

Editorial

In the autumn of 2006, in response to growing concern that the care system was failing children, the government of the United Kingdom introduced its Green Paper *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care* (DfES 2006). The reform agenda included: the responsibilities of the corporate parent; the education of young people in care; life outside of education; the transition to adulthood; the multi-professional prevention of care; and the performance of the care system itself. The consultation associated with the launch of the Green Paper intended to encourage a 'national debate on the future of care' and it was against this backdrop that a symposium on foster care was organised by the publishers of this journal, the Fostering Network¹ and the University of Salford.

The event (*Fostering Matters: A symposium focussing on the future of foster care*) took place on 28th March 2007 at the University of Salford, and was attended by policy makers, the senior managers of children's services, as well as leading academics. Presentations were made by: Bob Broad (De Montfort University); Dave Crimmens (University of Lincoln); Nick Frost (Leeds Metropolitan University); Steve Hicks (University of Salford); Derek Kirton (University of Kent); and Clive Sellick (University of East Anglia). In addition, papers were provided by Jo Dixon (University of York), Janette Logan (University of Manchester) as well as Jo Lipscombe and Elaine Farmer (both at the University of Bristol). Based on recent empirical research and current theoretical developments, these papers offer an academic perspective and articulate the drivers behind the Green Paper referenced above, but also the subsequent White Paper (DfES 2007). Almost all of these academic contributions will be published as two volumes of a special edition of this journal.

Two of the papers presented at the symposium were particularly significant in setting these recent policy developments in their wider social context. The paper presented by Nick Frost, which gave consideration to the general approach of the state to the care of children, will appear in the next issue. In this edition, the paper by Derek Kirton elucidates the major trend towards the professionalisation of foster care. Over recent times the increasing demands placed on foster carers have led to calls for their training, substantially increased allowances and in some cases the payment of fees. However, these calls have been countered by others who cherish the ideal of fostering as a voluntary role, carried out within the family for love rather than money. Kirton questions whether love and family really co-exist in opposition to work and money, as suggested by the critics of the trend. He concludes that, although there is no evidence that the professionalisation of foster care improves outcomes for children, on the grounds of social justice and gender equality, it may be a necessary development. Given that the White Paper (DfES, 2007) identifies foster carers as members of the child care workforce, this development appears to have become established.

Training and financial support for foster carers are important themes within Sellick's

paper, which describes the increasingly mixed market of placement provision and the rising number of Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs). In the past, it was assumed that foster families would be recruited, assessed and supported by the Social Services Departments of Local Authorities. When the Conservatives took office in the 1970s, their commitment to market-based provision of welfare meant that this assumption would be questioned. Despite the political change in 1997 when the New Labour Government was elected, policies have continued to encourage the independent provision of foster care. Now, approximately twenty per cent of all looked after children are placed with foster carers who are trained and supported (financially and in other ways) by IFPs.

Ideologically, markets are expected to drive up standards. From the perspective of foster carers this appears to have happened. IFPs have offered their foster carers a higher level of support than they would have received from the Local Authority, including the payment of substantially higher allowances and in some cases fees. In many regions this has forced Local Authorities to reconsider their approach to their own foster carers in order that they should not be 'poached'. In consequence, it appears that the introduction of the market in foster care provision and the arrival of IFPs, has contributed significantly to the professionalisation of the service.

Lipscombe and Farmer (in this edition), are committed to the training of all foster carers. Although both the Green and White Papers propose a tiered system in which trained, specialist foster carers will offer placements to the children demonstrating the greatest emotional and behavioural demands, Lipscombe and Farmer argue that 'mainstream' foster carers may also benefit from training in that they also have to care for children with extremely complex needs. This is particularly the case when caring for adolescents whose physical and psychological stage of development, coupled with their familial and social history, can require a high degree of understanding and an insightful, sensitive response. Lipscombe and Farmer reach this conclusion on the basis of empirical evidence emanating from a project funded by the Department of Health (Farmer et al. 2004). This research, which is outlined more fully in this issue on pp.41-58, explored foster carers' parenting strategies and supports in relation to the outcomes of placements for adolescents. The findings indicate that outcomes might be improved if all foster parents are trained to

respond to young people's emotional and developmental age; talk to young people about the past and about difficulties in their relationships with their families; monitor adolescents' activities outside the home ... ; and assist young people to develop independence and autonomy whilst also providing them with a secure base. (p.54)

Broad's paper shows that questions concerning financial and day-to-day support are also pertinent to the provision of kinship care. Legally acknowledged in the Children Act (1989), and endorsed further in the Green and White papers, kinship care is an increasingly popular option for children who are unable to remain with their birth parents (see below). According to Farmer and Moyers (2006 cited by Broad), the majority of the people providing this kind of care are the child's grandparents. Research indicates that

grandparents (and other kinship carers) often struggle with their role, a struggle that results frequently from complicated family dynamics. Despite this struggle, the strength of commitment to the child usually means that the arrangement lasts. In consequence, kinship care is a relatively stable placement option. Not only this, the Local Authority benefits in that the children in need of help are diverted from more costly fostering and residential services. Put another way, grandparents might care for a child at their own expense, whilst foster carers who are 'strangers' would, at a minimal, be provided with an allowance as well as on-going support.

According to Broad, this situation has been described as inequitable by Justice Munby who, with reference to the *European Convention on Human Rights*, ruled that Local Authorities should make payments to carers on the basis of the child's needs, irrespective of whether their relationship was based on a blood tie. Broad is supportive of this stance and, although positive about the increased appreciation of kinship care, indicates in his paper that current policy developments do not go far enough. Whilst suggesting that training for kinship care may not be appropriate, the provision of financial and other supportive resources should occur: the conclusion is, therefore, that love and money both play a part.

Elizabeth Harlow
Editor

Note

1. The Fostering Network, the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in Fostering, has a membership of almost 50,000 foster carers, local authorities and trusts, independent fostering providers as well as local foster care associations.

References

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