best way out of those authorities is. There is a broad view that Ofsted are right in the judgments they are making about all of that, and clearly, foster care is a critical bit of it.



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I suspect we know quite a lot of what it would take to help those authorities out—it is those really strong local partnerships. If you look at an exceptional authority like Leeds, what they did to get themselves out of a mess was this absolute eagle-eyed focus on the lives of children and young people in their city, and it has had fantastic results over many years. Therefore, we need to be able to spread capacity to do that. My worry about big reviews is that we know most of the answers and the challenges; the question now is how we get the capacity through the system to make that happen more widely.

Jon Fayle: I would make a very general point—this was one of the central conclusions of the care inquiry that came out three or four years ago—about placing the importance of relationships at the heart of the system. Caring, loving, affectionate, empathetic relationships are what the whole care system should be trying to provide for children in care. You have got to put that right at the heart of it. The mountains of procedures, law, guidance, protocols and all the rest of it are all aimed at helping us to provide the child with that relationship. That is the most healing thing that can possibly get into their lives to promote their resilience and wellbeing as adults.

Dave Hill: I think we would ask the stocktake to have a look at the business of the interrelationship between local authority foster carers and private agencies. Sir Martin Narey's review calculated about £42 million of profits out of foster care. This year, I have spoken out strongly about the position in which some of the private agencies are poaching foster carers from local authorities with golden hellos and then charging us twice for a foster placement that was ours the week before.

It strikes me that if we are serious about public care being a thing of quality, we are going to have to think about that. In Scotland, it is not possible under legislation to be anything other than not-for-profit. You can have an independent agency, but it is a not-for-profit agency. I have said, and will continue to say, to the stocktake that that issue needs thinking through.

Jon Fayle: I strongly agree with that.

Dr Ruth Allen: We know that the numbers of children coming into care correlates with levels of deprivation in different authorities. Poorer authorities often have poorer funding settlements and have had increasingly deteriorating funding arrangements. We know that there has been a reduction in preventive services to try to prevent children from coming into long-term care in the first place. All of that needs to be in the mix if we are going to review what is happening with fostering, because we want children to be able to stay in families, where that is the right option, with the right preventive support.

Rachel Harrison: To agree with some of the points regarding the stocktake, it is fundamental that relationships are looked at, as well as funding. Councils are facing massive cuts and as a way of managing those cuts some are looking to drive down the terms. It is a false economy.



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Poaching by the agencies is happening. What actually happens is that a foster carer can take the children to an agency with them, so the authority then ends up paying for the same children and same foster carer but for twice the amount of money. Things like that need to be addressed.

Chair: Right. I want to thank you all very much. There is one area that we are going to need to probe further: this tension between a national approach—perhaps a register—and local authority co-operation with and/or extension into the charity and voluntary sector. That is where we need to know a bit more about how local authorities are effectively working together, where their linkages are and how far those extend. If you have any information that you think we should have to inform our deliberations as we move towards preparing reports and recommendations, please send it to our team. Thank you very much indeed for what you have said today.