

Care experienced children and young people

PAC(5) CEC17

Evidence from Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers

Introduction

The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers is the not for profit organisation that campaigns on behalf of independent and voluntary sector fostering providers (IFPs) and the children for whom they care. The NAFP has over 100 members who care for over 90% of children placed in the independent sector across England, Scotland and Wales.

NAFP meets regularly with its members in Wales and our meetings focus predominantly on issues which affect the independent sector. We have sought input from our members in Wales to inform this response.

Expenditure and value for money of public services for care experienced children and young people

One of the NAFP's key roles in Wales is to support its members where there are concerns regarding the way that foster placements are commissioned. Since 2012, when the first framework contract in Wales for foster care services was launched, the NAFP has had, in our view, variable success in working with local authorities to help them improve commissioning. Between 2012 and 2016 partnership working was regarded by our members as ineffective with our members describing the leadership of the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4Cs) as 'obstructive and unhelpful'. The framework was reviewed in 2016 and at this point NAFP wrote to all of the Directors of Children's Services in Wales, expressing concerns regarding the lack of partnership work to date and the absence of co-production in the development of the new arrangement.

In this correspondence, NAFP shared how independent providers felt the lack of effective consultation had led to unnecessary and increased costs for local authorities. Unfortunately the views of the independent sector were not considered. This resulted in the current framework which has not enabled the level of efficiency and sufficiency which could have been secured for the public purse.

Shortly after the award of the new contract, the 4Cs recruited a new manager to manage the inherited arrangements. Our members say that partnership arrangements have since improved significantly, despite the ongoing limitations of the framework contract. Whilst communication and relationships between the 4Cs and qualified providers has improved, there still remain some concerns regarding the way the 4Cs and local authorities engage with the wider sector to

ensure information is shared effectively. The NAFP has requested, on several occasions, that some investment is made in communicating information to the sector about commissioning updates and developments on a publically accessible platform but this has not been forthcoming.

The National Fostering Framework

A consultation on the national fostering framework took place in 2016. After the phase two report was published, NAFP wrote to the strategic steering group raising concerns about the work to date. It highlighted the following concerns from independent providers

- The strategic direction is a high risk as it has been based on a flawed mechanism for comparing the costs of foster care provided by local authorities and the independent sector
- The lack of effective consultation with the independent sector and the lack of representation on the steering group has meant valuable knowledge has not been utilised.
- There is a real need for improved transparency and communication

A copy of the letter to the steering group can be found here. To date NAFP have not received a response to the recommendations made.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y2DB5LbLiJh1v5qAW4ByXGx_1WNMcf9D/view

The effectiveness of local authority corporate parenting arrangements;

Corporate parenting arrangements vary across Wales. IFPs have cited examples of excellent practice where local authorities have kept providers informed and abreast of issues. There have been some good arrangements where delegated authority has been clearly demonstrated and supported by placing authorities. Providers have particularly praised some local authorities for the way they have sourced placements for some individual children with complex needs.

However, there are still some areas for improvement. Over the past year the NAFP has met with IFPs who routinely share their views that improvements are needed in the following areas:

- Corporate parents need to improve the quality of information that is shared with the independent sector. Referrals are best completed in partnership with those who know the child the best (for example, to ensure that foster carers are properly involved in creating this document when there is a plan for a child to move on).

- To ensure that delegated authority is effective and to ensure that carers are able to make day-to-day decisions for the children they care for. To ensure that, whenever consent is needed from the authority, that there is a mechanism to obtain this in a timely way so the child is not disadvantaged.
- To ensure that there are effective mechanisms in place to facilitate independent interviews with children when they return home after a missing episode. To take forward the recommendations being made by the Children's Society:
<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-knowledge-gap-safeguarding-missing-children-in-wales>.
- To ensure that there are clear policies in place for supporting both children and foster carers when an allegation is made. To ensure that policies are applied consistently, regardless of whether or not the child is placed with an independent provider or local authority carer.
- The need for commissioners to act as a mediator and intervene when there are concerns around the quality of corporate parenting which affects the providers ability to deliver the commissioned service in the interest of children.

Value for money and the effectiveness of current arrangements for care placements;

Much of our views regarding the value for money and the effectiveness of current arrangements is captured above. NAFP members believe that, in the context of working under the requirements of the current framework contract, local authorities are largely securing value for money. Numerous examples are available of services being provided by the independent sector that give added value, despite the local authority not always paying for these. IFPs closely monitor ongoing arrangements, advocate and support the carer in caring for the children and young people in achieving desired outcomes. We believe that the regulations and standards within an IFP are often higher than that of the local authority, therefore the value for money and effectiveness can be more successful, demonstrable and success/outcomes achieved. This has proven essential, particularly with regards to the more difficult to place children and young people.

The improved leadership at the 4Cs is acknowledged and members believe that this has improved some partnerships which consequently delivers value for money.

Members believe that further value for money could be secured if there was improved communication, greater transparency, genuine co-production and

strategies founded on evidence based research and in consultation with the independent sector. Less strategic separation of local authority in-house fostering services with IFPs could further improve this.

NAFP advises that commissioners and providers jointly agree a definition of 'value for money' and determine an agreed methodology of how this will be measured.

North Wales

To date the six local authorities in the North have engaged variably with the framework contract. The NAFP met with the North Wales Regional Collaboration Team in 2017 to discuss the way that foster care placements are being commissioned in the North. We have been working together to share information and have an event planned for April 2018 for local authority commissioners, independent providers, the 4Cs, regional lead for the National Fostering Framework, NAFP and the regional collaboration team. This event will be to share information, understand the current landscape and to develop relationships so that we can work together in partnership to develop an effective commissioning strategy for the region.

Commissioning Survey

In 2017 the NAFP undertook a survey, asking independent fostering providers for their views on how well local authorities commissioned foster care services. Our members in Wales also contributed to this survey. A copy of the findings and recommendations can be found here

www.nafp.co.uk/briefings/how-well-are-fostering-services-commissioned

Recruitment and Retention

IFPs in Wales, like their local authority counterparts, are struggling to recruit new carers. There are difficulties in that there appears to be varied understanding across the sector regarding the amount of active vacancies at any one time. Providers feel this is due to local authorities not consulting with independent providers and not having effective arrangements in place to properly analyse and understand the data submitted by IFPs.

Value for money of the Pupil Development Grant for care experienced children.

Our members understand that different local authorities access the grant and spending the grant in very different ways. This information has not been routinely shared with our members. They would be interested to understand more about this and consider how the services they provide can compliment this