

**A Presentation from Elaine Dibben,
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JOURNEYS TO PERMANENCE:

Improving Support for Foster Carers Who Adopt

Foster Carer Adoptions

I was asked to foster a 16 year old who was 8 months pregnant for 4 weeks pre birth and 6 weeks after birth. They both ended up staying for 6 months and then birth mother decided to leave the placement without the baby. The family home of the birth mother was not seen to be suitable for them to live in. I was already attached to her and wanted to provide her the best chance in life. For myself I did not see myself having my own child and was very happy to create my family this way. As I was single and I was not already approved as an adopter and was a useful foster carer of teenagers I am not sure that the system was very keen for me to adopt. I got the feeling that there were many 2 parent pre approved families waiting for a child like her and I had to fight the fact that she was very bonded with me.

(FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016) 2

“I started considering adopting him when he was about 18 months old. He had been a very poorly baby and a few times we thought we would lose him. He was eventually tube fed and endured many stays in hospital. I realized that the bond between us had drifted past that of foster carer and foster child during this very difficult time. He is an amazing child and I realized after fostering over 100 children over 17yrs that this was one child I would not be able to pass on. He has an unknown future and I felt that with the love and support of my family that no one would be able to love him as much as us and love him unconditionally.”

FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

The current position

- Government focus on adoption and legislative programme in England since 2012
 - increasing the number of adopters available,
 - reducing the delay in the child's journey and
 - improving the availability of adoption support
- Developing practice in concurrent placements and Fostering for Adoption
- Very little change in the numbers of children adopted by their foster carers – between 10-15% of all adoptions in the UK

Statistics

- In England 5,330 children were adopted from care during the year ending 31st March 2015 - 860 children were adopted by their foster carer (16%)
- In Wales 385 children were adopted from care during the year ending 31st March 2015 - 40 of those children (10%) were adopted by their foster carer.
- In N Ireland in 2013/14, 89 children were adopted: 48 (53%) by adopters who had been dually approved; 14 (16%) by their short-term foster carers and four (5%) by their kinship foster carers (ARIS, 2014).

Foster Carer Adoption in US

- In October 2013, 50,608 children were adopted, 30% by relatives, 53% by non-related foster carers and 17% by non-related adopters.
- Significant change in attitudes to foster carer adoptions since the early 1980s when legislation was introduced to enable financial support for children adopted from foster care.
- Practice has changed gradually over time and foster carers are now recognised as a valuable resource for waiting children - 28 States have procedures for foster carers to adopt when their foster child becomes legally free for adoption.

Foster Carer Adoption / Fostering for Adoption

“The advantage of this type of placement is that the child will be placed with foster carers who, subject to a placement order being made, or parental consent, are expected to go on to become the child’s adoptive family. Delay in finding a permanent family for young children who have already experienced neglect early on in their lives may have a profoundly damaging effect on their development. This type of placement has potential to reduce this delay and the damage caused significantly.”

DFE Adoption Statutory Guidance 2013 on FFA

Nagallo Open Letter in response to DoE policy paper: Adoption a vision for change March 2016

- Any assessment relating to permanency decisions for children should take into account of and give proportionate and appropriate weight to the child's existing secure attachments
- Children adopted by foster carers sometimes have the additional benefit of established contact arrangements with their birth family with which their carers feel comfortable, unlike most unrelated adopters.
- It is our experience that foster carers wishing to adopt in such cases rarely receive support from their local authorities in the first instance.

Nagallo Open Letter in response to DoE policy paper: Adoption a vision for change March 2016

- This stems from financial reasons because foster carers typically are unable to afford to adopt unless they continue to receive financial help.
- Local Authorities (LAs) are also reluctant to lose foster carers who provide a skilled, expensively trained, resource
- This results in either the child continuing to live with a sense of impermanence and fear of removal as a 'looked after child' or,
- in some cases, a stressful, not infrequently bitter, stand-off results between carers and their local authority .

Benefits for the Child

- A continuing and legally secure relationship with foster carers they know and trust and have developed an attachment to, including wider extended family members
- An end to the uncertainty of foster care and, for many children, a positive psychological shift in their sense of identity, connection and belonging
- The chance to remain in a familiar community, school, and neighbourhood
- Potentially a shorter time to achieve permanency than in other types of adoption
- Greater likelihood of maintaining an ongoing connection with their birth family
- Experienced parents to manage their needs (often including emotional and behavioral challenges due to early life trauma)

Potential benefits for child's birth family

- Birth parents more likely to know and have had a relationship with the carers
- May feel more able to support the adoption plan
- Contact arrangements may be more open
In 1 study in the USA more than one-third of all children who had been adopted (36 per cent) had some post-adoption contact with their birth families (Vandivere et al, 2009)

Messages from Research

- Kirton (2006) estimated that about three in every eight foster carers had considered adopting at least one foster child and about one in eight had proceeded to adopt. The majority had adopted only one child.
- Other carers were very clear about how they saw their role - *We did not go into fostering with a view to adopting*; *It defeats the purpose of fostering*; *We provide a service*; *We are foster carers*.
- He noted that although 'the social work system tries to establish a clear demarcation between fostering and adoption services, adoption has a strong resonance among foster carers, irrespective of their terms of approval'. He surmised that foster carers may be an underutilised resource in terms of adoption.

Messages from Research

- Biehal (2010) found foster carers were motivated by their own feelings of love for the child, wanting to provide them with security and stability but also a desire to protect them from the “vagaries of the care system”.
- Children had formed a strong bond with their carers prior to the adoption & had a strong sense of belonging to their adoptive families. There was no reported sense of divided loyalties, and some had maintained direct contact as carers had been more open to continuing contact that had been in place while they were fostered.
- Children expressed relief at achieving the legal security of adoption where this had happened at an older age.

Messages from Research – What are the barriers ?

- Hill (1982) noted resistance by social workers to short-term foster carers adopting children in their care, carers viewed as achieving adoption “by the back door” or concern being expressed about agencies losing valuable short-term placements.
- Attitudes within the local authority – lack of clear policy to inform workers across all teams involved
- Variation across agencies
- Carer’s concerns about lack of financial support and post adoption support

Messages from Research – Stability of placement

- Selwyn (2016) found that there was no evidence that carer adoptions were more (or less) stable than adoptions by “stranger” adoptive parents but
- the average age of children adopted by their foster carers was 5.3, compared with an age of 3.8 for stranger adopters.
- **Causes of delays** - foster carers only stepped in to adopt when adopters could not be found; negotiations for acceptable support packages were lengthy or the local authority was not, at least initially, supportive of the foster carer’s application to adopt.

Messages from research – Stability of placement

Initial reporting suggested these adoptions may be less stable **but** Selwyn found that;

- adoption managers were more likely to report foster carer than stranger adoptive disruptions, as those who had continued to foster would still be in touch with the local authority;
- the withdrawal of support post-order from foster carers could increase the risk of disruption;
- foster carers may have adopted children with more special needs and
- children had waited longer for the foster placement to become their adoptive placement

Non agency adoption route

- *If (when the local authority receives a notice of intention to adopt) the foster carer had not previously discussed with the local authority their wish to adopt before notice is given, the local authority should give it serious consideration and ensure that the foster carer is offered information and counselling.*
- *If adoption is already the plan for the child, and the local authority considers that the foster carer may be suitable to be approved as an adoptive parent, the foster carer can be assessed using the fast-track procedure under Regulation 30F of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005. Any application for an adoption order by the foster carer made after they have been assessed and considered suitable to adopt, would proceed as an agency adoption.*

Non-agency adoptions

- *The foster carer needs to understand the eligibility for adoption support. If the agency has not placed the child for adoption with them and the foster carer applies directly to court for an adoption order that the local authority opposes, they and the child will be limited in their eligibility under the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 to counselling, advice and information only. However, if the local authority supports the application to the court for an adoption order, the foster carer and the child will be eligible for assessment of their adoption support needs as is the case for any looked after child. SG 2.39*
- *Where a foster carer applies to adopt a child that they have been looking after and the local authority opposes the application, the local authority is not required to meet the legal costs of the foster carer. SG 6.65*

Foster Carers Who Wish to Adopt

- *‘Foster carers who express an interest in adopting children in their care ... should be given advice about the fact that adoption procedures apply in their case as in any other.’ SG 3.75*
- *‘There is a fast-track process for certain previous adopters and foster carers who bypass Stage One and enter the process at Stage Two. They should receive a tailored assessment (which may include elements of Stage One) to take account of such factors as their previous experience of adopting or fostering in general and experience of the differing needs of the child they have previously adopted/fostered.’ SG 3.73*
- *‘It should be made clear to foster carers... that their assessment will be in respect of their suitability to adopt generally and that, if they are approved, their suitability to adopt a specific child or children will be addressed separately as part of the matching process’ SG 3.77*

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Agency Response to FC expression of interest

- Written policy & procedure
- Initial visit
- Professionals meeting
- Accept Registration of Interest (ROI)
- Assessment
- Panel for approval
- Matching process
- Confirmed as an adoption placement

Responding to a Carer application

'I was asked, quite aggressively, why I put social services to the expense of training me as a foster carer if all along my intention had been to adopt. I was told that I would have to give up fostering for two years minimum and asked to give immediate answers about how I would provide for us financially in that case. I was told that I would have to move house to a location at least two boroughs away to provide a one-borough buffer between my family and birth family. The fact that this would move me far from my support network seemed inconsequential. I was given the distinct impression that if I didn't agree immediately to all of these requirements then the woman sitting in my living room would not write a favorable report.'

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FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

Factors to Consider at Initial Visit

- Information on the child and the carers relationship to the specific child
- What is the motivation for this expression of interest?
- How has the child progressed so far in this placement?
- Description of current relationships within the family and how adopting this child may impact upon all family members
- Establish the views of all household members about the proposed adoption and any other birth children living elsewhere. Issues such as inheritance should be considered at this early stage
- Is there an understanding of the change in the carers' role and responsibility?
- Are they clear about the change in parental responsibility and the lifelong commitment expected?

Factors to Consider at the Initial Visit

- Location: is the foster carer living near the birth family, could this represent a risk to the stability of an adoptive placement? What would the options be if there is an assessed risk?
- Health Issues: are there any known health problems that may impact on the foster carer parenting the child in the long term? If so do they have a contingency plan?
- Is there enough physical space in the home? If not what would the plan be to address this?
- Financial stability- this should include a discussion about the continuation of their fostering career.

Whether to accept the ROI?

- If the Local Authority initial enquiries lead them not to recommend assessing the carers, then the carer/pros adopters should receive written notification outlining the reasons for not pursuing the adoption assessment within 5 days of receiving the registration of interest (ROI).
- Carers who have been turned down have described situations where they have never received written explanations and are then left very often to continue fostering the child until an alternative family is found.
- Transparency and openness is important²⁴

Preparation /Training

- SG 3.74 states: *‘The agency should provide any necessary additional training, such as where the prospective adopters are seeking to adopt a child with needs that are very different to those of the child they have fostered/adopted.’*
- Tailor made training that considers the differences between fostering and adoption, the aspects of parenting that will differ, the lifelong commitment that adoption requires, talking to children about their adoption, contact with birth relatives and adoption support.
- Comments from carer/ adopters attending ‘standard’ adoption preparation courses indicate that they found some aspects were a duplication of fostering training courses.

Preparation

Some agencies /consortia have offered a Modular programme or a one off event that considers the specific issues likely to be faced by carer/adopters.

- The lifelong nature of adoption
- Legal differences between fostering and adoption and the roles and responsibilities of the adoptive parent
- Child development and attachment
- Contact issues and managing issues with the birth family
- Behaviour management
- Education and health
- Talking about adoption and life story work
- Adoption support

Assessing Carer Adopters

- If initial enquiries are positive then the 'Fast track' assessment should commence and completed within the 4 month timescale
- The requirements of an assessment of foster carers who wish to adopt are the same as in any adoption assessment – Schedule 4 AAR
- The assessor is considering 'suitability' and will use similar tools and techniques as in other adoption assessments.
- Discussions from initial visits will be helpful in forming the basis of the more in depth piece of assessment work and questions around motivation, wishes and feelings of the family should already be understood

Key areas to explore in assessment

- Motivation
- Parenting capacity and experience
- Impact on all family members
- Change of role
- Support
- Any financial implications for carer (and implications for agency support)
- Views of child

Assessing Carer Adopters

- Additional evidence is available as compared to completing a 'stranger' assessment
- The family is already known- there will be an existing foster carer assessment containing significant background information
- There will be Foster Care Reviews outlining the skills, capabilities, training attended, performance and areas for development
- There will be Supervision Records and Carer Recording that will give evidence of the applicant's understanding of the child, areas of success and areas that need more work
- There will be Child Care Review documents that give information about the child's progress (or not)

Information sought from fostering agency

- Regulation 32(6) of the 2011 Fostering Services Regulations requires fostering services to share information with an adoption agency to support their assessment
- The original assessment report (if recent enough to be relevant), a copy of the last foster carer review and any other review reports considered useful
- details of any concerns about standards of practice or allegations made against the foster carer/adopter or their household members and what if anything is being done/has been done to address them + any other information considered to be relevant to the assessment
- Written consent of the applicant to the sharing of their information is needed and the information, redacted where necessary, should be provided within 15 working days

Carer Motivation

“When I became a foster carer, I had no intention to adopt. While caring for my son during the first period of care, I never thought about adopting him. We were all working towards to plan of rehabilitating him with birth mum. I spent a lot of time with birth mum, helping her learn how to care for him. It was only after the rehabilitation failed and he returned to me that I considered adopting him.

My decision wasn't about me becoming a parent, but about him not suffering yet another abandonment and trauma in his young life.

FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

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Continuing to Foster?

So the time came to call the adoption team and put our interests in adoption forward. A meeting was held with the adoption team, social workers and our family. However, this is where our world felt like it had come crashing down. Without going into too much detail we were told that if we wanted to go ahead any further we had to resign from fostering! This was my job, my career, my means of financially supporting my family.

FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

Continuing to Foster?

- ‘Yes we did want to continue to foster. The adoption team told us that we would have to stop fostering for two years.

The fostering team said that, as we had had the baby since birth then there would not be a settling in period or a period of adjustment. We started to foster a couple of months later.”

FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

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Continuing to Foster?

- To continue fostering or not can be a common area of conflict for carers considering adoption
- Consideration must be given to how the adoption is perceived by all parties: do the carers expect the child to react and behave differently? What is the child's understanding of the adoption? What is the expectation and understanding of other children in the household, including other foster children?
- 'the overall goal is to clarify, explore, confirm or confront the various forms of magical thinking of each individual involved in the adoption'³⁴ Fahlberg

Financial considerations

Where fostering is a main source of income, having to cease fostering may cause financial hardship for not only the carers but also the child/ren in placement.

‘I wanted to continue fostering. The adoption team wanted me to stop for at least 3 years. I did not see the need for this and financially was only happy to agree to 2 years when the 2 other long term placements may have ended and otherwise I would have had to get a job and put her in childcare. In the end I was allowed to foster again after 1 year as fostering were desperate – however if the full 3 years had been insisted it would have caused a major issue. ‘

‘How would we be financially secure to care for an additional child and lose my job in order to adopt? We were devastated to feel so excluded, unfairly treated in comparison to other adopters who are not forced into giving up their jobs or careers’

Having a written policy?

Local authorities often have written (or unwritten) policies about carers continuing to foster – these will vary between authorities. There is a case for these decisions to be based on an assessment of the individual situation.

‘My adoption social worker was a wonderful woman, sensible, compassionate and insightful. Within a few meetings she had stated that she saw no reason for me to give up fostering. I already had another child in placement who had come while my son was living with his birth mother for that failed rehabilitation, and my son was used to him being around. My SW felt it would be better for my son if we just started as we meant to go on, and that stopping fostering and then starting again would be more unsettling for him.’

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Financial Support

- *ASR 9 states... where the adopter previously fostered the child they are adopting, and they received remuneration in the financial support paid to them as the child's foster parent, the local authority may continue to pay remuneration for a transitional period of two years from the date of the adoption order.*
- *This can continue for longer than two years if the local authority considers the case to be exceptional.*
- *The purpose of the transitional provision is to enable local authorities to maintain payments to foster parents who go on to adopt, at the same rate as they received when they were fostering the child. This is intended to give the family time to adjust to their new circumstances.*

Local authority policies

- We ask the foster carer not to foster any new children until at least six months after the adoption order is granted. We offer a non-means-tested adoption allowance for the first two years of the placement. Thereafter it is means-tested. LA1
- In relation to taking time out of their fostering arrangements, this is dependent upon individual circumstances. There may be considerations where children have been in placement for a significant period and are very much part of the family unit and it would not be appropriate to disrupt this. There are times when we advise the need to take 6–12 months out, or it might be thought that fostering is no longer an option now the family has adopted. All of this is worked through with the family, fostering supervising social worker, the child's social worker and the adoption worker. It is far better to come to a joint agreement where everyone is happy. LA2

Ethnicity in Matching

- *‘ Religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background are among the matters to be considered in determining the appropriate match for a child.... Only in very exceptional circumstances should matching a child with prospective adopters be delayed solely on the ground that the available prospective adopters do not match the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin or cultural background’*

SG 3.16 July 2013

- Where a foster carer expresses an interest in adopting a child in their care whose background is different from their own, an integral part of the assessment should consider how the child’s varied needs have been met so far (look at a range of evidence) and what plans are in place to promote these needs in the future.
- This also applies to children who have complex health needs or disabilities- use the evidence of carer skill and capacity to hypothesise about future developments.

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Ethnicity and Matching

- The assessment needs to explore the cultural competence of the adults and their capacity to promote and support the child's identity, and how they may manage these differences in the future.
- What is their understanding of how a young child may experience difficulties such as racism as they become older and be more aware of the reactions of others?
- How prepared are they to seek advice and guidance in the future?

‘As the baby is of dual nationality they had concerns that we were both white British and we may not be able to promote her culture and heritage. We managed to prove that we would be able to do that as we had lived abroad twice and travelled extensively.’

FC adopter in Dibben & Howorth 2016

Matching

- Sharing full information about the child's history with the carer adopters
- Evidencing the carer/s ability to meet the child's needs now and in the future
- Integration into the immediate and wider family
- Contact plans
- Assessed support needs of the child and the adoptive family
- Reasons for recommending match

Contact

- Contact arrangements can be complex and on occasion may pose risks.
- Risk assessments may be needed
- There should be no presumption that contact will continue unchanged **but** carer/ adopters should be included in discussions about contact plans
- Take account of existing arrangements and carers' views when planning sibling contact
- Birth family members need to be helped to understand the proposed contact plan
- Support should be offered to all parties to manage the contact proposed.

Contact

- 'We have arranged for the baby to see her birth mother and maternal grandmother every four months. This was decided solely by us and it is arranged by us and the birth mother. It is going very well at the moment and the birth family is very respectful of our feelings and appreciative. We hope that this contact will be beneficial for our daughter and help her to know her story.'
- Due to having a positive relationship with the birth parents, we were happy to send photos in letterbox contact. However, this was decided by others to only take place once per year. Unfortunately, we have not received any letters back as yet. The birth mother did try to contact us through social media but we have had to block her due to messages which clearly worried us in her understanding of adoption and the future.
- We are still left in the dark as to where we send future letterbox contact.

Adoption Support

- Information about entitlement to adoption support services
- If continuing to foster then access to training and support groups in their fostering role.
- Need to be included in mainstream adoption support services
- Support with education and schools
- Life story work
- Assessment for adoption support needs after 3 years post order
- Access to funding through Adoption Support Fund

Adoption Support

‘Once the assessment was underway, we were briefly told by the child’s Independent Reviewing Officer about assessments which can be made to determine the level of support both financially and for other needs. However, we were also told by the adoption team that because our child had no additional needs we wouldn’t be required to undertake the assessment’.

‘I was promised help from a social worker who has not contacted us since the adoption. I have been included in the support groups but again only after several requests. After being treated the way we were, we don’t feel able to request anything from the adoption team!’

FC adopters in Dibben & Howorth 2016

When it works well

- 'I found the whole process excellent, including panel, which was an encouraging and up-building experience. This was, in large part, due to my excellent social worker who I can't praise highly enough' (carer comment)
- 'After the unpleasant, initial meeting, I have received nothing but positive comments about my decision to adopt my son. There were no questions to answer at panel, and every single panel member said that they were delighted with this outcome and congratulated us. I saw my adoption social worker recently through work, and she said again what a great outcome it was for my son. It means a lot to have had the unequivocal support of those who took us through that process and made the important decisions.'

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Carer reflections

- 'It felt at the time like the natural thing to do, and it still feels that way. We can spend months and years agonising about whether or not to adopt, and deliberating over matching criteria, but, in the end, there are children that are in desperate need of a loving family, and if we can be that loving family then it's a no brainer, and we work out what to do with the hand that we're dealt as we go along, like any other parents.'
- 'Has it changed my relationship with my child? Well, yes and no. I already loved him, already cared for him, already put his needs first. Now I am able to add permanence and belonging to that. That doesn't change my love for him at all, but it will, I believe, give him the best chance for his future.'

Conclusion

- Adoption by foster carers should be seen as a legitimate route to permanence
- Agencies should develop policies and procedures that are accessible to foster carers, IRO's and social workers to ensure a consistent and informed agency response
- Policies should enable decisions to be taken on the basis of a full assessment of the individual circumstances and needs of the child and the prospective family
- Assessments should take account of the different motivation of foster carers and the existing attachments for the child
- Foster carer adopters should be routinely included and linked into adoption support services and given clear information about how to access support in the future, particularly when it is likely that support services may not be needed in the near future

A personal account from a carer adopter

Clare

Contact Details

- Thank you for listening to us
- If you would like a copy of this presentation or to discuss any aspects of this presentation with me I am happy to be contacted on elaine.dibben@corambaaf.org.uk

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