

Children's Workforce Strategy

Consultation Response

Please contact

Andrea Warman

Foster Care Development Consultant

andrea.warman@baaf.org.uk

0207 593 2005

John Simmonds

Director of Policy, Research and Development

14 July 2005



Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

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

- promote the highest standards of child-centred policies and services
- speak out on behalf of looked-after children
- influence UK-wide policy and legislation
- provide much-needed information and advice
- promote greater public understanding of adoption and fostering
- support our members in their work

BAAF's main activities are the development, promotion and advocacy of best policy and practice; the provision of advice and information to our members and to the general public; training, consultancy and seminars; child placement services including the publication of our flagship monthly newspaper, **Be My Parent**. We also publish a quarterly professional journal, *Adoption and Fostering*, books and guides for professionals, academics, parents and carers and research studies. The main users of our services are our members comprising local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales, voluntary adoption agencies, independent fostering agencies and also individual social work, legal and medical professionals and carers. We are currently developing our service to Northern Ireland.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The British Association for Adoption and Fostering welcomed the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper as an important step towards improving services, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to develop to their full potential. However, we highlighted a number of challenges and concerns. Our response to the *Children's Workforce Strategy* consultation should be read in the context of that response.
- 1.2 We now welcome the *Children's Workforce Strategy* consultation because it provides recognition of the huge impact that Social Care services have on the lives of some of the most vulnerable children, young people and their families. And, that outcomes for these children and young people will not improve unless those who work with them and care for them are appropriately trained, skilled and qualified to meet their needs.
- 1.3 However, we strongly believe that the future children's workforce must be child-centred and child-focussed, and that this must be central to the vision for the development of future services. Furthermore, the need of all children to experience security, stability and 'normal family life' must remain paramount, and the development of a professionalised workforce should not detract from this. The resulting tensions do require further thought and debate. And, there clearly must be significant additional financial investment to ensure that the creation of a 'world-class' children's workforce able to meet current challenges becomes more than just an aspiration.
- 1.4 BAAF's response to this Consultation will begin with some general comments on the proposed strategy, before focussing on Chapter 4, *Social care and foster care*, and commenting on the questions raised there about the future of children and families' social work and fostering services.

2. The Strategy: The Children's Workforce Vision

- 2.1 BAAF does welcome this vision for the children's workforce, and in particular that foster carers are recognised as highly important members of the team. We also value the intention that different professionals should work together and develop a shared skills, values and knowledge base. We welcome the related proposal to develop coherent career pathways that allow professionals to move across different sectors of the workforce.
- 2.2 However, while the proposal to introduce a single qualification framework to promote this might encourage more joint training and increase understanding, achieving more effective inter-agency and multi-disciplinary working will also require addressing some of the complex issues related to developing shared meanings across disciplines and professions. These were discussed in greater detail in BAAF's response to *Every Child Matters*, and will be discussed below in relation to foster carers.
- 2.3 Furthermore, while it is clear that social workers, teachers and foster carers all have a key role to play both in the Early Years work and for children and families who require substitute care, BAAF's Health Group is concerned that there is very little detail in this strategy about the role that health professionals will play in the team. The strategy does make reference to workforce shortages in this sector, and states that these will be addressed nationally by the NHS, but it is clear that a significant part of the *Every Child Matters* agenda depends upon the contribution of health professionals with an understanding of social medicine and child health. In particular, the contribution that Community Paediatricians, nurses, health visitors, midwives and psychologists make to Early Years preventative work and work with *looked after* children, as well as the role of Medical Advisors on Adoption Panels is vitally important. Yet, this speciality is rarely promoted in workforce planning agendas, or in the education of doctors and nurses. As a result, we are likely to face a shortage of these practitioners within the next few years.
- 2.4 BAAF therefore urges the NHS workforce planners to identify a comprehensive workforce plan for the delivery of social medicine. And, it is essential that more thought is given to the role that health professionals will play in the new children's workforce.
- 2.5 In addition, BAAF's Legal Group is concerned that lawyers are not identified as being part of the children's workforce. This is worrying, particularly at a time when there is a shortage of experienced local authority legal advisors in many areas. BAAF urges that this be rectified, and that future training for social care professionals promotes understanding of court proceedings and legal processes as well as the role lawyers play in this work.

3. The Strategy: The Role of the Social Pedagogue

- 3.1 BAAF welcomes the strategy's recognition that currently some of our most vulnerable children are being looked after by carers with a much lower level of training and education than carers in other European countries. This is most clearly evident in residential care.
- 3.2 We also welcome the promotion of a more integrated approach to meeting children's care and educational needs, both in the Early Years workforce and for *looked after* children.
- 3.3 However, we do have some concerns about whether the creation of a new profession in England, the 'social pedagogue', would address the problems in the delivery of social care for children identified in the strategy.
- 3.4 Social Pedagogy has a long tradition in countries like France, Sweden and Denmark. But there are clear differences in the application of the model in these different child welfare systems. The English system provides yet another very different context, and careful thought would need to be given as to how these new professionals would work alongside teachers and especially children and families' social workers.
- 3.5 There is a strong risk that the introduction of a new professional could create additional confusion in a system where there is already clear evidence of a lack of understanding and dialogue between professionals who work in care and those with responsibilities for education. These difficulties need to be fully understood and addressed before making any radical changes to the system.
- 3.6 Furthermore, removing responsibilities for any direct work with children and young people from social workers without considering current serious problems in social work training and with professional identity is likely to have a negative impact on morale and recruitment. In particular, we know that many students choose social work as a career because they want to be directly involved in therapeutic work. We also know that many social workers do not feel that their current training provides them with the skills to carry out this difficult, but rewarding task. Many others become disillusioned, and even leave the profession because they find they are spending more time on administrative tasks than on direct work with children and families. BAAF believes that we do need to address shortcomings in social work education, but if we simply remove what has always been seen as a key aspect of the social work role from the profession, it is highly likely that many more experienced practitioners will leave, and there will be even more recruitment difficulties.
- 3.7 However, social pedagogues in some countries are most usually based in residential settings where they are able to provide education as well as care for children with the most complex needs. This could provide a model for the care of our most vulnerable children, and at least suggests an urgent need to address the education, training, recruitment, remuneration and support of carers in residential units.

4. Chapter 4: Social Care and Foster Care

- 4.1 BAAF welcomes recognition in the strategy that social care and foster care are priority areas with pressing capacity and quality issues. We also welcome the clear statement that outcomes for children and young people are unlikely to improve unless they experience stable, good quality care, and the adults working with them are skilled, trained and qualified to meet their needs.
- 4.2 Chapter 4 of the strategy poses a number of consultation questions in relation to the future of social work and foster care:

What more could/should Government do to promote a career in children and families' social work?

- 4.3 BAAF welcomes recognition of the vitally important role that children & families' social workers play in social services and the need to address the acute morale problem in the profession. We are also aware that good communication and understanding between these social workers and family placement social workers as well as foster carers is essential if we are to improve support for carers and create a child-centred system of substitute care.
- 4.4 We note proposals in the strategy which aim to improve status and skills, particularly the introduction of Advanced Social Work Practice qualifications which would encourage experienced social workers to specialise in work with children & young people, to remain in 'front line' work and share their expertise with, and support new workers.
- 4.5 However, BAAF believes that there are complex reasons for the current difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers. In particular, although remuneration and good employment conditions are clearly important, we also need a more detailed public debate about the nature, requirements and processes of social work, especially in relation to assessment and child protection work. Social workers have to be fully involved in the anxiety, complexity, risk and uncertainty of addressing the needs of children and carers without a well established technology for changing these circumstances. This includes identifying the causative factors when families are in trouble, engaging in a helpful way with these families that effectively brings about change, but against a background that families know full well that social workers have the authority to remove the children. This inevitably creates a tension, which individual workers have to learn to cope with by reflection and with the support of good supervision. When these things are not available, social workers can become unsure about the purpose of their work and uneasy about their role. At the current time, many social workers experience little space and little supervision. We believe it is now essential to openly acknowledge and discuss these

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

difficulties, and for more thought and discussion about future expectations and support.

- 4.6 Social workers also clearly require excellent training and although some of this education can take place in the classroom, some of the skills needed are practice-based. As a result, students require good quality and challenging placements with practice teachers who have the time and experience to support them. There is a lot of evidence that universities and colleges are experiencing difficulties in obtaining these placements for social work students, and BAAF would urge that this is investigated, and incentives are introduced to encourage agencies to offer placements, especially in children and families' teams. This would not only improve preparation, but also help to prevent the 'burn –out' which occurs when social workers who have not received adequate training have to very quickly learn the skills they require in their first post.
- 4.7 Similarly, social workers need to be self-aware, with the confidence to engage with diverse groups of people in a wide range of contexts, including those where suspicion and hostility are present. The current competency-based training does not always help to equip social workers with the 'people focused' skills they need to carry out this work. Again, on courses and in practice there is now often less time spent on self-reflection, and less recognition of the value and importance of good supervision.
- 4.8 BAAF urges that at national level the bodies responsible for social work training re-assert the people-centred nature of the profession and lead a debate about the necessary values, knowledge and skills base required – particularly the need for skills to carry out direct work with children and young people, which is not currently given high priority on many social work courses, but is so important in practice.
- 4.9 In addition, in order to improve morale and retention, the importance of enabling supervision and supportive leadership must be emphasised and promoted by managers and employers, locally and at national level.

What additional measures would support increased supply, improved stability & greater quality for children and families' social work?

- 4.10 BAAF welcomes the recognition in the strategy that 'acute supply pressures remain' and that the current reliance in many areas on agency staff is very concerning. The introduction of local workforce strategies to encourage and support other workers and carers to train for a career in social work are also welcome, although the best ways to prepare and support them through the process would need to be carefully thought through.

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

- 4.11 However, BAAF believes that without more thought and debate about the role and expectations of children and families' social workers, it will continue to be difficult to recruit, but particularly retain good quality workers. In particular, the extremely heavy case-load held by many workers, gives them very little space for reflection, and is a real cause for concern. BAAF's response to *Every Child Matters* explored these issues in greater depth.
- 4.12 Nevertheless, the proposal that the LGLC should support improvements in leadership, management and supervision for social work is very welcome. It is clear that many front-line workers are currently unhappy about the quality of support they receive, and that this not only has an impact on service delivery to children, but also acts as a disincentive to joining the profession.

How could we incentivise the emergence of new roles and new ways of working in children's social care?

- 4.13 BAAF welcomes the strategy's objective to promote better working relationships within social care and between social care and other sectors. We particularly welcome recognition that foster carers are members of the workforce, whose knowledge should be respected and valued.
- 4.14 We also welcome the suggestion that social workers, foster carers and residential carers should share a values, knowledge and skills base. We would like to see more opportunities for joint training and joint working, and will return to this in our discussion about foster care.
- 4.15 It is clearly important to improve communication between professionals involved in social care and education, and this is vitally important if we are to improve educational achievement for *looked after* children. But there will need to be a good deal of thought given to how roles could be shared in practice. In particular, sharing the same tools for assessment will promote understanding, but encouraging other professionals like teachers to take on the Lead Professional role in child welfare work will require an examination of workloads, but also a real culture shift. Debate and discussion about how this would work will be needed at local level. Again, BAAF's response to *Every Child Matters* looks at this question in more depth.

What are your views on the model of pedagogy we have described?

- 4.16 BAAF's concerns about the introduction of social pedagogy in a very different child welfare context, and in a situation where professional roles and boundaries are already unclear were discussed above. However, the urgent need for improved training and career structures in the social care workforce, especially for foster carers and

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

residential workers is clear. In some other European countries there are foster carers who are trained social pedagogues, and although BAAF does not believe that this is the most helpful way forward in England, this discussion in the strategy does highlight the need for a nationally recognised system of post-approval training for all foster carers. BAAF has participated in the DfES/OPM review of foster carer training and it is hoped that the results of this review will be used in this consultation. We will say more about the training needs of foster carers below.

How can we support foster carers to improve life chances for looked after children?

- 4.17 It is widely recognised that the needs of children in the care system have become increasingly more complex, and that as a result, the fostering task has also changed. Some local authorities have recognised that their fostering services needed to be modernised, and they have introduced professional foster care schemes as well as more specialist provision for particular groups of children, but there are others where the organisation of the service and expectations of carers have changed very little. In some areas the independent sector has developed the 'professional' approach further, including providing contracts for service, comprehensive support for the whole family, career progression, and, importantly, payment for carers which covers periods when they do not have children in placement. But without uniform service standards and strategic development, these changes have simply produced 'pockets of excellence' and of more concern, arrangements which often fail to meet the needs of children and young people for stability and security.
- 4.18 BAAF's *Skills Protect* position paper describes the changes we believe are necessary to support foster carers in their work with *looked after* children. In particular:
- Foster carers should share a values, knowledge and skills framework that draws on, and is related to other social care professions, especially social work. In addition, we need to recognise the relationship between foster care and residential work, and provide more opportunities for these workers to meet, share training and perhaps the same qualification requirements as they do in some other European countries.
 - There should be opportunities for professional development and routes to qualify as social workers as the strategy suggests. But we also need a career structure for foster care in its own right, where qualified carers are able to progress and use their skills to recruit, assess, prepare and mentor new carers.

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response British Association for Adoption and Fostering

- We need a national system for post-approval training with qualifications that are externally recognised and validated so that carers are able to meet the needs of children in their care.
 - Foster carers should all be paid the National Minimum Fostering Allowance.
 - Most foster carers will also require remuneration, the payment of fees, and not be expected to claim benefits when they have no children in placement. During these periods carers could be used more creatively, employed as family support workers, in residential settings or in training and supporting other carers.
 - Foster carers require good support from social workers who do not have high case-loads, understand their role, and value them as part of the team. Family Placement social workers can also play a valuable role in managing the placement, liaising with the child's social worker and making long-term plans. In addition, they often act as an interface between the foster carer, social worker and other parts of the system, especially education and health services. Their valuable contribution is currently not always understood or valued.
 - Carers may also require additional support, respite care, and access to out of hours teams who have a real understanding of their role.
 - It is also increasingly recognised that the families of foster carers, especially their own children, also benefit from access to their own support systems.
- 4.19 However, BAAF does recognise that although there is a clear need for a 'professionalised' foster care system, there are groups of carers who may not see themselves as part of the social care workforce, but do provide loving, family homes for children. In particular, there are long-term foster carers who provide permanent 'families for life', and many more children who need this kind of placement. We do need more thought and debate about the status of this particular group of foster carers, as well as the kind of support they may require.
- 4.20 Furthermore, there is a particular challenge in developing a child-centred system of foster care, and much of the workforce strategy does not have a strong child-centred focus. Children need to be able to identify people who are secure and stable psychological parents for them. This may include a home they can call their own, and the kinds of experiences that most children regard as 'ordinary'. And where necessary, people they can turn to, even in adulthood. BAAF is concerned that nothing in the development of a 'professionalised' foster care service should detract from this need. Yet, there clearly is tension in the development of a professional service, that can at the same time

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

create a meaningful sense of belonging for children. And, as a result, we want more thought and discussion about the possible impact of 'professionalisation' on foster carers and children in foster care.

- 4.21 BAAF would also like to see recognition of the distinct contribution and the distinct issues facing kinship carers. They have a complex role, and are also likely to come from sections of society least prepared practically and financially to take on the task. BAAF is concerned that kinship care is not used consistently by local authorities. This may reflect the difficulties encountered by local authorities who are using systems and frameworks derived from stranger care. While the Mumby judgement is helpful in respect of allowances and payments for kinship carers, BAAF would welcome proposals and debate about a workable and practical system of assessment, training and support for this group of foster carers.

How can we attract more high quality applicants into the foster care workforce in order to address the current shortage?

- 4.22 BAAF welcomes recognition in the strategy of the importance of recruiting more foster carers in order to provide placements which can meet the needs of all children. We also welcome recognition of the need for local recruitment strategies, as experience shows that 'word of mouth' may be a far more successful way of recruiting new carers than national campaigns. In particular, we need to adapt national messages to reflect the local context and provide local spokespersons and local staff to respond to campaigns, provide information and accept applications.
- 4.23 In addition, there needs to be more encouragement and effort to recruit foster carers from all sections of the community, and from diverse backgrounds. More thought is needed to develop imaginative strategies for recruiting carers who will reflect the diverse population of *looked after* children and provide placements which can meet particular needs.
- 4.24 However, significant improvements in recruitment, and especially retention of foster carers are unlikely unless expectations and conditions of service are made far more clear and explicit. In particular, thought needs to be given to complex practicalities related to tax, insurance and pensions, that may apply already, but are currently 'hidden' as the cost falls on carers and their families.
- 4.25 We also need more clarity about the status of foster carers, and a full debate about National Registration. The requirement for all carers to be registered would allow us to move away from the current situation where a foster carer who moves area or even from one provider to another must go through the whole approval system again. Experience does suggest that many carers leave the service at this point. However, thought needs to be given to how this would work in practice,

Children's Workforce Strategy – Consultation Response
British Association for Adoption and Fostering

and whether registration would be subject to requirements like continuous training and professional development. And, again, long-term carers and kinship carers may well not wish to register and could be lost to the service if registration becomes compulsory.

- 4.26 Finally, local authorities who are experiencing difficulties with recruitment could learn from the experience of some Independent Providers, who are more explicit about their expectations of foster carers, but who are also clear about their own obligations as employers to provide the kind of support, including remuneration, described in the previous section. Many of these providers do not have any problems with recruiting or retaining their foster carers.

What more could/should Directors of Children's Services & Lead Members do to support fostering locally?

- 4.27 BAAF welcomes recognition in the strategy of the need for Directors of Children's Services and Lead members to develop local recruitment strategies, good systems of support for carers and to involve carers in the planning and development of fostering services.

- 4.28 However, it is very clear that to bring about the kind of changes described here, necessary to create fostering services which can really meet the needs of children and young people, significant new investment will be required by **national** government. BAAF and The Fostering Network launched the *Cost of Foster Care Report* on 11th July, 2005, which calculates the amount of new money needed in each of the 4 countries of the UK. For England the additional funding required in 2005/6 is £615.7 million. We are now using the Report to campaign together for this investment to be made.

How quickly can Local Authorities develop better fostering services and be supported to reduce their dependence on out-of authority placements?

- 4.29 BAAF welcomes the intention to reduce out-of-authority placements by developing local fostering services to meet local need. However, this clearly will have the resource implications described above. Furthermore, we are most concerned that any future fostering service must be primarily focused on meeting the needs of *looked after* children and young people. In particular, the best interests of the child should be paramount in any decisions made about the choice, and the location of placements.

Concluding Comments

The Children's Workforce Strategy provides a very welcome opportunity to address shortcomings in services which have an enormous and life-long impact on the lives of children and young people.

BAAF hopes that it will also be used to open up debate, and for further discussion about some of the challenges and complex issues facing social care and foster care described in this response. We believe that this is essential in order to create a workforce and a system that is truly child-centred and can meet children's needs.

And, it is clear that building this workforce will require significant additional financial investment by national government. This funding should be seen as a long-term investment, because improving outcomes for *looked after* children and enabling more of them to become happy, responsible citizens and parents makes economic, but above all, human sense.