

NORTHERN IRELAND

DRAFT PRIORITIES AND BUDGET

2005 – 08

Consultation Response

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BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR ADOPTION & FOSTERING

Response to the Northern Ireland Draft Priorities and Budget 2005–8 Consultation

1. About BAAF

1.1 The British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF) is the leading UK-wide membership organisation for those involved in adoption, fostering and child care. BAAF campaigns to make real and lasting changes to the lives of children who are separated from their birth families.

1.2 BAAF:

- promotes the highest standards of child-centred policies and services;
- speaks out on behalf of looked after children and enables their voice to be heard;
- influences UK-wide policy and legislation;
- publishes advice notes, leaflets, books and guides for prospective foster carers and adoptive parents, birth families and children;
- develops policy and practice guidelines for professionals working with looked after children;
- organises multidisciplinary forums for doctors, researchers, lawyers and social workers; and
- promotes greater understanding of adoption and fostering by raising public and professional awareness of the issues affecting looked after children.

1.3 BAAF has offices across the UK, and members come from a range of organisations working in adoption and fostering in the UK as well as an increasing number of individual members. Every local authority in Britain is a BAAF member, along with over 100 independent fostering providers, and all 36 UK voluntary adoption agencies. There is also extensive associate membership from boards and trusts in Northern Ireland.

2. General Comments

2.1 BAAF welcomes, in principle, many of the measures that are proposed in the Northern Ireland Draft Priorities and Budget 2005-08, and supports the key priorities of “building equality and community cohesion” and ensuring better public services.

- 2.2 The focus of this consultation response, however, is on the proposed allocation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) that would allow the department to:

increase foster care allowances, introduce a salaried foster care scheme therefore attracting more people to foster care, and set up a 24 hour/7 days a week support service for foster carers.

- 2.3 We applaud these measures as they are a very important step in acknowledging and addressing the current crisis in the recruitment and retention of sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of children. The measures will improve the support to foster carers in Northern Ireland and this will also benefit children and should lead to a reduction of placement breakdown. We would like to consider these proposals in more detail in this response.

3. Foster Care in Northern Ireland - context

- 3.1 Foster carers provide the majority of looked after children with safe and meaningful relationships, all the practical benefits of family life, stimulation, guidance and advocacy, and the knowledge to negotiate and access education, health and other services. They have a critical role that should be valued for what it contributes to a group of very vulnerable children and their birth families.
- 3.2 According to the Fostering Network, there are currently approximately 1,600 children and young people living with 1,200 foster families in Northern Ireland. A further 350 foster carers are needed to address the shortage in foster carers.
- 3.3 This represents a crisis in foster care that is most apparent in the following areas:
- Recruitment and retention of a sufficient number of foster carers to meet demand for placements, as well those carers with the ability and expertise to deal with severe emotional or behavioural problems
 - Maximising the potential contribution to the fostering service of all sections of the community by recruiting foster carers from minority ethnic groups, single carers, gay and lesbian carers and disabled carers, thereby providing children with foster carers that meet their needs
 - Providing stable and secure placements, within easy travelling distance from a child's family, school and community
 - Developing a career structure and a system of rewards and remuneration that reflects the complexity of the task and enables foster carers to remain in the fostering service
 - Ensuring that all foster carers can and do access appropriate training and support

- 3.4 BAAF therefore welcomes the proposed allocation that will attempt to redress these issues by increasing allowances, introducing a salaried foster care service and providing a support system for foster carers.

4. Increase in foster care allowances

- 4.1 Allowances are currently paid to foster carers to cover the cost of looking after fostered children. However, fostering services are free to set their own rates and consequently, rates vary significantly across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. According to the Fostering Network Survey of Allowances and Specialist Payment Schemes 2003-4, every board or trust in Northern Ireland pays below the Fostering Network's recommended minimum allowances for that period.
- 4.2 This means that the majority of foster carers are out of pocket as a result of fostering children, and that children and young people do not have access to the same range of opportunities as other young people living with their families in the community. This is particularly worrying as most children who are in foster care and looked after by local authorities have already experienced significant disadvantage in their lives and need to benefit from the widest of opportunities and activities that can be made available to them. This also has a serious impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- 4.3 The current shortage of local authority foster carers leaves very little choice for children coming into local authority care in an emergency and many children are moved from carer to carer because no carer is available locally. This lack of stability can be very distressing and upsetting for children, and there is very little prospect that children "on the move" will be able to benefit from educational opportunities. Children who do not know where they will be living and who have no reliable and consistent adults in their lives will not be able to learn, however supported they are within the school environment.
- 4.4 Increasing fostering allowances can only be achieved if a minimum rate is set which can then be the benchmark for all inspections and will also show our foster carers that we value the work that they are doing, thereby increasing recruitment and retention rates, improving placement choice for children and providing children with much better supported foster carers. It would mean that the needs of children are being more appropriately and adequately met, and that foster carers are not, in effect, subsidising the government by covering these expenses themselves.
- 4.5 It is essential, however, that adequate consultation and research is undertaken to ensure that the correct increase in allowances is made.

5. Introduction of a salaried foster care scheme

- 5.1 There is a need for an appropriate professionalised framework of practice for foster carers that incorporates recruitment, training, career progression, remuneration and contractual obligations.
- 5.2 The introduction of a salaried foster care scheme acknowledges that being a foster carer requires a range of skills and expertise that enables foster carers to care for very vulnerable children within a family setting in a way that is safe, effective and transparent. This requires a direct shift away from a structure that has arisen out of the volunteering history of foster care, towards one that enables foster carers to undertake such a complex and unique task with adequate professional and financial support.
- 5.3 A salaried foster care service must include the following:
- A service with clear objectives that is primarily focussed on meeting the individual and complex needs of looked after children and young people
 - A service where career progression is related to a qualification framework that is nationally recognised and regulated.
 - A service where foster carers are remunerated according to their qualifications, experience and skills and where there is a clear contractual arrangement between the carer and the service provider.
 - A service which matches the demands made of specific foster carers to their identified skills
 - A service where foster carers are integrated as team members with other professionals delivering assessment, caring and planning services to the child and their family, and that enables foster carers to draw on the relevant expertise of teachers, therapists, health professionals and others
 - A service that is based on a mixed economy of direct local government as well as provision by the voluntary and independent sector.
- 5.4 BAAF believes that the proposed allocation to introduce a salaried foster carer scheme, if appropriately and comprehensively structured and managed, can incorporate these aims.
- 5.5 The development of a salaried foster carer service represents a long-term commitment by the government. Investing financially at this stage of children's development is a very positive step, as statistics show that children who do not grow up in a stable and loving home are more likely to experience problems as they grow into adulthood. Children growing up in care are 14 times more likely than other children to become homeless in later life, 50 times more

likely to be sent to prison, 4 times more likely to develop mental health, 4 times more likely to be unemployed and 66 times more likely to have children who also end up in care. Finding stable foster placements is therefore crucial, especially when compared with the cost of looking after a child in residential care.¹

- 5.6 A structured, salaried foster care service will improve recruitment rates and attract a wider range of foster carers that can effectively reflect the diverse needs of the children and young people needing foster carers. BAAF looks forward to seeing how this might be achieved, and what form the scheme will take.

6. 24 hour/7days a week support service

- 6.1 BAAF welcomes this move. Adequate support is a key issue for foster carers, and one of the main reasons that foster carers leave the service. By providing 24 hour, 7 days a week support, the DHSSPS will be making an important step towards rectifying this situation.
- 6.2 BAAF is interested to see how this support will be developed. A telephone helpline staffed by effectively trained support workers will be very much welcomed and appreciated by foster carers in Northern Ireland. Knowing that this support is in place will encourage more carers to the service, although other measures will also need to be in place. These must be accessible, with adequate follow-up practices that will provide on-going guidance for foster carers.
- 6.3 Without sufficient training of foster carers, these measures will be futile. The government must ensure that comprehensive training programmes are offered to foster carers that are easily accessible and well-structured, so that foster carers can develop their skills and expertise and offer the best possible care to children and young people.

7. Concerns

- 7.1 BAAF's main concerns are to ensure that any new monies allocated are applied to the foster care service, and we would like to take this opportunity to stress the importance of investing financially into the foster care service. We believe the ring-fencing of a new grant would give the right message and also be tangible recognition of the

¹ Social services Performance Assessment Framework Indicators for England for 2003/4 show the unit cost of children's residential care per week as £2,048, compared with the unit cost of foster care, which is £349 per week.

vital role that foster carers have in providing care for some of our most vulnerable children.

- 7.2 BAAF recommends that before any minimum allowances are set consultation with key stakeholders will need to take place. This will help the DHSSPS achieve the outcomes proposed by the government. BAAF would also like to know the proposed timeframe for the implementation of these measures.
- 7.3 Essentially, BAAF would like to see policies that are straightforward, practical and cost effective, that provide the structures to deliver a modern, accessible and high quality fostering service. The proposed allocation acknowledges that foster carers are critical to the delivery of effective services for children separated from their families.

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