

## **Shaping agendas, securing futures – a manifesto British Association for Adoption & Fostering**

### **Setting the scene**

- There are 78,500 children in public care in the UK.
- 13% of children in care in England have had three or more moves in the last year.
- An estimated 18,000 children in care have been looked after by local authorities for more than five years.
- 4,000 are waiting for adoptive families and 68% are living with foster carers.
- About 37% of children for whom adoption is the plan are not adopted, primarily due to a shortage of adopters.
- Some 50% of children in care have experienced abuse and neglect.

All children in care will be struggling with the sense of loss and despair caused by being separated from their birth parents. When children in care become adults they are far more likely to be homeless, unemployed, need mental health services and enter prison. They are 66 times more likely to have their own children taken into care. The legacy of wasted potential is appalling.

### **About BAAF**

The British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) is the leading charity and membership organisation in fostering and adoption in the UK. BAAF:

- promotes and develops high standards in adoption and fostering for child care, health, legal and allied professionals
- increases public and professional understanding of adoption and fostering and the lifelong implications for children separated from their birth families
- acts as an independent voice in the field of child care, informing and influencing policy makers and legislators

In order to make real difference to the lives of children who are unable to live with their birth families, BAAF is calling on all the main political parties to incorporate actions from eight key areas into their manifestos.

### **1. Significant investment in the foster care service**

The latest government statistics illustrate that the care system in the UK is still failing to meet the needs of many children in public care. Foster care continues to be the 'workhorse' of the care system, as two out of three children who are looked after away from home are in foster care. Foster carers look after some of our most vulnerable young people, many of whom will need a placement for the rest of their childhood and beyond – a family for life. They play an extremely important role in providing stability and security for this group of children, but recent research and experience illustrate that the service urgently needs development and investment. More foster carers must be recruited for children with diverse backgrounds and complex needs.

There is also a major recruitment crisis in most local authorities that leads to little choice of foster carer for most children. This in turn leads to more destabilising

placement moves. Too often, children are placed in an emergency with the independent sector, instead of through a planned and coordinated approach. We call for foster carers to be recognised as professionals doing an important job for children.

- The main carer needs proper remuneration so they do not need to do other paid work outside the home and can be at home for their foster children and help them to succeed at school.
- They need to be trained, well supported and paid a national minimum allowance for the cost of caring for the child in addition to remuneration.
- They deserve the status and recognition of being registered with the General Social Care Council.

It is essential that local authorities that place children through independent fostering agencies have proper commissioning arrangements in place to ensure that placements are planned and meet children's needs. We must transform fostering services and improve the life chances of our future citizens.

## **2. Raising expectations for children in care by increasing support post 16**

A shocking 46% of young women and 59% of young men are leaving care with no educational qualifications at all – with very serious implications for their future life chances. At the time when most young people are preparing for their GCSEs and making decisions about staying on at school, some children are leaving the care system with very little support. If the next government is serious about improving the educational achievement and employment chances for children in public care, then these children need stable, secure homes beyond the age of 16 and support from carers and professionals who have high expectations of what they can achieve. It is not good enough that so many young people who have had such a poor start in life have to move out of their foster homes at 16 or 18. They should have full support until they are 21 so that they can remain with their foster carers where this is appropriate – we would want our own children to have this secure base and they are likely to have had much more stable childhoods.

## **3. Investment in adoption support**

Increasing numbers of children in care are being placed for adoption. These children have often experienced neglect or abuse and they can have many difficulties. Adoptive parents need a lot of support if these adoptions are going to be successful. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 in England and Wales introduced a range of new measures to improve services to children and families after adoption. For the first time, statutory duties were placed on local authorities to provide a range of adoption support services, appoint a specialist adoption support service adviser and undertake assessments of support needs of adopted children, adopters, birth parents and adults affected by adoption. But the Act did not require local authorities to make the services available to meet the assessed needs of these children. Waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services mean many adopted children never get access to the help they need. Too often, educational support packages are cut off when the child ceases to be in care and is adopted.

We are concerned that the level of current new investment in adoption support services is far too little. We want assurances that new funds will be made available and that adopted children and their families will have the priority they need.

#### **4. Funding for kinship care**

When children cannot live with their birth parents every effort should be made to enable them to live with relatives or family friends where they can still feel part of the wider family and not be separated from everyone they know and care about. In the UK, far less children are cared for in the wider family than in the rest of Europe and the USA. We know that many grandparents struggle financially to care for their grandchildren who may then go into care where contact can be lost forever. We want support for:

- an urgent review of services to support care by friends and relatives
- a special income tax credit for kinship carers to enable them to care for unsupported children in their family

#### **5. 'A Surer Start' for infants in the care system**

Increasing numbers of children under two are coming into the care system as result of their parents' drug and alcohol misuse. They have often experienced the prenatal effects of substance misuse themselves. Many of these children are moving straight from hospital after birth to foster carers. When, as sadly so often happens, their parents are not able to make the progress needed to have the children back, or the courts agree adoption is in the child's best interests, the child moves again. 36% of children placed for adoption that entered care as infants experience three or more placement moves before they enter their adoptive family. The long term impact on the brain development of these children, their ability to make attachments and their ability to learn is profound.

There are four concurrent planning schemes in England where foster carers are also approved as adopters, but are supported to care for children while efforts are made to help them to go home. These children have frequent supervised contact with their birth parents. The schemes also provide a lot of support to the birth families through this difficult period, but, where the child is unable to return home within a timescale agreed with the court, the foster carers are able to adopt them and the child does not have another traumatic change of carer. The evidence is that children do much better in concurrent planning placements, but the amount of support needed makes it an expensive option.

We believe that the future costs of not pursuing concurrent planning are very high. We ask for support for a new funding stream and for policy guidance to be issued to allow this placement option to be available for all children who need it. Local authorities should monitor the number of placement moves experienced by children under two and the aim should be for no child to experience more than two moves.

#### **6. Full registration of private fostering**

Children under 16 (or under 18 if disabled) are privately fostered if someone who is not a close relative, guardian or someone with parental responsibility cares for them

for more than 28 days. Many are of west African origin, but others include children who attend language schools, young people temporarily estranged from their parents, children brought from abroad with a view to adoption, children whose parents work unsocial hours and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We do not know how many children are cared for in this way. Local authority records only include a tiny number of privately fostered children and their carers. The real figure could be anything from 15,000–20,000 children.

Every report the government has commissioned in the last five years confirms that privately fostered children are very vulnerable. New measures have been introduced into the Children Act 2004 to require local authorities to raise local awareness about the need to notify these arrangements. We believe a registration and approval system, similar to childminding, would protect these children better and this is indeed covered by a sunset clause in the Act.

We are asking for reassurance that monitoring the success of the new measures will be a priority and that the sunset clause will be acted upon if necessary.

## **7. A better deal for the health and well-being of children separated from their birth families**

Children in the care system suffer severe health disadvantages. Disabled children are more likely to be taken into care. A comprehensive and holistic health assessment is central to repairing health inequalities, ensuring an appropriate match with carers who can meet the child's needs and determining needs for placement support. Yet there is a shortage of health professionals with expertise in the complex health needs of children in public care to provide much needed services, along with inadequate resources for treatment, in particular, for child and adolescent mental health services. If the health of these severely disadvantaged children is to improve, there must be an investment in health services.

Furthermore, disabled children living in residential schools are not afforded the same protection as children in public care. They can become chronically isolated from their families. There is often no proper scrutiny and they can remain in limbo with multiple carers and no real sense of family life. We need an incoming government to establish a review mechanism for disabled children in special residential schools as rigorous as the looked after children's review system.

## **8. Recruitment of adopters**

BAAF has welcomed the increase in the numbers of children who have been adopted from care since 2000 and congratulates local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies on the sensitive and complex work needed to recruit and support new adopters and to prepare children. However, we remain very concerned about the children for whom no adoptive families are found. These children are not included in the available statistics but research indicates that they could represent up to 37% of all children for whom adoption is the plan.

The pain experienced by these children, who have been prepared for adoption, can be great. Many are boys, most over the age of five and many need to be adopted together with brothers and sisters. Black and minority ethnic children are over

represented amongst children who wait. Ironically, there are charging mechanisms that get in the way of finding families quickly. Voluntary adoption agencies successfully recruit many adoptive families but in order to cover the costs of recruiting and assessing families they charge an interagency fee. Whether or not a local authority uses families that are referred to them as suitable for a child may inevitably be dictated by their own budgetary restraints. This is a major disincentive and leads to some children waiting when families are available elsewhere in the country. It also means that voluntary agencies cannot afford to expand their family finding services. We believe every child should be matched with the most appropriate adoptive family and that finance should not stand in the way.

We recommend there should be some central pot or ring-fenced fund for interagency fees from which agencies can draw. We would also like statistics be kept of all children for whom adoption is the plan so that the percentage who are successfully adopted can be known.