

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased Government and media focus on the benefits of adoption for children in care who cannot return to their birth families, the importance of reducing the time children wait for a permanent placement, and the need to increase the number of adoptive families available. This is now a pertinent time to look in more detail at the potential resource being offered by foster carers wanting to adopt children in their care and to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the potential benefits and challenges in making these adoptive placements.

In writing this Good Practice Guide, we recognise that every case is different, so that whilst we set out our view of what needs to be considered in the decision making around foster carers adopting children in their care, we would suggest that ultimately each case must be decided on its individual merits, recognising that there may well be a balancing exercise around strengths, concerns and areas needing support.

We primarily focus on foster carer adoptions within the context of the legislative framework in England and Wales, but the issues discussed in this guide apply to all of the countries in the UK.

Whilst adoption by foster carers has always been possible, it is an area of adoption practice that has attracted divergent views and controversy over the last 30 years. Controversial cases have been featured in local or national press stories or have found their way into contested proceedings, which can be stressful for all involved. Differences have been voiced within and between teams about the advantages and disadvantages of making such placements.

In this Good Practice Guide, we explore some of the issues behind the contradictory views and perceived challenges. We have also talked to agencies and professionals who responded to our requests to hear about agencies' experiences, and share some examples of their practice and some of the forms and policies that they have developed and which have helped them in this area. We hope that by sharing practice from different agencies and reflecting on experiences of foster carers who have adopted, we can establish how this route to adoption can be maximised for those children and foster carers for whom adoption is the right plan.

In preparation for this guide, foster carers were invited to contact us about their experiences, resulting in a number of responses. Fourteen carers followed this initial contact with a written account of their

experiences, including two who provided a response through their social worker (FCA 10 and FCA 11). Their personal accounts provide evidence of successful placements of the children they adopted and demonstrate the depth of emotions that they experienced through the adoption process. Their experiences are vividly illustrated in their own words (under coded names), and summaries of their situations are given in Appendix 1 to provide further context.

We have adopted three children who we were fostering in our 35 years as carers. Our first is now 19 and achieved 10 passes at GCSE and is now at college.

FCA 9

It was R's wish to be adopted by our family...He adopted us in many ways.

FCA 13

TERMINOLOGY AND REMIT OF THIS GUIDE

There is no specific terminology used in legislation for foster carers who adopt, but for clarity in this guide we use the term “carer adopter” when referring to a foster carer who is considering or is in the process of adopting a child in their care.

It is worth briefly mentioning Fostering for Adoption (FFA) and dual-approval schemes, as these are not covered in this Good Practice Guide. In the last couple of years, the renewed interest in concurrent planning and the introduction of FFA into legislation in the Children and Families Act 2014 has caused some confusion in the minds of the public and some professionals about the role of FFA placements and foster carers adopting children in their care. FFA is a type of early permanence in which approved prospective adopters are also approved as foster carers for a specific child so that the child can be placed with them before the child’s plan for adoption has been agreed by the courts and a placement order made. If a placement order is made, the placement can then become an adoption placement.

The Department for Education (DfE) notes in Statutory Guidance (2014b) that:

The advantage of this type of placement (FFA) is that the child will be placed with foster carers who, subject to a placement order being made, or parental consent, are expected to go on to become the child’s adoptive family. Delay in finding a permanent family for young children who have already experienced neglect early on in their lives may have a profoundly damaging effect on their development. This type of placement has potential to reduce this delay and the damage caused significantly.

It is interesting to note that the recognised benefits of minimising delay and reducing placement moves can also equally be applied to those situations where a short-term foster carer adopts a child, but the difference in the status of the carer and the way in which the plan is made means that a much more varied response is experienced.

Further information about FFA can be found in the *Fostering for Adoption Practice Guidance* published by BAAF and Coram (2013) and in Borthwick and Donnelly's guide to concurrent planning (2013).

Specific projects have also been set up to encourage foster carers to consider how they can offer permanence to a child in their care, such as schemes where prospective carers are dually approved as foster carers and adopters and are matched with a child for whom they will provide a permanent placement. The children are placed under fostering regulations, but the carers work towards offering adoption or special guardianship to that child within three years. This is a model that some voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities are exploring.

While there may be some practice similarities between these types of schemes and foster carers adopting a child in their care, this Good Practice Guide does not consider FFA or dual-approval schemes.