

## **Wandsworth Foster Carers Association**

### **Nature of Supply**

- Taking Wandsworth as a case study, the Borough has gone from having only 5-10% of fostered CLA placed with IFAs in/around 2013 to a current situation where more than 50% are placed with IFAs.
- Wandsworth offered additional funding to carers to take multiple placements but this had negligible effect on raising in-house capacity.
- Wandsworth has removed its dedicated Foster Carer recruitment role (presumably for cost saving purposes) and unsurprisingly foster carer recruitment has slowed leading to a decrease in internal capacity.
- Local experience is that foster carers are not being replaced as fast as they leave and the LA is failing to attract, suitable younger carers. The age profile of foster carers is increasing over time which is clearly unsustainable and puts CLA in home environments that are in another respect different to those of their peers living with biological parents.
- Anecdotally and locally, our Local Authority has had some success in attracting IFA Carers to convert to in-house carers. Motivation appears to be frustration with delays in decision-making where foster carers have to appeal to their IFA supervisors who have no decision-making powers since parental authority is held by the placing LA and so the enquiry has to be deferred to the LA children's social worker and the answer eventually returns by the same, multi-stepped route. Once transferred ex-IFA carers most usually find that the grass is no greener- quality of social workers is poorer (as the better ones can get paid more by IFAs), support resources are fewer and of poorer quality etc.
- Bedroom tax impacts foster carers housed by local authorities who could care for more children were they exempted. Where LAs elect to pay a foster carers bedroom tax liability in order to increase supply – this raises costs for Children's Services whilst creating a vulnerability for the carer (since the payment is not contracted or guaranteed but simply a goodwill gesture that can be withdrawn).
- There is no practical collaboration between local authorities to place children with each-other's in-house carers – which is a missed opportunity. Why should using a carer approved by a neighbouring LA be more difficult/less preferred than placing with an IFA? This study should consider the case for

Foster Carers to be truly self-employed and able to be utilized by whichever LA has parental responsibility for a child best matched to the provision they offer.

- IFA and LAs are competing for carers, poaching from each others as carers seek a better experience with a different “employer” instead of growing overall numbers and capacity
- The importance of Year 13 – a key local finding of a review of Staying Put and Leaving Care in Wandsworth has been the importance to CLA of stability in their final year of school education when sitting A Level and BTEC examinations. They have advocated strongly that young people must be listened to and planning for futures started early at 16 with an exploration of preferences but then delaying discussion and planning for transition to independence/semi-independence until such time as it does not disrupt study and revision for these key examinations. Any planning for foster care provision must allow for young people to remain in their stable foster homes without any significant changes in that provision or funding until the end of the academic year, even after the young person turns 18.

### **Commissioning**

- Carers need respite and breaks to avoid burnout/compassion fatigue and in order to provide this capacity and to in order to retain carers to provide this support carers must be able to earn a living income in between placements this enable the LA to sustain a workforce significantly larger than the demand at any point in time (that is, contingent capacity). The 2018 review conclusion that there is no “absolute shortage” of foster carers fails to take adequate account of the variance in needs of children placed in care and the necessity of gaps between placements both to meet carers needs and CLAs.
- Over-reliance on IFA results in more children being placed out of borough where this is often not in the child’s best interest – leading to longer journeys to school, increased isolation from friends and even undesirable changes in schools as well as increased overhead costs e.g. in unproductive time of children’s social workers travelling to visit child in placement.
- The placement process – it is far easier for a single “placements officer” to place a call to an IFA with whom they have an established relationship to largely outsource the matching process than to trawl through records of available, internal carers and consider the degree of match in each case, or engage across multiple social workers in the local fostering service to do this

matching. Careful matching is key to achieving placement stability and long term good outcomes for fostered children.

- The absence of a central body for professional standards for foster carers contributes to escalating costs as LAs, private and charitable providers all independently develop training material to meet the requirements of the same set of National Minimum Standards for fostering rather than working collaboratively to share material and best practice. Similarly the interpretation of these standards and regulations at local council level leads to unnecessarily variant policies, payments and practices which creates artificial competition and division without any impact on raising standards or decreasing risk.
- The nature of placements – many, if not most, requirements for placement come at short or no notice, often under emergency procedures, and because every child is different (and has a unique history) every requirement is bespoke. These are unique features of foster care provision and the system must be geared to cope. A child in need must be housed – it is not an option to delay. In contrast, careful matching for successful placement takes time and consideration of alternatives. There must be both quality and quantity of foster carers that exceeds demand. The system must allow for the short term, emergency housing of children for a period of days/weeks while a thorough matching process is concluded – performance indicators should be adjusted to allow for such changes of placement in the early days in order not to drive premature matching decisions not in the child's best interests.
- On what basis has the CMA already concluded that “In foster care the evidence we have seen so far does not appear to point to concerns around overall pricing levels and availability of places” – if there were more foster carers accepting teenagers into placement then there would be less demand for residential places and lowered costs for LAs. The issues behind why there are relatively few carers willing to accept teenage placements need careful exploration and should include; the experience and backgrounds of carers, availability of training, support and mental health services, financial protection for carers working in their home environments (including compensation for damage)

### **Pressures on Investment**

- Cost comparisons are too often not like-for like – cost to an LA of placing with an IFA includes spend on the approval, matching, training and supervision of Foster Carers - which are often omitted and most usually not reflected in

corresponding reduction of costs of in-house provision as in-house staffing levels remain static in training and supervision provision.

- In the absence of any national cap on prices that can be charged by IFAs it is a sellers market. IFAs know if contacted by a LA that there is no in-house carer available and can therefore effectively name their price since the LA has a statutory duty to house that child. The requirement on a LA to provide “the most appropriate placement available” effectively establishes only one overriding criterion – that the placement is available – not that it is high quality or the correct provision for the child.
- Costs – whilst a minimum level of allowance is set by the government in England to meet the costs of caring for a child, this minimum level is not sufficient to provide a rounded and rich life experience comparable to peers not in care. There is evidence from the Fostering Network’s annual surveys that many carers supplement the allowances they receive in order to meet the needs of children placed with them, suggesting that most fostering households require at least one adult to be bringing in a wage independently of fostering (relevant also to the supply question). This is quite apart from the inconsistencies between local authorities in reimbursing expenses incurred by foster carers as a result of their fostering, or paying them for their time and skills. The cost to LAs of in-house placements do not fully reflect the true costs of caring for those children – consider the illustrative breakdown of the child’s allowance in Wandsworth (which critically underfunds both food and travel). Note also that qualifying care relief allowances for foster carers have not been increased since the scheme was introduced by HMRC more than a decade ago – with the result that carers can now pay tax on money received from their LA, further reducing the funds available for foster children.
- Supply of foster carers – any comprehensive study should consider the evidence from foster carers themselves, from LAs and IFAs and from exit interviews of when and, more importantly, why foster carers give-up fostering and why potential carers drop out at various points in the recruitment process. Such consideration can identify structural obstacles to recruitment and retention – such as the poor management of unsubstantiated/unfounded allegations, the impact of working in Childrens Services graded inadequate or requires improvement, the expectations of prospective carers vs. the reality of carers and whether this gap is more impactful in carers from some backgrounds (professional, educational, cultural...) more than others. Exploration of motivation and factors influencing what makes a foster carer successful over a sustained period must be part of any market study in order to identify how supply can be increased.

## **Regulatory**

- The regulatory system – there is a case for separation of functions to drive up performance standards and reduce risk. Foster carers' experiences and livelihoods are dependent on approval, matching, training, review and de-registration decisions made all by the same agency without any genuinely independent checks and balances. A professional standards body that separates commissioning and placement from the approval, review, training and deregistration of carers would be a vehicle for more consistent high standards and allow foster carers to become genuine equal players in the team around the child for the benefit of the child. The duplication of functions such as training provision, review officers etc. in each and every Local Authority increases costs.