

Independent fostering agencies Providing high quality services to children and carers?

Independent fostering agencies have grown significantly in recent years in an era which encouraged the expansion of non-governmental welfare services. **Clive Sellick** reviews the practice and research literature in respect of this placement sector and its associated services to children and foster carers. He also summarises some major issues which have emerged from the recent evaluation of one independent fostering agency. The views of agency foster carers and local authority social workers are considered, alongside case material relating to children placed. Conclusions are drawn about the future relationship between public and independent fostering agencies.

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Introduction

Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) have developed rapidly, particularly over the last decade. One report estimates that they grew from 11 in 1993 to 62 by the start of 1998 (Lord, 1998). These generally small-scale organisations offer foster care placements to local authorities who are unable to find appropriate placements with their own approved foster carers. A few of the IFAs have acquired charitable status, some operate as profit-making organisations, but most have become not-for-profit voluntary organisations.

At present, the IFAs are not subject to registration or inspection. However, the report of the UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care (NFCA, 1999c) recommends 'at the earliest opportunity . . . the introduction of registration and inspection of all fostering agencies and services' (p 13). Currently, a local authority which places children with IFA foster carers must satisfy itself that the placement is suitable and safe for each individual child. The Department of Health circular LAC(94)20 allows voluntary agencies, including the not-for-profit IFAs, to undertake some local

authority functions but only in relation to a named child or children. These include the approval, review and termination of approval of foster carers.

The growth of the independent sector has occurred at a time when the children's residential sector has continued to decline and when the majority of looked after children have been fostered (Berridge, 1985; Cliffe and Berridge, 1991; Sinclair and Gibbs, 1996; Berridge and Brodie, 1997; Brown *et al.*, 1998; Department of Health, 1998a). Recent government and other official reports have highlighted the problems and shortfalls of contemporary foster care policy and practice. These are linked to both the lack of choice and instability of placements for children and young people and the poor supply of public sector foster carers (eg Association of Directors of Social Services, 1997; Utting, 1997; Warren, 1997; National Foster Care Association, 1999a,b). Waterhouse (1997), for example, found that insufficient numbers of foster carers meant that only 20 per cent of English local authorities could offer a choice of placement to children aged under ten years. For children over that age, the figure fell to three per cent. Considerable official concern has also been expressed about the retention of foster carers across the countries of the UK (Pithouse *et al.*, 1994; Association of Directors of Social Services, 1997; Utting, 1997; Waterhouse, 1997; Triseliotis *et al.*, 1999).

Another issue of relevance to the growth of the IFA sector is the degree of difficulty presented by children being looked after in public care. The independent sector has flourished not simply because it has filled the vacuum created by insufficient public sector foster carers, but because it offers a range of accessible and specialist services. These include special needs teaching and therapeutic services for fostered children, and high quality support services for foster carers. Rooted in the Kent teenage

fostering schemes of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hazel and Fenyo, 1993), the IFAs have continued to offer family placements to children and young people whose psychological, emotional, learning and behaviour difficulties exclude them from mainstream local authority provision. However, this situation is no longer that clear cut. Many local authorities have developed specialist or professional fostering schemes for these children and the IFAs have received a far more heterogeneous group of children. Utting (1997), in commenting on the report of a Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) study of ten IFAs in 1994, stated that:

... in some cases the inspectors thought that the children were amongst the most troubled children they had seen in foster care and in others they found it hard to believe that placements could not have been found nearer their homes. (p 41)

Related research

The relevant research is limited and has not kept pace with the growth of independent fostering agencies and their use by local authorities. Those few studies which have examined the IFAs report positive accounts, particularly from foster carers themselves. Examples of studies which have examined the independent sector are:

- Bebbington and Miles (1990) who included some independent agency foster carers in their extensive study of 2,964 foster homes in 13 English local authority areas. They commented:

It is noteworthy that by comparison with local authorities these agencies appear to place emphasis on factors linked to foster family retention, such as substantial group support, respite care and high fostering payments. (p 302)

- Sellick (1992) who interviewed foster carers from four local authorities and two IFAs in his small-scale qualitative study of the provision of support to short-term foster carers. He found that foster carers who were dissatisfied with the services they were receiving from local authorities

left in order to join the IFAs, where on arrival all spoke as though they had discovered a new world of efficient, realistic and responsive social work and financial services.

- The Department of Health (1995) which reported a study of ten IFAs by the SSI. The findings were generally positive, though some concerns were expressed about the distances at which children were placed from their families and neighbourhoods, especially as over 30 per cent of the children were less than ten years old, and about the numbers of black children placed in white communities. The report noted that the IFAs often provided additional integrated services such as therapy and education on the premises.
- Bridgman (1997) who, in an unpublished study, examined the effectiveness of two local authorities and two IFAs in meeting the needs of hard-to-place children.
- Waterhouse (1997) who surveyed 94 local authorities in England which represented 88 per cent of the total at that time. She found that although local authorities made only a modest use of the IFAs (most used less than ten foster homes provided by these agencies), 73 per cent used the voluntary, including the independent fostering sector, to provide foster placements for their looked after children.

It appears, therefore, from the available literature that the IFAs are well regarded by the foster carers who have been recruited and retained by a range of support services. It is also clear that IFAs provide placements for children when their local authorities are unable to do so. However, it seems that they are unpopular with local authority managers whose concerns are generally related to financial and managerial issues such as high costs, lack of inspections and confusion about delegated powers (Collier, 1999).

An evaluation of an independent fostering agency

Beyond the praise expressed by foster carers and the concerns voiced by local

authority managers, the literature says remarkably little about the practice of the IFA sector and its impact upon children, their families and social workers. What kinds of services do children and families receive? Do local authority social workers value these? Do their experiences put them at odds with their managers? Some of these questions have been explored through a recent evaluation of one large IFA.

This evaluation stemmed from questionnaire and interview data collected from local authority social workers and IFA foster carers in respect of a cohort of 105 children, placed by 22 local authorities with this IFA during a 12-month period from 1 May 1997 to 30 April 1998. Questionnaires were completed by the staff and carers of the IFA and by the local authority social workers in respect of 82 of these children. A small sample of ten IFA foster carers and eight local authority social workers, each from different social services departments, was also interviewed. Both groups were questioned as service users of the IFA: the carers described and evaluated the support services which they and their foster children had received; and the social workers did the same regarding the services which their departments and the children and their families had received. The evaluation incorporated the key developmental dimensions of the Looking After Children (LAC) materials (Ward, 1996), in addition to a range of outcome measures developed from a recent review of the relevant family placement literature (Sellick and Thoburn, 1996, pp 32–34).

Summary of major issues to emerge

Having examined the available literature about the independent fostering sector, the rest of this article summarises some major issues which have emerged from this evaluation by using some of the qualitative material available. Direct reference will be made to the views of some of the foster carers and social workers who were interviewed and to case material related to some of the children placed. This material has been

anonymised by changing the names, ages, gender and circumstances of the children. The quantitative material and a more detailed analysis arising from this evaluation will be considered in a future article.

This evaluation did rediscover some of the areas of concern evident in the earlier SSI report (Department of Health, 1995) in relation to the level of fees and the placement of children, including those of minority ethnic origin, at considerable distances from their families. However, the evaluated IFA had taken steps to allay some of these concerns. An additional issue – the removal of children from their IFA placements in order to place them with less costly local authority foster carers – also emerged.

Financial costs

Financial costs to local authorities of placing children with the IFAs are at least three times higher, even than those of their own specialist foster care schemes (Knapp and Lowin, 1998; National Foster Care Association, 1999d). Estimates of additional costs per child range from £500 to £1,000 per week (Collier, 1999). However, many offer additional inter-disciplinary services to children and families, such as education and therapy, as well as high levels of social work support linked to foster carer retention and to the lower risk of placement breakdown. The IFA in question, for example, includes within its weekly fees the provision of regular therapy and counselling for all children placed, and support and training of carers and staff. Published figures of the amounts paid to specialist scheme foster carers (as opposed to the overall fee level charged to local authorities) are available for both the public and independent agencies (National Foster Care Association, 1999d). However, these are difficult to measure like for like as some include allowances and fees, and others simply fees. The evaluated IFA, for example, pays its carers a weekly fee of £315 for each child, a sum similar to other IFAs. Very few local authority specialist fostering schemes pay even as much as two-thirds of this amount to their carers,

even when fees and allowances are added together.

The relationship between costs and services is a complex one as many of the children received a wide range of services from the IFA, their placing local authority and occasionally the private sector. As the following example of a child in placement shows, local authorities who place children in the IFAs are likely to be providing their own social work, education and health services to children, in addition to other services which they purchase through their fee to the IFA.

Samantha, aged ten, was placed with IFA foster carers following a local authority fostering breakdown. No other local authority foster carers were available. On placement, she behaved aggressively at school towards her teachers and the other children, was encopretic and had a very low sense of self-worth. She attends an LEA school but receives support from a classroom assistant and an educational psychologist employed by the local authority. In addition, she has weekly appointments with a therapist employed by the IFA.

Recruitment of black carers and social workers

Concern has already been expressed by commentators about the number of black children placed with white IFA foster carers in white neighbourhoods (Department of Health, 1995; Collier, 1999). Initially, our data led us to share these concerns. Twenty-two per cent of the 82 children were reported to be black, including those of mixed parentage. Ninety-five per cent of the foster carers who completed the questionnaires described themselves as white. However, at the conclusion of the evaluation some 18 months after all the data was collected, the agency had made significant progress in recruiting black foster carers and social workers. Seventeen out of a total workforce of 79 foster carers and one-third of social work staff employed by the agency were black. The IFA had appointed a black social worker specifically to concentrate on attracting and recruiting black foster care applicants and the

agency now has a black workers' support group. This IFA has also found that the appointment of more black staff and the approval of more black foster carers has been followed by more referrals of black children for foster placements.

Geographical considerations

Other concerns have been raised about the distance between the placement and a child's family home. The earlier Department of Health study found that many children had to move from familiar neighbourhoods, schools and family members, and required complex contact arrangements with their relatives and friends involving long journeys. One foster carer in the current evaluation said:

This placement is not the best in the sense that children are not being placed within their own local authorities, near their families.

However, this IFA employed a transport manager, provided and staffed a contact centre, and had established some regional sub-offices which were intended to facilitate easier access of families to their children and foster carers to the IFA social workers.

Local authority social workers who had successfully made a case with their senior managers for placing a child with this IFA then found they had to do so at regular intervals. Many placements were made on a very temporary basis. Costs appeared to be at the heart of this policy. As one social worker said:

Our local authority only approves funding one month at a time. This has a knock on effect with schools because guarantees cannot be given.

A social worker from another authority concurred and raised the same problem. In her words:

We are only allowed to use [the IFA] on extremely short contracts and this has other problems, for example, when explaining to local schools about taking children. It's a nonsense when there is only two weeks funding.

Several social workers described how they needed to negotiate with their managers in order to maintain the children in placement. As one social worker put it:

I have to fight my case and the LA [local authority] is actively seeking a local placement.

Another who could not convince her Assistant Director said:

We had to bring these two lads back. I am very pessimistic about whether another placement can hold them. We only found out about the degree of difficulty when they were placed.

Issues of distance, moving back for purely financial reasons rather children's needs, are illustrated by the following case vignette.

Joe, aged nine, Jeanine, aged seven, and Kirk, aged 18 months, were placed together from home with IFA foster carers. They arrived on Police Protection Orders after their heroin-addicted parents had left them alone for two days. There were no local authority approved foster carers able to take the three siblings together. Two months after their arrival, Kirk was moved to a local authority foster carer 40 miles away. Joe and Jeanine are taken twice a week to a local authority Family Centre by IFA staff and transport to visit Kirk, who is brought there at the same time by local authority staff and transport. On a further occasion each week, the children's mother and Kirk are separately transported by the local authority to visit Joe and Jeanine at the IFA foster carers' home.

Evidence emerged of considerable efforts by both the IFA and local authority social workers to meet the needs of children placed at some distance from their homes and schools. In spite of these, children were being moved away only to be returned at a point which their social workers and foster carers did not consider to be appropriate because of local authority cost constraints.

Working relationships and carer satisfaction

On the positive side, independent agencies are generally smaller than local authority foster care or family placement units, with related benefits associated with more satisfying working relationships between staff and carers, greater participation in service delivery, recognition and respect for the foster carers and feelings of carer satisfaction (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Sellick, 1992; Department of Health, 1995). In the present evaluation, the IFA foster carers interviewed concurred with the favourable comments of carers in these previous studies. Their remarks included:

I know who people are here and can call them directly if I need to. Here you are a person in your own right.

My link worker phones and visits regularly. If I need to see her she will see me that day if she could.

The managers are flexible and open to new suggestions. They are not like social services who would say 'no that's not our policy' – and you don't have to fill in four forms.

Many of the local authority social workers knew how satisfied IFA foster carers were and indeed expressed similar sentiments themselves about the agency and its staff. These three social workers said the following:

I felt a great sense of support. They were willing to listen to what we had to say in respect of the child and they came up with what they thought we needed in respect of that placement.

It has been very good; they have kept in close communication and been very supportive.

They always keep in contact with us and are very co-operative.

As a result, some of the social workers commented on what, in their experience, distinguished independent from public sector fostering services. This social worker spoke for others when he said:

I am impressed that [IFA] carers and workers feel they belong to a group and when they are stressed they will send in support immediately. There is significant personal attention as well as belonging. If the LA could only mirror what they have got for our foster carers we would be in a real partnership in taking on more and more difficult children.

Children placed with this IFA are provided with regular therapy sessions which the foster carers generally rated highly. For example, one commented:

The therapy enables the children to move on. The children love it and it's a relief for yourself.

One social worker contrasted her experience of seeking therapy for a child within her local authority with another child being looked after by the IFA:

Local authority therapy would have taken time. There is a waiting list and it would still have cost money.

The importance of supporting foster carers and children through a range of inter-disciplinary services has been raised again by a recent study which analysed 50 referrals for temporary fostering placements in five local authorities (Waterhouse and Brocklesby, in press). This study found evidence of many more single foster carers – as many as 50 per cent in some local authorities. Over one-third of boys were placed with single carers, including many with behavioural and emotional difficulties and children excluded from school. The study concluded that these carers required extensive support systems in order to successfully manage these placements. All of the IFA carers interviewed reported positively on the support which they considered underpinned their work, as well as the children's progress. Interestingly, nearly all of these foster carers were in partnerships where both male and female carers considered they contributed equally to the fostering task.

There has been much recent attention in social work literature about the

placement of siblings. At least 75 per cent of children who need to be looked after away from home will have siblings, and studies have generally found that keeping brothers and/or sisters together has either a positive or a neutral effect on placement stability (Beckett, 1999; Mullender, 1999). Forty-four per cent of the children in this IFA evaluation were with at least one brother or sister in the same foster household. One social worker said:

We were looking for a placement for three children together that would accept their difficult behaviour. They immediately received counselling and the foster carers received additional support systems around them.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the relevant available practice and research literature in respect of the independent foster care sector and summarised some major issues emerging from the evaluation of one IFA. Within an earlier political climate, which both encouraged the development of non-governmental welfare services and discouraged their regulation, this sector has flourished. While most local authorities continue to struggle to find and keep a workforce of foster carers who can provide choice and stability, the IFAs have gone on expanding both in size and number. Although often referred to as private, many of the IFAs are voluntary not-for-profit organisations and welcome the opportunity to be inspected. Most know that their ability to recruit and retain experienced foster carers, offer choices of placement for children and provide them with a range of inter-disciplinary services, especially related to schooling and therapy, are more than a match for most local authorities.

The evaluation of one IFA has confirmed what many foster carers have said to other researchers. These foster carers felt themselves to be valued, respected, trained and supported by the agency in ways which enabled them to provide high-quality foster care. This evaluation has also highlighted the positive views held by virtually all of the local authority social workers in respect

of the carers, the agency and its services. However, as local authority managers know, these services come with a high price tag and the social workers described stringent procedures they had to follow to obtain permission to place and maintain children in this particular IFA.

Two factors which emerged from this IFA evaluation help to clarify why the supply of foster carers is unlikely to increase to meet demand within the public sector alone, and why the pace of growth of the independent agencies is unlikely to slacken. Firstly, the IFA in question has established a working model of support which retains a largely satisfied workforce of foster carers. Its approach is one which they found open, responsive, accessible and flexible. In other studies, public sector foster carers rarely say the same about their agencies with such enthusiasm. Secondly, this IFA is not unique in having developed its foster care, education and other services to such an extent that it has become a specialist therapeutic placement agency. Local authority senior managers would be well advised to view the IFAs in that light and to see them as family-based alternatives to therapeutic residential care, and as a complementary service to local authority family placement services. In so doing, total placement costs are likely to appear more acceptable. Using the IFAs simply because no local authority placement is available, and then moving children back simply because one becomes vacant, is neither a good use of resources or the most sensitive service for children and their families.

Recent attempts by some public and independent fostering agencies are being made to complement rather than compete for scarce resources. For example, one of the local authorities placing children with the evaluated IFA was negotiating a service contract which would guarantee the IFA a minimum number of placements in return for a reduced placement fee. This does seem a pragmatic and productive attempt to provide quality services aimed at meeting children's needs without exploiting either the independent agency and its foster carers, or the public purse.

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