REPORT ON FOSTERING CARE INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Children's policy is based on a fluid compromise between ideals and values concerning children, parents and government. In the UK, strong values exist concerning family privacy and autonomy. On the whole it is accepted that parents are normally responsible for their children's upbringing and entitled to carry out their role without state interference. On the other hand, it has become increasingly accepted that in a complex, modern society, the government does have a role in supporting parents and this is why in almost all civilized and developed countries the government keep an eye on the children as well as provide allowances or child benefit to parents. This does not end there, in cases where the system detect an abuse of a child or children leaving in extreme poverty whereby the parents are deemed not fit to take care of there children, these children can also be placed in foster care homes. In the past orphans or delinquents have also been placed in Foster care. Foster care is a system whereby a child/young person or adolescent who is looked after by the local authority/government is placed in an institution, group home, or private home of a state-certified caregiver referred to as a 'foster parent'. The placement of the child is usually arranged through the government or a social-service agency.

KEYWORDS: Foster Care, Foster Policy, Family, Children

INTRODUCTION

Fostering is an important part of Care in UK's Children's Services. From the 1970s onwards, fostering has become increasingly 'task focused' working towards particular goals for looked after children. The changing nature of fostering is well captured in [9] distinction between a quasi-adoptive exclusive foster care and an inclusive model, where foster families can work constructively with birth parents and social workers and accept 'letting go' of the children. As foster care now provides two thirds of looked after children, its quality is crucial to that of the child care system itself. Just as residential care has faced its own negative publicity, foster care has faced its own challenges. Many of these stems from the uneasy mix of professional childcare and family life, the ambivalent status of foster careers between workers and volunteers, and whether they are genuinely valued as colleagues by social workers [3]

The fact that foster care populations are dynamics has long been a stumbling block to policymakers, administrators, researchers, and other concerned with the fate of this vulnerable population [2]. Throughout the western world, family based foster care is facing similar challenges, to which most governments are responding in broadly similar way. Among the most important of these challenges are declining numbers of careers coupled with growing number of children who are displaying more serious and intractable problems than was the case even a decade or so ago. In the USA, Britain, and Australia, one predictable response to the crises has been outsourcing or devolution of the foster care system to non-government agencies operating under contract to government [6]. The emphasis on family preservation that is evident in child welfare policy today is part of a worldwide change in child protection legislation that reasserted the rights of the births parents. Across the world countries are developing foster care as their preferred placement for 'out of home' care [4]. This, in part, reflects a growing appreciation of the needs of children. From its earliest years of its development, foster care

has the capacity to deliver on children's key needs while also allowing, where appropriate, children to remain in touch with and identified with their birth families [10]. The qualities of foster care that give it the potential to meet a wide range of children's needs are:

- It offers care in a family setting

- It offers care in the community

- It offers opportunity to make attachment relationships to committed foster parents

- It can permit children to continue to be attached and indentified with family of origin

- It can include the child's family in the care of the child

- It can provide care and support for the child into adulthood

- It can channel extra support from the agency for the child and careers [10]

Foster care offer all these positive features for the agencies charged with caring for children. It has provided an established example of a service that has drawn flexibly on community resources to reduce reliance on institutional care, truly a 'community care' service. Foster care provides agencies with a highly flexible service. Agencies retain control over who they recruit and how they access and support them. The term foster care now embraces many different forms of care provided by many different types of careers. This is summarized below:

Who are Foster Careers?

- The child's relatives

- Largely untrained volunteers paid expenses

- Trained and supported volunteers

- Salaried foster careers

Types of Foster Careers

- Respite for parents

- Short-term care in emergencies

- Short-term care for assessment or preparation for long-term

- Medium or long term care

Specialist placements for adolescents [19]. It is not surprising then that foster care has become the dominant placement of our child care systems. In England and Wales the proportion of children in care who are in foster care has grown from one third to two thirds in the last 20 years. In Northern Ireland, of the children in care and living away from their parents almost 80% are in foster care and the actual number of Ireland the percentage of children in care who are in foster care grew from 50% to 75% between 1977 and 1997. In all justification this growth has been mainly at the expense of residential care [19].

Foster care has truly become the 'work horse' of the child welfare systems in the UK, Ireland and many other countries. It may lack some of the qualities that are claimed for the 'thoroughbred' adoption, but adoption remains an executive privilege for a small minority in most care systems. In England and Wales, for example the proportion of

children placed for adoption in any one year has rarely risen beyond 5% [17] and it has had an even less significant impact in other jurisdictions [11]. In the United States, as the number of children who are abused and neglected continues to grow each year [18], the number of children entering foster care likewise escalates. At the end of 1994, there were an estimated 468,000 children in foster care [5] an increase of 70% since 1984. Although the number of children in foster care who need adoptive families is not known, many states estimate that 15% to 20% of the children in foster care need families through adoption [14]. In Fiscal Year 1993, some 86,000 children in foster care needed adoption planning and services [15]

As the number of children in foster care has grown and the number of children needing adoption services has escalated, the numbers of children in foster care whose adoptions are finalized in any one year, nevertheless, has remained stable. The highest number of finalized adoptions occurred in Fiscal Year 1982 when between 22,000 and 24,000 adoptions were finalized [16]. Since that time, the number of adoptions finalized each year has ranged between 17,000 and 21,000 each year, reflecting increasingly smaller percentages of children in care [16]. In the most recent year for which data is available, Fiscal Year 1993, only 18,000 adoptions of children in foster care were finalized [15], a figure that represents only about four percent of the total number of children in care that year and, based on the low estimate of 15% of children in care having a goal of adoption, only about 27% of the children whose plan was adoption [15]

Growth in the Foster Care Population

It is reasonable to predict that foster care will be necessary for a growing number of children whose parents and relatives will find themselves without the necessary financial resources to support their children. It is difficult to project the exact number of children who will enter foster care because their families lose benefits and their ability to provide their children with basic care is undermined. It has been estimated, however, that if one percent of children currently on AFDC must enter foster care, there will be an additional 100,000 children entering care -- a 20% increase in the already burgeoning number of children in care whom the child welfare system is attempting to serve [12]

UK Children Policy

Over the last 50 years, policy and legislation has oscillated in its emphases with regard to the state-parent-child triangle. Public intervention with respect to children has usually been justified in terms of three overlapping approaches or discourses, associated with need, risk and rights. Most conceptions of social need recognize that fulfillment of human life across the life span encompasses physical, social and autonomy needs (e.g. for education) are met, whether by direct or indirect actions. One justification for policy concentrating on vulnerable children is that their needs are greater than average of their families less capable than usual of meeting needs, so special services are required. The legislative category of 'children in need' has been the basis for this more targeted provision. From the mid-1990s onwards the Department of Health in England and Wales developed an integrated framework for assessing children's needs based largely on psychological and social work research and concepts [1]

UK Fostering Policy

The Children Act 1989: Acknowledgment of failing within the care system, boosted by events of Cleveland, were reflected the Children Act 1989 with its theme of working in partnership with parents and the later rights, albeit coached in terms of parental responsibilities. Increased recognition was also given to the importance of links with extended family and siblings. Borrowing ideas from New Zealand's in particular, some agencies began to experiment with family group conferences, in which family group members were brought together and encouraged to draw up their own solutions to problem of childcare and protection with professional involvement being kept to a minimum [13].

At the same time, pressure for children right began to exert at least some influence in policy and practice, notably in terms of encouraging their participation in decision-making and attempts to give them a stronger voice [8]. The thinking behind the Children Act is aptly described by Fox Harding (1991) as an 'uneasy synthesis' and many commentators have noted how the Act can be interpreted in quite different ways. For a long time the moves to empower birth families and children, there was to be no easing up on child protection nor a return of drift. Importantly, no additional resources were made available to implement the Act. In turn this made it difficult to offer the promised support to families and threatened to overload social work agencies and the courts as they grappled with the competing demands [8]

Key Features of the Children Act 1989

- More active involvement of courts in decision-making about children

- Welfare of the child to be paramount

- Use of a welfare checklist for decision making

- Avoidance of delay

- No order to be made unless better than not to do so

- Ascertaining and taking into account child wishes

- Specific order to deal with residence and contact

- Parental responsibility to be maximized, even when the child is in care

- Bringing to public and private law

- Due consideration to be given child religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background

Modern foster care has been shaped by the twin concerns of extending 'fosterability' and adaptation to the emphasis on planning and permanence [20]

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services

The UK National Standards for Foster Care, produced in 1999, along with the Code of Practice on the recruitment, assessment, approval, training, management and support of foster careers, continue to be applicable to fostering services. Those Standards are more far-reaching and child-centered – in the sense that they cover all aspects of the life of the foster child, not only the services provided by the fostering service. Although in contrast to the national minimum standards issued under the CSA they have no formal legal status, they represent best practice and as such should be fully complied with by fostering service providers. [7]. The national minimum standards for fostering services focus on achievable outcomes for children and young people – that is, the impact on the individual of the services provided. The standards are grouped under a series of key topics:

- Statement of purpose

- Fitness to carry on or manage a fostering service

- Management of a fostering service

Each standard or group of standards is preceded by a statement of the outcome to be achieved by the fostering service provider. The standards themselves are numbered and the full set of numbered paragraphs must be met in order

to achieve compliance with the standards. The standards are intended to be qualitative, in that they provide a tool for judging the quality of life experienced by services users, but they are also designed to be measurable. Wherever possible, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (S1 2002 No. 57) that a set of standards is linked to have been listed, under the standards. However, other regulations and/or primary legislation, in particular the Children Act 1989, may also be relevant. The note should be taken as a general guide and is not an exhaustive legal reference [7]. In inspecting against these standards, the NCSC will follow a consistent inspection methodology and reporting format across the country. It is intended that the standards will be used, both by fostering services providers and by the NCSC, to focus on securing positive welfare, health and education outcomes for children and young people, and reducing risks to their welfare and safety. All providers and staff of fostering services should aim to provide the best care possible for the children in their care, and observing the standards is an essential part, but only a part, of the overall responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of each individual child [7]

Fostering accountability in public child welfare involves holding agents answerable for the validity and integrity of the actions they take on behalf of their principals. It is demonstrated by presenting valid evidence of the efficacy and effectiveness of child welfare interventions, and by showing that agency relationships reliably efficiently achieve the results valued by children, families and the public at large. Assembling the best available evidence and minimizing agency risks are not simple task. They are made difficult by variable scope of public interest in the safety, performance, and well being of the children and by conflicting perspectives on the best type of agency relationships for accomplishing these public purposes. Although public policy remains in flux along these dual dimensions of interest and organization, the dynamic situation also presents opportunities to make better use of empirical evidence to guide and child welfare practice and policy [21]. The nature of the challenges and opportunities are apparent in the latest U.S child welfare legislation enacted into law: The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008. The new law expands federal support grandparents and other relatives who assume permanent legal guardianship of children under their foster care. The same legislation authorizes direct federal payments to Indian tribal organization for the operation foster care, adoption, guardianship assistance programs, renews the bonus program for improved adoption performance, and gives states the option of extending federal foster care assistance to youth adults beyond their 18th birthday [21]

CONCLUSIONS

Foster care is likely to be around as long as society sees fit to provide homes for children whose families are unable or should not be allowed to do so. The next century will see vast changes in the social context of the foster care system. Policymakers, administrator, scholars and advocates interested in the foster care system will do well to monitor these changes in order to maximize the possibility that the families and children involved with it benefit, rather than suffer, from the impact of societal and institutional changes on the system. At the same time interested parties must take an active role in ensuring that the rationalizations of foster care that will almost certainly take place over the next few decades' results in better services and outcome for children and families. In summary, the next few decades will see a rapid growth in knowledge of the processes and outcomes of the foster care system. This should lead to an improvement in foster care and a professionalization of child welfare practice in general, rather than to an undermining of basic practice standard and managed care "race to the bottom" in the care of foster children.

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