

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(3)-11-09(p2): 7 July 2009

Submission from Barnardo's Cymru

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities working in the country. We currently run 42 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with 20 of the 22 local authorities, supporting over 8,000 children, young people and families in the last year.

Barnardo's Cymru services in Wales include: care leavers and youth homelessness projects, young carers schemes, specialist fostering and adoption schemes, family centres and family support, parenting support, community development projects, short breaks and inclusive services for disabled children and young people, assessment and treatment for young people who exhibit sexually harmful or concerning behaviour and specialist services for children and young people at risk of, or abused through, child sexual exploitation.

Every Barnardo's Cymru service is different but each believes that every child and young person deserves the best start in life, no matter who they are, what they have done or what they have been through. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better childcare policy and to champion the rights of every child. We believe that with the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around.

Barnardo's Cymru believes that the values and philosophy that should underpin the way we work with looked after children by the state, is that they should be given the same opportunities that we would expect our own children to have: this means paying attention to the small things as well as changes to legislation and policy, although this can, of course, set the expectations. Looked after children and young people tell us that the things that can make a real difference to their feelings of self worth and self esteem are not necessarily those that can be legislated for - having photographs, being helped with homework, someone attending school sports day, parents evening or out of school activities. These measures cost very little, but require workers and professionals to put the same value on them as young people do.

B. BARNARDO'S CYMRU ADOPTION AND FOSTERING

In July 2007, Barnardo's Cymru Adoption and Fostering Service (BCAFS) became an all Wales registered fostering service, having previously been registered as two services offering foster care in North and South Wales. We did this to enable co-ordination of work, thereby ensuring consistency of service delivery and the sharing of good practice. In 2008, Barnardo's also celebrated 60 years as a registered Adoption Agency across all of its UK adoption services (including Wales). The service is registered with and regulated by the CSSIW.

The service aims to provide both long term and short term foster care for children aged 0 - 18 years. This includes children with learning and/or physical disabilities, older children and groups of brothers and sisters who need to live together. The service has considerable experience of successfully placing children with learning disabilities and/or physical disabilities with long term carers and also experience of placing black minority ethnic children. We have experience of working with a number of local authorities throughout Wales and England, on whose behalf we have found long term placements. The service aims to expand the scale and range of provision for local authorities seeking to make placements in Wales. For more information on the Barnardo's Cymru Adoption and Fostering Service, please find the service's Annual Report 2007/2008 enclosed.

C. RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Gathering information about a child

1. In determining whether and where to place a child into care, a social worker will need an accurate picture of a child's needs and circumstances, which may require them to have information from a range of local services - health services, social services, etc, who may also have to consider their responsibilities towards confidentiality. To what extent is information about a child's needs effectively shared with decision makers, and do you have any examples of good practice in such inter-agency communications? Is there a clear understanding of who is ultimately accountable for decisions about a child's care?

Response

This question assumes a degree of choice in foster placements which is not always there which means that placement matching criteria are not always clearly assessed and adhered to. Where the appropriate assessment of need is possible (usually in the case of a longer term match) then our experience indicates that there is reasonably good practice in seeking out all of the necessary information. For example, Barnardo's Cymru chairs the Wrexham Permanency and Fostering Panels, where the matching of children and young people to long term permanent placements involves using discrete criteria that ensures that assessed needs are properly addressed. However, we also know that, unfortunately, for many children and young people, placements are chosen by placement availability/space rather than any assessed choice - and it is often these placements which break down or where the foster carers struggle to cope.

Many placements are made on an emergency basis and this poses a number of problems - very often the information is not always as complete as it should be or shared appropriately. Our experience is that, often, when trying to identify suitable placements in an

emergency, local authority social workers (understandably perhaps) prioritise finding the placement above gathering and sharing information. In these circumstances, information is frequently minimal. The exception to this is when there are skilled and experienced social workers overseeing the placement. Emergency placements are often extremely traumatic and turbulent events for the children and young people involved and it is usually the case that planned placements, where they are able to meet the carers in advance, are more successful than those made in an emergency situation.

In our experience, the reviewing of placements is happening more consistently due to clear regulations around this. However, we have had variable experience of support from children's social workers post placement. As a provider of fostering placements, however, our staff often have to challenge local authority social workers regarding their responsibilities. There is good practice, but as stated above, this often depends on the experience of the social worker. It is evident to us that local authorities are struggling to recruit staff within children's services with the necessary level of skill and expertise to oversee such cases.

Independent Reviewing Officers carry out their tasks within the review process but as an employee commissioned by the local authority from where the child is placed, can they really be deemed to be independent?

"Using that information"

2. To what extent does the Children's Commissioning Support Resource Database provide sufficient information about child placements, and to what extent is the database currently utilised? How could the database be better utilised?

Response

The CCSRD does not provide independent fostering providers (IFP) with the information necessary to meet the needs of children and young people. Independent fostering providers are not able to access information on the types of placements being sought by local authorities and cannot, therefore, plan their recruitment of carers to meet this need.

The financial constraints for local authorities are also evident when seeking placements. Some local authorities in South Wales are now using a piloted tendering process for placement finding. Minimal information is received by the provider electronically and IFPs have been informed that if no cost is put onto the tendering form, the carer available will not be considered for the placement. This indicates the influence of finance in placement finding for local authorities. Whilst it is acknowledged that cost is an issue, there needs to be a balance between meeting the needs of children and young people to achieve the best possible outcomes for them. It is also unclear how the CCSRD and tendering processes work alongside each other. It appears to be a duplicated system.

The CCSRD does provide statistical information regarding the population of foster carers in Wales which can be useful in planning.

3. Information about a child's needs and circumstances will be needed by fostering agencies and foster carers in order to appropriately conduct risk assessments, provide for a child's needs, etc. To what extent is appropriate information normally provided to fostering agencies and foster carers, and how could such communication be improved? Does the commissioning system enable or inhibit the provision of information to prospective fostering agencies and carers, and do you have any examples of good practice in the provision of information to fostering agencies and/or foster carers?

Response

In our experience, nothing beats good communication and information (both written and by word of mouth) in giving placements the best chance of a positive outcome. It is not unusual for foster carers in their reviews to comment on a lack of information at the time of placement or that the questions they have asked about the child or young person's needs have not been answered or addressed. The theory of the commissioning system is that core information is sought and shared when seeking a placement but, as stated earlier, this frequently fails to happen during emergency placements. The more unplanned the placement - the more unlikely it is that full information will be shared.

As previously mentioned, the commissioning system's initial focus appears to be on cost when seeking 'out of county' placements.

Information at the early stages is often minimal and sometimes information for carers can be completely absent. For example, we had a request for a placement from a local authority which failed to tell us the ethnicity of the child - it was only through the placement planning further along the process where it became apparent that the child had a black and minority ethnic background.

In our experience, therefore, practice is patchy and can often depend upon the skills and experience of the child or young person's social worker. Whilst some systems appear to have improved (eg paperwork in relation to placements is received more readily from local authorities), we are also conscious of the huge demands on social workers' time where they are under considerable pressure to manage competing priorities. As is the case in many areas of social work, there are often far too few qualified and experienced staff to undertake work which has a profound affect on the lives of vulnerable children and young people.

4. To what extent are placements planned out? Is there clarity over whether placements will be for a short period of time, whether it may eventually lead to adoption, etc? Can you provide any examples of good practice in the planning of foster placements?

An analysis of foster care reviews would undoubtedly demonstrate how easily short term - becomes medium term - becomes long term. The reasons for this are numerous (delays in Court processes, despite the Public Law Reform, being a common one) and the delays can create uncertainty around future planning and often leads to children and young people becoming more bonded in the placement than had been initially intended. We have concerns when carers take placements outside of their approval range or when they take on more placements than their original approval - because these factors often contribute significantly to placement strain and breakdown. There

are occasions when a child or young person settles well into a short term placement and this can be a good thing if it eliminates the need to move to another placement. However, more often than not, there can be confusion in planning when placements merge from short - medium - long term.

We have had positive experiences of planning for placements using similar processes as the adoption route, eg attendance of matching panels, making plans for introductory meetings between foster carers, children and young people and professionals. This has occurred where the care plan is clear that long term/permanency is required.

5. To what extent are the risks of foster placements explained to foster carers?

Response

In our experience this can be variable. We are not convinced that social workers always provide the fullest information when placing young people with difficult and risky/harmful behaviours. Foster carers are often inclined to say yes, rather than no, to placement requests - they often like a challenge and are prepared to go the extra mile. As a rule, agencies generally know who their best, most competent carers are, along with those who are the most flexible and responsive. However, we believe it is absolutely essential that carers are told as much as possible about the difficult behaviours a child or young person may have.

It is vitally important that foster carers receive appropriate training and advice regarding the needs of the child or young person being placed - particularly when dealing with adolescents who may be exhibiting risky/harmful behaviours. Training budgets of fostering agencies and local authorities need to reflect the need to meet this.

We also believe there should be more specialist foster care provision - particularly for young people with risky or harmful behaviours. Please see our response to Question 9 for more information.

6. To what extent do children and young people participate in their own placements' process?

Response

In our experience, this is variable. When making an emergency placement for example, the child or young person's involvement in the process is minimal - and frequently there is no choice of placement. We have received comments from children and young people in long term placements, who want to experience permanency, who have found the LAC review system unduly intrusive. In asking for children and young people to contribute to their foster care reviews we have had a number who have also commented negatively about the LAC review system.

In 2007, the Office of the Children's Rights Director for England issued a report, 'Children's Messages on Care'. Whilst this was a review conducted on England's looked after children, many of the points they made on placements, decisions and reviews, would, in our view, have resonance in Wales. They were:

A quarter of the children had not been asked for their views about moving to their present placement; a quarter said their views had made a difference. Two thirds agreed with their care plans. Just over a half said their care plans were being kept to. A quarter had little or no say in their care plans.

Many children said they find it hard to express themselves in mainly adult review meetings, and to hear their personal problems being discussed in front of them by a daunting group of professional adults, many of whom they don't know. They want a choice of different ways to feed their views in to reviews and concerns, and to be asked before a decision is made, not consulted afterwards. Children want their feelings to count too - even for very young children. Feelings 'just are' and shouldn't have to be justified.

Children often don't know who makes the final decisions about their lives and some decisions don't stay made. Finding a placement often takes too long. Children said arguments are the most likely reason for a placement breaking down. They told us that adults usually assume a placement breakdown is the child's fault and no one else's.

Just under half said there was a choice of placements last time they were moved. Just over half scored their present placements five out of five as right for them. It is usually best to be placed near home, not to separate brothers or sisters, and not to change school - but sometimes these might be necessary to meet a particular child's needs. Children should only be brought back from an out of authority placement if it is in their best interests, after listening to their views - not because the budget has run out or the placement was supposed to be temporary.

When being placed, children want a choice of at least two possible placements each time, gradual introduction with visits and lots of information about the new placement (including photos), a social worker checking how they settle in, and a backup placement to move to if the first doesn't work out.

Following a placement

7. To what extent do you consider that a child's social worker remain engaged in their care, once they have gone into a foster placement? For example, who is responsible for initially liaising with schools? Are foster carers given sufficient flexibility and autonomy to care for their children, without bureaucratic impediment?

Response

Clear roles and written agreements are needed to ensure responsibilities do not fall between the foster carer and social worker. Clarity is also needed regarding issues such as overnight stays/respice stays where the child remains in the home but is cared for by a relative of the foster carer. Does this relative then have to become an approved foster carer for example?

Social workers for the child carry out the minimum regulatory required visits; however, once a child is in placement longer term, they could be seeing the child only once every six months. Foster carers are often the main negotiator with local schools, health, etc. This is particularly our experience where children are placed out of county.

There is, in most cases, a good intent to maintain the same social worker for children to ensure continuity whilst in placement. However, one of the main obstacles to this is the high turnover of staff that exists across children's services departments - this can often lead to numerous changes of the child's social worker during the time they are being looked after. Different social workers can sometimes bring different approaches and different interpretation of bureaucratic guidelines, etc, and these can have a direct bearing on the placement.

The distance a child is placed from the placing authority also has a significant bearing on how 'hands-on' the social work involvement can be.

8. To what extent are placements of children into care qualitatively reviewed? Can you provide any examples of placements being given a cost-benefit analysis for example?

Response

Children and young people have looked after reviews which focus on the care plan. Foster carers should have annual reviews which are an analysis of placements (eg what has been good and bad); training needs; comments from children and young people and social workers, etc. They are largely about confirming, or not, the registration of carers. Both of these processes are largely driven by regulation and are not, in our view, particularly qualitative.

Too often we find the review of a child's placement taking place outside of regulatory timescales and most often because of social workers' lack of time the qualitative element of a review is absent. Again, it is questionable whether the child's views are fully understood and listened to. One of the main obstacles to achieving comprehensive reviews is the lack of preparation time by social workers due to the caseload pressure.

Appropriate professional supervision of staff in IFPs and local authorities can assist in reinforcing the relevance and need for gathering and sharing qualitative information.

"General"

9. Are there any further comments you'd like to make about the placement of children into care? Are there any specific recommendations you would suggest the Committee makes to the Welsh Assembly Government?

Response

Placement stability

In our experience, placement stability in foster care is dependent on recruiting and retaining the right carers in order to provide a range and choice of placements. While we understand the need to ensure rigorous training for carers, we are concerned about the increasing 'professionalisation' and the emphasis on gaining formal qualifications. There is a body of evidence to suggest that the qualities that make a 'good' foster carer, and contribute to placement stability are those that cannot necessarily be measured by examination and qualification - warmth, tolerance, patience, etc. We would like to see more emphasis placed on assessing these characteristics during the assessment process for carers. Nevertheless, we do recognise that additional training and support will be needed for carers who are asked to take on children with particularly complex needs, and think the tiered approach proposed provides a basis for ensuring that these carers do get the necessary additional training, support and remuneration.

Multiple placements

We are concerned that, in some cases, foster carers who are able to work with children with very complex needs are put under pressure to accept multiple placements, thereby compromising their ability to do good work. Our fostering and adoption services are extremely effective in terms of placement stability because we are extremely careful in placing children and young people with challenging behaviour, pay the nationally agreed fees, and offer first class training and support to carers. We also give carers the training to enable them to advocate for young people at school and in other settings.

Remuneration

Remuneration is of course important, particularly for those carers who may give up employment in order to care for those children with the most complex needs. The lack of standardisation of fees can lead to difficulties in recruitment and Barnardo's services have experienced difficulties in recruiting foster carers particularly in what can be a very competitive market.

'Out of Hours' support

We would like to see proposals in relation to support for both foster carers and residential workers out of 'normal' working hours. Local

emergency duty social work systems are not resourced to provide direct intervention unless there is significant risk, and immediate access to advice and support should be available to foster carers, residential workers and children and young people themselves. Such timely provision could prevent an escalation of crisis situations which can result in placement breakdown. Foster carers tell us that if they had access to such advice and support, it could have more impact on whether they continue with both individual placements or generally as a carer, than the financial remuneration.

Need for more specialist foster care provision

Because of the regular difficulties in finding appropriate placements, it is our view that there should be more specialist foster placements developed to cater for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation and for those who exhibit sexually harmful behaviours. These specialist foster carers should then have greater levels of training and support to provide the expertise and specialist care that these particular groups of children and young people need to keep themselves and others safe. In our experience, the pressure on placements is such that decisions are based primarily on the limited availability rather than on having a variety of placements from which to choose a best match. When these placement decisions are being made, can we hand on heart always say that they are being done so in the best interests of the child and with the child's needs paramount?

Our experience tells us that, currently, Welsh local authorities often place young people with sexually harmful behaviour in expensive private residential or fostering provision because of the paucity of specialist and single placement provision at the local level. There is also evidence that secure units are used, in our view, inappropriately for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. There is an obvious need to develop specialist fostering provision for those young people with risky/harmful behaviours which cannot be accommodated appropriately in mainstream fostering, residential or custodial settings.

Accessing appropriate CAMHS support

Many looked after children experience serious attachment problems borne out of their family circumstances and/or their multiple placements. Many are referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and are in need of intensive treatment programmes. However, CAMHS teams frequently do not have the staff skilled to deliver this service with child psychotherapists in particular being in short supply across Wales. This results in only the most damaged children being able to access services, with no capacity in the system to provide more preventative support.

Lack of stability in placements

In our experience, this continues to be a major issue. This can include a constant turnover in social work and/or residential staff where the young person being looked after has little time to form appropriate attachments and to develop trusting relationships with adults. Multiple placements are still far too common where children and young people are moved regularly between foster carers (and residential care) resulting in a hugely disruptive and unsettling impact on their lives. These issues all contribute to the attachment issues highlighted in the bullet point above.

Training for foster carers

Many of the children and young people being looked after by foster carers are some of the most damaged and vulnerable in Welsh society. It is essential, therefore, that the carers receive the best and most informed training and advice possible to enable them to deal appropriately with the difficult, and sometimes extreme behaviours these young people may exhibit. Ongoing training and support for foster carers comes hand in hand with successful placements.

Foster carers part of a professional team

We would advocate that foster carers be recognised more as being vital and key members of a professional team of people delivering the best placement possible to that child or young person. However, unfortunately, there is variable experience of this with, all too often, foster carers not being included in vital meetings or included in the sharing of information - despite them often being the people who know the child best.

Emergency carers

Some authorities operate 'emergency care' placements. These carers are well trained and are generally paid whether the placement is occupied or not. We support the idea of such placements as they can frequently provide the short term care and support the child or young person may need prior to any longer term placement planning.

Charging parents

Some local authorities are considering charging parents who voluntarily place their children into care. Along with the Children's Commissioner for Wales, we oppose this development because we believe it will deter families from seeking support when they most need it and could result in family breakdown and children and young people being made homeless.