

Education Committee

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

Wednesday 19 April 2017

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair); Suella Fernandes; Lilian Greenwood; Ian Mearns.

Questions 154 – 206

Witnesses

I: Matthew Brazier, Specialist Adviser, Children Looked After, Ofsted, **Dr Heather Ottaway**, Lecturer in Social Work with Children and Families, University of Bristol, **Professor Judy Sebba**, Director, Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford, and **Jim Wade**, Honorary Fellow, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York.

II: Graham Archer, Director of Improvement and Learning for Children's Social Care, Department for Education, **Simon Bower**, Contract Manager, South Central Independent Foster Care Framework, Bournemouth Borough Council, **Melissa Green**, Director of Operations, The Fostering Network, **Steve Walker**, Acting Director of Children's Services, Leeds City Council, and **Jonny Woodthorpe**, Commissioning Co-ordinator, Bournemouth Borough Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Ofsted [[FOS0054](#)]
- Department for Education [[FOS0086](#)]
- The Fostering Network [[FOS0085](#)]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matthew Brazier, Dr Heather Ottaway, Professor Judy Sebba and Jim Wade.

Q154 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this session on fostering. First of all, as some of you will have spotted, there is a general election coming up, moving into view, so this will be the last evidence session of this Committee. That does not mean to say it is not an important session, because it is. This Committee has already conducted at least two significant sessions on fostering, and we intend to pass on our findings and our work to the successor Committee, which of course will not be tooled up and ready to go until the autumn. That means there will be a lapse of time between now and any further consideration, but it does not mean this report or any contributions to the report will be any less significant; it is just that they will be later. I want to make that point clear. It is a great pleasure to chair this Committee in its current form for the last time, so let us remember the hard work of my colleagues and all the officer team who have contributed over the last two years. Thank you.

We are looking into fostering, as I have just said. This is to probe into academic research, professional research, and thinking about innovation, new ways of proceeding, and where fostering can go in the future. In other words, we want to sketch out what a report might be looking at, in terms of recommendations. I am delighted to welcome all of you. I want to ask you to say who you are and where you have hailed from, Jim first.

Jim Wade: I am Jim Wade. I am a research fellow at the University of York. I was invited here today because I have recently—two years ago—completed a study on special guardianship.

Chair: The great city of York, with its history—the Romans and the Vikings. If you want to pepper your thoughts with references to those two great—

Jim Wade: There has been a lot of history since then as well.

Chair: Like you, I am from the north-east, so when I was young, going to York was a bit of an excursion south. Judy.

Professor Sebba: I am Judy Sebba. I am a Professor of Education at the Oxford University Department of Education, and I direct the Rees Centre, which specialises in research in fostering, in particular at the interface of fostering and education.

Chair: Judy, I want to say how good it was to meet you properly at Oxford when we had our away day. All the things we discussed then were absolutely fascinating and have informed the way we have been thinking about future inquiries, so thank you.

Professor Sebba: Thank you. Also I am deaf, so if you do ask a question, I would be very grateful if you could speak up a bit.



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Chair: I happen to be a bit deaf as well, but I am just deaf to the left, and that is pretty suitable with the general election coming up. Heather.

Dr Ottaway: I am Dr Heather Ottaway. I am a lecturer in social work with children and families at the University of Bristol and a member of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies.

Chair: Excellent. My daughter goes to Bristol, and you are not far away from my constituency, so that is good news. Matthew, what links can I come up with you?

Matthew Brazier: Good morning. Matthew Brazier, based in Ofsted's social care policy team, and I am Ofsted's special adviser for looked after children.

Chair: We know a lot about Ofsted. This Committee has been in the spotlight about that. Thank you very much indeed, all four of you, for coming today. I will kick off with some questions. A startling statistic from Ofsted, Matthew, on fostering, is that there has been a drop of one third in the number of applications by potential foster carers. That is significant. Can you account for it?

Matthew Brazier: Across the country, we are seeing most authorities struggle to recruit as many foster carers as they need. There is an increase in the number of looked after children, and there has been over many years. There has been demand in certain areas, like increased numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In terms of the number of applications, I know the Committee has looked previously at the reasons why people might not be as interested in fostering as they might be, and hopefully we can have a discussion about how the sector can make fostering more attractive to more people.

One of the positive things from our data that it is probably worth pointing out is that although the number of applications has dropped, partly that is due to some agencies not reporting their data. Also, the number of applications that have ended in approvals has gone up. That is a positive news story that shows, maybe, that the way that agencies are recruiting is becoming more effective; possibly there is better sifting at early stages, and increased clarity about what the task might be.

Q155 **Chair:** Matthew, again a question for you: only one third of local authorities were rated good or outstanding for their provision of care for looked after children. What do we need to do to improve that figure?

Matthew Brazier: That is a big question. From the outset, I would probably like to say that when we talk about the difference between inspection outcomes for independent fostering agencies and inspection outcomes for local authorities, there is not quite a fair comparison. It is a different inspection framework. We have quite clearly stated the sort of issues in single inspections that can help authorities to improve. We know the strengths tend to be broadly similar across the high-performing authorities where there is stability of leadership, a stable workforce and



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local authorities that understand themselves well. One of the things we can do at Ofsted is shine a light on those authorities that are not doing very well. We are consulting currently on an inspection framework that focuses more closely on authorities that are less than good to help them improve, but also making sure that we still highlight good practice, so that weaker authorities can learn from those other authorities that are doing better.

Q156 Chair: The question of leadership springs to mind, of course, in local authorities. We noticed in some authorities we went to, not specifically in connection with fostering but looked after children, that the key things are strategic and operational leadership. Is that something you would agree with?

Matthew Brazier: Absolutely, yes. We think it is a key factor in success, and one of the aspects of leadership that has a big impact is an organisation that really understands itself well, makes clear its priorities, knows its strengths and weaknesses and is able to act on that. Fostering and looked after children is an area in which they do need to know themselves well. The authorities that do better at recruiting foster carers, for example, are the ones that know where their gaps are, know what foster carers are telling them, know what looked after children are telling them and are able to respond accordingly and make really clear to potential foster carers or to children what they can offer.

Q157 Chair: Judy, you have nodded quite a lot listening to Matthew. What do you think needs to be done to improve local authority provision, basically?

Professor Sebba: For us, one of the things that comes through most strongly is the lack of co-ordination between the different services, and it is what young people complain about as well. That then could contribute to improvement on some of the specifics, like what happens when you change placement and whether or not you move schools when you change placement, what do we do about the differential attainment and educational progress of different sub-groups within the population we are looking at, and placement in particular kinds of schools. All of that is helped by greater co-ordination at local authority level, and some local authorities seem to have that co-ordination much better than others. That is one thing that needs to be prioritised. When you come on to your second panel, the Innovation Programme has some excellent examples of that.

Q158 Chair: We will test that with the second panel. Jim, have you anything you would like to say about this question?

Jim Wade: One of the research studies we undertook at York was looking at fostering services for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. Local authorities perhaps need to be more creative in thinking about recruitment and retention, and about reaching out into settled migrant communities to identify and recruit foster carers from within



those communities to look after and support unaccompanied young people, as those numbers are again rising. What we found in that study was that when they were able to do that, those placements could be very successful for young people for a period of time.

Q159 Chair: Thank you. Matthew, I am sorry I keep starting with you, but this is about Ofsted's findings and you are of Ofsted. The Staying Put programme has meant that a lot of young people are staying with their carers beyond 18. That is good, but it is an inconsistent pattern across the country—and, again, regions, and particularly local authorities. Is there anything we can do to improve the overall take-up of Staying Put?

Matthew Brazier: You have heard previous evidence that has talked about better cross-departmental working. We think that would really help. A big issue for children who are leaving care or are thinking about remaining with their foster carers is that it needs to be a seamless transition. They do not suddenly feel different on their 18th birthday. Anything that can be done to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy or uncertainty for those young people—things like having to claim housing benefit; I know you have heard about this already. Knowing that their foster carers feel well-supported and are financially able to support them, so they do not have to consider those kinds of issues. It is about what is best for them. More of a gradual transition—that is what we want for young people, so anything that can avoid any unnecessary bureaucratic difficulties.

An issue that we hear a lot as we inspect is the financial constraints on foster carers. It is a big decision for them to keep looking after young people beyond 18, and it has been their job for a while. I use that term in its widest possible sense, but they are caring for these young people and they need to feel financially secure. We know that sometimes foster carers feel that they might have less money, and that needs to be addressed to make sure they are not penalised by providing continuing care for young people.

Q160 Chair: Are there any further comments about Staying Put? Judy.

Professor Sebba: It is not directly on Staying Put, but I think the issue for us has been about when we look at the data of post-care outcomes. At the moment there is a lot of focus, for example, on access to higher education, further education etc. at 19, and when we look at the data at 19, it is possibly too early for this population. That is speculation. We do not have any proof of that. Anecdotally, from the young people that we talk to on different studies, they seem to access further and higher education much later, for a whole host of understandable reasons. It is becoming more possible to get that data, depending on whether they identify as care leavers in the system, which they do not always want to do, understandably. But it would be possible now to get more data on later access to these other services.



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Staying Put, according to the American literature, would contribute to that, because where they have done natural experimentation in the States between areas where young people are staying in care for longer, to 21 and 25, and compared it with areas where they are leaving care at 18, the 21 and 25-year-olds are much more likely to be in employment or higher education. I think that is the connection there, that we are missing a slight trick at the moment in not exploring that data, but it wouldn't be perfect, because we know that many young people choose not to declare for understandable reasons.

Chair: An interesting point.

Jim Wade: I think a question to consider as well is how do you extend Staying Put to situations where young people are rather less settled? It tends to be reserved for young people in very established foster placements who are doing well, whose carers have a very close relationship with them. But what we are still tending to do as a society is release young people to independence at an early age where they have had more unsettled care careers, and where they are probably among the least able to cope with that transition to independence. We need to think about it in terms of residential care, in terms of young people who have had less time in a foster placement and perhaps have more issues that need to be worked on over time.

Q161 **Lilian Greenwood:** Is there any argument for having Staying Put—it is a bit off topic—arrangements for children who are in other forms of care, particularly in residential care? Is that something that has been looked at?

Matthew Brazier: The current Government are looking closely at something called Staying Close that came out with the Martin Narey review, which is a form of Staying Put for children in children's homes. We will be piloting that shortly, or are due to.

Q162 **Chair:** Matthew, again it is you. This time I want to know a little bit about social care inspection frameworks, the new ones, and I would like to know how they are going to improve assessment of fostering provision.

Matthew Brazier: We have just published a new social care common inspection framework where we are trying as far as possible to look at the same things for a range of different settings, but that includes foster care. So independent fostering agencies will come under this social care common inspection framework. It is very much focused on outcomes and experiences and progress with children.

That is at the heart of what we want to look at. We have been trying to do that under the current framework, but this is writ large in the new common framework, so we think that will make sure that we are looking at the things that matter most to children and, indirectly, at what matters most to carers and what can have the most impact on the difference, so less on process, less on procedure and more on experiences and progress. We think that is important, so we will do much more case



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tracking, case sampling, looking at real cases. We will spend less time just talking to professionals, so we think we will be able to tell a more accurate story about what it is like to be fostered in England, particularly if you are looked after in an independent fostering agency. It is closer to the approach that we take for inspections of local authorities, which again is focused on experiences and progress and less on process and policy.

I will try to make this as simple as I can, but we do look at fostering in different ways. We regulate and register independent fostering agencies and we have a framework for those and that will be under the common inspection framework. But we only inspect fostering services as part of the bigger inspection of local authorities, so as I mentioned earlier, it is a bit more difficult to compare the outcomes.

I think somebody said earlier that outcomes for independent fostering agencies are much more positive than they are for local authorities, but if we look at outcomes for fostering, that is not quite so straightforward. It is a little bit inaccurate to say that means that local authority fostering services are worse. If you look at the reports of local authority services, what we say about fostering services is generally very positive and is fairly similar to what we say about independent fostering agencies, but how we look at local authorities is much broader, much more complex. It is a much broader set of responsibilities, so it is a complex area. We should not make simple comparisons between the two.

Q163 Chair: You have answered the next question I was going to ask, which is good. What I am going to say is that your answer basically means that when you are looking at the local authority, you are looking at a lot, and where you are looking at an independent provider, you are looking just simply at what that organisation does provide. Judy, do you think that there is a way in which Ofsted could be more forensic with local authorities?

Professor Sebba: I am not sure it would only apply to local authorities, but one of the things that Ofsted has done since we published our education work has been to look more closely at the crossover between social care and education. I think that will make a big difference in the long run. All of us were depressed by the fact that some of the social care issues were not well known to people in education. Some of the education issues were not well known to people in social care—not only inspectors, but managers of services. For example, somebody managing a school needs to be aware of what procedures social workers use when they are moving a child placement and how that might impact on their schooling, so I think that there is more awareness of that need to cross over at the inspection level.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are now going to move on to Ian and he is going to talk about education outcomes.

Q164 Ian Mearns: I will briefly make an observation. I was a lead member for education and children's services in my local authority a number of years



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ago, and a rule of thumb, from my perspective, was “Never be satisfied.” As good as you think you might be, never be satisfied, because you can always find something to improve. I think that is the rule of thumb for any elected politician within any local authority who is looking after children’s services. That is just an observation.

Judy, nice to see you again. Your study of the educational outcomes for looked after young people found that young people in foster care can make good educational progress, so what needs to be done on the part of schools, teachers, social workers, carers and Government to secure better educational outcomes for more young people in foster care?

Professor Sebba: There are three or four key messages that come through from the research—not just the major study we did, but we also did an evaluation in London of the London Fostering Achievement work that The Fostering Network and others were involved in. One of them has to do with this better linkage, in the sense that when a child moves placement, typically where there has been a geographical change of location that has involved a change of school, we know now that would be a predictive factor in dramatically lower GCSE outcomes. That is the first thing, to link that up.

In some local authorities, the school is consulted every time there is a placement move. In other local authorities that does not happen. That is quite important in terms of trying to give the child the option of staying in the current school. The young people that we interviewed in our study suggested that they would rather travel for a long time, if necessary, than be moved to a different school, particularly in the last two years of schooling when they have established relationships. That is the first thing.

The second thing is young people also said—and this is true of many studies—that having an adult who is key to their development, their progress, who looks out for them, who is reliably there to help them and support them is absolutely key. We are talking about somebody in the school. It does not have to be a teacher. We know that many times those people are teaching assistants or other people in the school system.

The third thing is you asked specifically about social work. There is still a lot to be done on better understanding and co-ordination between social workers, foster carers and the school system. The London Fostering Achievement, which The Fostering Network ran, did a lot to both expose some of those problems and also address them. They had fostering champions who were experienced foster carers who supported other foster carers in ensuring better access to the school system, finding their way around the school system and making more demands of the school system.

But the schools have a big responsibility here to reach out to foster carers. Many of them, I am afraid, are not doing it, as far as we can tell; foster carers complain that they are not treated as a parent. They are



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treated as a second-class parent, if you like—a second-class citizen. I think those are some of the main things.

The other thing that is an increasing problem is that in the population of entrants into care, the age of those entrants is going up at the moment and we know that late entrants to foster care and teenagers do worse. We have a challenge here for the schools and the social work system in particular in how to make better provision for teenagers. It relates also to Jim's point, because the percentage of unaccompanied asylum-seekers is also going up, and they would fall into that bracket.

Chair: Jim, did you want to say something?

Jim Wade: I think that is quite a comprehensive answer. The only thing I would add is when young people are of an age to transition into further education, for example, those support systems often are not there, and it is thinking about how we better support young people who transition into further education in trying to get vocational qualifications, access to apprenticeships, and making sure those support systems are there for them.

Q165 **Ian Mearns:** You talked about stability in terms of the school arrangements, but it is also important in terms of the fostering or placement arrangement. What more can we do to aid placement stability for the educational sector that the youngster is in, but also in terms of the care situation, the educational placement and also the fostering placement? What can we do to aid placement stability?

Professor Sebba: That is also Heather's area. We know from the research—I will not touch on Heather's work for the moment because she should be doing that herself, obviously—something about what helps foster carers to keep fostering and the placement stable. One of the tensions at the moment has to do with the initial matching process of children to foster carers. That is something we are currently researching, but I can't tell you the results yet. Certainly we think that engaging the young people more in that process of initial placement will help us to achieve greater longer-term stability.

I can give you an example of a programme we are doing with Birmingham City Council called Step Down, where the young people are coming out of residential care into intensive fostering placements. The young people themselves are very intensively involved in the planning of that placement and that does seem to be leading to greater stability in a very challenging population. Within that very challenging population, the percentage of placement breakdowns has been surprisingly low.

Dr Ottaway: It is a very complex area, obviously, foster care support. One of the things that came out of our study on compassion fatigue in foster carers was the vital importance of supporting and maintaining foster carer wellbeing. If supervision and support can focus more actively on wellbeing and how carers are doing, foster carers are more likely to



feel positively supported and more able to then respond sensitively to children's needs.

One of the things that came across very clearly in our study was that when foster carers were experiencing compassion fatigue—that is a combination of burn-out, secondary trauma, but also experiencing low satisfaction or low levels of support—they said to us, “We can feed and clothe and provide accommodation for the looked after children and young people, but we cannot engage with their emotional needs, because it is enough for us to simply get through each day”. No doubt we will talk more about foster carer support, but there are certainly some elements of that.

Q166 **Ian Mearns:** But the whole process is much more than providing a roof, a bed.

Dr Ottaway: Of course it is. The foster carers that took part in our study felt terrible about not being able to provide for the emotional needs. They knew that is why they were there. Some of their primary role and purpose is to help children and young people progress positively, but their experiences of being in compassion fatigue meant they could not do it. So part of what we have been looking at is how to support foster carers to reduce compassion fatigue.

Q167 **Ian Mearns:** But I think from the perspective of everyone, where a youngster is in the care system, my attitude would be that we are all the corporate parent, and that should be the school as well. Therefore there needs to be much better communication and much better lines of communication between the school, the foster care placement and social services, because in the last analysis, they all have a part to play. How can we get that to work? Because it is not just about a roof and a bed and feeding children. It is about helping to nurture them and bring them back from troubled places, quite often, and all the rest of it that goes with being in foster care. How can we get the message, to communicate this so as to challenge many of the negative aspects that are there for young people in the care system, so that they are not seen as a problem but as someone to be really assisted?

Dr Ottaway: One aspect of that is more understanding and education across all agencies who work with children and young people about what their needs are and about what is the reality of the support they need following experiences of abuse, neglect, loss and trauma. Certainly, we were talking to foster carers primarily about social work staff, but they also talked about education staff, and what a difference it made when people had a good understanding of children and young people's needs. So I think there is room and scope for more education and support about that in particular.

Professor Sebba: Both schools and foster carers are being targeted, albeit in small numbers, for training and support in mental health and wellbeing. That is absolutely critical to this, because we know from the



work we did with the strengths and difficulties questionnaire that scores predicted both placement and school stability once you control for other factors. These young people had much higher scores, which means much poorer scores, if you like—higher levels of behaviour problems—which were associated with poor outcomes when we control for other factors.

There is a need for supporting schools and teachers specifically, and there is a lot of work going on at the moment about attachment training and social learning training and so on to try to better support teachers and better prepare them for, at a minimum, not exacerbating the problems, because that does happen at the moment in the school system, and at best being able to intervene earlier, more appropriately, more subtly, so as not to highlight the child's problems in front of the rest of their peers.

Chair: Thank you, Ian. Suella, effects on carers.

Q168 **Suella Fernandes:** Thank you very much for coming to take part in the session today. This is aimed at Dr Ottaway. In your report on compassion fatigue, you concluded that it was vital to reconceptualise the support that foster carers require. What should this look like, and how can it be done?

Dr Ottaway: It should take a number of forms. First, a recognition and understanding that compassion fatigue exists. In our study we surveyed over 500 foster carers. More than three quarters had some symptoms of compassion fatigue, so it is there, and it is potentially significant. A recognition and understanding will be a start to intervening and dealing with that.

I have talked already about the need for education. Education and training are particularly where foster carers and social workers can come together. I think they probably have a lot to learn from each other about compassion fatigue on their respective roles, alongside the impacts on each other and a greater understanding of what it is like to be a foster carer.

Something we talked about in our report is that foster carers are foster carers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They do not have a break and when respite is offered, it is often offered in a way where children who have already experienced abuse and neglect, and often trauma and loss, are then going to strangers for periods of time, which is not child-centred and not relationship focused.

I know you are having evidence from the Mockingbird Family Model later on. Our perspective is a respite system that acknowledges the importance of foster carers having a break. All other stressful helping professions where compassion fatigue has been researched, around nursing, doctors, those working in disaster relief zones, all say that one of the most important things to reduce compassion fatigue and increase compassion satisfaction is for foster carers to be able to step back, even



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if it is just for a few hours at a time; it is to have a system where people can step back for a while, rest and recharge and come back, because that then enables foster carers to be able to emotionally engage with children and young people again in the way that they need.

One of the other areas is peer support. We heard again and again from foster carers that some of the strongest support and levels of understanding comes from peers, but peer support was variably supported within the different agencies. Most had buddy systems, and we often heard that greater investment and support was needed there, but also when foster carers got together in support groups organised by agencies, often they had to sign confidentiality agreements, and they were not allowed to talk about the children and the children's needs. What they want is to be able to have a safe space to be able to offload.

One of the key findings and key thinking about reconceptualising foster care support is the absolute need for a safe and non-judgmental space. Carers often said to us, "I am having a really bad day, and I just need to vent. I do not need to have the child taken away. I do not need to have placement support meetings. I just need to vent, and I do not feel safe to do that with the fostering support worker because I feel judged or feel that they are going to try to solve it". Foster carers felt that when support from fostering services was good, it was safe, it was non-judgmental and it really focused on their wellbeing, encouraged them, and supported them to support their peers and their peers to support one another.

Q169 Suella Fernandes: What do you think can be done by Government to ensure that the finance and resources are available to provide what you set out?

Dr Ottaway: Again, one of the things that came out very strongly was that compassion fatigue is exacerbated by material circumstances. Carers talked about not having bridging payments any more between placements. If a child or a young person has left or the placement has broken down, they still need to make their mortgage payments and pay the bills. It led some foster carers to have inappropriate placements because there was no other way financially they could manage, particularly those single carers who were often required to stay at home. I think a way of easing the financial burden through a different way of thinking about payments so that payments are more consistent will help support foster carers more effectively.

Also, on their status, what shone through about the foster carers who took part in our study was their expertise, their knowledge of children and young people and their difficulties, and their absolute commitment to caring for and loving these children. So thinking about their status and recognising that expertise more will also help.

Q170 Suella Fernandes: Finally, following on from what you say about recognition of status, how do you think we can practically ensure that foster carers get the respect and recognition they deserve?



Dr Ottaway: It is a difficult question. Government and agencies talk a lot about foster carers being full members of teams around children. I think that rhetoric needs to have some more weight behind it, in terms of foster carers having all the information they need, being fully part of discussions and their views and perspectives being given appropriate weight. Again, multi-agency and multi-disciplinary teams do not always agree, but foster carers should have a more equal place at the table.

To give an example of that, one foster carer said during our study that they would come to meetings dressed very much suited and booted, and it was the only way they felt they could get the respect of the other people around the table. I thought that was a very sad situation. Again, perhaps more training and support for other professionals about the role and status of foster care would be a start.

Jim Wade: Could I just take a moment to extend this discussion to special guardianship families, because I think many of the issues Heather has raised apply to them equally? As you know, the numbers of SGOs have increased exponentially in recent years. They are mostly made to grandparents or aunts and uncles who take on one or more often very young children within the family network.

When we surveyed a sample of 230 special guardians, they reported that the services available to them were highly variable, from virtually nothing through to rather more comprehensive packages of help. Around a quarter of those guardians reported that they very rarely got a break from caring for those children; about a quarter said they were tired most of the time. Very rarely were they able to access respite facilities—only about 6% ever had that opportunity—and around one in five felt they were financially worse off as a result of caring for those children.

We need to think very carefully about how we support special guardianship families, given that there are more of them, and to think about how we can give those families the best chance of success, because at the moment, as kinship carers, they are getting a very patchy service indeed.

Chair: Thank you very much. Lilian, special guardianship orders.

Q171 **Lilian Greenwood:** Jim has already started to answer my questions, but I think that is helpful because that is where I want to move to. As you said, Jim, there has been a huge increase in the use of special guardianship orders, and we know the arrangement can be very positive for both guardians and children. But there are concerns that special guardianship orders are being granted to cut the number of children in care and reduce costs to local authorities. My first question to the panel—perhaps it makes sense to start with you, Jim—is: are SGOs being made for the right reasons?

Jim Wade: If we think about the research we undertook, I suppose the data collection was completed in 2012, and the picture is ever-changing



after that. I would say at that point, certainly by and large, SGOs were being made for the right kinds of reasons. They were either trying to prevent children coming into the care system because members of the extended family wanted to look after them or they were a mechanism for returning children from the care system to a relative or guardian.

When we followed up those children over three to six years, the outcomes at that point were looking pretty encouraging. 90% of children were reported to be doing very well or quite well on a placement against a range of measures. But what has happened in recent years is there has been a steady growth in the numbers of children who are being made subject to SGOs at a very early age and as a result of care proceedings, either in a pre-proceeding stage or during the care proceedings themselves. That segment of SGOs is increasing, and I think some concerns rest around that group about whether assessments during care proceedings are being undertaken in a relatively hasty way, and whether they are sufficiently robust.

SGOs are also being made in circumstances where children either have not previously lived with that carer or where the relationship between the carer and the child is assessed as being relatively weak. Some caution needs to be exercised around those cases because those factors were predictors of later breakdown.

Q172 Lilian Greenwood: We heard several respondents to our inquiry, including FosterTalk and the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, tell us that some foster carers have been put under pressure to take out an SGO, with the threat that the child might even be removed from their care. I wondered if other members of the panel wanted to comment on the use of SGOs, particularly in relation to that evidence that we heard.

Matthew Brazier: If I can say something from an inspection perspective, if I was answering this question about a year ago I would probably say the position was very mixed. There are some concerns with foster carers around some slightly patchy use of special guardianship, but I would say since the guidance has been revised and more emphasis has been put on good, clear assessment of relationships between the prospective guardian and the children and the risks involved for children, we have seen an improvement in the use of special guardianship. The quality is better and we have seen some particularly good examples in recent inspections. We think that the message is starting to get across to local authorities about getting back to what it was originally meant for.

Jim Wade: I think the revised guidance has been positive. It picked up on some of the key worries from the research findings, particularly in terms of thinking about permanence for the future for the child and building that into the assessment process, and also in terms of assessing the quality of the relationship between the carer and the child. These are very positive steps that I think reflect some of our main worries from the research.



Lilian Greenwood: Heather, Judy, do you want to add anything?

Dr Ottaway: Only that I would echo Jim's perspective about taking a more longitudinal perspective and the importance of supporting special guardians. Many of the issues cut across foster carers and special guardians, in terms of the challenges of caring for children who have had complex early life experiences.

Jim Wade: There is a discussion that has been going on for quite some time concerning the increasing use of supervision orders attached to SGOs. They are tending to be taken out by the courts in circumstances where they have some worries, either about the viability of the placement or the support needs of carers. So there has been some discussion between the judiciary, the academic and practice world and the Department for Education about whether there is a necessary intermediate step that should happen in circumstances where those relationships are not well-formed, in the form of an interim SGO or some equivalent.

At the moment, supervision orders are being used inadequately to fill a vacuum. If you think about adoption, adoption orders cannot be given unless there is a placement order and a period of monitored settling in to assess the relationships between carers and children. Something similar needs to probably happen in relation to special guardianship in circumstances where there are worries about the quality of a relationship that exists at the time of the SGO.

Q173 **Lilian Greenwood:** Do other members of the panel think that would be a helpful development?

Professor Sebba: Yes. I think that relates to the point I wanted to make, which is there seems to be a pressure for SGOs to be an automatic route in some cases, even when the panel has concerns, and that is a worry. I think there is a lot of pressure to use this as a route, with varying—not entirely negative, by any means—outcomes.

Jim Wade: You raised the point about pressure on carers. Certainly in our study, about two in five of the carers said there had been some pressure from the local authority to move towards an SGO. One in five felt that had been quite severe when they were probably considering alternative solutions. They were being pressed, so there is an issue there for sure.

Q174 **Lilian Greenwood:** In your answer to Suella's question, you were saying that your research found that financial arrangements were variable, access to CAMHS and support services was difficult, and respite provision was extremely rare. I was going to ask: are special guardians supported enough? I think you have already answered that with a no. I suppose the question is: what support should special guardians receive, and is it the same as foster carers or are there any differences, do you think?



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Jim Wade: I would start by saying they are the same children. The children who move to special guardianship are not dissimilar to children who are in foster care or who move to adoption. We therefore ought to be thinking in terms of the same kinds of provision for families after the SGO is made. For children who were looked after, there is at the moment a right to an assessment of need. For children who are not currently looked after, there isn't. The local authority may undertake an assessment of need, and I think good practice would suggest that that assessment of need should happen in all cases.

The Government enabled special guardians to have access to the Adoption Support Fund, but what their recent figures suggest is that the Adoption Support Fund is in crisis and is under enormous financial strain because demand is outstripping supply, and special guardians are not getting much of a look-in. For the last year, they accounted for less than 1% of applications to the Adoption Support Fund, so although they have some entitlement to it, they are not getting it. The question is: do they not know, are they not being told, or are they not being encouraged to apply for services the child may need? It falls back on the local authority to mainstream fund those services to families, and their response to that is very patchy.

Dr Ottaway: Part of that is that many special guardians are not getting support on an ongoing basis. In comparison, if we think about the relatively high levels of contact foster carers have with the local authority—of variable quality, but nevertheless there is contact and supervision and support built in—as Jim said, these are the same children that go through being looked after, having special guardianship and adoption. So much research evidence points to longitudinal support needs for many children—not all, but many—and therefore many carers. Probably a fundamental thing would be a right to support, not just a right to an assessment, and a right to meaningful support for special guardians, given the complexity of experience that these children have often had.

Q175 **Lilian Greenwood:** Matthew, are there any examples of good practice, with local authorities doing a good job to support special guardians?

Matthew Brazier: I have noted a few here, yes. Very recently in Harrow and Wigan we have seen some good support offered there to special guardians. The support is crucial. I think the point about seeing it from a longer-term view—we do not have that view yet—makes perfect sense. If the support isn't there, these children are going to come back into care, or may well come back into care and place additional pressure with additional needs back on the system. It is cost-effective in the long-term to make sure that support is in place, and not just for the interests of the children themselves.

Dr Ottaway: The difference with special guardians often is that they are managing the complexity of family or friend relationships within that



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special guardianship arrangement. I think support for that in particular would be very helpful.

Jim Wade: That is both the strength and the curse of special guardianship. The strength is that young people remain embedded within the family network and there is an expectation that they will have contact with birth parents, but we need to bear in mind that for some of these families there is enormous tension and conflict going on. We found that less than half of the birth parents, for example, supported the SGO, so the basis there for potential conflict is enormous. Over half of special guardians had some support around managing contact over our follow-up period, so this is a big issue for local authorities in terms of how they fund and resource that.

Q176 **Lilian Greenwood:** A final question on special guardianship. Obviously SGOs are one way of achieving permanence for children in care, but should long-term fostering be recognised as a permanent option in its own right?

Jim Wade: Absolutely.

Dr Ottaway: Yes.

Jim Wade: There is evidence that it can provide it. There was a study done at York a few years ago that looked at long-term fostering, where children had been in the same placement for seven years and the outcomes were not dissimilar to those for adoption, so it can provide it.

Matthew Brazier: One of the conversations you have had on the Committee is about the status of foster carers and about how to recruit and make it more attractive to people, making sure that people do see long-term fostering, including prospective carers, as a really important task, to offer children permanence. Not all children can be adopted. One of the issues that increased awareness or good recruitment can deal with is showing that long-term fostering is not less important or further down the hierarchy of care than adoption. I think it certainly can and it does for many children.

Dr Ottaway: What needs to happen, though, as we were saying earlier about the link with Staying Put, is that there needs to be a mechanism in place to support foster carers in caring permanently for these young people.

Matthew Brazier: Yes, and when we see Staying Put done well, it is raised with foster carers as soon as they become interested. As soon as there might be a possibility that they are going to offer care to a child on a long-term basis, we start talking about it: "You might be looking after children well beyond 18". It is not something that you start thinking about when a child hits 17.

Jim Wade: At the moment, it is still seen as an add-on. It needs to become an expectation for young people.



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Chair: We are going to have to move on to another topic now, but thank you for that exchange. It was quite informative. Thanks, Lilian. Ian, last but not least, we are going to look at the national register for foster carers concept.

Q177 **Ian Mearns:** Yes. A number of previous witnesses have supported the idea of establishment of a national register of foster carers, on the basis that it might increase their portability, highlight capacity gaps and improve carer status. Have you any particular views on that?

Professor Sebba: Our work has struggled tremendously from not having information about the national position of foster carers, in the sense that we have been unable to link data, for example, about foster carers to all these other care and educational data. If you said, "What role do foster carers play in the educational outcomes of a young person?" the answer is, "We don't know in statistical terms," because we do not have that information about foster carers. From a research point of view, in terms of informing future practice, I would say it is crucial.

Matthew Brazier: It could be really beneficial in terms of understanding where the gaps are, and helping people to consider what they need to do to fill those gaps. We would have real concerns, though, if we start using it as a way of moving children around the country. We look closely on inspection at the outcomes for children who live far from their home area, and we know that is a real struggle and causes a lot of difficulty for young people for all sorts of reasons. If one of the unintended consequences is that we started thinking that we could use a register to think, "Well, that child could move from Coventry to Liverpool," we think that would be a bad thing.

Q178 **Ian Mearns:** The ADCS and the LGA have voiced concern about this for that very reason, but given our previous conversation, if we put a number of safeguards in there—for instance, the consistency of education provision would be an important factor before a child was placed somewhere else—do you think they could get around that?

Matthew Brazier: I think there would have to be a lot of safeguards. It can work on a regional basis maybe, but once a child does move away, it has implications for education and stability of support from workers. It certainly has implications for their future, because you have to think about where they are going to go, or where they are going to return to.

Q179 **Ian Mearns:** We have already seen, on a local level, foster carers move between employers because of the benefits of being offered higher rates for fostering, so they move between local authorities or from an agency to a local authority, or from a local authority to an agency. That already happens, but we are not sure how many people are moving and why, so the register could be important, but it is a question of making sure that it is not used for the wrong reasons.

Dr Ottaway: Also within that is what we know about child placement outcomes; moving school, moving too far from family and not having



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anything that is familiar is detrimental to progress for children and young people. But regionally, when we look at the regionalisation of adoption agencies—but equally, I take Judy’s point entirely about research and how helpful that would be—in terms of a register, I think we do need to think about what the heart of this is, which is children and young people.

Q180 **Ian Mearns:** If such registers were to be established, whether at a national or regional level, who should run them?

Chair: Any thoughts on who should take charge of the register? Who should co-ordinate it?

Ian Mearns: No strong views? Okay.

Q181 **Chair:** None of you are particularly keen on a register, are you? That is the point that I think has come out of that.

Dr Ottaway: There are pros and cons.

Professor Sebba: At the moment, the work that the Children’s Commissioner is doing on the Stability Index is important to this. They are trying to look at the instability factors in the child’s life that contribute to their poorer outcomes. That would include foster carer or care instability and social worker instability, which is a huge problem. We do not know much about that at the child level, because on the databases we do not know how many changes of social worker that child has experienced. Anything that would help us to better understand what is happening in the system would obviously be advantageous, if you can provide those safeguards. The work that the Children’s Commissioner is doing on the Stability Index would be quite important in helping us to understand how that might develop.

Chair: It is the end of our session. We are going to have another panel, but I want to thank all four of you for some very interesting answers, and for referencing previous sessions that we have had, because that has clearly been helpful to the process. Thank you very much indeed, and best wishes.

I am going to move swiftly on to panel 2, the last panel of today—and, indeed, of this Parliament.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Graham Archer, Simon Bower, Melissa Green, Steve Walker and Jonny Woodthorpe.

Q182 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the final panel, and also the final session of this Parliament. You are in a very interesting position here. You will be able to say for years to come, “I was there as the general election lumbered into view, and I made the last recorded contribution to the work of the Education Select Committee”. If you have grandchildren they will be grateful for that information. It is like a demob situation.



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Could we start from Jonny, and say who you are and where you come from?

Jonny Woodthorpe: I am Jonny Woodthorpe. I am the Commissioning Co-ordinator at Bournemouth Borough Council, but I am here today in my capacity as commissioning lead of the South Central IFA Framework.

Simon Bower: I am Simon Bower. I am the contract manager for the South Central IFA Framework.

Melissa Green: I am Melissa Green, director of operations, The Fostering Network, and programme director for the Mockingbird Family Model.

Graham Archer: I am Graham Archer. I am the director of improvement and learning for the children's social care bit of the Department for Education, and included in that is my responsibility for the Innovation Programme.

Chair: Excellent, thank you very much. Steve.

Steve Walker: I am Steve Walker. I am the director of children's services with Leeds City Council.

Q183 **Chair:** Great. There is some excellent experience and practice in the field from all of you, so thank you very much. Graham, I am going to kick off with you, because you are from the Department, and I want to know a little bit more about the Innovation Programme and how any outcomes from that, particularly best practice, are disseminated.

Graham Archer: Let me start at the beginning. Why an Innovation Programme? There is a general reason and a very specific reason for that. The general reason is that we have, to some extent at least, a burning platform that says that we need to improve things across children's social care. We have rising demand. We have an Ofsted profile of performance that shows that 25% of local authorities are delivering inadequate children's social care and less than 25% are delivering good children's social care. We have a sense from, for example, Eileen Munro's report in 2011, from contacts with ADCS and with the LGA that we have a system that is a little too focused towards compliance and not focused enough towards innovation, system redesign, and social work confidence in professional practice.

The Innovation Programme is there to have two sizeable inputs into that. One is through the individual projects that it delivers, and you have some really good examples in The Fostering Network and in Leeds of really powerful impacts of the projects. The second is to try to change culture within the social care system so that there is more of a systematic desire to see practice informed by learning, and to see innovation as a standard part of what we do.

We have had two waves of activity, as we call them, within the programme. We had 53 projects in the first wave at a cost of £110



million. We are just now beginning to get the formal evaluation reports from those projects. We have had about half of those. The remaining half we will have by the end of the summer, and we are actively using emerging findings—we have had interim reports from the Rees Centre, in fact from Judy Sebba, who has co-ordinated that evaluation for us—and we have established what we slightly unimaginatively call a learning network of local authorities and others who have been engaged in the Innovation Programme. We have brought people together around specific themes and specific projects to discuss outcomes and possible implementation.

In the summer, we expect to see six themed reports alongside the individual project reports that will pick up particular aspects of the programme. We will have one around how we have reframed social work practice, and one around how adolescence and the transition to adulthood has been influenced by the programme. We will use those as the basis for both face-to-face networking and for products that will help local authorities to implement and learn from projects. Ultimately and in the medium term we would expect to see quite a substantial body of knowledge coming from the Innovation Programme and feeding into the What Works Centre that we are looking to establish, which will be independent of Government. We will want to see that leading, if you like, the development of that learning culture within the social care system.

Q184 Chair: Thank you. That is a very good answer, because you mentioned first of all the Eileen Munro report, which this Committee in its previous form discussed in some detail; then we did a report on social work. Among the several themes that we picked up were, first, that judgment question vis-à-vis Eileen Munro and, secondly, the professional status, if you like, of social workers and the question of leadership. How much more do we need to do to push those agendas forward basically to meet the requirements you have just been describing?

Graham Archer: I think there is a little way to go. The “Putting Children First” document that was issued last July set out a number of ways in which that would happen. Some of that is about working directly with social workers, as you will understand; the assessment and accreditation of social workers; and the development of programmes like Frontline and Step Up to Social Work, which tried to attract people into the social work profession who would not otherwise have come into social work. The assessment supported a year in employment, which gives them a good start.

Alongside that is the stuff that is really about how social workers, however good they are, get the best possible environment in which to operate. Our belief and the Government’s belief is that it is strong leadership within the social work system—the practice leaders that we are looking to develop in each local authority—and the frame within which social work operates. Is there a common framework of understanding of how social work is conducted? Is there supervision that



is reflective and honest about how well individual cases are going? Is there an environment in which social workers are trusted and supported to take the right kinds of decisions? Is there an environment in which there are new ways of doing social work, either building on good practice elsewhere, or as in some of the cases that we see around the table—certainly The Fostering Network project—good practice that we can import from other countries, which we can adapt and develop to the particular needs of the country? My view would be that there is a little way to go to get that in place, but that there is a programme of work that the Government set out in July that will get us a long way towards that.

Q185 **Chair:** Jonny, Simon and then Steve, are you aware of the Innovation Programme's project, and do you hear about recommendations and innovations?

Jonny Woodthorpe: Yes, we currently have an application in for the next round, so we are fully aware of that. Part of the area that we are looking at is how we can learn from elsewhere in the country and the innovations, particularly around the link between foster care and other provision types—residential care and others. We are very much aware of that, particularly the Mockingbird, and we used that to reform our commissioning.

Simon Bower: Certainly as a by-product almost of the current framework, the partners on the group have looked to join up to apply for the Innovation Project, in terms of establishing new residential models within the area with smaller local authorities working together in partnership. Then we look at how that dovetails with our foster care framework and the provision that is available and that we are looking to commission from that framework.

Steve Walker: Leeds has been involved as a beneficiary of the Innovation Programme, getting funding to help us to go further and faster in terms of delivering better outcomes for children. We have also been involved in the Mockingbird pilot and in multi-systemic therapy, so it has been very important for us in Leeds in terms of helping us to develop a strong culture of practice in the authority.

Q186 **Chair:** According to our research, we have 59 projects to date under the Innovation Programme from DfE and another 11, which takes us to 70. That is quite a large number. Is it a bit too complex? Is it a bit too difficult for local authorities to navigate around the best examples? Simon.

Simon Bower: I will probably have to defer to Jonny on that, because he is very much involved.

Jonny Woodthorpe: The learning we have taken from the Innovation Fund has been very useful in forming our vision and our thinking around what works well. Taking your point around the complexity and about defining the detail, what I have read to date does not go into the



minutiae of the detail around what would happen if I were to take a project and then replicate it in our region. Some of the detail required to do that is not necessarily readily available. What it does give you is that high-level vision of looking at what works well, so that you can then embed that within your practice, so I guess it is that: the ideas, rather than necessarily the practical tools. That is my understanding of it.

Melissa Green: Certainly as the recipient of an innovation grant, I am really impressed with the way the programme does not look at that as 70 distinct programmes, each going off and doing their own thing for three years and not sharing learning. I would really echo Graham's point around thematic evaluation. We have been encouraged not just to look at the Mockingbird Family Model and the impact that has, but what broader learning we can draw from that and use across our work with local authorities and independent providers. So while it might seem overwhelming to have 70 programmes, I think what you are getting is a real body of evidence that will produce models that can be replicated but will also give us broader learning about the sector.

Graham Archer: The one thing that I would add—and you would not expect me to say, “Yes, I agree it is too complicated”—is that I think it was right to have a broad range of projects. I think there is a challenge for us as we get evidence from those projects, and as we disseminate that learning, to distil what are the really powerful lessons and to create themes from them that local authorities can easily access and, where necessary, drill into the detail. Clearly we need to frame that in a way that is easily and attractively accessed, so that people do get the learning and do not feel overwhelmed.

Steve Walker: I think it is important that the programme is thematic. Variety is important because social work happens in a variety of different contexts. The other thing that I think the programme has stimulated is a culture of openness among local authorities; authorities involved in the Innovation Programme and organisations like The Fostering Network are very keen to share. I think one third of local authorities in England have been to Leeds during the time that we have been involved in the Innovation Programme to find out more about what we are doing and how that can be applied within their context, so it has had great benefits for the sector.

Q187 **Chair:** It is relationship and networking between authorities—between individuals and leaders of different councils—to draw out the best. Is that something you would all agree with?

Last but not least, before we move on to Suella, there is obviously scope for innovation within authorities. I think that has come through in the last 10 or 15 minutes. The question, though, is are there enough resources? It is not just a question of the good old, “Do we need more money?” but capacity, staff and leadership. Graham first.



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Graham Archer: The first thing I might do is turn that question around. It does feel to me that resources are undoubtedly tight. The fiscal position is tricky for local authorities. I think that provides part of the platform for needing innovation. We do not see a very direct correlation between the performance of individual local authorities and the amount that they spend on social care. We do see some projects in which there is a process of redesigning social work and thinking about early intervention and the quality of social work, and reducing the number of children who need to be removed from their family can save money effectively, so yes, the resources and the quality of leadership is an important factor in this.

If we thought there were sufficient high-quality social work leaders, then we would not be investing money in a development programme for practice leaders in every local authority, and we would not be working as closely as we do with the Association of Directors of Children's Services. But I do think that the Innovation Programme has shown a great willingness—we have had over 500 applications for funding—and we have identified, as you say, 70 projects that I think have some really good learning and that are really well-led and have the capacity to influence the way the system as a whole works.

Q188 **Chair:** Thank you. Any further comments before we move on to evaluation with Suella?

Simon Bower: I would just like to say that by working together with a group of 14 councils, the efficiencies that we are able to achieve from that has allowed an investment in contract management, which has again allowed the opportunity to seek innovation and develop the different ways of working within the foster care market. There is definitely the appetite to do that, and certainly the authorities that I work for are demonstrating that with investment.

Q189 **Suella Fernandes:** You have mentioned the Mockingbird Family Model. Without wanting to repeat some of the points you have made, what would you say are the broad lessons that can be learned from it?

Melissa Green: I would echo some of the sentiments that were shared in the previous session. The key things for us are around reconceptualising foster care and foster care support. What the Mockingbird Family Model does, for those not familiar with the model, is it creates an extended family of foster care, so six to 10 families are supported by a hub carer or what is known as a constellation. The key things that we have seen come from that are peer support and respite for foster carers, and a broader network of support and relationships for young people. Those have then had the impact around placement stability and increasing placement stability, increasing choice, increasing teamwork and co-operation between those in the team around the child. So we are already starting to see some of the early signs of those impacts that they have already seen in the States for the last 11 or 12 years.



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For us, it is about stripping back foster care slightly. I think everybody in this room would feel the same—that people feel families are stronger when they have an extended family network around them. It is a shared wisdom in our society that new parents are best supported by peers, other families and their wider network. In foster care, that same support network is not provided. In fact, the conditions in which you begin your time as a foster carer when a placement is first made between foster carer and child can be incredibly isolating for both the foster carer and the child. Not only are you often looking inwards into your family, so you are cut off from your extended family and peer network, but foster carers—particularly those who are slightly older when they become foster carers—find that they have just become disconnected with their own social networks, because they no longer have anything in common with those around them. What this does is recreate that network for those foster carers. It just taps into some of the things we know to be the key issues in foster care at the moment.

You have touched previously on recruitment and retention of foster carers and we know that remains a challenge. We know that one of the best ways of recruiting foster carers is through word of mouth, yet our recent “State of the Nation” report suggested that only 55% of foster carers would recommend it to a friend or a family member, which is a really telling statistic, because we know that group are also very passionate about foster care and really feel it is worthwhile, yet would not recommend it to someone close to them.

We know that 11% of foster carers feel they will leave within the next one to five years, so there are some real challenges around maintaining our foster care workforce. Often when people leave foster care it is because they feel they did not have the support and the resource around them. What the Mockingbird Family Model does is create that, and create that safe space that the first session talked about, where foster carers can share their concerns, work through issues and de-escalate things that we know all too sadly often end in placement breakdown.

Steve Walker: We have six Mockingbird hubs now in place in Leeds. I think they have allowed foster carers who work with particular groups of young people—for example, with adolescents—to support one another, share and develop expertise. It has played an important role in raising the status of foster carers and recognising their skills and expertise. Three of our hubs are focused on kinship carers, because it has a very important role to play in kinship care foster carers, who can be more isolated than your mainstream foster carers, because very often relationships within families have been disrupted by children becoming looked after. So we found the Mockingbird Model very important in increasing the support that is available to kinship carers.

Graham Archer: I wonder if I could add one process rather than a substantive point. The other thing that The Fostering Network have shown in the way they have introduced the Mockingbird Project is its



scalability and that is obviously a really important thing. They began with half a dozen local authorities; they are in a second wave now with a further half a dozen. That shows that this is something that is replicable in a range of settings and in a range of different types of local authorities.

Melissa Green: What I would add to that is we have new services who are starting in phase 2 of the programme, but for our existing services, Leeds included, what we are looking at is working with more specific groups of young people, and young people with specific needs. So as well as rolling the programme out to more services and exploring it in different geographic or demographic circumstances, we are also looking at ways it can be used to support young people with particular needs or particular experiences. Certainly, how it is applied in the States is that there is an outer layer of people outside the constellation; they could be SGOs, adoptive families or birth families. You create this wider network that means that, when it comes to some of the areas we discussed in the first session, you could look at applying that model more broadly to provide the support that I think we all agree is needed for all families, whatever placement type you are talking about.

Jonny Woodthorpe: We have certainly taken some elements of the model into our specifications in terms of investing in foster carers, making sure they have sufficient respite, training, and support around the foster carer. We don't have a Mockingbird model within the region, but we certainly have taken a lot of those core elements and it has certainly influenced our specifications.

Q190 **Suella Fernandes:** You mentioned scalability. Looking realistically at scalability, would you say that the Government should focus more on targeted intervention, such as young people with particularly challenging needs, or do you think this can go everywhere, bearing in mind that this is against the backdrop of a reduced level of Government funding?

Graham Archer: If you are thinking in terms of the Mockingbird project particularly, I would have thought that it is scalable to a number of different local authorities and a broad range of settings. I don't think that is a decision for the Government to make. It is about individual local authorities deciding that this works for them and pulling, if you like, the Mockingbird project to them rather than having Government from the centre decide that this is something that everybody should do. Our record in mandating that kind of change is perhaps not the strongest and I think that combination of testament from other partners and a desire of local authorities to take things on is the most powerful way of spreading things around the country.

Melissa Green: I would echo that. What we have heard is that there are 70 programmes, different models, different interventions that we are exploring. Local authorities know best the young people that are in their care and the needs that those young people have. I think what this programme and other programmes are doing is providing choice. Sometimes it will be specific interventions, specific target groups,



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sometimes it will be a broad approach to managing and supporting foster care. I do not think we should mandate that. I think there should be options there for ADCS and their teams to be able to choose what works best for them.

From a personal perspective with the Mockingbird Model, I think it offers both, because it provides you a platform or a way of organising foster care. We are exploring that over the next three years in wave 2 of the funding, but it also allows you to look at could you provide support specifically for a group of young people with a shared experience or particular needs? I would add that the fidelity of the model is that the Mockingbird Family constellation should provide a normalised experience of childhood for young people, so we are not talking about putting a group of young people together all with the same experiences or the same needs. We are talking about introducing them into a diverse group of families where they will learn from them and get support from different people.

Q191 Suella Fernandes: Lastly, the Mockingbird model, as you mentioned, is a very strong lesson in how foster carers can access support and respite care. How would you say that those provisions could be made more available to carers?

Melissa Green: More generally outside the model?

Suella Fernandes: Yes.

Melissa Green: I guess we will always end up coming back to money and making sure that there is money in the system to ensure that there is the appropriate amount of support. We know the two things that foster carers regularly say is that they receive insufficient respite or insufficient respite of an appropriate standard and availability. We also know that 49% of foster carers have no training plan post-approval, therefore some of it is about money and investment. I think some of it is time and space for services to look at the needs of their young people, the needs of their foster carers and be able to plan that appropriately. It is putting a focus on those things.

We know those two areas are things that increase the recruitment because I think a lot of foster carers do ask as they are going through the approval process, "What support will be available to me, what training will be available to me?" but then making sure that that is a formal part of the package of support for a foster carer. It should not be a privilege to get respite support. We talked about that again in this morning's session. It should be part of what you have so that you have that release, that safety net for you and for the young person to allow space and time to release some of the pressures that sometimes bubble up.

Steve Walker: Could I just add that investment in support for foster carers is not something that is optional? It is something that absolutely needs to be in place and not to invest in it is a disinvestment because you



will not be able to recruit or retain carers. Having a good range of support available to carers is how you will recruit and retain carers and that is how you will have a strong network where you are able to place children locally within their communities if they can't be with a family. It is not something that should be optional. Whether there is enough money in the system, clearly as ADCS I would say more is needed, but it is also having the right framework in place to ensure that that money is being spent wisely.

Simon Bower: With the South Central model that we are running now, we have developed what we call an alternative to residential provision that specifically targets those children who are in residential children's homes, but we feel would be capable and would benefit more from being in a family-based environment. What we can do is use potential savings from a residential environment to invest heavily in a very well-resourced foster care placement that does have additional respite, additional levels of support and is a more tailored model to the needs of the child. We are looking at spending and it is our spend-to-save model.

Jonny Woodthorpe: Echoing some of the other points, I think we are clearly committed to value for money. That does not necessarily mean reduce costs. If we invest in the foster carers at the outset we get better outcomes for our young people. If you look at it from a purely financial point of view, that does deliver long-term savings. I think financially, as well as being the right thing to do, investing in foster carers is essential.

Chair: A stitch in time saves nine?

Jonny Woodthorpe: Exactly.

Q192 **Lilian Greenwood:** We have heard evidence today and previously about the challenges faced by local authorities and independent providers and it seems that there is a need for more collaboration and co-operation. Do you think there are particular barriers to local authorities' children's services working effectively together and what can be done to overcome these?

Steve Walker: No, I don't think so, or there shouldn't be. In Leeds, across Yorkshire and the Humber we have—similar to colleagues from Bournemouth—what we call the White Rose Framework, 14 local authorities that work together with independent fostering agencies, one single framework for that. It is very important to be clear about what you are trying to achieve and to have a common understanding of what you are doing, because that then enables you to put those kinds of frameworks in place and to share and develop. But it is about partnerships and relationships. As Graham was suggesting earlier, I think the current climate of austerity means that local authorities are having to work more closely together. If we are doing that in the right way for the right reasons with a clear focus on delivering better outcomes for children, that is a good thing.



Q193 **Lilian Greenwood:** Coming to Jonny and Simon, what were the barriers to pulling together? How have you overcome them?

Simon Bower: We have a very solid group and we work very well together. That has been a real enabler in order to progress in the manner that we have done. We are quite an ambitious framework group and we are looking at how we can work in partnership with other frameworks like the White Rose model and in the south-west with the Peninsula. There are various London models and large authorities as well that are doing their own thing. We are going to explore opportunities of cross-working between different consortia so that we can look at opportunities for streamlining processes and sharing resources. What we are very keen to do is foster a consistency of approach within the authorities so that when we work with the foster care agencies they are receiving the same message or very close to the same message from all the partner authorities. It takes away a lot of the levels of bureaucracy and discussions and time—which of course is money—that is involved in the various relationships that we have.

In terms of sharing resources and working together, we are doing well. We would like to potentially expand our current group, if the opportunity presents itself, and work with other consortia as well. There are issues like us all going out to tender at the same time, which we know is very resource intensive for the foster care agencies. Exploring ways of better managing that process between us or even going as far as having a shared procurement single-point facility I don't think is unachievable.

Q194 **Lilian Greenwood:** You have made it sound very doable. Graham, sitting in your position, what would you say from the overview?

Graham Archer: I think there are some really good examples, both in individual areas like the ones we have just heard about and in adoption. There are some good broad examples. If you take the collaboration that happens in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, in Richmond and Kingston in London, in the tri-borough, at least until recently, there are some powerful benefits from bringing either specific services or the whole of the children's social care services together. It is not easy to do. I think it requires, as Steve said, a really clear statement of the benefits and the objectives. It takes a certain amount of bravery among both politicians and officers in local government to share ownership, decision-making and accountability, but ultimately it is about the quality of those relationships locally and beyond. I think it is doable and there are some good examples. I am not going to pretend it is easy, but it is something we should encourage, particularly where there are economies of scale in a difficult fiscal environment that will be more of in the future.

Q195 **Lilian Greenwood:** Is there anything we can learn from the tri-borough situation falling apart somewhat?

Graham Archer: I am not close enough to the detail of that to give you a strong answer. Clearly there are both practical and political aspects to



that. What I would say is that there are lessons to learn from the period of time that the tri-borough worked effectively together. From the Ofsted ratings that occurred in all three local authorities you can see the power of that and you can see the power of a group of strong senior managers across those three authorities coming together and thinking about how they do things better. You get that scale of leadership and innovation from bringing people together. In other examples you see stronger leadership teams supporting weaker ones. I think that is true in both Hampshire and the Isle of Wight and in Richmond and Kingston, where it certainly was not a takeover, but it was about bringing that strength to other places.

Melissa Green: At The Fostering Network we represent services across the spectrum. Our members are both local authorities and independent providers. We see some great examples of collaboration between local authorities and I think many of those have already been referenced. We also see good examples of local authorities working in partnership with IFPs and independent agencies.

Going back to the question about barriers, the national narrative, the distinction between a local authority provider, a local authority foster carer and an IFP foster carer is sometimes damaging. A third of our young people are in placements with independent providers. We think a mixed economy is very powerful. We all want our young people to be matched with exactly the right families and a mixed economy that provides choice helps us to do that more effectively across the country. However, there are distinctions and competition that builds up sometimes within local authorities and IFPs. There is competition for foster carers, but a group of people who are in demand, the focus on cost and how you calculate the cost of a placement all exacerbate this division between independent providers and local authorities. We would like to see that national narrative change.

The Fostering Network is doing some work at the moment to bring local authorities and independent providers together to look at what are some of the common issues for fostering agencies and services across the UK. Those issues are the same. From that, the things we are noticing are better shared planning between local authorities and independent providers and understanding need in a locality and recruiting and supporting that appropriately. Reviewing commissioning arrangements to make a more effective partnership between the independent providers and local authorities would also help. But I think with something that could bring both sides together to work more effectively, obviously the outcome is better placements for young people.

Q196 **Lilian Greenwood:** Less of the “them and us” and more of talking to each other?

Melissa Green: Absolutely.



Simon Bower: I think that is an interesting point from the South Central consortium's point of view, because those are the issues we are very much trying to address. We are inviting the National Association of Foster Care Providers to sit on our board, so that we have the voice of the IFA within our consortium meetings. We are looking at regular engagement events with our providers, where they will have the opportunity to shape the forthcoming events based on recognising those common areas between themselves, our in-house providers and us as commissioners. I think it is a very important point and it sounds like we are on the right path, which is reassuring, if nothing else.

Q197 **Lilian Greenwood:** Moving on from that, I wanted to hear from you two about what successes or improvements your framework has achieved so far and what benefits you envisage going forward. Tell us about what is good, what is making the difference.

Simon Bower: The framework itself started on 1 April, so in terms of tangible benefits it is still very early days, but I think the group that has been established over the last 18 months has become a very powerful force working together on our shared vision, which is improving the quality and the sufficiency of foster care placements within the region. It is a large region. The emphasis has not been on cost, although it is always a factor, but the emphasis is more on sufficiency and quality. We are doing a large piece of work on sufficiency, which we intend to do over the whole period of the next four years, in monitoring our sufficiency and where the foster carers are geographically, what services they offer. We can then start producing some sort of mapping data, which we hope to be able to share with not only the partner authorities but with the independent foster care providers, so we can see where the foster carers are not and as such identify the appropriate areas that we need to for that targeted recruitment.

We are under pressure to keep our children local for a number of reasons. It is generally recognised for most children—not all—that a local placement is preferable and will result in better outcomes. Sufficiency is an absolutely key driver for us and working with our foster care providers so that we can improve those areas. That is our key driver. So far we will be running all hosts of data mining over the period so that we can closely monitor our foster care providers. We want to try to establish what good looks like and which of our providers are providing the best service for us. That is going to be at a local level as well as a regional level and will give us a whole host of information that we can then analyse to see where changes need to be made or where improvements could be made. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but that is certainly a large part of it.

Finally, we will be evaluating the effectiveness of the framework arrangement. We are hopefully soon to commission an external provider to run a full evaluation over the next three years to see what impact it has had and what impact the investment in the contract management aspect of the project has had and whether it is positive. We certainly



hope it will have a positive impact, but we wish to be able to demonstrate that so that can then in turn inform our future commissioning when hopefully we will go out as the consortium that we are now or an even stronger consortium in the future.

Jonny Woodthorpe: Just a couple of points. You have said most of it, but I think the relationship with local authorities is key. We are working much more closely together and the data that we will soon be able to harvest from our shared data intelligence will be a driver for improved commissioning, more informed commissioning. We have ambitions to have a shared sufficiency strategy, a shared marketing position statement for the region. That is going to be a driver and that is already having unintended consequences/benefits in terms of the joint residential project we are doing and some independent projects we are doing. It is already having benefits.

The other opportunity, which I think Simon mentioned, the alternative to residential provision we have is trying to make stronger links between provision types so that we are taking a whole system approach. Rather than just seeing it simply as foster care and residential, we are trying to look at the transitions between the two and encourage our IFA providers to work more closely with residential providers and so on. For example, the NAFCP are on the project board for the residential project we are doing and they can work closely with that. It is trying to make the transition to dovetail between the provision types rather than reinforce the siloed approach where you have that type of provision and that type of provision. I think that will make smooth transitions more likely.

Q198 **Lilian Greenwood:** Do you have any very clear targets that you expect to be delivered through the framework?

Jonny Woodthorpe: The bit that I think is particularly of great attention locally is our Lot 4, which is our alternative residential, because there is a need to identify between the partners that there are young people who are in residential care and for some young people that is the right place for them, for others it is perhaps no longer the right place for them. It is ensuring we can move them on in a timely manner at the right place at the right time in the right location. A key area of focus is on getting that area right. It is an area that we are working with IFAs to shape. Our evaluation with the IPC is looking at that, how we can continue to improve and share that learning nationally if we can. I think that is probably one of our key areas of focus and the Lot 4.

Steve Walker: There are a couple of benefits that have come out of the framework over the past two or three years while it has been employed. The first is for independent fostering agencies having a single coherent framework to which they work and to be able to have a single conversation with a group of 14 local authorities. I think it has had an impact on sufficiency across the region and placement stability because we are now being able to place children locally. It has facilitated sharing of information about what fostering agencies work best with what kinds



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of children under what kind of circumstances. If you need a placement for a child with this kind of needs, this is the independent fostering agency that these children are probably best placed with for the support and expertise that that agency may have.

It has also had an impact on being able to involve independent fostering agencies in planning for the future. If we are, as colleagues in Bournemouth, thinking about a particular initiative or focusing on a particular group of children, we are able to involve independent fostering agencies in that discussion at an earlier age and in a far more strategic way than happened previously. Finally, it helps that sharing of expertise between local authorities about where particular things have worked well, where we may be piloting something like Mockingbird and sharing what we have found from that across the region.

Q199 Lilian Greenwood: If I can turn to another aspect—I will try to go quickly—there are increasing examples of local authorities that are contracting out social work or children’s services, or working closely with charities and independent agencies, such as TACT running Peterborough’s children’s services or Achieving for Children in Richmond and Kingston. Very quickly from each of you: is it to be welcomed and could it go too far? What do you think?

Graham Archer: The Government have of course encouraged a number of those, and indeed required some where there has been failure. I think it is to be encouraged in a particular set of circumstances. The impact of the trust in Doncaster, which is non-profit-making and has taken responsibility for the delivery of the whole of children’s social care services in Doncaster, has made a very sizeable improvement in performance there, an improvement that would not have been made had that action not been taken. We can see the beginnings of that in Slough. Examples like that in Peterborough and elsewhere, where you see local authorities choosing to work with partners—Coram in the adoption field, for example, have done that well with a number of local authorities—can again show really positive outcomes. I think you need to be very clear about what the benefits are, why it is necessary to make that kind of step or why that kind of step is beneficial. I would say it is to be welcomed in the right set of circumstances but needs to be handled and managed carefully and taken at a pace where it can be made to work effectively.

Melissa Green: I would echo those sentiments. We would encourage anything that allows services to think differently about what they do and home in on what their challenges are, but not change for the sake of change. We welcome the Government’s targets for alternative models, but it needs to be tailored in the right way and we also need to remind ourselves that you don’t necessarily need to change a model in order to effect change. I think Doncaster and Slough, who we worked very closely with on the Mockingbird Model, are examples of where they have turned things around using an alternative model. You could use examples like Rotherham, where a traditional model managed in the right way with



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strong leadership also brings change. It is about getting the right model for the right set of circumstances.

Q200 **Chair:** We are going to have to move on. Are there any other quick points before we move on to commissioning?

Jonny Woodthorpe: The needs of the child need to be paramount. I have no particular ideological position on that. I think the needs of the child need to be out in the forefront; it is why you are doing it.

Q201 **Ian Mearns:** Is the current system for commissioning foster care placements fit for purpose and if not, or not completely, how could it be improved?

Chair: Graham, do you want to kick off on that one?

Graham Archer: I am not a foster care expert or a commissioning expert. I think you would be better to talk to our local authority colleagues, some of whom are.

Chair: Let's go with Steve.

Steve Walker: I think it is fit for purpose. Within Leeds we have a well-run service that matches children to placements. We have placement choice, strong recruitment, good retention, so if there is sufficient attention given to it and sufficient focus on running a service that delivers the best possible outcomes for children, it is clearly doable. We are doing it within a context of 14 colleagues across the region who are working with us around the framework. Yes, I would say it can work.

Simon Bower: We are working very efficiently and effectively in terms of a large number of local authorities with different challenges and different volumes of looked after children still achieving effective commissioning. That does not mean to say there are not troubles. We still have placement breakdowns and short notice breakdowns and a lot of those challenges still exist. I think choice is great to have. I don't think we always have the luxury of as much choice as we would like and sufficiency comes into play. With the work that we intend to do with market development and improving the sufficiency regionally we should be able to reap those rewards in the years to follow.

Jonny Woodthorpe: The model is okay. I think there is potential for greater efficiencies if we work more collaboratively not just within our own consortium but with other consortia. If there is more collaboration between local authorities, there is scope for increased efficiencies and improved practices.

Q202 **Ian Mearns:** But if you extend the net and you are getting these economies of scale in some areas, you would not be looking at extending placement areas for individual children as a result of that, would you?

Jonny Woodthorpe: No.



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Graham Archer: Could I make one very quick point, having pointed you elsewhere to start with? I would expect the fostering stocktake, when it starts, to have commissioning and the quality of commissioning and how that works as one of its themes.

Q203 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. We have been told that an increasing number of contracts are being weighted more on price than on quality. Should we be concerned about that?

Simon Bower: I think the concern is difficult to measure. South Central have not excluded anyone on price. We have not capped price because that was not our key driver for going out for tender. I know that other areas have more recently gone out and capped fees for foster care, some of which have been below current rates, and I think that has had mixed levels of success around the country. There are some levels where some good examples can be seen and others where it has been unsuccessful. IFAs in a lot of regions have had no increases for many years because of the restraints and the austerity felt within local authorities. It is very difficult for local authorities to do anything but at least manage the rates as best we can. That being said, we still have to provide quality placements for the looked after children, for which we are all responsible.

Steve Walker: I think the focus has to be on the delivery of the best possible outcomes that you can for children with a view to whether or not you are doing that in the most effective and efficient way. You need some form of contract management to make sure that you are getting the kind of outcomes that you are paying for, but if you are making judgments solely on price I think you are in a very bad place.

Q204 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. We have heard that relationships between local authorities and independent fostering agencies have on occasion been strained, with some mentioning a "them and us" culture. How can we ensure that working relationships are improved?

Simon Bower: To be honest, that is my job and that is going to be my job for the next four years.

Ian Mearns: We are now going to get a comprehensive answer.

Simon Bower: I will try to offer you a comprehensive answer as much as I can. Part of my role and my job description, effectively, is in being a mediator. I don't have any experience of marriage guidance or anything along those lines, but my role is in being able to work with both the local authorities and the foster care providers, when they have a difficult situation that they are unable to resolve. The notion is that they will then come to me and I can take a view and hopefully offer a solution that will move those situations forward. It has been clear that I am not necessarily on the local authority's side, and that I have to apply a commonsense approach in order to make sure that the correct decision-making is achieved.



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I will know them all. I have a huge job of visiting 50 foster care agencies every year, some of which will be visited up to four times a year, possibly more. We will be holding events, probably two events every year, in which all the agencies will be present, and all will be invited to shape the forthcoming events, so that their issues are properly heard and addressed. From that, we hope to develop small tasking groups as well. If we have particular areas of need or concern or that we need to do some work on, then we will be looking at establishing groups within the local authorities and drawing in our partner agencies as well, so that we can move those issues forward on a consortium-wide basis.

Jonny Woodthorpe: I think also listening to providers. To give you a tangible example of that, at the outset of the framework we were told by providers that they sometimes feel reluctant to be too candid about any issues with the framework because they feel it may have a detrimental impact on their ongoing commercial relationship with us. There are things we can do. For example, we are working with our evaluator to create mechanisms whereby they can put forward anonymous feedback so if they are unhappy with Simon or somebody else they can say that without the risk of that. There are quite a lot of tangible practical things we can put in place to encourage that reciprocal relationship of trust and openness.

Steve Walker: I think some tensions are to be expected and in some respects to be welcomed. There is a limited pool of foster carers and sometimes there is that tension of foster carers moving from a local authority to an independent fostering agency or back, which makes you think they have spent time recruiting, training, developing and now they have been poached by somebody else. I think there is the opportunity for local authorities and independent fostering agencies to learn from one another, certainly with recruitment and support for foster carers. In Leeds and across Yorkshire and the Humber we have learnt a lot from the way in which independent fostering agencies have worked.

I think that working collaboratively, as colleagues are doing in Bournemouth and we have done across Yorkshire and the Humber, has enabled us to be more open with independent fostering agencies. I think there is often a feeling that there is something more going on, "There is something that we perhaps don't know. They are not sharing all the information that they have. We do not know what you are trying to do in terms of sufficiency within the region". I think we have been able to be more open and to be clear that we value the resource and expertise that independent fostering agencies bring to fostering.

Q205 **Chair:** Thank you. I want to talk quickly about the Leeds child-friendly focus, because that has clearly done very well, given that five years ago you were inadequate and now you are pretty good. Steve, do you think that is something that can be replicated elsewhere?

Steve Walker: Absolutely. The basis on which we have built the improvement in Leeds is we started from the premise that if Leeds wants



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to be, as it does, the most successful city in the UK, then we need to be the most successful city for children. We came across the concept of child-friendly city. What that has done is two things. It has enabled us to place children at the heart of the growth strategy of the local authority. If I want to attract businesses to Leeds, it has to be somewhere that is good for employees to come to, and if I am going to move there, I am going to move my family, so it has to be a good place for children to be, with good-quality education—somewhere where children are valued.

The other benefit is that it has moved children's services beyond the normal partners that have to work with us. We work very closely with businesses. We have well over 150 ambassadors across various companies in Leeds and they are able to engage with us. For example, looking at issues of foster care recruitment, in 2010-11 when we started the journey, we recruited nine carers, which was fewer than we lost. In 2014-15 we have recruited 76, and that is because we developed what we called the Leeds foster care offer, where we were clear that foster carers do an incredibly valuable job for the city in supporting some of our most vulnerable children. It has enabled businesses and others to come there. We have a foster care awards annual event, which is sponsored by local business. It has been very important in putting children at the heart of everything that we do.

Q206 Chair: That is a very holistic approach, isn't it? It is thinking about engagement across the piece, and obviously that is something that might be tried elsewhere.

I have one last question in connection with Leeds. You have had success with what you describe as a dedicated recruitment team. That is good news. Is that something that you think is really important in terms of recruitment of foster carers?

Steve Walker: Absolutely. The approach of many authorities for many years was unfortunately if you applied to us to be a foster carer, we were doing you a favour assessing you and, "We will get back to you when we get a minute, because we are very busy." In actual fact, if people are coming forward as foster carers, they are offering a very valuable service and they need to be engaged quickly. That simple thing of establishing the recruitment team is absolutely fundamental, and I would encourage all local authorities to do something similar.

Chair: Thank you very much. I want to thank all five of you for some excellent contributions to this final session of not just the fostering day, but of the Education Select Committee. It is a very good point on which to end, I think, and I am very grateful to you for coming today and answering our questions so clearly and helpfully. Thank you.