

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Fostering](#), HC 340

Tuesday 17 October 2017

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; Michelle Donelan; James Frith; Emma Hardy, Trudy Harrison; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell; Thelma Walker; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1 - 66

Witnesses

I: Christina Brandi, Fostering Service Manager, Action for Children, **Tay Jiva**, Adoption and Fostering Manager, PennyAppeal, **Alison Michalska**, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services, and **Dr John Simmonds OBE**, Director of Policy, Research and Development, CoramBAAF.

II: Mark Douglas, Chief Operating Officer, Doncaster Children's Services Trust, **Andy Elvin**, Chief Executive, The Adolescent and Children's Trust, **Professor Ray Jones**, Emeritus Professor of Social Work, Kingston University and St George's, University of London, and **Steve Miley**, Director of Children's Services, Hammersmith and Fulham Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Action for Children [[FOS0079](#), [FOS0115](#)]
- Penny Appeal [[FOS0042](#)]
- Association of Directors of Children's Services [[FOS0099](#), [FOS0113](#)]
- CoramBAAF [[FOS0081](#)]
- The Adolescent and Children's Trust [[FOS0072](#)]

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Christina Brandi, Tay Jiva, Alison Michalska, and Dr John Simmonds OBE

Q1 Chair: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the first evidence session of the newly appointed Education Select Committee. For the benefit of the tape, could you kindly introduce yourselves, please?

Dr Simmonds: I am John Simmonds; I am Director of Policy Research and Development at CoramBAAF.

Alison Michalska: I am Alison Michalska and I am the President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

Tay Jiva: I am Tay Jiva, I am the Adoption and Fostering Manager for NGL PennyAppeal.

Christina Brandi: Christina Brandi, I am the Fostering Service Manager for Action for Children.

Q2 Chair: Thank you for coming. We have been looking at some, in some ways, disturbing statistics about placements and, for example, the Department of Education's statistics show that 20% of all children in care had two placements in the previous year; 2,910 children in foster care experienced 3,490 unplanned endings in the year 2015-16, and you will know these statistics better than I do. What I want to try to understand is why this is happening and what should be done about it?

Dr Simmonds: There is a range of issues but it is the case that many children when they come into care come into care—

Chair: Could you kindly speak a bit louder?

Dr Simmonds: Yes. Many children who come into care, come into care in an emergency, so the issue for the local authority is understanding the circumstances of those children in their pathway into care and how to identify a placement that best meets their needs. The first placement that is made may be the only placement that is available on an emergency basis, so it is very likely that most children will have two placements because the placement is unplanned in the first instance.

I think there is a second set of issues, as the local authority makes a care plan for the child, as social workers and lawyers come to take a view about how to put a legal order in place, whether it is a care order or any of the other orders, possibly adoption, then that care plan will emerge and other views will come up about where the child should be placed and who the child should be placed with. That would include more detailed issues emerging as the children are assessed and we get to better understand their needs.

There are other issues. The greatest proportion of children in foster care is of adolescents and the range of issues that those young people face



HOUSE OF COMMONS

both local authorities and foster carers with can be deeply disturbing. We have become very familiar with issues like child sexual exploitation; there can be very serious mental health issues, and as local authorities are trying to plan for the child, there will be an emerging set of issues about what is the best placement for this child.

The other thing that we have become very familiar with is placements that disrupt or break down. That becomes a familiar issue for us all as well.

Q3 Chair: We have evidence from one child that said that they had had six placements in four years and another six in less time than that.

If you can try, because of the time, to just give slightly shorter answers, that is very helpful. Thank you.

Does the rest of the panel have any views about the extent of it and what could be done about it, and do they agree with what the Fostering Network said, that there were 7,600 new foster families needed just to adequately meet the need?

Alison Michalska: Certainly I agree with all that John has said. He has very eloquently summarised many of the issues. I want to add that not all placement moves are negative. Some are very positive and planned as part of—as John said—a continuum of making the right choice, longer term, for the particular children. We would always be distressed by the sorts of children that have many, many moves, but these are a small number of increasingly complex and typically older children. But absolutely there is a gap in sufficiency of foster carers and we have no reason to doubt the Fostering Network's figure of around 7,500 additional foster placements needed for children. The more we can have, the more placements we can have, the more chance we have of finding the right place for the child the first time.

Q4 Chair: You agree with that figure?

Alison Michalska: Yes.

Q5 Lucy Powell: 7,500?

Alison Michalska: Yes.

Chair: Just for the benefit of the tape, I think they said 7,600 but I may be corrected.

Tay Jiva: My work is very much based with faith communities, particularly the Muslim communities, and my work is very much focused on the recruitment of Muslim foster carers and adopters. In terms of the appropriateness of placements—particularly dual cross-religious or cross-ethnic placements from children that I have spoken to and foster carers I have spoken to—it is not a clear-cut case that for every child necessarily they should be, or have to be, in a placement of the same religion or the same ethnicity. Religion and ethnicity are part of a range of factors that need to be considered when placing a child into foster care or adoption.



When I have spoken to care leavers or children who are in placements where they have been with carers of other ethnicities or religion, there has been a mixed response. Some people feel that it might have been better for them in terms of their understanding of their identity, if they have been placed with the same culture or religion. For others it has been a fantastic experience, particularly for asylum seeking children who stated that in terms of understanding British culture, in terms of learning English, it has been very beneficial for that.

Q6 Chair: What you have said comes on to another part that obviously was a controversy in the summer, the Government guidelines say that people should be ideally put with their religious or ethnic backgrounds if that is what they want. What do you think of that? How far is it being adhered to and if it isn't, why not? Please feel free to comment on that as well.

Tay Jiva: My experience as a social worker and from working with local authorities and independents is that every social worker knows that that is preferable. However, if the child has a greater level of need in another area—for example, if it is a child with complex disabilities—it can be extremely difficult to match the disabilities with faith and culture, and disabilities take precedence over faith and culture. A child of complex disabilities might not have an understanding of their faith or their culture and that need takes priority.

The will is there from the Social Services and the social care sector, but in terms of the capacity within the system—the number of ethnic minority and people of faith—there is evidence to suggest that those numbers could be higher.

Q7 Chair: What I am trying to find out is how much—despite the family of the child wanting a particular ethnic or religious background—this is happening, and whether people are being denied that opportunity to be with foster parents of their own ethnic or religious background.

Tay Jiva: The will is there from services but the placements are not always there.

Christina Brandi: I would absolutely agree. Running services across the south-east, sufficiency is the real key issue. We just do not have the choice of foster carers to meet culture needs of children and young people. However, there is some good cross-cultural matching and we do work very hard to ensure that our carers are trained and informed to be able to promote cultural identity and to be able to connect and link into communities where children and young people do get a sense of their identity. A connection to their family unit is also equally as important.

The challenge will not go away but there are ways to address that.

Q8 Chair: Do we know the extent of it, the figures? Is there any data?

Dr Simmonds: There is data from Ofsted that shows the proportion of white to mixed, African, African-Caribbean, but it does not really tell us



HOUSE OF COMMONS

anything about whether for any child they are matched with carers who reflect their ethnicity, culture, religion and language. That is unknown on a child-by-child basis.

Q9 **Chair:** So we do not know if the Government guidelines are being enforced.

Dr Simmonds: No. I would agree that the issue about—

Chair: Sorry, just one quick one from you and then we will go on to Lucy.

Q10 **Lucy Allan:** Following on from that, should it be a priority that matching along ethnic lines is up there? I think, Tay, what you were saying was that what is in the child's best interests is their needs overall need to be assessed rather than just cultural background. That made absolute sense to me and it is a little bit worrying that we are saying, "Oh, it has got to be done along ethnic background."

Alison Michalska: What I would say is that we take a range of things into account when trying to find a suitable placement and often a greater priority is about ensuring that we find somewhere local so children can be at the same school, friendships, contact with the birth family if that is appropriate, the communities. That is the most important thing. While intrinsically it feels right, I am not aware that there is any evidence that suggests that culturally appropriate placements make a particular difference.

As colleagues have said, if foster carers are well trained, well supported to be very sensitive to the needs of children if they are different to theirs, and help them then to access appropriate faith and community groups, communities of interest locally, we would always try and do that. However, for me it is unlikely to be the most important.

We do take the needs and the wishes of children into account, particularly of older children. If that was what was of key importance to them, then that absolutely be our priority to try and match that.

Q11 **Thelma Walker:** Linked to what we have been discussing, there has been a 60% rise in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children over the past two years. What specifically can we do to encourage diversity from ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds for foster carers? What can be done specifically linked to that 60% increase over the last two years?

Tay Jiva: Can I just go back to the question about statistics? I did a Freedom of Information request in September 2015, which found that that one third of local authorities do not record religion in a way that can be reported in terms of figures but based on those figures, there were 3,000 Muslim children entering foster care over that year and approximately half of those are spending time living in non-Muslim homes. I would suggest, just to answer that, that there is a shortage of Muslim foster carers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and meeting the need for them, their needs are different from meeting the needs of children in the UK of religious and ethnic background. I would just state that. It is very complex.

Q12 Thelma Walker: Very complex. So what specifically are we doing to meet those children's needs that have already faced trauma?

Dr Simmonds: We did a study at the University of York on unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in foster care and the issue of matching is hugely complex. Most of the placements we looked at were white UK families, couples, taking those 14, 15, 16-year-olds into their care. Many of those young people have never experienced electricity in a house or were surprised about dogs being allowed in the house; the food issues were huge. So the question for those foster carers, and for those young people themselves, was of enormous adaptation but we found very robust evidence about both the young person themselves and those foster carer families being able to adapt and being very keen to adapt in the way that they accommodated to each other. That would include finding out where the local mosque was but at the same time finding out and enabling the young person to join the local football team.

There was no minimisation of the trauma of the profound issues that arise through the journey itself, but those foster carers were deeply aligned to trying to make the best they could for what those young people had experienced and what they were facing.

Q13 James Frith: Good morning. On that point, is it unreasonable guidance from the Government when the resources are not there—the carers are not there—to give priority to this matching along religious, cultural and ethnic lines? It strikes me that emotional, practical, available and sensitivities are better priorities.

Alison Michalska: What I would say is that at the core of fostering is that ability to provide a safe and loving home that can meet the individual needs of individual children, whatever their background, whether they are an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child that has had a huge trauma, whether it is one of our own children that is particularly vulnerable and has been traumatised. Our priority is always to meet the needs of that child.

I do not think it is an unreasonable thing for the Government to say, "You should consider this," because I think all local authorities would. What it begs to is the much bigger issue around sufficiency of foster carers, full stop, and particularly offering a more diverse foster carer supply. One of the things Government could do would be to get behind a national campaign for recruiting foster carers, to actually show the range of skills. Yes, we need foster carers that can offer ethnically and culturally sensitive, if not matched, placements but we also need foster carers who can deal with very challenging adolescent young people, and we need those who can cope with larger sibling groups, children with disabilities.



The children who come into care, by the very nature of them coming into care, are very vulnerable young people with complex needs. The more we can do to raise the profile of fostering as being such a worthwhile thing to do and providing such a valuable service—there could be more national campaigning to raise the awareness and the rewards also of being a foster carer—that would be very beneficial.

- Q14 **Lucy Powell:** Following on from that—but moving things on slightly from this matching around ethnicity and culture, just to that more general point about how can we make sure we have got enough good foster carers who feel supported and well trained—I do not know if there are figures about churn, but certainly my experience locally is that foster carers feel that a lot of the time they are unsupported, and that can put them off taking on more children or continuing with that role. You say, rightly I think, that sufficiency and supply of foster carers is the key number one issue here, but what more do you think we could do in terms of the training and support aspect of that—perhaps we could come on to recruitment later—to make sure that we really do keep those foster carers on board who do come forward, that they can take on more children, and go on to have a long career?

Christina Brandi: Yes, talking about the churn is quite apt because what we are seeing is foster carers potentially getting to a point of burn-out. Having a skilled workforce that can recognise the importance of the role is one of the key aspects to foster carers feeling valued and also retaining them in their roles because the more satisfied they feel in their roles and part of a professional network, the more that they feel satisfied that what they are doing is making a difference.

The role of the supervising social worker or the fostering social worker is absolutely critical and the level of expertise, training and support that they have is the key to enhancing and unlocking the carer's ability to have that compassionate and consistent understanding of the trauma and being able to tap into what has happened to that child, what those behaviours mean, and to be able to constantly manage that throughout the child's transition and life with them.

The workforce is probably the first step—and consistency in that workforce, because changes in social workers for the child is not only distressing for them, but it is really challenging for the foster carers to manage.

- Q15 **Lucy Powell:** One thing I have come across quite a bit is that the foster carers themselves have a social worker, and the children themselves have a social worker, and sometimes that structurally does not always work for the family as whole. Would anybody have any comment on that?

Dr Simmonds: There are some projects evolving to try to address that issue.

- Q16 **Lucy Powell:** Would you like to explain a bit more about that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Simmonds: Yes. That issue about the changes in children's social worker is very upsetting for everybody.

The issue about what the alignment is between the child's social worker and the supervising social worker can be difficult too. These projects are exploring the potential for having just one social worker who has a very specific focus on placing the foster carers at the centre of the placement. Many foster carers report issues about feeling marginalised when decisions are made elsewhere. There are still issues about who can authorise haircuts, overnight stays or school trips. There is an issue about the authority of the foster carers who, for all intents and purposes, are the child's parents on a 24/7 basis. We are trying to emphasise the significance of that by having only one social worker supporting them fundamentally in the way that they exercise that particular role.

Q17 **Lucy Powell:** Would the rest of the panel agree?

Alison Michalska: There are tensions. We always need to make sure that we do not lose the focus on the child. The issue then is in the long term, stable, where the permanent plan for that child is to stay with that foster carer and maybe then stay put, I could see that working. Where you have foster carers who are perhaps dealing with more short term, more respite, it would then be very difficult to say, because the social worker might have—I don't know, say—15 children on their caseload placed with 10 different foster carers and then what happens when the child rightly moves on or goes back home. The foster carers would then have lots of different social workers, whereas having a social worker supporting the individual foster carer and their own family brings some stability. I can see for and against, to be honest, in that.

One thing that probably could help and has been a significant improvement in children's residential care, is having some nationally agreed quality standards for foster care and foster carers. That would standardise the very basic sort of training but also what carers could expect in terms of ongoing training and support. Issues about who can approve a haircut or an overnight stay—some of those things could be teased out through national standards. That would also help the status of foster carers; I think it would help with portability. So you might have a foster carer who has been approved by a local authority in the south of the country, moves up north and, at the moment, would have to start again. That is crazy. There has to be some portability. If you have been assessed as an appropriate foster carer by an agency or another local authority—subject to checking that the house and conditions are appropriate; social workers do not have to requalify, because they move from one local authority to another—

Q18 **Chair:** Okay, I am going to Will, because of time, and then to Emma. But just quickly before I do, given what you have just said, should there be a national database of foster carers?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alison Michalska: I think it would be too unwieldy. The numbers are too large and the number of children is too large. It would be permanently out of date and I think would create a huge bureaucracy and wasted resource keeping it up to date. So personally I do not think that is the solution.

Q19 **Mr Wragg:** Good morning, everybody. You have touched on raising the status of foster carers and this is quite interesting given the written evidence that we had, because while there was unanimity in wanting to improve the working conditions and the employment standards for foster carers there was not unanimity in the feelings towards professionalisation or the unionisation of foster workers. How do you square what you are saying with that—that there is not necessarily uniformity of demand from foster carers themselves to be “professionalised” in that way?

Alison Michalska: We can get hung up on the word “professional”. I would see that the foster carer are the absolute expert for the children they are working with and should be treated as any other parent, any other professional. Their views are incredibly important.

Do I think that we should attach a label of professionals to foster carers? I think it would be misunderstood and certainly many of the foster carers in my own authority, if they thought they had to be a qualified professional, would never have become foster carers because what they provide—they are highly skilled at offering very loving, ordinary homes with extra skill on top. So we trip over ourselves. There are different types of fostering, so it is incredibly specialised. For me, that respect and how we treat them in the standard, so for example direct access to CAMHS, is hugely variable across the country. What I am arguing for is standards about what support foster carers could expect to support them in their role rather than them being seen as a distinct employed profession because that would put off a huge number of people.

Q20 **Emma Hardy:** Good morning, everyone. Sorry, I am a bit croaky this morning.

You mentioned previously about training being needed for foster carers but in the report we were reading some of the training has been described as not fit for purpose. A lot of foster carers have replied that they prefer on-the-job training instead. Sadly you do not get training before you become a parent so how can do you square that circle in giving people the support and training they need but making it still a home for the children that need a home?

Dr Simmonds: I run a series of groups for foster carers who look after small babies discharged from hospital or placed very shortly after they have been born, so that is a particular group of foster carers. It is very likely to be temporary, although it may go on for two years or so. They were very experienced in looking after babies but the issue for them was there were often issues with babies that are drug addicted, where issues start to emerge about their feeding or their development, where their



HOUSE OF COMMONS

access to an expert in baby development was really important to them. Being able to talk and explore with other foster carers and possibly paediatricians or social workers about these issues, that was key to their development.

That is very different to what one might find with foster carers looking after a teenager with mental health problems or who is excluded from school. Everybody gets a level of generic training but then it very much depends on the kinds of children that are placed with you, the development of your own motivation and expertise and the degree to which there is then a direct response, depending on the kind of child or the kind of children that you then come to look after. Being able to discuss those issues with somebody who has expertise, is supportive and can recognise the upset, the anxiety the sense of loss in many instances, is really important. There is a wide range of issues with that. Training is undoubtedly one part but one cannot underestimate the importance of just being able to talk about some of these issues and feeling that somebody understands what you are struggling with.

Alison Michalska: To add to that, one of the key roles of the social worker working with the foster family is absolutely to be that support and that listening person and to offer that supervision but also to help access the bespoke training that is needed to meet the needs of a particular individual child. In most local authorities, or certainly in fostering agencies, they have their own networks of support and information evenings, gatherings for foster carers to come together with their children as well, to have that mutual support.

Tay Jiva: From my perspective of training, which is required for carers looking after Muslim children, I am not aware of training to date that I feel is sufficient to prepare the carers. There is a great deal of interest in that kind of training. I have started to deliver sole training but in terms of Penny Appeal's capacity, we cannot provide sufficient training for the whole of the country.

Q21 **Lucy Allan:** One of the factors that leads to placement breakdown is that foster carers do not have adequate information about the child coming into their care. I wonder what you thought—perhaps starting with Christina—could be done to ensure that the challenges the child may present are being properly briefed to the carers, because failure to meet their expectations can lead to this placement breakdown and instability.

Christina Brandi: In my experience with working in fostering over the last 10 years that is a consistent issue that comes up with foster carers. I do see that fostering agencies could have a greater input into how they support local authorities at times with information sharing because what we do see, as we talked about before, is with referrals for the child where there have been placement breakdowns and they come back out to look for other foster homes, is the same referral information with no update of the child. The information about the child is the same as it was previously.



Q22 **Lucy Allan:** Is it ever deliberately withheld in order to secure a placement?

Christina Brandi: No, it is not deliberate. The experience I have is it not deliberate but there are time pressures and resource pressures in local authorities around getting that information, and a lot of the time there are professionals outside that statutory service who probably know that child better, with greater detail about the personality of the child and what makes them tick, what kind of carer would work well for them and bringing in other professionals from other services would be more helpful at times around that referral process than it just coming from a child's social worker who may only have known that child for a matter of weeks. It is looking at widening the net of how we get that information in a way that can be done in the timely manner that it needs to be to move that child quick enough.

Q23 **Lucy Allan:** Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Alison Michalska: Occasionally it is an emergency placement and information is limited. You asked whether anything would be deliberately withheld; certainly not to facilitate a placement. There might be sometimes something of a highly confidential, sensitive, safeguarding nature that would not be shared or not necessarily straightaway, but that is for very specific reasons.

I want to pick up on Christina's point about who knows the child best. While we are very clear with local authorities about our role in corporate parenting, certainly one of the things that ADCS is pushing very hard is talking about partnership parenting and whether, while teachers, youth workers, police—other people who might know the child better—have a longer relationship than the social workers or have seen them over a more sustained period, have really engaged in their responsibilities to help share and help settle a child in. Coming back to matching, sometimes the most important things are keeping the same school, the same youth club, the same other networks that children are used to so that they can grow together.

Q24 **Chair:** Before I move on to Michelle, on that point, in terms of the schooling, given the frequency of placements, is consideration given to the fact that the child has to change schools often and the nature of that? It seems that the changing of the schools is happening an enormous amount of times.

Alison Michalska: It depends on the reasons for moves, obviously. We would always try and keep a child local and to their local school because often that is the one consistent thing. If there isn't a placement locally, then I know that up and down the country local authorities are spending lots of money on taxis to get the child to the school that they are used to, if there is not a placement nearby, and the move might be to move the child back into that community.



At the other end of the scale, where we are dealing with difficult teenagers, often they are excluded from school so often that school is a difficult thing and sometimes part of the reason that placements break down, but we would always try to sustain that—where a child is in school and that is a positive for them—even if we have to move the placement. Often we will transport children to school rather than move them, wherever possible.

- Q25 **Ian Mearns:** I accept that an awful lot of effort goes into that but for an awful lot of youngsters the school is quite often the one stable. It seems to me also that sadly that one of the greatest expenditure is busing or taxiing kids around to keep them in school places. We have to try to find some rational way of finding children a stable family to stay with—a stable family background for a foster placement—but also the vital importance of keeping them in that school setting if at all possible. Experience to me has shown that maybe things are changing but the school placement has been a secondary consideration from social work staff.

Alison Michalska: There are things that have helped that more recently, not least the role of the virtual school head within local authorities around supporting the school and also supporting the social workers, because, after all, social workers are not educational professionals at heart. The role of the virtual school and their team has helped to ensure that the child's personal education plan is fit for purpose. Yes, we do spend a lot of money transporting children back to their school, because that is how important we believe it is for children to do that.

But, again, at the heart of this is sufficiency of foster carers. We need more foster carers so we can have that real choice to be able to match children to the right foster carers in the right community so they can continue to attend school, continue to be with their friends, continue to be in contact with their birth family where many children return to. That is really important. There are always exceptions when the priority for the child is to be moved well away from their home community for their own safety.

- Q26 **Michelle Donelan:** Hello. I want to touch on the involvement and integration of young people themselves in the decision-making process about their care.

Back in April there was a seminar in Parliament by Action for Children and Adolescent and Children's Trust, which I went to. The feedback from the young people themselves was that there were so many different changes in their placements and they were not informed most of the time, and when they were informed there was not enough time to make any preparation; they could literally just be moved straight after school, which is very disruptive and has a knock-on effect in their lives. I want to know what your experience was of that and your thoughts on that matter.



Dr Simmonds: That issue is profoundly important. When we think about the issue of matching, the issue about the disruption, the loss, the separation that most children have experienced when they come into care is profound. There may be a relief at one kind of level but also that sense of continuity, of feeling you belong to something, to feel that you are listened to and that those views are taken into account—it has driven and it is very much at the centre of both law and practice in so many different ways. The issues about delivering it are complex. I think it goes back to these issues about sufficiency, about the general churn in the system. From a child's point of view, it is not stable and permanent in the way that it needs to be, and that is probably one of the most fundamental questions that the whole system faces at the moment.

We have driven very hard those issues about adoption and permanency for many, many years now. I still think that, on these issues about settling children in foster care—in a way that they come to experience that, "This is the centre of my life"—we still have some way to go.

Long-term foster care is one way of thinking about it—special guardianship may have another part to play in all of that—but listening to what the child needs, thinks and feels about those issues is absolutely fundamental to the system. It is what all of us would expect in relation to our own children and we still have some way to go in delivering it for children in foster care.

Q27 **Michelle Donelan:** The evidence suggests that it is extremely variable up and down the country, to the extent that perhaps it is a postcode lottery if you are a person in care as to whether you will have any say or input or even know about the changes that are going to happen in your own life. Is that correct?

Alison Michalska: At the heart of good quality social work is putting the child and their views absolutely at the centre of what they do. There is a difference between being able to meet every want that the child might have, as we would with our children, but where we cannot meet a child's particular want, then we ought to be explaining to them why not.

It is something that is very large throughout the Ofsted inspection framework. It is absolutely a key part of social work and, indeed, that wider social care training, and children should have a strong voice in making decisions about themselves, whatever their age. We should be taking their views and wishes into consideration. That is not to say we can always meet them, it is not say it would always be appropriate to meet all of their wishes, but we should be explaining to them—

Q28 **Chair:** Am I right in understanding that the children have access to advocacy services?

Alison Michalska: They do.

Q29 **Chair:** Am I also right in saying they often do not know about this? If a child feels that there have been too many placements, or he or she is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

moving schools, what rights—like legal rights—does the child have to either have an advocate or to appeal or whatever it may be?

Alison Michalska: Absolutely children should all have access to an independent advocate, in addition to the social worker. The best practice—certainly in local authorities that I have worked in and the ones I know where children are invited to participate in their review—is that it might be they attend in person, or the advocate or the social worker will take their views into account; they can write in; younger children might draw a picture as to how they are feeling.

We do absolutely all that we can to take their views into account, but also children can have access to that independent legal advice should they really want to challenge what is happening for them.

Q30 **Chair:** Is there an obligation to tell the child that they have this right?

Alison Michalska: Yes. Children should know about that. For children, sometimes older children, when they come into care, it is a very difficult, challenging time for them. That might not be something they have taken note of. So in the best quality of care we have consistent social work practice and social workers who will reinforce that. Not every local authority is able to do that. You will all be well aware of the shortage of social workers and the churn of social workers. What we would set out is to be absolute best practice, what we would want to do, and as John has said, sometimes delivering that on the ground is incredibly difficulty, but it is not for the want of trying.

Q31 **Chair:** From what you are saying, going back to what Michelle just said, it is a postcode lottery as to whether the child knows if they advocacy rights or not.

Alison Michalska: It shouldn't be.

Michelle Donelan: But we are talking about what is, not what it should be.

Q32 **Chair:** Yes, that is what I am trying to understand. What you are saying is there is a postcode lottery.

Christina Brandi: With the young people we had come through Action for Children, it is a real mixture just within the small group that we had of young people that came. In my experience, advocacy services are not frequently used for children; especially in the independent sector they are not as readily available sometimes to those children and young people. I would just emphasise that the skill set of the child's social worker really is key here, around enabling the child to have a relationship with somebody who is a key person who makes decisions about their life, their care plan. That is where I think we need to put a lot more of our resource and energy, into having good quality children's social workers who know how to work with particularly difficult, challenging, adolescent children and young people.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q33 **Emma Hardy:** You have mentioned—we have not really mentioned enough—social workers’ workloads and how much they have to take on. In fact I know, in my area we do not have enough to cover everybody’s needs. You have talked about advocates, how aware are children that they have them, and then you mentioned legal advice. I would be very interested in any young person who has ever taken legal advice in the entire area where I am from. Just before you talked about social workers being very important, but earlier you said social workers might have only known the child for a matter of weeks. So if we have social workers who have only known the child for a matter of weeks, with massive workloads, children not aware of advocacy services and not aware that they can seek legal advice, it seems to me that we are wholly reliant on that child being able to represent themselves properly. So in reality—and sadly this is the reality—how does that happen? How can that child truly influence when their placement starts or ends and how much say do you think that child should have? How much should they have and how much do they have?

Christina Brandi: What we were talking about earlier is that the foster carer is the expert on the child. Where their voice should be one of the loudest in the care planning decision, it is not. When you are talking about the person that could speak for the child with the strongest voice, knowing that child best, in most cases the most appropriate person is the foster carer. It goes back round to ensuring that they are recognised as a really intrinsic part of that professional network.

- Q34 **Lucy Powell:** To follow on from that with a similar point, it seems to me that there are many good aspirations in terms of frameworks and outcomes that people want in this area, and our inquiry could focus on those, but the reality is that how they get delivered is incredibly varied because of two critical factors: the quality of social work—and we all know that the vast majority of local authorities require improvement or worse—and the supply of foster carers themselves and how they are cherished.

As people on the front line, if you had one or two things that you think could affect those big problems that we have in system, what would they be? If our inquiry does not address those two big fundamentals, we are missing the point. Maybe, just quickly, one each.

Dr Simmonds: They are difficult questions to answer practically.

Lucy Powell: I know; that is why I am asking.

Dr Simmonds: I suppose the one thing from my point of view is this issue that what we are creating for a child when they come into care is an alternative family life. That may last for a short period of time or it may last for a longish period of time, if not the entirety of the child’s minority. I think these issues about the foster carer’s role—and this is the model that we all have—is that parents are absolutely core to listening to the child when they are going to bed or you are giving them a bath or you are having a meal together. We would not generally expect our children



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to turn to an advocate or to a lawyer to get their views known; they would talk to us.

Q35 **Lucy Powell:** But that model is not disseminated, is it, generally?

Dr Simmonds: No. I think that is the dilemma that we are currently faced with. When we are thinking about what children want and need and how we take into account their wishes and feelings, it is the person that they will talk to on a 24/7 basis, and that is going to be the foster carer. We have been very ambivalent about recognising this.

Lucy Powell: I agree with that, okay.

Alison Michalska: Yes, I very much agree with what John is saying, and I think that up and down the country there are places where social workers are overburdened and most local authorities would want more social workers. There is an issue about supply and with the cuts around authorities.

Lucy Powell: The resources.

Alison Michalska: The resources are a big issue. I am sure there are cases where it is not good enough and I think I can speak for every director of children's services up and down the country; if you have children that you know that are not getting a good enough service, the director would want to know about it. Up and down the country there are excellent social workers, excellent foster carers, doing exactly what John has just described about ensuring that it is right for children.

Lucy Powell: I declare that my dad was a social worker; he is just recently retired. I agree with you.

Chair: We have time for two quick questions so we will finish promptly at 10.45.

Q36 **Trudy Harrison:** Good morning. Regarding the training that we referred to earlier, I have made a point ahead of this session to speak with some foster carers and also employers and I only found one employer, Morgan Sindall, who have a foster policy for their foster carer employees, which is to provide, I think, five days' extra leave. One foster carer I spoke to was only being paid £36 a week to do this job—provide this service, provide a loving family home, look after the child under government guidelines and then be prepared to say goodbye. My eyes were opened wide at the wonderful people that are our foster carers. I wonder how employers are being encouraged to support their employees, if they are foster carers, to be able to attend that training.

Christina Brandi: It is variable. We have foster carers that do have positive employers and when they are going through the assessment process, it is part of the assessment that we would talk to employers of potential carers, the references, so they would be aware that that is happening. More and more we are trying to have that dialogue with them around how they would support them to be able to be released for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

training. It is a real variable and I have not seen any carers where there is a policy in their employment, the same as there is for adopters, around allowances they have to be at training or have a period of time at home with the child while they are settling in. I think that would be a really strong position to support carers.

- Q37 **James Frith:** At the top of the evidence session, we heard about guidance with priorities that did not match the priorities that were in reality a priority. You talked about national standards, and in all the questions and answers, it struck me that there would be a role to share best practice and nationally standardise the proportion of social workers to children in care, to have a target for care worker numbers proportionate to looked-after children. That might indeed determine an improvement of funding and resources that we talked about.

I would like to hear your views on how national standards might best arm you to go back and do the best practice that we know exists but is not uniform by any standards. As with the guidance point, we have potentially a system that is advocating a priority that is not based in reality and expecting standards that are not nationally applied. I would like your thoughts on that.

Alison Michalska: In terms of standards for foster carers, it would help to even out with that training, support, what they can expect as foster carers in caring for their child and also within that what we would expect from them in terms of the care. Some of the standards you are talking about around other things are probably for another day but, for example, a standard caseload. There are ranges around what is an appropriate caseload, but every child is different. You might have one family with half a dozen children or a single child, a child who is incredibly complex, so whenever you try and say, "A social worker to have a caseload of 18," or whatever, there will be another social worker who for very good reasons has a lot less than that; another two might have more. What is at the heart of it is the quality of the support and supervision so that social workers' caseloads are manageable and foster carers are supported to care for the children they are caring for. It needs to flex around the children.

- Q38 **James Frith:** The point I am making as well, though, is about the proportion of foster carers to children.

Alison Michalska: Yes, we certainly need a lot more foster carers and if we are going to be able to match and support children in the way that we would want to, we need a lot more foster carers to have that capacity.

- Q39 **Chair:** Briefly, can I press you again on this idea of the national foster carers' database? You said it would be very complicated to do. Why is that when you can just register online, have an online system? What is the problem?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alison Michalska: Very quickly, if you are trying to have a database that has where your current fostering vacancies are, it will change by the day, by the hour, so potentially only at a point in time—

Chair: It is a register of foster carers not necessarily the vacancies.

Alison Michalska: Right, okay. With all respect, I am not sure what that would add.

Tay Jiva: From my perspective on that, for the national standards side of things as well, there are 645 adoption and fostering agencies registered with Ofsted. They all work separately in terms of recruiting foster carers and adopters. From my experience, it is small pockets of work done and their resources are not used efficiently. If there was more standardisation—where the resources could be more centralised and they could work with bigger research organisations, bigger marketing and PR organisations, and also do some work on the profiles of children in care as opposed to the profiles of foster carers—recruitment could be more strategically organised, and training as well, to identify the needs.

In terms of the database, if there was an organisation that was responsible for recruiting all foster carers and adopters, that organisation would then naturally be able to gradually form a database of available foster carers.

Q40 **James Frith:** It would professionalise the process as well, wouldn't it, in terms of that cycle of recruitment?

Alison Michalska: To be very clear, the local authorities have a duty to ensure sufficiency in their area. I am absolutely all for far more national recruitment campaigns and certainly there are collaborations—Yorkshire and the Humber have a single first entry point into it if you are interested in becoming a foster carer—but what is really important is the local link between the local authority, or the local fostering agency, and their carers. If it was somehow owned by a national body, there would not be that relationship between the local authority and the local carers.

Q41 **Ian Mearns:** In reality the local authorities, while they have a duty to make sure there is sufficiency, are poaching foster carers from each other—not adding to the overall base, but taking foster carers from each other. That is not helping this process.

Alison Michalska: Absolutely, that is why we would get behind a big national campaign to raise the number of foster carers. All I am saying is it is important that foster carers have a close relationship with the local authority that will be mainly placing children with them. If we come back to the point that the majority of children are placed in their communities close to home, it will be that close local authority that needs to have that really close relationship with its carers.

Chair: Okay, we have to wrap up now for our next witnesses. Thank you very much indeed.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Douglas, Andy Elvin, Professor Ray Jones, and Steve Miley

Q42 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone, thank for you coming to our now second evidence session of the new Parliament. For the benefit of the tape, could I please ask you to briefly introduce yourselves?

Andy Elvin: Hello, I am Andy Elvin, I am Chief Executive of TACT, The Adolescent and Children's Trust.

Mark Douglas: I am Mark Douglas, I am the Chief Operating Officer of Doncaster Children's Services Trust

Steve Miley: I am Steve Miley, I am Director of Children's Services in Hammersmith and Fulham and responsible for the Tri Borough Fostering and Adoption Service.

Professor Jones: I am Ray Jones, I am a social worker, I was the Director of Social Services in Wiltshire and more recently I have been a Professor of Social Work.

Q43 **Chair:** Thank you for coming and thank you for your evidence. Do you think that there is a spaghetti junction of supply in foster care that is quite confusing? You seem to indicate that in your paper particularly, Professor.

Professor Jones: In my view, and it came up in the conversation this morning, didn't it, what we are looking for for children is stability, continuity; and from those who are caring for the children, we want them to know their children well and have a major commitment to them. The more we fragment our services, the more churn and change we have, the more complexity we have, the more difficult it is to give that continuity to children that we need to have within our communities.

Q44 **Chair:** You talk about scepticism towards privatisation—or, as others have described it, certain organisations benefiting by £40 million profit for foster care, is your objection to private foster care because of that or, if all of it was not for profit, would you have a problem with independent organisations doing the foster care? If so, why?

Professor Jones: My issue with commercialising foster care is that those organisations are trying to make money out of it and that is their driving motivation; that is what their directors are required to do, to look after their shareholders and their owners. My concern is it may skew decision-making and it may lead to a deterioration of service because they are trying to drive down costs to generate a profit. That profit is money that is going out of the service. Big sums of money, tens of millions of pounds that should be there for the care of children, are now leaking out of the system. So that is my concern about privatisation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

My concern about having not-for-profit organisations is much less so. There is an expertise that might come from specialisation, but if those not-for-profit organisations are not local, not embedded within their communities and not providing a continuity of care within the local networks, we have that disruption and that discontinuity I was talking about earlier.

Q45 **Chair:** You seem to cite in your evidence that one of the problems of whether it is not-for-profit or privatisation is that fragmentation in terms of locality. We talked about schools earlier and having an impact on that. In essence, would you favour organisations like Andy's?

Professor Jones: I favour the local authority doing it for themselves because they are embedded in their local communities. They have accountability to their local community; they know the local community. Organisations like TACT offer a very viable and valuable specialist service but what I would want them to do, if they were working in my area, is to embed themselves into my community alongside my local authority social workers rather than just being, if you like, more distant.

Q46 **Chair:** Would any of the panel members like to respond to what has been said?

Andy Elvin: I would agree entirely. That is exactly what we have done with Peterborough. We are embedded; we are in the same building. We have not moved the staff; it is co-located. It is the only way you can do it to start with because you have to connect to the social workers. We have made links with local community groups, local voluntary sector groups, local NHS, local business because we are interested in getting a deal going for our children in care there, and I think it is a model that can work and more local authorities will begin to look to it. I know there are 12 or 13 local authorities already talking to us about what we are doing in Peterborough.

The issue is systemic. The difficulty with fostering and adoption services in most local authorities is they are not the most important thing in children's services. Child protection will always be the most important thing. Child protection is what loses you your job. Sometimes care is not optimal; it is very, very rarely dangerous. The risk is all in the child protection side. A lot of senior management time is taken up in the child protection side. Too many fostering teams, too many adoption teams are the backwaters in local authorities. They do not get the care and attention or the rigorous management focus that they need to run a great service.

Child protection is only 10% of the job. It is protecting the child from harm. Transforming that child's life, helping them recover from trauma, helping them go on to be a successful adult is the bigger part of the job yet it is—

Q47 **Chair:** Your organisation I am sure does wonderful work. If you are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

based in the same building and so on and so forth, what is the difference?

Andy Elvin: Child protection is not my business. I do not have to worry about the child protection side; it is not my part of the business. Our organisation is wholly focused on the fostering, adoption and SGOs. It is wholly focused on permanence and families, and so everything within the organisation focuses on that.

What our foster carers have noticed in Peterborough is the differences in things like foster pay. We have a department dedicated to that, whereas in the local authority, you are just another client of the finance department and often mistakes are made. There is nothing more dispiriting to foster carers than having no foster carer pay or having it done wrongly.

The training is not sufficiently looked upon as being important and embedded in the foster carer offer. There is no proper out-of-hours service. If you are asking foster carers to look after very complex children, you need to be there 24/7 because they are. Everyone with a social work qualification in my organisation is on the out-of-hours rota, including me, because problems do not happen 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday; they will happen in the evenings, they will happen over weekends and you need to be there alongside your foster carer.

Q48 **Chair:** What advantage do you have over private foster care agencies?

Andy Elvin: The advantage we have over commercial ones is I do not have to do anything with the money other than keep the lights on so all the money we get in goes on services for children. It goes on lower caseloads for social workers, it goes on increased fees and allowances for foster carers, it goes on additional therapeutic support for foster carers, additional training for foster carers. I do not have venture capitalists who want 15.4% or more back out of the system. I do not have to worry my area managers about occupancy rates, about bed nights, about the things that on a monthly basis, commercial agencies drag their managers in to talk about because it is a business model and you have to make return.

Some of them are getting out now. Interestingly, Acorn sold up. There is a lot of consolidation in the commercial part of the sector.

Q49 **Chair:** This is my final question before I move on to my colleagues. The previous Children's Minister, Ed Timpson, said his view was what works but also the Government professed scepticism towards privatisation and commercialisation. Is your view, "What works?", and do you think there is enough scepticism towards privatisation or commercialisation in the system?

Steve Miley: My view would be definitely, "What works?" I think the independent sector does add value. If there is not sufficient capacity within local authority resources, it is helpful to be able to turn to the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

independent sector and I can say that there is no child that needs foster care that is not in a foster care placement in our three authorities, because we either have resources in house or we can turn to the independent sector.

What I absolutely would agree with is the issue about money going out of the system through privatisation or commercial profit making and that is not helpful to children. So for me it is what works for children that is the most important thing.

Mark Douglas: I was just going to add, there seems to be consensus that there is concern about the amount of money that is going out of local authority and children's services departments into private organisations. As the demand within the system gets greater, independent agencies can charge more and they can cherry pick the children who they are prepared to look after. That causes, for me, operationally, some real challenges because we have some children with additional or complex needs who it is recognised would benefit from a family, and if we cannot provide that internally, often they are not offered placement within the independent sector, so there is a real tension in terms of demand and cost that we have to manage.

Just picking up on Andy's point, to make one further point, as the chief operating officer, I am responsible for all of the operational delivery of services in Doncaster. That includes fostering, adoption, it includes child protection systems and all of the other elements you would expect to see in a children's services department. For me the strength of the model in Doncaster is by bringing it all together. We can see the system as a whole, so I can make sure fostering is equally a priority for the child protection teams, and because of the scale and size of the organisation, we have had some success at driving quality and provision through that.

Steve Miley: Can I just make one other point about the local authority resources? Matching a child, placing a child in foster care, isn't just a transactional arrangement; it is thinking about, "What does that particular child need and what are the strengths and abilities of that individual foster carer?" Therefore knowledge of your own foster care pool is really important and that is much more easily delivered by having your own in-house resources.

Q50 Ian Mearns: We have heard about local examples of where local authorities have been collaborating and co-operating with each other and we have also heard of some stories where that those arrangements have fallen to bits somewhat. Do you think there is much more that the Government could do to support and encourage local authorities to work together and, where necessary, to support one another?

Steve Miley: Our three local authorities, Westminster, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham, joined our fostering and adoption services together in 2012, which was under the tri-borough arrangements. Although the formal tri-borough is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

coming to an end and some services within that did not deliver in the way that we hoped, fostering and adoption is the one area I think where we were all agreed that we wanted to maintain that service. Even though tri-borough is coming to an end, that shared service will continue.

I think the reason why it is successful is because we pooled our carers. We provide more opportunity, therefore, to have a good match, because there is a wider selection. One borough might have an adolescent they might need to place; one borough might have a baby. It is easier to make good placements. We have reduced by 25% our use of the independent sectors. As a result, we have increased our recruitment of foster carers, although not quite in the way that we would have hoped. It is not the panacea to recruitment, but it does allow a wider pool of carers and better matching.

In terms of support and what the Government could do, regional adoption is a good example of where it is quite difficult to bring people together. The three authorities are still separate authorities, so you are still accountable to three different local authorities, so that makes it quite difficult for the fostering service. If you have a larger number, you are still accountable to that larger number of councils. I would suggest just facilitating those conversations is helpful. I know some local authorities are talking about bringing their foster services together, because I think it does add value.

Q51 Ian Mearns: Because of those levels of accountability back on an individual local authority within that sort of agreement, have you found any significant examples where no one is taking responsibility?

Steve Miley: No, quite the opposite. All three councils put a lot of attention on the fostering and adoption service. The head of service for our tri-borough service is currently reporting to the Westminster senior management team today, because they want to know. It is their fostering services, they want to know what is happening to it, so does RBKC, so does Hammersmith and Fulham. If anything, it adds complexity and scrutiny, but I have certainly not seen it lose accountability.

Ian Mearns: Anyone else?

Andy Elvin: If you are asking what the central Government could do, have less local authorities. Simple. It is very difficult to join things together service-wise if you do not merge politically, because you end up with the issue where you are still answering back to scrutiny in three places, to corporate parenting in three places.

Q52 Lucy Powell: Just a quick follow-up on that, because there obviously is an idea that maybe combined authorities you can devolve. In Manchester we have a very successful combined authority, but I just wonder, do you think there is an optimum kind of scale? Because Birmingham is huge, and Birmingham has not been great at that at all, and some smaller authorities have been much effective.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Andy Elvin: I suppose the other thing would be Birmingham is too big and has always been too big, but why are there three authorities in Bedfordshire? I think there is somewhere betwixt and between the two; there is an optimum level. Perhaps the tri-borough is a very good example of where the optimum level is.

Q53 **Mr Wragg:** Other than cost savings, what are the advantages? If cost saving was not the spur, surely all these good things that you are mentioning should have been the spur before the need for cost saving.

Steve Miley: The advantages for us are reducing duplication—so, you do not need three heads of service, reducing the duplication in terms of marketing; you do not have three different campaigns—but the two main advantages that we see are “Compare and contrast”. We have used that as thinking, “Why does something work better in one authority rather than the other?” and having a close relationship between the three authorities allows that kind of ongoing discussion. Although I meet my colleagues in London and have a discussion with them every month or so, it is quite a shallow discussion. The relationship within the tri-borough allows you to have a deeper understanding of why something might work. So compare and contrast and the wider pool of carers gives you the ability to make better matching.

Mark Douglas: I would just add that if the system is not leaking money and you are able to reinvest that money in your own services, it gives you a greater ability to innovate as well and to develop good practice models. In Doncaster we have been very successful at developing what is called a mockingbird approach, so you have a constellation of carers who all work together as a team with a set group of children. At the centre of that constellation is a carer who does not have a child, but they are able to support the other carers within that group with things like respite care, daycare and so on.

Now, that model is more expensive because you have more carers and you have some voids in terms of beds, but the outcomes for children are being seen to be much better in terms of things like placement stability, their views of themselves within that fostering network, and they see it as an extended family. That is what we want to develop in Doncaster, but it comes with a cost. The less money we spend externally, the better practice we can develop internally.

Q54 **Emma Hardy:** Thank you, Professor, for the report that you sent in. I found it extremely useful and informative. I completely agree with your call and reasons for saying that local authorities should provide direct provision for fostering. I share your concerns about profit being made. One of the points from your report that I would like to mention or question about was the point you mentioned about local authorities having brokerage workers ringing around agencies to identify available placements. In the panel just before, we were talking about how important it was for the children to be listened to about where they went and them having some control over where they are, so that really



HOUSE OF COMMONS

concerns me.

I suppose my concern with having more authorities working together in an even wider area is if you have these brokerage workers, how can you then ensure the children are listened to and they are not stuck in a different authority, they are not having to be taxied in to go their school? Where is their voice going to be represented, when it sounds as if you have a brokerage worker ringing around agencies, then that is not the social worker, that is not the foster carer and that is not the child making the decision?

Professor Jones: It is a big issue and not every local authority does it, but in some that do, it becomes the management of a commercial transaction. You are ringing around, you are trying to find an agency that will take them and then you start negotiating on price. That becomes the commercial transaction, rather than someone who knows the child trying to find the best match for the child. That is the reality of the world that we are now operating in, in terms of the market that we have created. That is a considerable concern for me.

But can I go back to two other comments that were made just now and one about the scale of local authorities? I do think some local authorities are too small, picking up on what Andy says. My view is that you need a capacity of about 300,000 population as a minimum to be able to sustain what you need to sustain. If you are smaller than that, it is even more important that you have good partnership relationships with your neighbouring authorities. One of the things that makes for good partnership working is if you have some stability in terms of leadership. If you have churn and change at the top of the organisation all the time, you never build up the relationships, the trust, the agendas with each other to develop the partnerships you need to develop across the local authority boundaries.

The recent history is that about a third of children's services directors changing every year. We just need to calm it all down a bit. We need to reintroduce some stability and some consistency and some calmness. It is something that we have made just too excitable at the moment and if we calm it down for our organisation, we start calming it down for the children as well. That seems to be a task that we really have to focus on. We are not helped sometimes, I have say, by Ofsted coming in with their judgments and councils then responding in terms of, "We have to get rid of the leadership, because it is not the Ofsted judgment we anticipated we were going to get." Somewhere along the line we have to build stability in our organisations at the top and of our frontline social workers so that we can give stability to children. Then we get the partnership working well and we get the care for children better.

Ian Mearns: I think there is an elephant in the room within all of this, inasmuch as that since 2010 we have had a Government who have made a unilateral decision to withdraw revenue support grants for local authorities on an incremental basis. That has a differential impact around



the country, depending on what the council tax base of the local authority is, and that makes a very complicated and very different picture. In my own local authority in Gateshead—who are not a bad authority, with a population of just over 200,000 in this area, so there are different conditions in different places—we have calculated if this withdrawal of revenue support grant is to carry on that by 2020, even if we do away with 100% of all of their services and we do not empty a bin, we do not mend a hole in the road, we do not have a leisure centre or a library, if we do away with 100%, we are still going to have make cuts in adult social care and in children's services in order to balance the books. There is a massive elephant in the room here in terms of capacity to improve the services.

Professor Jones: You are the politicians, not me, in terms of this. But in terms of being a professional manager, it is hard to do all the things that you talked about in the first session, in terms of we know what we ought to do in providing good services; we know what we ought to be doing in terms of staying close to children; we know what we ought to be doing in terms of advocacy services, children's rights and so on. If you start cutting that back, as you do when you have less money, we cannot do the job that you want us to do in the way we should be doing it. That is the reality, I am afraid, facing a lot of departments at the moment.

Ian Mearns: Briefly, I do apologise, but unfortunately we get professionals coming in front of us in these sort of sessions and they are telling us how much improvement they are making, despite this massive elephant in the room. I am sorry; for me it is not wearing, this is not wearing.

Thelma Walker: In support of what Ian is saying here, it is the elephant in the room, because we are talking about a rising need, with a shortage of foster carers in a time of austerity since 2010, where frontline services have been cut and cut and cut—Sure Start, public health, national health, school cuts, funding cuts. It all has that impact and it is an accumulation of year on year of cuts to our services, cuts to staffing and it is the children that are suffering. Ian, just to support your statement, we need to have that open conversation about why we are in this situation—why we are short of social workers, why we are short of foster carers. It is because, day on day, local government are facing these cuts and facing awful decisions about what to prioritise. At the end of the day, it is our most vulnerable in our society that are suffering.

Q55 **Lucy Powell:** Just a brief follow-up. I hear what other colleagues are saying. I am not always sure that more money makes good decisions, by the way, but anyway, I think that is a different thing. Equally, you can go too far with the cuts.

But just on your point, I was going to ask about that role of Ofsted point. Do you think the kind of heavy hammer of Ofsted hanging over—it seems to me slightly bizarre that we have a circumstance where, what is it, 80%



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of local authorities are below the expected standard. Does that mean the standards are the wrong place or the whole system is—

Andy Elvin: Ofsted are not improving services for children; Ofsted are not making children more safe; they are not transforming outcomes for children; they are not making things better. In Scotland, you have a Care Inspectorate, who are an improvement partner. Their role, they see it, is to improve all the services in their area, to have a continual relationship with you and conversation with you to make things better. Ofsted do not have that.

In Scotland, we have meetings with our inspector. When there are new members of staff, they come along and meet. It is much more interactive. I would not know who to ask at Ofsted to get that kind of service. It is not a helpful inspectorate in that I do not think it is making children more safe, and in some authorities it has made them less safe, because as Ray described earlier, you then have an outflux of decent staff when you get an inadequate, because everyone fears for their careers and they go elsewhere. I do not think it is helpful.

Q56 **Chair:** Should Ofsted just inspect the fostering side of local authorities to make it comparable to organisations like yours and private foster agencies?

Andy Elvin: I would not argue that the inspections we get are useful. I would not wish them on local authorities.

Q57 **Chair:** Yes, but Ofsted come in at private foster agencies and you guys and just investigate you.

Andy Elvin: Yes, they do.

Q58 **Chair:** Whereas with the council, they are looking at children's services in general and that surely puts the councils at a disadvantage. Should it be separated, in other words? Should they inspect foster care in the same way that you guys are inspected?

Andy Elvin: It might be helpful, but then if they have the same inspection as we do, I would not say that is altogether useful all the time either. I am not sure. Though they talk about looking at outcomes for children, it still feels very process-y to us.

Q59 **Lucy Powell:** What do others think about Ofsted?

Mark Douglas: Just in terms of the recent experience in Doncaster, I would not want to suggest for one second that Ofsted do not place a huge burden on children's services, including the fostering service, because they do. Local authorities try to work to the test, effectively, in terms of passing that Ofsted test. However, in Doncaster over the last 12 months, because we were inadequate, we have had a series of monitoring visits. They are quarterly. They come and look at the various aspects of the service, which was previously rated as inadequate, and it has been very much an approach about trying to help us to drive quality



in the areas of weakness. For Doncaster, it has been hugely helpful. Now, we are still inadequate. We are anticipating our big inspection within the next few months, but those four monitoring visits have helped us focus our attention where it needs to be. It has been helpful for us, so I would not want to suggest there is no benefit from Ofsted at all.

Steve Miley: I would agree. The inspection in principle is helpful and makes sure that standards are maintained. I do not think you can reduce the complexity of what a children's services department does to one word—good, outstanding and so on. I think a narrative judgment is much more helpful. I am interested to hear Mark say that Doncaster get benefit from advice and guidance and support, because my experience is that there is a real wasted opportunity that good people who know social work, who see practice across the country, do not contribute to helping you learn. They come in and inspect and mark you, give you a word, either a "good" or "not good" and then go and then you are the one searching for best practice. I think that we could be much more helpful in getting Ofsted—

Q60 **James Frith:** I concur with the comments, and the evidence from both this panel and the first panel demonstrates there are significant consequences to a period of seven years of austerity, but I draw the line as saying that we cannot, in that same time, have seen good decisions and good progress being made by professionals. I know that in my constituency there is some excellent work going on in spite of austerity, but absolutely right, what we are seeing is that there are consequences to that austerity, which is why it should stop.

I would like just to move it on a bit, but encompass both the Professor's comments and yours, Andy, about a constructive operation with Ofsted, a constructive operation with a local authority and its relationship to the Government. It is the Government's policy to intervene and close down children's services and restart, as with Doncaster. Is there a sense that that is too quickly applied? Mark, with some interest, perhaps if you could conclude comments and just see what openers we get from other colleagues.

Is the Government too quick in intervening, given this kind of constructive appetite that you seek with Ofsted? I note from the evidence submitted it is £3 million to £3.5 million just for a transferral of organisation. Interrupted leadership is quite damaging and quite often you could have a political lead change that would in turn improve the officer lead that is being experienced. Is there a sense that the Government's policy is too hastily applied, Professor? Andy, particularly keen to hear from you.

Professor Jones: It is not only that it is too hastily applied; it is the wrong intervention. When you take the responsibility away from a local authority and you place it into another organisation, there is the cost, £3 million-plus, there is a time delay, two years in terms of then focusing on making improvements you need to make. You build in a cost and you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

build in a time delay and that does not seem to be sensible for me. At the end of it, you have a complication and you have created more complexity. You have a confusion of accountability and you have a continuing recurring cost because the local authority still have the responsibility in terms of statute, so it has to employ people to manage the contract with the organisation now providing the service, which is outside the public sector.

We have created a way forward, which might be creating a bigger market for children's services, but it is leading to more complexity and cost within children's services. Is there an alternative? Yes, there is, sure, because not all local authorities have been judged as inadequate by Ofsted and have been required by the Government to give up control of their children's services to direct provision. What they have been required to do is to have someone in to direct how they will provide their children's provision for a period of time until they have demonstrated that they are on top of the job and are now doing it better.

My view is that what we do not want to do is create additional complexity and cost and time delay. What you want to do is to inject a resource into a local authority with some power, to be able to give direction, to make a local authority do what it needs to do, to understand what it needs to do, but at the end of the day still have a local authority that can take overall responsibility still for its children's service.

Q61 Chair: But according to Andy, he says the advantage of his organisation—and possibly yours—is that they can just focus on this and nothing but, whereas a local authority is always conflicted.

Professor Jones: As a social services director, I never thought that I was not responsible for the children in my community with my colleagues. I had a responsibility to make sure that the services for those children were integrated. I needed to know the communities, I wanted to know the children in care. The leader of my council, Baroness Scott, would know the children who were in our long-term care. We would meet with them through events about every six weeks. We felt that responsibility and I do not think that is any less if you are working in a local authority than if you are working in a not for profit organisation.

Andy Elvin: I think in terms of responsibility, it has not devolved at all. They have contracted out to us for what we have as a partnership, but they are still absolutely responsible. There is still local democratic control over the service and we answer to their corporate parenting committee, to their overseeing scrutiny committee in the same way as the service did when it was in-house. What they have brought in is someone who specialises solely in this side of children's services to work hand in glove with the front door and to provide a more effective service than was being provided hitherto. We have taken over the staff. We have not changed many staff. We have employed the people within to become the managers. We have just given them new leadership, new training, new direction.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It has had an impact. In the course of this year, we are going to increase foster care recruitment in Peterborough by 1,500% simply because we are good at recruiting in a way that local authorities are not, because I have marketing people at my fingertips. I can employ them in councils. They are in another part of the forest; you cannot always get hold of them for children's services. This kind of expertise can be shared. I think it is these partnerships that are the way forward and I would say local authorities, forward-looking authorities, are looking to make those partnerships. But it is not about trying to rid yourself of the responsibility; it is finding a new partner to discharge responsibilities, but to do them better.

I think that could be done both by contracting with us; I think it could be done by making internal spinoffs, if you like, for your fostering and adoption services, like the trust arrangement. I think that can also work. But it is having an organisation that is solely focused on children and permanence. It is not just foster care; it is about special guardianship families, because in Peterborough, they now have the same rights as foster carers and adopters, the same training, the same sort of support, because hitherto they were just being, far too often, left to sail off into the sunset. There is no sunset.

They are looking after the same children as adopters are, as foster carers are. They have just gone through a different legal door. We have a duty when we create families through child protection and through court processes to make sure that that family works all the way through to the child's adulthood. That is where we have been failing and I think there should be a far greater focus on permanence within local authorities. I would like to see more permanent services, where you bring all those services together. We no longer have adoption teams and fostering teams. There is one team. They are the permanence team. I think RAAs were a complete distraction. I think taking adoption away from fostering and SGOs is the wrong thing. It is the same children, they just happen to have gone through a different legal door. They need the same support.

If we move towards those models—yes, the resource is an issue, we need more money in fostering and we need more money for allowances and fees to help with things like respite care—there are systemic changes that can be made that will benefit things enormously ongoing. I think some of them we are beginning to see, but there has to be that focus on the foster carer as the expert, as Alison said earlier, and far too often they are not invited to the meetings. Their view is very little heard.

I do judicial college training and I was saying to the judges the other day, "How many of you have ever heard from a foster carer direct in your courtroom?" That person knows the child far better than anyone else you hear. Cafcass do not see children for very many hours these days; the social worker might not have a great relationship with the child and might have not been allocated for very long. Once a foster carer has looked



HOUSE OF COMMONS

after someone for six or seven weeks, they know that child better than anyone except the birth family, and yet they are not heard from enough.

Chair: We had better come on to Emma, you had some questions, but just to put it on the record, before the previous committee we did have a number of foster parents come and give evidence for precisely the sort of—

Q62 **James Frith:** Sorry; I had a specific request about local authority transfer of leadership and I would just like to hear Mark, as the only one on the panel.

Mark Douglas: What I would say is that the trust arrangements in Doncaster would not be right for everybody and I would not suggest it is a “one solution fits all”-type approach. I think what Professor Jones describes in terms of that connection between senior leadership and children in the local communities is what you would hope to see in a good or an outstanding local authority. Before I went to work in Doncaster, I worked in one of the few outstanding local authorities nationally and that connection was very, very evident.

Where you are working in authorities where there has been systemic failure over many years, that connection is often broken or lost. Certainly for Doncaster, the view that was taken prior to the trust going live and since is that only a clean break between the local authority in terms of management of services could deliver the improvement and change that was required. My personal experience of the past three years is that I do not believe that we could have created the change and the pace of change and improvement had we remained within the local authority.

Just to pick up the point of cost, we talked about a £2 million to £3 million set-up transfer cost, but that needs to be measured or considered against the cost of systemic failure, and not just for individual children, who might suffer significant harm. Prior to the trust going live—part of the consideration around the creation of a trust—there were numerous serious case reviews in Doncaster of children who were either seriously harmed or even died. We need to think about the longer-term costs as well, in terms of what is the cost to the public purse of delivering services to children who have experienced trauma and abuse. That needs to be considered within that context. It is not simply a case of saying, “There is an additional cost to set up”.

I think one of the big successes in Doncaster, and this is being tested out and Ofsted will come when they come, is the staff really wanted that separation from the council. We have worked very hard to engage staff in the new organisation. It has almost detoxified the service in Doncaster and we are able to recruit and attract staff now, because we are seen as separate, whereas we could not before.

Q63 **Emma Hardy:** I recognise that the pressure, because of the cuts to funding and the lack of foster carers, makes outsourcing quite attractive,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

but it has been suggested that outsourcing could lead to, as mentioned before, privatisation and the creation of a marketplace for children's services. Do you think this should be allowed and what problems or benefits could this lead to?

Andy Elvin: I would start by saying that ship has sailed. There has been a private market in fostering for the last 20 years. It is already there.

Emma Hardy: What are problems or benefits then, do you think?

Andy Elvin: The problems are the market does not work and it was never going to work. They have tender frameworks in each different part of the country, but the fact is when you phone up on a Thursday morning and you need a fostering placement, very few local authorities have a choice of fostering placements. Quite often you just have one, particularly for more complex children. The sufficiency thing does not work, because local authorities sometimes struggle to recruit foster carers who will look after more complicated children, because perhaps the support is not there, like out of hours and like training and very high caseloads for social workers.

There sometimes are not enough foster carers in the open market, so I welcome the idea of an education-led recruitment campaign. We tried to solve this by offering to do it for them, to make the film with us and some other not for profit fostering organisations, because obviously marketing spend seems to be an issue in the DFE. If they could get behind it, you do not have to put it on TV or you do not have to put it in cinemas, you can do all these things online. We do all the recruitment online, because that is where people are. It is reasonably inexpensive.

Sometimes local authorities are at a disadvantage because IFAs pay higher fees quite often or better allowances to carers and the carers get better support in some of the IFAs because there is more resource put into it, but on the flipside, that means local authorities are paying what they perceive to be more money, but there is an argument about local authorities, whether they get the market. So the market is there, but it has not solved anything, so I would not welcome any further market.

Chair: Does anyone else want to come in briefly, because we are running out of time?

Steve Miley: Yes. I would support effort going into recruitment and a national campaign. Particularly for inner London and other cities, where accommodation is tight, it is not so much the supply of foster carers, but the supply of accommodation is the problem. We have been having some discussions with the mayor's office about whether there could be a grant made available for extensions or loft conversions to allow more bedrooms to be provided. We have good-quality carers, but not enough space in inner London.

Professor Jones: Can I make two comments?



Chair: Briefly, if you may.

Professor Jones: Slightly changing the tone as well, one is that it is useful to look at the international comparisons. In the UK, we have many more, a higher proportion of young children in care of local authorities than would be so in Europe and many other places, which invest much more in supporting children with their families when they are younger. One of the reasons that we have this, if you like, pressure on foster care is that we are caring for more children, including in particular more young children than many other places.

At the other end of the age scale—adolescents—we have disinvested in residential care. When I was a social worker back a long time ago in the 1970s, only 30% of children in care were in foster care. We had residential provision across local authorities. Much of that was not good—a good idea to close it—but now we have disinvested too far. Most local authorities no longer provide residential children's homes. Eighty per cent of children's homes are now in the private, for-profit sector and that is an issue in the same way we have been talking about private foster care being commercialised.

My view is that we have adolescents who do not want to be in foster placements in another family because of the competition of identity with their own family. They run around the system of foster carers, causing disruption and chaos for the foster care system as well as for themselves. I would like to pitch that local authorities ought to be expected—every local authority ought to be expected—to provide some residential children's homes that it itself manages. That would be especially so for 14, 15 and 16-year-olds, who do not want to settle down into another family. We have skewed the system. We are out of step with what is happening in other countries, so it is worthwhile looking at that international comparison.

Q64 Trudy Harrison: This is quite timely. The panel this morning has been quite enlightening. The word that I have heard more than any, I think, is "sufficiency". Andy, you mentioned a 1,500% increase, which is colossal. I am keen to know how on earth you went about that and what change would each of you make to the structure of the system that delivers foster care.

Andy Elvin: Just briefly on recruitment, if you want anything these days, you Google it—other search engines are available, I understand, but that is what you do. Too much money is spent on putting things on the side of buses, on newspaper adverts and radio adverts. It does not bring you foster carers. You do it all on Facebook and using Google Analytics. I cannot pretend to be an expert; I have employed some 20-somethings who are. Our foster care statistics for recruitment went up by several 100% instantly.

But recruitment does not stop there, and where sometimes local authorities fall down is that you need to make sure that you phone them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

instantly, that when you are on the phone, you arrange the initial visit, that immediately after the initial visit, you get them on Skills to Foster. It is a momentum thing. When someone has decided to become a foster carer, it is a huge decision and then contacting you is the end of their process of decision, not the start of it. They want to get going. If they are left waiting two weeks for a phone call back, if they are left waiting two months for a Skills to Foster, they will go elsewhere—they will go to someone who can do that for them. So that is the side of recruitment and that is what needs to be done. It is not always done across all IFAs and across all local authorities.

In terms of your second question about system change, I have promised our young people I would mention this, because we talked about listening to young people this morning and the importance of listening to young people. They want to vote. They want votes at 16. The opportunity is coming up. That is what they are after, because for children in care, the state directly is their parent. They have more reason to want a say than anyone does.

Chair: After that shameless populism, can we move on to Mark, please?

Mark Douglas: I suppose just to answer the second question from a different perspective, if I could change one thing or if I could invite the Committee to consider one thing further, it is the contribution of the multi-agency partnership to caring for children, because too often foster placements fail because we do not get the CAMHs—the child and adolescent mental health services—right, we do not get the education provision right. Children's services end up holding the child, effectively, and managing the trauma and chaos that that creates. There are others who could contribute to looking after that child in a much more joined-up way and I think that would improve outcomes for children.

Steve Miley: I was going to say virtually the same thing. Fostering is about a relationship between an adult and children in difficult circumstances, where children have had difficult experiences, and that gets played out in that relationship. Foster carers need support. Supervising social workers, you talked earlier about them and their role and how that important that is. I think it does need to be supplemented by additional skilled professionals from other disciplines. We have a clinical team of therapists that work with our foster carers to support those placements and that improves placement stability.

Professor Jones: Turn the tanker around, and if the Select Committee can do one thing, it can make the argument that we need services to be local, they need to be embedded within our communities, they need to be stable. Where we can simplify rather than making it more complex, let us do that. That is turning the tanker around, because at the moment what we are doing is creating more complexity, we are creating more confusion in terms of accountability, we are creating more cost, but we are also creating a situation where the social workers who are responsible for the children that they are placing do not get to see the children,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because they are some distance away. We do not know the foster carers who we are placing them with. We have gone down a track that has made it more difficult to do the job that we need to do. If you can help us to get back on track, that would be really useful.

Q65 **Chair:** Could I just ask you to confirm: you completely favour a local authority model; you are opposed for a not-for-profit mode. Is that right?

Professor Jones: I favour having a local service that is locally accountable, which is integrated across all parts of the system and where there is accountability to the local community. I think that is what local authorities are supposed to do.

Q66 **Chair:** But in your memo—and I may have read this wrong—you talk sympathetically of when private foster agencies first started, they were rooted in their community just by a few social workers and then you said the problem was when they got taken over by bigger enterprises and so on. Is that—

Professor Jones: Yes. This goes back only about 15, 20 years. I can remember it happening in my area. Three or four social workers, really good people, decided that they would set up a small community enterprise, take some foster carers with them and they would sell that back to us. We thought at the time that was quite a good idea, because of what Andy was saying, they were quite specialised and we could use them as a specialist service. When they then became successful, they got bought on. They sold out. It got aggregated up, so we now have organisations like Core Assets providing a lot of foster care and taking a lot of money out of the business and no longer do the people placing the children have any idea who we are placing them with.

Chair: Thank you very much, all of you. I think we have finished for today, much appreciated.