

Support Foster Care: developing a short-break service for children in need

Summary

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May 2004

Background

Under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities can provide short breaks for children with foster or other families. The majority of such placements are used to support the families of disabled children, but they may also be used in other circumstances. Support foster care schemes aim to work with families who are experiencing difficulties or stress by providing short breaks for children and support for parents. Such schemes have been slow to develop, and the Department of Health commissioned the Thomas Coram Research Unit to carry out a small-scale study to find out more about the barriers, legal and otherwise, that might be deterring local authorities from establishing support care schemes, and how such barriers might be overcome.

About the study

In addition to identifying barriers, the study aimed to provide information on the extent of support care schemes and how they operate; to examine the motivation and views of foster carers who provide this service; and to explore the potential for childminders to offer this kind of short break support to families in the light of recent changes in the regulation of childminding. Information was obtained from a variety of sources. A short screening questionnaire was sent to all English local authorities; telephone interviews were undertaken with key officers in 14 authorities, both with and without support care schemes; three schemes were studied in more depth, including focus groups with support carers; and coordinators of community childminding networks were surveyed. The fieldwork was carried out between March and August 2003.

Key findings

- Only a small number of authorities, probably no more than a dozen, currently operate formal support care schemes. However, many offer short breaks to a small number of non-disabled children on an *ad hoc* basis, usually using existing foster carers, and there is interest in developing further this kind of support for families.
- The schemes included in the study varied considerably in size and scope, but all were able to offer a flexible response depending on families' needs. This was often a weekend break every fortnight or month, but could also involve care in the daytime (for example when children were excluded from school), overnight stays during the week, or short periods of full time care (for example when a parent needed repeated stays in hospital). Support care was often used alongside other social work support, and was usually offered for no more than six to nine months.
- The majority of support care schemes are currently located within fostering services, but there is a strong case for considering a base within family support services, whilst maintaining strong links with fostering and family placement teams. Whatever the location, support care needs to be presented to families in an accessible, non-stigmatising way.
- The most frequently mentioned barrier to developing support care schemes was the priority given to 'mainstream' fostering and a fear of possible competition for resources and potential carers. However, the study found that support carers were usually drawn from a

pool of people who would not be available for full-time fostering, or who would otherwise have left the fostering service. Providing opportunities for part time fostering could actually draw in people who might later move on to offer full time care.

- Another barrier was the lower priority often accorded to preventive services. Many schemes had struggled to keep going financially, and had only been able to develop through tapping into additional sources of funding such as Sure Start or grants provided under the *Choice Protects* initiative. Strong management backing for support care schemes was an important factor in their success.
- Legal issues, such as whether children receiving support care needed to be treated as looked after under section 20 of the Children Act, were rarely mentioned as a barrier to setting up schemes, but they did become more of an issue once schemes were operating. There was widespread confusion and varying practice with regard to the need for reviews, medicals and care plans for children receiving support care. Most schemes had decided to operate some form of 'slimmed down' Looking After Children procedures, but were unsure of the legality of this. All authorities reported that they would welcome clarification and guidance from the government in this area.
- Support carers were very committed to providing a positive experience for the children placed with them. However, there was general dissatisfaction with the poor pay and increasing pressure to accept more challenging children, and a feeling that their service is marginalized within social services departments.
- Some community childminding networks have started to explore the potential to offer a similar short-break service (including overnight care), and there are examples of successful practice. Such schemes operate under different regulations, with no requirement for childminders to be registered as foster carers.
- Although there was little 'hard' evidence of effectiveness because of a lack of monitoring or comparative studies, the available evidence suggests that providing short breaks for children in need helps them to remain with their families and may avoid longer-term care. The service is highly valued by parents, and its flexibility is a particular strength. Short breaks can also provide continuity and stability for children when used alongside periods of accommodation.
- Overall, the study suggests there is a need for a more integrated approach to providing this kind of support to families, both at a local authority level (locating support care firmly within a spectrum of services to children and families) and at a national level (for example, greater dialogue between the regulatory bodies responsible for childminding and for foster care). Areas that local authorities need to consider when developing support care services are discussed, and an appendix to the report provides further information on relevant legal issues.

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Institute of Education, University of London. Founded in 1973 by Professor Jack Tizard, its principal function is to carry out research of relevance to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

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