

“Avoiding placement breakdown for children in care” – Roundtable discussion summary 14th January, St Stephens’s Club, London

Introduction:

The Children’s Services Development Group (CDSG), a policy coalition of leading independent providers of foster care, residential care and specialist education services for looked-after children and those with complex needs, which is comprised of: Cambian Group; Castlecare Group; Foster Care Associates; Hesley Group; National Fostering Agency; NorthernCare and SENAD Group; worked in partnership with ‘A National Voice’ to conduct a roundtable discussion on “Avoiding placement breakdown for children in care”.

The CSDG believe that the Children and Young Persons Act promises to improve outcomes for looked-after children. However, currently, these young people are left behind, disadvantaged and expected to fail. Statistics show that 23% of adult prisoners have been in care and only 8% of looked-after children achieve 5 or more A* - C grades compared with a national average of 45.8%.

Placement stability is the key to reversing these trends. However, only 37% of children currently in care have remained in one placement for at least 2 ½ years, and 10% of care leavers have experienced more than six placements. This is despite recognition that placement stability is fundamental to placement success; enhancing emotional resilience, as well as educational and social prospects.

A discussion on this issue was therefore considered timely by the CSDG, particularly in the wake of recent high profile cases such as Baby P and now Doncaster.

The event, conducted under Chatham House Rules and chaired by BBC Social Affairs Correspondent Kim Catcheside, included a series of speeches by: Maxine Wrigley, Chief Executive of a National Voice; Les Lawrence, Chair of the Children and Young Person’s Board at the LGA; Sue Berelowitz, Deputy Children’s Commissioner; David Oldham, CEO of Foster Care Associates; Howard Woolfenden, Managing Director of NorthernCare, and; Tim Loughton, Shadow Minister for Children and Young People. These presentations served to inspire the ensuing debate.

The event was attended by senior experts in the looked-after children arena consisting of service commissioners, practitioners, policy stakeholders and charity executives. A delegate list is attached for your information.

The speaker’s presentations are briefly summarised below and followed by an overview of the contents of the discussion. Individual comments have not been attributed due to the Chatham House nature of the discussion.

Presentations:

Welcome by Kim Catcheside - BBC Social Affairs Correspondent:

Kim welcomed participants and introduced the topic of placement breakdown as being particularly high on the current political agenda, drawing on the high levels of media coverage of cases such as Baby P and Doncaster to highlight a growing discussion around the issue of safeguarding.

Kim also raised issues of negative reputation surrounding social work and the care system in general, expressing a need to “rehabilitate the idea of care” in the public’s mind.

Maxine Wrigley – National Co-ordinator, A National Voice (PowerPoint included):

Maxine drew on her experiences of being in care as well as her longstanding work with many care leavers to comment on what changes must be made in order to make the system work.

A particular focus of her speech was on the 95% of children in care who cite placement instability as the single biggest barrier to education and desperately want to be treated in the same way as foster parents’ own children. Maxine revealed that small changes to location, school or friends can be the “straw that breaks the camel’s back” for traumatised young people who have lived incredibly instable lives and have often fallen victim to high social worker turnover and poorly matched placements.

She specified that there is a desperate need to increase the system’s capacity, creating a wider range of placement options. This must develop alongside increased training for carers and social workers whose jobs can be made easier through removal of red tape and enhanced communication between departments. Both carers and looked-after children would benefit significantly from free phone out of hours support.

Les Lawrence – Chair of the Children and Young Person’s Board at the LGA and Birmingham Councillor:

Les emphasised that a councillor’s job is to ensure that children are safeguarded and that when they are unable to live at home, they are cared-for. It is important that we do not fall into the trap of seeing care as a last resort but rather a positive choice in some situations, which means that we must ensure the quality of these services. In many cases, corporate parenting is misunderstood by councils and the targets driven culture of “there must be a certain number of children in care/on the child protection register” needs to be challenged, with options available to provide the most suitable model of care for each young person.

He raised the issue that at present, inexperienced social workers are all too often sent in to challenging situations alone, whereas a more effective method of safeguarding would be to send in two workers to assess both family and environment, with an independent review officer to challenge case notes. The benchmark must be for a working environment that social workers perceive to be of benefit to themselves and others.

However, rather than simply focusing on reactive measures, there is a growing call for a proactive focus on preventative and early intervention measures in families where there are likely to be safeguarding issues, for example working with young parents pre-birth to educate them on bringing up children. Les also stated that residential children’s care needs to move away from the model of large institutions and instead focus on smaller, family settings.

Les’s speech also covered the need to ensure effective transitions from care through greater input from housing and adult departments at local authority level as well as possibly a commitment from schools to educate a proportion of the care population. This must be coupled with a regulatory framework of safeguarding for best practise with scrutiny, currently underused, to be seen as a “critical friend”.

Sue Berelowitz – Deputy Children’s Commissioner (Replacing Roger Morgan):

Sue agreed with the Chair’s notion that we need to “rehabilitate the idea of care” and challenge the received wisdom that care does not work. Her comments drew on a study conducted by a Brighton-based psychologist into foster carers looking after troubled youngsters to assess the emotional impact of their work. The finding revealed that at times it is appropriate for children to have a series of short term placements when they consist of planned moves, provided they are designed to meet the particular needs of the child and the child is kept informed. Indeed, this is to be considered as progression rather than breakdown. It is when a child is uninformed and moved from place to place at a moment’s notice that issues arise.

Sue summed up her arguments by saying that the care system is currently far too reactive and desperately requires a focus on assessment, planning, good training and innovative models of care.

David Oldham – CEO, Foster Care Associates (PowerPoint included):

Some background to FCA...

David summarised the outcomes achieved by FCA, highlighting educational attainment and placement stability as particular areas of success. There was also a focus on the reasons why placements breakdown, such as the age of the child or poor access to social workers.

David then examined the solutions to the stability problem, outlining changes that carers and young people have cited as being key to successful placements. There was a reiteration of Maxine's assertion that young people want to experience loving, secure relationships that are not noticeably different from those that carers have with their own children. A full version of David's presentation can be found in the attached PowerPoint presentation.

Howard Woolfenden - Managing Director, NorthernCare:

Howard began by introducing NorthernCare as one of the largest providers of residential children's homes with DCSF registered education in the UK.

He went on to state that 80% of young people who enter the care system return home at some stage. His focus was therefore on viewing care as a process, with emphasis on preparing children effectively for future life and dealing with any problems so that they are equipped for either returning home or staying in care.

The presentation also warned against a tendency to move young people on too soon, for instance extremely damaged young people with destructive behaviour can arrive in residential care and after intensive work will display reformed behaviour patterns, however in too many cases young people are then not given the time to consolidate these advances and instead are moved on to different types of care before they are ready.

Howard also focused on the intrinsically entwined nature of secure placements and positive outcomes, stating that "education supports placement stability and placement stability supports education".

The point was also made that it is invaluable to have one link worker in each team of practitioners dealing with a child, who is really familiar with the individual young person: down to eye colour and life ambitions. Part of protecting a child's interests means also knowing when being party to certain information may lead to anxiety. For example, the knowledge of constant assessment panel reviews to determine whether placements continue is likely to leave young people anxious as they will feel that there is no certainty in their situation.

Howard ended with calling for better relationships between care providers to allow for transition to and from residential and foster care, depending on the needs of the children they care for.

Tim Loughton MP - Shadow Minister for Children and Young People:

Tim broadly agreed with the previous speakers but saw the main problem as being turning ideas into a reality. He was principally concerned about a worrying public tendency to see social workers as part of the problem rather than the solution, particularly following the Baby P safeguarding case. This was linked to a recruitment challenge which extends beyond the "big cities" (in contention with Les's assertion that social workers tend to move away from cities to nicer, more "leafy" practice areas).

Tim emphasised the importance of good placement matching and explored 'kinship placing' as a good option here, whilst emphasising that early intervention is essential in safeguarding and that good matching etc must happen early on. This will all lead to stability of placements, which has been proved to bring security not least in education, as children will be in the same area and able to maintain consistency in learning and friendships. However, it is not just young people but also foster carers that must be sufficiently supported, a concern that is often raised above that of funding.

The presentation also criticised the tendency to view care as a rigid system whereby “you’re either in care or you’re not”. There was a call for a more fluid approach to care, with reference to Denmark’s model whereby young people are often in care during the week and with family at weekends with parents even coming into the placement to cook for their child one night a week. It was also mentioned that in Denmark 60% of the care population go on to university.

Discussion Summary:

Key points:

Public impression of social care:

Several participants picked up on speakers’ comments about the frequently negative public perception of social work and the damage that the Baby P case has done to the profession.

Profile raising and the creation of a positive rhetoric surrounding the care system were considered to be a necessary in a bid to turn the tide on public misperceptions.

Workforce:

The key issue relating to social care workforce was perceived to be the migration from front line social work, which occurs frequently once practitioners have gained experience. A mixture of heavy workload, undesirable hours and emotional strain all make front line social work a less desirable job prospect.

Consequently, front line teams are often limited to new and inexperienced workers or agency staff, which obviously increases the potential for assessment mistakes and leads to additional strain on new recruits which will result in continued migration from this area of social work.

A number of participants posited as a solution the successful schemes of job matching social workers to their areas of interest and best performance, which appear to have been broadly successful amongst both professionals and also the young people and carers that they interact with. There was a suggestion that social work needs to be re-approached from the perspective of business and HR modelling, growing social workers within counties and encouraging those outside the organisation to retrain.

There was also the suggestion of allowing front line social workers the opportunity to re-locate to other authorities for periods of around 18 months as well as incentivising and rewarding those in front line positions. A comparison was made with the newly announced policy of “golden handcuffs” for teachers in ‘difficult’ schools.

Concern was also raised over recruitment of low academic achievers into the social work profession and the poor quality of social work graduates. There was a suggestion of promoting a “back to social work” scheme in the same way that there has been “back to nursing”.

There was also widespread criticism of bureaucracy of the system and excessive administrative costs and constraints, which takes up a significant proportion of social worker’s time, when they could be focusing on assessment and spending time with people.

Conversely, one attendee did offer some criticism of a “golden handcuffs” approach to recruitment, whereby it is perceived that financial incentive is the necessary key driver to re-balance the social care workforce. Instead, there was a call for mental health and emotional support for carers and workers who operate in an incredibly emotionally draining role.

Importance of relationship:

A focus emerged on the necessity of building good relationships between young people and their foster carers. One participant mentioned research by Professor Gillian Schofield in which she cited the different types of attachment style that individuals may have. Schofield also acknowledged that there may be elements of the carer’s attachment methods that need to change and participants discussed the

importance of ensuring that carers learn how to relate to, and include, the children in their care in the same way that looked-after children are encouraged to learn how to form attachments.

The problem of bureaucracy was cited by many as contradictory to the focus on attachment. Historical reference was made to the deregulated system of the 80s in which the primary focus was caring about young people. Delegates stated that it seems at times as if we have regulated, professionalised and bureaucratised the system to a significant extent yet are still trying, paradoxically, to retain a caring/relational focus.

Relationship stability was considered by some to be as important as placement stability and largely the most significant force in avoiding placement breakdown.

It was perceived that there was a limited understanding amongst councils about what corporate parenting actually is, and consequently the responsibilities and best practises that will contribute to its effective operation, and for the children in its care being enabled to form the desirable emotional bonds.

Participants expressed concerns that carers are too vulnerable to allegations of misconduct and that heavy boundaries on social workers behaviour can result in a stifling of the system and a culture of fear where the desired outcome should be the forming of good relationships between young people, families and official practitioners/commissioners.

Kinship placements:

Participants expressed a feeling that generally kinship placements were a preferred choice, however, there was concern regarding the dearth of longitudinal studies in this area as in many cases family members are excellent at providing care for very young children but as they move out of childhood the placement can break down, resulting in teenage entry to the formal care system.

Other concerns with kinship care included the lack of Local Authority involvement, which means limited training and support is available for these carers. In addition, delegates claimed that insufficient effort is made to trace young people's relatives (especially if they are located overseas) and to give them the chance of a placement with a family member.

Local authority targets:

There was criticism of the tendency for targets to be "process rather than outcomes driven", for example one attendee described how looked-after young people are required to have an annual health assessment, even if they have previously been found to be completely healthy and would not be expected to have medical attention if living with their own family. One delegate argued that the system needed to be more flexible; with greater social worker input required for children who are in new placements than those in long term stable placements.

What can be done to prevent placement breakdown:

The main method for avoiding placement breakdown, discussed by several participants, was to ensure careful placement matching took place. This would mean that the child or young person was placed in the best possible environment to grow and develop physically, mentally and socially.

Targets and funding were in some cases perceived to act as an obstruction to effective placement matching and safeguarding as authorities are often uncomfortable about the need to pay for empty places, which may be needed at some point but are not right for the young people currently under the council's care.

In many cases, effective matching to placements is prevented as social workers can on occasion avoid asking the "difficult questions" as they may be afraid of the answers that they may receive and therefore, children's needs sometimes go unnoticed.

The need for cultural background to be taken into account alongside other considerations was perceived to be paramount in thoughtful placement. Delegates stated that if a child cannot be matched with a family

from the same suitable cultural, or ethnic, background, then there should be specific training for foster carers to understand issues surrounding the child's culture and ethnicity.

The option of finding the best fitting placements outside of the authority was considered useful, but there can be practical difficulties in accessing the necessary therapeutic support, such as CAMHS, due to postcode constraints. This was specified by several participants as an area in need of action.

The important point was raised that more work needs to be undertaken on placements on the verge of breakdown to address any issues that may have arisen and to provide additional support such as mentoring or temporary respite for carers to improve the situation and ensure its security. One attendee noted that the important work had to be done when the child was in care to prevent them "yo-yoing" back and forward in and out of the care system.

One delegate also mentioned that involving the child in placement decisions is one of the best ways to promote their ongoing happiness in the placement, for example, finding out whether they would prefer to be in residential or foster care.

Thresholds – who decides?:

The discussion focussed on Tim Loughton's point about the fluidity of care came into play here, with a more fluid approach to care considered to be an effective means of making safeguarding and involvement criteria less rigid.

There was a feeling that social workers are often inappropriately burdened with threshold decisions and that schools, GPs and the police should have a greater input in decisions about whether children should be taken into care, with one attendee stating that 'care conferences' should be used to determine whether intervention should be made. Other delegates argued however, that in practice, representatives from other agencies often fail to attend these meetings, making multi-agency working impossible.

Conversely, one participant stressed that guidelines about children at risk of harm do exist from the 1989 Children's Act and that it is important to return to the fundamental guidelines, teaching social workers what the law actually says and how to implement this.

Research by Ian Sinclair was suggested to have shown that there is often a strong link between local budgets and thresholds and participants discussed whether limited finances influence the point at which authorities decide to intervene.

Partnership working:

It was perceived that there needs to be a more strategic partnership developed between commissioners and providers in being more flexible in matching needs. In particular, greater links are needed to be established between public and private providers, through possible partnerships.

The necessity of pooling budgets in order to work effectively was also established as being helpful in eradicating the complication provision due to differences in budget streams.

Commissioning:

Comments were made on the tendency to approach commissioning in a similar way to panic buying Christmas presents whereby in a rush to place a child too much money is spent on a service or placement that in reality does little to meet their needs. Delegates argued that instead of spot purchasing, a more detailed understanding of local needs and the provision available, should be developed. This dovetailed with discussions on effective placement matching and also partnership working between commissioners and providers to ensure best practise across the board.

Court Proceedings:

A disagreement took place over whether a child's social worker should remain the same following a court case. One side of the argument believed that due to the "adversarial role" of a social worker during a trial, they should be changed immediately afterwards for a new figure who could build bridges with the child and

against whom no negative connotations will have been constructed. On the other hand, opinion was that after a court case was a key time for building relationship with children and that consistency, more than anything, was vital at this time.

The group were instructed that CAFCASS reforms were indeed beginning to allow for continued contact between families and social workers after trials had taken place.

Conclusion/ Key Points:

- The social care profession is under threat due to a migration away from front-line social work.
- The most effective work for children in, or about to enter, the care system is that based on relationships and this is one of the most significant factors in ensuring placement stability.
- Kinship placements are often not entertained enough as a preferable option for placing children.
- Local Authority targets were generally considered to be unhelpful and process rather than outcomes driven.
- Careful placement matching was considered paramount in avoiding placement breakdown.
- A sea-change in attitudes is necessary to channel more effort into fortifying placements that are at risk of breakdown, rather than just moving a child on.
- There are significant difficulties in making out of area placements (which in some cases are necessary or indeed preferable) due to access of other Local Authority provided therapeutic services such as CAMHS.
- Taking the views of each child into account when making placement decisions is a compassionate and effective way of creating successful placements.
- There is a call for greater fluidity in the care system with less rigid definitions of children being 'in or out' of care. This would allow for a more holistic approach to safeguarding issues.
- Participants stressed that important decisions about whether a child should be taken into care should not rest solely on the shoulders of social workers but that police and schools, for example, should be involved too.
- The pooling of budgets and greater application of partnership working was perceived to be desirable.
- Discussion also covered the need for measured, child-centred commissioning to promote decisions that will work for the long term benefit of the child.

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