

Independent review of children's social care – focus on foster care

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18 July 2022

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It then recommended changes that it projected would place 30,000 more children living where they should be (with their families) by 2032.

Regional care co-operatives

The report recommends that local authorities gather in regional care cooperatives (RCCs). Amongst other functions, regional care cooperatives RCCs would be responsible for the creation of all new public sector fostering as well as commissioning all not-for-profit and private sector provided care.

A key part of what the report recognises is a shortage of foster carers. It records that many children are currently living in children's homes who would be better suited to a fostering environment, if only there was sufficient carers prepared to offer foster homes in the right parts of the country. It also recognises that many children have varying and complex needs. Foster carers need to have the parenting skills to address those, requiring a 'new deal'.

What that means on a practical level is that foster carers would be given a greater degree of support and training but with a corresponding relaxation of control by local authorities and fostering agencies. As the report puts it, social workers and families will need to have a *"greater trust in foster carers making the day-to-day decisions which affect children's lives"*.

A recruitment drive

All of this requires an immediate foster carer recruitment programme with a target of 9,000 new foster carers within the next three years. The report's author Josh MacAlister, points to the enormous public response to the homes for Ukraine programme as a signpost to how ready people are to engage with this sort of recruitment exercise.

Family network plans and bespoke arrangements

Importantly, the report focuses heavily on the potential of family networks. It observes that kinship carers, or 'friends and family carers', are often (depending on their postcode) placed in the position of having to choose between:

- having parental responsibility for a child but no financial support, or alternatively
- becoming a foster carer in which case they have the financial support but have to cede parental responsibility to the local authority and place the child in the care system.

This drives families towards becoming foster carers simply to get the financial allowances and practical support they need to care for their relatives. Instead, where a local authority and a family agree that kinship care is in the best interests of child the report (Chapter 4) proposes a new concept – a Family Network Plan. This plan includes provisions for success measures, multi-disciplinary practical and financial support, and bespoke monitoring and supervision.

The report recognises that some local authorities do support kinship carers who have a special guardianship order or a child arrangement order, but this is discretionary and can lead to a postcode lottery, leading family members to become foster carers deliberately simply in order to have a guarantee of financial support. This is likely to become more necessary than ever as the current cost of living increases. Inconsistency between local authorities is one of the objectives the reports seeks to address. For that reason, a recommendation is in place that all local authorities should make a financial allowance at the same rate as the fostering allowance for special guardianship and kinship carers with child arrangement orders.

Pilot schemes

There has been a fast and brief response from the Government ([see here](#)). It includes commitments to:

- set up an implementation board to review reform
- develop a national children's social care framework, and
- prioritise foster carer recruitment

What is not yet clear is what practical effect the recommendations might have, particularly, to what extent they are likely to be adopted and on what timescale. For ambitious and innovative teams (in both the private and public sector) now is probably a good time to launch any pilots – but don't forget to include your risk management teams and insurers on any planning for this!

Now is also a sensible time for all fostering agencies to review their current policies, procedures and business plans for the next three to five years, to ensure that they are ready to move nimbly as soon as some of these recommended changes come into practical force.

For any support and questions about the proposed changes and recommendations – and how to put them into practice please contact us.

Contact



Sarah Erwin-Jones

Partner

Sarah.Erwin-Jones@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)115 976 6136

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