

Minutes

15 November 2022 | 10am – 12:30pm

Present:

Jenny Alexander-Brown	Foster Carer, member of FCAC	(JAB)
Hanan Al-Najjar	Foster Carer, co-chair of FCAC	(HAN)
Linda Briheim-Crookall	Coram Voice	(LBC)
Sarah Carter	Essex County Council	(SC)
Lucy Croxton	Together Trust	(LC)
Sam Frith-Jones	AFA Cymru	(SFJ)
Nazeema Gill	Foster Carer, member of FCAC	(NG)
Cara Jones	Foster Carer, co-chair of FCAC	(CJ)
Alitha Lee-Townsend	Achieving for Children	(ALT)
Sarah McEnhill	The Fostering Network	(SME)
Charmaine Orchard	Expert by experience	(CO)
Claire Rogers	Tree House Care	(CR)
Steffi Roth	Brighter Futures for Children	(SR)
Liz Spaven	Newcastle	(LS)
Sarah Thomas	The Fostering Network	(ST)
Tony Turner	The Fostering Team	(TT)
Ruth Willetts	Foster Talk	(RW)

In Attendance:

James Bury	CoramBAAF (CB)	(JB)
Georgina Coope	CoramBAAF (CB)	(GC) (minutes)
Emma Fincham	CoramBAAF (CB)	(EF) (chair)
John Simmonds	CoramBAAF (CB)	(JS)

Apologies:

Sally Barnett	South Coast Fostering	(SB)
Angie Gillies	AFKA Scotland	(AG)

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND PREVIOUS MEETING

- 1.1 EF welcomed members to the meeting and initiated introductions.
- 1.2 EF shared meeting apologies.
- 1.3 No amendments or additions were raised regarding minutes from the last meeting.



- 1.4 During previous meeting, LC suggested compiling a document outlining FAC connections with other organisations and key areas of focus. Members to email GC brief bio stating which organisations they are employed by/ affiliated with and any areas/ issues they wish to prioritise. GC to collate in one document and share with committee.
- 1.5 EF noted Eva Elks and Chris Senior CB's main link to DfE. Both very interested in listening to and working with committees and looking to attend the Foster Carer Advisory Committee in January. EF to contact Eva post-meeting to update on key points to raise with department.

2. FUTURE MEETING TOPICS

- 2.1 SME suggested including language as standing agenda item. Useful to have continuous conversation focusing on how individual roles can influence sector culture, by supporting others to be mindful of terminology and challenging where necessary. SME noted language often bound to legislation, which doesn't reflect desired environment. Members agreed language to be prioritised for future work.

3. CHAIR ELECTION UPDATE

- 3.1 EF updated members on status of FAC Chair elections.
- 3.2 Candidates to send EF and GC short statements outlining motivations and experiences to share with members. GC to send out email poll for members to vote.
- 3.3 New Chair to be in position for next meeting on 21 March 2023.

4. COST OF LIVING, RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

- 4.1 Members discussed impact of cost of living on retention and recruitment of foster carers. Aimed to focus discussions on how best to support Foster carers and influence best practice.
- 4.2 RW gave overview of Foster Talk survey key findings. Recognised survey sent out in July and answers collated in August, so situation likely worsened since then. Key takeaway that many Foster carers feel unable to discuss money with agencies, for fear of being judged regarding motivations to foster. Vital that agencies begin financial conversations first, before Foster carers resign. Foster carers borrowing concerning amounts from formal lenders and family. Spreads negative messages around fostering, which will have huge impact on word-of-mouth recruitment. Disparity between local authorities causing resentment amongst existing foster carers. Collected many comments on how various services administrate allowances and fees. Foster carers feel processes too complicated, taking up time and energy that could be spent on foster child.
- 4.3 NG noted Foster carers just want basic pay and a pension, same as everyone else.
- 4.4 ST agreed inconsistencies must be addressed, as creates post code lottery for children. The Fostering Network about to launch piece of work, undertaken over last 6 months, working closely with economists to come up with new national allowances for children.



- 4.5 Due to financial difficulties, Foster Carers Advisory Committee members feel they can no longer recommend fostering to others. JS agreed appropriate funding essential to care for children and FC motivations should not be questioned when all they are asking for is the means to provide children with a basic standard of living.
- 4.6 CJ recognised Independent Fostering Provider carers earn more in general than local authority carers. CJ experienced judgement from disgruntled local authority carers who think Independent Fostering Provider carers don't have the right to be displeased about money. Atmosphere of us against them, when everyone should be working together. CJ earned same wage for 8 years of fostering. In no other job would someone not receive a pay rise in 8 years.
- 4.7 JAB noted raising money issues prompts agencies to look into families, as gives impression they aren't coping. Foster carers worry children won't be placed with them if agencies think they're struggling financially. Finance system broken; too time consuming and exhausting to constantly fight, which takes away from children being cared for.

5. BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSION AND FEEDBACK

- 5.1 Members moved to break out groups to discuss cost of living, recruitment, retention and recent John Lewis Christmas advert.
- 5.2 *Group 1*
- Positive about John Lewis advert, as felt like a genuine attempt to portray the care experience. Members noted descriptions of hobbies and interests of children coming into care not always accurate, so this aspect slightly unrealistic. Positive representation for young people. Focus on recruitment should be remit of central government. Would have liked equivalent focus on retention.
 - Recognised need for consistency between Independent Fostering Providers and Local Authorities and to identify ways of bridging that gap.
- 5.3 *Group 2*
- Recognised more money needed and individual agencies not able to solve this on their own. Requires national focus.
 - Foster carers resigning will result in greater costs down the line, negatively impacting children if appropriate families can't be found for them. Number of foster carers resigning greater than those being recruited.
 - Importance of recognising foster carers not asking for luxuries.
 - The Fostering Network taking direct approach by inviting providers to discuss financial implications of carers potentially leaving the service and how to bridge gap between retention and recruitment. North West quite saturated with Independent Fostering Providers and Local Authorities need to join discussion. Current number of services on offer declining.
 - Services require child-centered focus to provide support needed.
- 5.4 *Group 3*
- Felt John Lewis advert positive recruitment hook. Positive messages for care leavers about support available from John Lewis.



- Recognised cost of living as a government issue, so difficult for individual services to make big impact.
- Sarah's service offering financial wellbeing advice to foster carers and looking into what Local Authorities already offer (fuel allowance, solar panels, free activities etc.). Not a level playing field; some Local Authorities very proactive and some larger Independent Fostering Providers able to absorb some additional costs.
- Discussed impact of supervising social workers constantly changing. Claims not being signed off. Services need to think about how to make things easier for foster carers.

5.5 *Group 4*

- Highlighted inconsistencies in fostering and staffing in general. Consistency of social work staff necessary to provide best support for families.
 - Social workers leaving Wales to work remotely in England.
 - Recognised fostering system should be secure base for children and workforce commitment huge part of that. Instability prevalent, which children and families experience negatively.
 - Devastating implications of spending review for Local Authorities; shortage of social workers, shortage of foster carers, and lack of policy. Huge policy vacuum around children's social care. Must take every opportunity to lobby DfE and central Gov. Association for directors of children's services lobby hard. Recognised importance of lobbying, as none of these issues can be solved by any single group.
 - Monitoring mini-budget for funding changes will be vital. More money needed in system, not less.
 - Not enough being done to stabilize provisions already available.
- 5.6 EF suggested members might wish to write a letter to DfE, highlighting fostering inconsistencies and how to address them. Members to email EF with key points to include. Members to inform CB of key links to DfE and implementation board, so letter can be sent to individuals as well as teams.

6. **FOSTER CARER ASSOCIATIONS**

- 6.1 HAN chairs Waltham Forest Foster Carer Association. Waltham Forest Foster Carer Association aiming to grow and become registered charity in future. HAN asked whether members found Foster Carer Associations effective supportive resource or not, and how they could be improved. HAN questioned whether Foster Carer Associations can ever be fully collaborative, or if they'll always be that element of challenge.
- 6.2 SC noted Essex Foster Carer Association very well subscribed and collaborative. Essex Foster Carer Association heavily relied on for support, advice and consultation. SC believes Foster Carer Associations a great resource.
- 6.3 CJ asked if Foster Carer Associations can be accessible to Independent Fostering Provider carers. Another area where Foster Carer groups separated when could be perfect environment to come together. HAN noted many Foster Carer Associations set up by Local Authority carers and don't include Independent Fostering Provider carers. Some Independent Fostering Providers have their own. In Waltham Forest, foster carers automatically become Foster Carer Association members upon approval, but Independent Fostering Provider carers not supported. This is something



Waltham Forest Foster Carer Association would like to explore. However, as well as advocating for foster carers, Foster Carer Associations also challenges Local Authority policy and practice. One challenge of including Independent Fostering Providers is that, administratively, Independent Fostering Providers function completely differently. Therefore, many issues discussed by Foster Carer Associations do not effect Independent Fostering Provider carers. Yet another area where two groups divided when should be united, but no clear solution yet.

- 6.4 JAB agreed Foster Carer Associations sound positive and expressed interest in setting one up. The Fostering Network have information on how to do so on their website. TFN working with number of services on a consultancy basis to help establish good, robust Foster Carer Associations. TFN can provide bespoke information depending on need. Important to talk to fostering service first to make sure they're in support of a Foster Carer Association and willing to collaborate with foster carers.
- 6.5 ST noted two important points:
- Foster Carer Associations must work collaboratively, or risk creating 'them vs. us' attitude between foster carers and services. Should try working together to achieve mutual outcomes. Foster Carer Associations should be about providing perspectives and good communication channels.
 - Foster Carer Associations must always be child centered and constantly checking what they're doing is for the benefit of the children.

7. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

- 7.1 Members discussed how diversity and representation could be increased within FC community. Members considered how cost of living could impact FC ability to engage children in activities which support their sense of identity.
- 7.2 Anne Freud Centre conducting 'Share your voice' survey to find out how research in children's social care can be made more inclusive, accessible and representative. Open to everyone (e.g. researchers, carers, care experienced people, social workers and charities):
<https://forms.office.com/r/GQEvFBg8tC>
- 7.3 CJ's Independent Fostering Agency is doing work on family time and identity. Recognises importance of child's self-acceptance. System lacks understanding of importance of encouraging children to look beyond trauma and identify positive aspects of experiences. Foster carers should be made aware of positive aspects of child's family and identity, to pass on to them. System needs to be re-built to be more child focused. LBC shared link to Coram Voice Brightspots [10,000 Voices report](#) containing young people comments about not receiving information on families.
- 7.4 SME noted TFN hold number of member forums across England looking at representation and recruitment within foster care (actively include anti-racist practice) to meet needs of young people and adults.
- 7.5 CR acknowledged life story work very hit or miss. LC suggested it would be helpful to get clear understanding of life story best practice. Praised 10,000 Voices report. Highlighted importance of Independent Fostering Providers and Local Authorities being knowledgeable about Equality



Diversity and Inclusion, in order to best equip and support foster carers. If knowledge not there then essential to identify training required. Some really good grass roots organisations looking at intersectionality, e.g. care experience and black identity, such as The Black Care Experience Network. Potential for sharing expertise. LBC noted Northern Ireland developing model for how practitioners and foster carers can work together to help children understand why they're in care. Members to bring examples of promising life story practice to future meeting. CB to invite life story experts to future meeting.

- 7.6 JS acknowledged LGBTQ+ children in foster care and development of their identity. Parents adjusting to evolution of child's LGBTQ+ identity is challenging in any family. Practitioners must be equipped to support foster carers supporting young people to build this into their narrative. CB hosting webinar with Proud2BParents on 13 December 2022. CB recently launched new [EDI web page](#).
- 7.7 LBC presented 10,000 Voices infographic on factors influencing wellbeing. Shows boys and girls have different needs and professional approaches should reflect this. JB praised 10,000 Voices infographic for capturing essence of young people.
- 7.8 CJ recognised correlation between wellbeing and cost of living. Increasing prices mean weekend activities with friends etc. will likely decrease, in turn decreasing wellbeing. EF acknowledged this situation also applicable to families with birth children. However, removing opportunities for foster children to spend time with friends or develop skills they feel passionate about effects them differently.
- 7.9 SME noted branded clothes and products play huge part in young people's self-esteem, but aren't always affordable for foster carers. LBC suggested activities don't need to cost money, as key wellbeing factor shown to be access to nature and spending time outdoors.
- 7.10 LC found Voices infographic and research scale very thought provoking. Notable how some findings can be resolved by individual families without much expense, whilst others require huge structural changes. Interesting to see the spectrum of what can be lobbied for and what can be carried out within communities.
- 7.11 HAN questioned how children develop trusting relationships with social workers, which study shows important for wellbeing, when social workers change on regular basis. Even consistent social workers only have finite time available for each child. Government need to provide more money, to decrease social worker case load and create time for relationship development. Worth bearing in mind not all birth families live in UK, bringing additional financial and logistical challenges. Family connections so important for child, but facilitating these can be unpredictable.
- 7.12 CJ created training on connecting and engaging with birth families. All foster carers can do is try, with possibilities unique to each child. Available opportunities can be utilised, such letter box contact, contact in a center etc. Important to value what each child says they want and try to make this possible in a healthy way.



8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 8.1 EF requested volunteers for Form F Working Party. Members to email EF and/or GC if interested in participating in any stage of Form F revisions process.
- 8.2 No other business was raised. EF thanked members for attending.

Date of next meeting: 21 March 2023