A Briefing Note

PRIVATE FOSTERING WEEK – 3rd July to 7th July 2017

Remembering the Forgotten and Hidden Children in Private Fostering Arrangements

What is PF?

Children who would otherwise be in public care experience a form of family life through private fostering arrangements.

Definition

Private fostering is when a child is placed for 28 days or more in the care of someone who is not their parent or close relative, (close relative being: step-parent, grandparent, sibling, uncle or aunt) through a private agreement made between their parent and a carer.

Private Fostering Week - Objective

Private Fostering Week offers local councils an opportunity to highlight the vulnerability of children in private fostering arrangements who remain unknown to the local authorities. In keeping with the Government’s focus on safeguarding children at risk, the key objective of the awareness raising initiatives during private fostering week is to increase the notification levels of children in private fostering arrangements by encouraging professionals to contact the local authority, especially if they suspect a child is being trafficked, has experienced FGM and sexual exploitation. CoramBAAF has been advocating on behalf of local authorities to give children in private fostering arrangements the recognition they justly deserve.

Why is Private Fostering important?

Mary MacLeod OBE, Chair of the Advisory Group on Private Fostering (DCSF, 2010) wrote:

*“Though I had been a social worker, had read the research and understood the broad issues, until I began to chair the Advisory Group on Private Fostering, I had little conception of just how complicated are the questions about how best to regulate 21st century private fostering and support the children involved. I found I was not alone. Each time I discussed the matter with colleagues, practitioners, researchers, or friends, I found limited understanding. Almost no-one outside social care colleagues, seemed to know that there is a legal requirement on parents and private foster parents to notify the local authority of private fostering arrangements. Indeed few understood the term at all. But most people knew of informal caring arrangements that, once interrogated, fell within the scope of the legal definition; and many, but not all, were aware that Victoria Climbié’s carers were, in law, private foster carers. I myself suddenly realised that the arrangement made by my husband’s parents, for family friends to care for him when he was 15 so that he could remain at school while they were abroad, was, in legal terms, ‘private fostering’. So ‘normalised’ within ordinary lives are the informal, outside the state, care arrangements made by parents for their children when parents decide to gain educational opportunities for their children or make temporary arrangements to safeguard their care or education in order to deal with family crises like bereavement or family illness or to deal with teenage relationship difficulties, that we do not think of it as anything to do with the state. Except, that is, when it goes tragically very wrong as in the case of Victoria Climbié. During the Advisory Group’s deliberations, we kept being asked to find a better name than ‘private fostering’ for this wide range of informal care, because the legal definition encompasses so many different child and family circumstances. From the ‘sofa surfer’, taking time out from family, or children coming from abroad to attend language schools or boarding schools, to the extreme end of children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation or servitude, the only feature that seemed common to the children and families captured by the definition was the legal definition itself. So what should the State do faced with such diversity – the commonplace and ordinary arrangements made by caring families and some alarmingly poor care of children? Can one approach suit all? Usually faced with questions such as these, we look for evidence. And here was the rub. Despite our most rigorous search for studies, the evidence base is extremely limited. We know how many children have been notified to local authorities over the past few years. We know the results of Ofsted inspections of local authority practice. We know, from the research commissioned as part of this programme, about the gaps in notification and about good and less good practice in managing the notifications that currently happen. But we do not know how many children are privately fostered at any one time; nor how many children have had this experience in their childhoods. We do not even have a good basis from which to extrapolate numbers. We do not know how many may require support or safeguarding; nor do we know how the outcomes for different groups of ‘privately fostered’ children compare with those children living at home and those in public care. We do not know whether children whose circumstances have been notified to the local authority do better than those who have not. We do not know how representative the circumstances of notified children are of those who have not been notified. And the children, themselves, what do we know of their experiences, wishes and feelings? There are a few studies, most with very small samples of children to draw upon, and otherwise, we know only of those who have spoken or whose voices are communicated through the medium of the professionals who have worked with particular groups of children, for example, those from West Africa. One of the reasons we know so little from children, parents and carers is their invisibility”.*

The fact that these children are essentially “invisible” places them in a vulnerable group where they can be subject to possible abuse and exploitation.

Who are the children in private fostering arrangements?

Case Studies

Case Study 1

Three children aged 15, 9 and 6 years were living with a woman and her birth children. The 15 year old girl would often accompany the birth children of the carer to the GPs surgery. On one occasion the receptionist tried to talk to the girl. Upon questioning she noted that she spoke very little English despite appearing to have lived in the UK for a prolonged period. The girl also appeared anxious and fearful when questioned and the receptionist noted that she was dressed inappropriately for the time of year.

Case Study 2

C was the only child of A and B who are both of Chinese origin. His mother came to the UK from China on a student visa at the age of 16. She gave birth to C when she was 17 years old and she and her child spent a short time in the care of a local council before A claimed asylum and moved into accommodation provided by the Asylum Support Service. A and C lived at various addresses in different local authority areas and received support from a number of agencies. However, when C was 10 months old A’s claim for asylum and her appeal against refusal were rejected. Shortly after this, A effectively removed herself and her child from contact with all agencies previously involved.

Case Study 3

L has a hearing impairment. She is known as LS at the local school. Ms S explained that L’s mother is a friend of hers and has gone abroad for work. Ms S says she agreed to care for L until her mother is able to return to the UK. There has been no contact with L’s mother for the past 4 years.

Case Study 4

C aged 15, turned up at the house of Ms H, saying his father had thrown him out. C’s mother and one older brother had died about three years earlier and his other brother M, had been living with Ms H, who was the mother of a friend. C had been living with his father and step-mother for something over a year, in a three-bedroomed house with three step-siblings under the age of nine. The arrangements were unsatisfactory and after an argument C’s step mother told him to leave.

Case Study 5

K’s mother died in a house fire and K was left in the care of her step-father Mr S, who had parental responsibility for her. When K was 14, her relationship with her step-father had become difficult. K had not accepted bereavement counselling after her mother’s death and Mr S had not been able to meet her emotional needs. He was drinking to excess and K was staying away from home and missing school. She had been staying with her boyfriend aged 16 and his family.

Case Study 6

S is 6 years old; his mother has just given birth to twins and is finding it hard to care for the children. So she arranged for her two oldest children to stay with their birth father, who has parental responsibility for them. S is a child with complex needs and has had several short breaks with carers approved by the local authority to offer temporary care to children with disabilities. However, S’s birth mother approached her neighbour to look after him on a more permanent basis.

Case Study 7

A is 10 and has moved to Britain from Iraq. He was living with his birth father and brothers all of whom have returned to Iraq. A is now staying with another Iraqi family who are permanent residents here. A calls them auntie and uncle. A is very bright and is doing really well in school and he seems settled in the community and his family. A neighbour has been in touch with Social Services to say that they are concerned as there are numerous people coming and going from the house where A resides and there seem to be five or six children living there who are not the birth children of the family .

Case Study 8

A couple returned from Bulgaria with an 8 year old child who they said they had adopted in Bulgaria through a church agency to which they had paid a sum of money.

Case Study 9

A mother and her 15 year old daughter came to the UK from Malaysia and stayed with an ex colleague of the mother. He is white British. The child started school locally to take her GCSE’s and the mother returned to Malaysia leaving her daughter in the care of this man.

Case 10

A German young person aged 13 years came to the UK on a student exchange programme to study at an International Comprehensive School and stayed with a host family after the scheme had ended and continued to attend school until the age of 16.

Case 11

Siblings aged 5 and 2 are living with their maternal cousin, who is of Ghanaian descent. Their mother passed away during childbirth. Mother's legal status was unclear and the children’s is unable to have them live with him as he has remarried and has another family. The maternal cousin is facing deportation.

Case study 12

A 13 year old British girl stays with her 25 year old friend in her (the child’s) family home as both her mother and father are currently in prison.

Case study 14

An African child aged 2 years stays with a white woman and man who say they adopted the child’s mother. She is therefore their granddaughter.

Case study 15

An Albanian boy, 7 years old, is an unaccompanied child staying with adult from same village back home. He entered the UK on his own but had found his way to the friend’s house. The arrangement for him to stay with the friend was made in Albania.

All professionals working with children have an important role in relation to safeguarding privately fostered children. If they become aware of a private fostering arrangement and they are not confident that it has been notified to the local authority, they should contact the local authority themselves. Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards can play a vital role in helping protect children who are privately fostered by raising awareness in the community of the issues around private fostering. (Working Together to Safeguard Children, HM Government, 2010)

May 2017