

British Association for Adoption & Fostering

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Dear

Re: Concerns about recent coverage by the Daily Mail of childcare social workers

I am sure you will be aware of a campaign on the front page of successive editions of the Daily Mail accusing social workers of being "child stealers". Social workers are accused of "tearing children away from loving families to meet performance targets for adoption". It is suggested that the only reason is that parents are not "clever enough to have a family" or are "too poor" (today's edition).

BAAF is appalled at the impact this sensational and irresponsible media coverage could have on those very vulnerable children who are only able to stay with their families because of the care and support they receive from social workers. If these families and their friends read, day after day, the accusations in newspapers like the Daily Mail there must be a risk that they will be less likely to approach social services for help. While they may not believe every word they read, they will certainly feel deeply suspicious. If families in need fail to access appropriate help this could present a real risk to children's wellbeing and safety.

In this letter, I am setting out some information which I hope will help you deal with any queries you receive and I am also attaching the judgment given in the recent High Court hearing by Mrs Justice Pauffley on 8 August 2005 in relation to the Essex case which appears to have been the trigger for the current campaign. The judge specifically asked for this to be publicised in the anonymised version, because of her deep concern about media commentary (available at http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/vip8/ecc/ECCWebsite/content/binaries/documents/high_court_judgement.pdf). I urge you to read it. I would also like to draw your attention to an article I wrote for the Guardian website (available at <http://society.guardian.co.uk/children/comment/0,,1547004,00.html>).

Social workers are required to make every effort to enable children to live with their families, even where there are concerns justifying an application to court for a care order. If the court does find that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm at home, it will need to approve the local authority's "care plan". A plan for adoption will only be approved after placement with the parents or members of the extended family has been ruled out.

Every day, social workers receive thousands of referrals both about possible risks to a child and from families asking for help and support. Statistics show, for example, that in a survey week in February 2003, 388,200 children in need were known to local authorities as requiring some form of social services provision. In 2004, the 61,100 "looked after" children (of whom just under two thirds are under compulsory orders) represent only a tiny proportion of those for whom local authorities are concerned. The majority of children who are looked after by the local authority return home in less than one year. The worst scenario for any child is long term "drifting" between foster carers and residential care, without any clear plan about their long term future. That is why local authorities are now required to have a "permanence plan" in place by the time the child has been looked after for as long as four months. The first option for any permanence

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plan is a safe and supported return to birth parents but where this is deemed not possible, or where parents are unwilling to care for their child, other options need to be considered urgently. We believe that one of the reasons that outcomes continue to be so poor for many children in care is because they have not received the security and stability which is so important to enable children to do well in their lives. Sadly, much of the damage may have been caused before the child has been admitted to local authority care – for example, children born to drug addicted parents are not only exposed pre-natally to the effects of substance misuse, but are then too often left in the care of serial friends and strangers while the parents pursue their drug habits. Other children who are living with parents who do not have the capacity to care for themselves safely or who can meet their needs are exposed to neglect and may suffer serious accidents. A significant proportion of children who remain in care long term have been seriously abused.

I have been Chief Executive of BAAF for ten years and I remember well in the late nineties the campaign conducted by elements of the media that accused social workers of *refusing to consider adoption*, indeed, of being philosophically opposed to concept of adoption, and leaving children to “languish” in care.

BAAF campaigned for and welcomed the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 which will be implemented at the end of this year. The Act introduces the concept of a welfare checklist for children being considered for adoption which has to be specifically addresses by the court prior to making an adoption order. The checklist addresses, among other things,:

(1)(4)(c) *the likely effect on the child (throughout his life) of having ceased to be a member of the original family and become an adopted person.*

Adoption Standards have also been introduced which have resulted in a much more consistent adoption service and contributed to a reduction in the delay experienced between an adoption plan being agreed by court and the child's being legally adopted. The Adoption Standards have a very clear value base and set out the provisions that need to be met for children, birth parents, adoptive families and adopted adults. Again, these have been widely accepted as robust and markers of good practice.

The introduction of adoption targets has probably been more controversial – however, BAAF believes that these targets had an important role in helping to concentrate minds on the importance of minimising delay and drift for children who courts had deemed could not return to their birth parents. Adoption provides the opportunity for a stable and secure family life outside the care system for some of these children. As a result, the percentage of children adopted from local authority care has risen from 4.5% to 6% and we consider that this is to be welcomed. Indeed, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Adoption, jointly chaired by Julian Brazier MP and Dari Taylor MP, has expressed repeated concerns about some social workers still appearing to be philosophically opposed to adoption, but we believe that this is less likely to be the case than in the past.

It is imperative to remember that there are no financial incentives whatsoever to remove children from home to local authority care. Indeed, the cost of looking after a child away from home and of court proceedings makes such a suggestion nonsensical.

We are also greatly concerned about the impact that this hostile media campaign will have on the role, status and morale of social workers. All social workers now have to be registered with the General Social Care Council and to sign up to ethical principles and values. They are all required to participate in post-qualifying training and a new four-year degree course has been introduced. Social workers are expected to work with the most vulnerable people in our community and have to make very difficult balancing decisions

between leaving children who are at some risk in their families and removing them to care, with all the concerns about whether they will be able to have placements that meet their needs. These are not easy decisions – we expect social workers to take them on behalf of society. We expect social workers to confront the hostility and suspicion of desperate families, and we expect them to give evidence in court about what they have seen and what the children have said to them despite very real threats that are sometimes faced if they do so. The recent media campaign appears to have joined forces with a pressure group, FASSIT (Families Anti Social Services Inquiry Team), which makes appalling allegations. I am greatly concerned about the impact this will have on social workers and on young people considering exploring the profession.

— I am sorry to write at such length as I know you will receive a lot of correspondence but these are such critical issues that I hope you will forgive me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Felicity Collier". The handwriting is cursive and somewhat informal.

Felicity Collier
Chief Executive