

Written evidence submitted by Independent Children's Homes Association and Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers

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Additional Submission to Education Committee Inquiry The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services July 2020

There have been a number of unexpected outcomes from the lockdown situation. In addition to our earlier submission, we would like to also highlight the following issues:

- Access to social work services have been varied. Whilst a number of children's homes and fostering agencies have experienced an increase in contact through telephone and online contact, some children's homes have seen little change. Some social workers have begun to bypass children's home staff and are contacting children directly, often relaying information that needs approval from all parties and resulting in inconsistencies, upset and potentially dangerous situations.
- There has been a degree of disconnect between local authorities and care providers. Some Local Authorities have instructed social workers to go back into houses without clearing this with the provider/foster carer. As a result, social workers may be refused entry-although not access to the child-after some travelling. The NAFPP has agreed a protocol with its members for such a situation and some (although not all) Local Authorities have adopted it.

This practice is perhaps a worrying indication that the increased co-working enjoyed between providers and purchasers during the lockdown is perhaps coming to an end.

- The increased use of technology has been a significant feature of the lockdown. Young people have enjoyed greater control over family time and professional contacts. This medium has also increased many children's confidence to attend meetings and engage in education.
- Completion of health checks for potential foster carers has been more efficient since a self-declaration has been introduced that may or may not be checked with GPs by the panel's medical officer, depending on their judgement about any issues this raises. Prior to lockdown, GPs were often reluctant to complete the forms and health checks were time consuming to both book and complete.
- Both the NAFPP and the ICHA have found that children have been less anxious and have developed closer relationships with their carers throughout this time. A contributing factor appears to be a reduced need to go into school. We have concerns that forcing children back into school full time will risk these vital relationships and improved emotional well-being. We suggest that each return needs to be individualised and be focussed on the mental and emotional wellbeing of the child. Whilst we recognise the need for education, it comes in many forms and perhaps needs to be tailored better to its recipients. Initial discussion has taken place between ICHA and the National Association of Virtual School Heads re the significance of this.
- Conversely, many children with EHCPs are being turned away by schools with some stating that children from care homes in particular, are 'safer' remaining there.

- Whilst we recognise that the educational attainment gap is likely to have widened for all children during this time we feel that there is a need to recognise the significant improvements made for children looked after in other areas such as emotional development. It might be argued that this actually means some children will be better placed to engage with more formal education in due course.
- Private providers who also provide education have maintained their services throughout the lockdown, accepting outside keyworker children as usual. We feel that the mainstream education providers could work collaboratively to better understand how to work closely and safely with children at this time.
- Some local authorities have not paid their residential care providers throughout the pandemic leaving them particularly vulnerable to service failure. They have a responsibility to ensure that sufficient funds are provided for the children in their care and believe that this issue should be managed by the DfE as a matter of some urgency.
- Homes, and the small number of IFAs, graded as inadequate or requiring improvement before the lockdown was initiated will not have the opportunity to be regraded until April 2021 onwards. In some cases, these homes will have remained at this grade for over 2 years. For those who were not full at the time of lockdown and who have not been able to attract placements due to their grade, there is a real risk of closure the longer they are not regraded.

Further to this, it is of concern that local authorities will place in their own inadequate provisions before considering an independent requires improvement home.

- Some local authorities have been potentially abusing the changes brought in by SI445 by advertising their ability to fast track foster applications, when this flexibility was only intended for a small number of emergency situations, not for generic recruitment.
- Whilst fostering panels have always had the ability to be held virtually, this power was rarely used. However, since lockdown, this has become the norm and has largely been accepted as an efficient way to practice and may be more widely adopted in the future.
- As part of the measures, the quorum for a fostering panel was dropped from 5-3 members. As yet, there has been no evidence either way to endorse or censure this. IFAs themselves are working to maintain standards.
- One of the most impactful changes has been the move away from large gatherings to discuss children to video calls. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that children are engaging more with these and feel less anxious and intimidated by this form of meeting.

We would be happy to take questions on any of the above or provide further information.

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