

Improving the care system for children

Introduction.

There is a variety of reasons why a child/young person comes into care, but having come into care the experience should be better than the experience received at home. Unfortunately, for a significant number of children/young people, this is not the case. This paper explores what is required and that includes endeavouring to keep children and young people at home so long as it is safe to do so.¹

The care situation.

Children need certain key elements to grow and thrive. These include food, warmth, shelter, consistent care and control, and love. They need to receive these elements of care from a significant carer, or carers, to form an attachment. Once the attachment is formed it can be successfully transferred but needs to remain strong and if the attachments are too frequently broken or changed, then children and young people suffer attachment disorder. This is a significant developmental issue that will weaken their ability to grow and thrive into fully functioning adults. Children need to have formed secure attachments to cope with growing up, and building up resilience, and these secure attachments set the foundation for a healthy life and healthy lifestyle.

Over the years the definition of “Family” has changed. There are far more re-constituted families, for instance where new families are brought together as parental relationships change, and children may be living with others to whom they are not directly related. Additionally some adults choose to have children as single parents, or as same-sex couples. Science and technology have also helped to enable more people to become parents through IVF and donor implantation. There is nothing wrong with these changes, or in the styles of “Family”, but it is important to note them as relationships have become more complex, and families are not always supported enough, and as a consequence it is the children and young people in these families that can suffer.

As families change, many become fragmented or dispersed. This can result in children seeing less of a parent, or a previous significant carer (to whom they may not necessarily be related), and their siblings. These relationships are important in order for children to grow securely during their minority, but are also important for them in the future, when they are adults and may have families of their own. If a child does not live at home within their “family”, they can struggle to understand who they are, and where they have come from.

These identity and cultural issues, in their widest form, are maintained in families, and must continue to be reinforced for children.

Alongside these changes there are also changes within our communities. Historically people tended to know who their neighbours were, and consequently would also receive support within their communities. In today's society this is no longer so well-developed. Families tend to be more isolated. People we view as being members of our families do not have to be related to us, but are those who provide appropriate support and care. Over the years this has also eroded and there are many reasons for this, which can be explored separately, but will not be the focus of this paper.

Alongside the above points there are other changes that impact on our families. There has been an increase in domestic violence, an increase in drug and alcohol misuse, and an increase in mental illness. This is often referred to as the "Toxic Trio". Some families experience all of these issues.

There are other factors too such as unemployment, inadequate housing and overcrowding, difficulties with the benefits system, crime and problems within the prison service, and fair and equitable access to good health care and education.² All of these elements warrant an individual exploration in their own right, regarding their impact on the care children receive, and what changes could be made to improve things significantly within our society. The number of people living in poverty is quite appalling in 2018, and the need for food banks a shocking indictment.

A major step forward would be an All Party responsibility for Children and Families and a ring-fencing of funds at Central and Local Government level to maintain and improve existing services to ensure Children and Families are supported adequately. Unfortunately, there is not this commitment currently, and it is extremely short-sighted as our children of today will become the adults and parents of tomorrow. They will continue to need services to support them if they are not appropriately enabled to grow and develop during their minority years.

Within this context we can understand how families are under more pressure and hence the experiences of their children are affected. Families need support and if this can be provided to help keep their children at home, so long as it is safe enough to do so, this is the ideal.

Consequently we need to put in place the necessary resources to keep children at home within their families. This requires all agencies (including the voluntary sector) to work together and despite the guidance "Working Together" (originally published in 1989 and subsequently updated), the pressures on health, children's social care, education, and the police have resulted in agencies becoming more separated, and less able to work constructively together.³ The erosion at the heart of all these agencies and the services they provide is why the number of children entering the care system is at a record high.⁴ This is hugely significant within the context of reduced, struggling, and limited resources.

Nevertheless, many Local Authorities today put in services at the "front door" and will provide staff to go into homes to help parents, and this even includes overnight and at the

weekend. This is a good use of resources. Parents often just need someone to help re-direct them, be there to offer the help, guidance and support needed, and to prevent a situation breaking down.

Additionally, children need to be able to develop their hobbies and interests and explore. The lack of appropriate green spaces and access to affordable leisure services affect have a major effect . The cuts in Central Government grant funding to Local Authorities have also had a significant impact. Within Local Authorities there have been cuts to the youth services that historically supported children living with their families.

Additionally when children come into care the choices open to them are often age dependent. Although a child can be adopted up until they are 18 years of age, as a rule it is normally the under 8's who are targeted for adoption. Adoption is only explored when there is no family option available, and then does offer the child the permanence and security they need. Adoption breakdowns are still quite rare, but again adopted families do require support and post-adoption support is offered and available.

Given this context it is not surprising then that for the older children who come into care, not only are they likely to be more "damaged" from the experiences they have received when living at home, as they have often been at home for longer periods and so lacked the parenting they have needed for longer, but given their advanced years there are fewer care options available for them. There is a crisis in fostering and a reduction in foster carers. Most Local Authorities agree that they need far more foster carers than they have currently, and all struggle to recruit year-on-year increases. Fostering provides what children need as foster carers mirror family life more easily than can be achieved in a residential setting. However, that is not to say that there is not a role for residential care. Some children are so damaged from their experiences of living in a family that they cannot trust adults, and so prefer to live with larger numbers of children to make them feel safe.

Foster carers often provide long term care, but can also provide support care, or what is known as respite care. A child can be placed with a foster carer and then return home, when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so, with the family continuing to obtain support from the foster carer. These arrangements work well. However, with current pressures on foster families they are less able to provide this type of care, as their households are usually full of children at all times.

Although there is some research to guide us around what is needed in the care system, more needs to be done. The All Party commitment flagged above should oversee the changes needed in future, to prevent the current care system continuing to fail the children it should be helping and advancing. Without An All Party commitment there will be no progress.

In overviewing this situation we therefore need the following:-

- We need more foster carers who are robust and have "stickability";
- we need foster carers who can provide support care and/or respite care, supporting families where children can safely return home;
- we need more support to be available for families;

- we need to tackle the “Toxic Trio”;
- we need to bring only those children into care that need to be in care, and if/when they can return home ensure that this is achieved;
- we need to value “Family” and invest in “Family”;
- we need more social workers as currently not enough social workers are being trained and retained;
- we need improved placements and placement options, and more choices that are of quality but also affordable;
- we need more out of school and after school clubs, improved activities for children, and we need to re-consider the youth service and the provision of youth services.

In addition to the key elements noted above, children also need the following. They need a safe and secure home base where they are cared for, have all of their basic needs met, where they are loved and feel loved; they need contact and involvement with their families and significant family members who can keep them in touch with their history, culture and identity; they need consistency of care and a reduction in the number of placement moves; they need a consistent home environment where they can have friends and form appropriate friendships and relationships; they need education that is not interrupted; they need to be healthy and have access to appropriate health support at the time it is needed and particularly the involvement of Child And Adolescent Mental Health Services; they need to feel safe and have good role models; they need to be listened to and have a voice; they need to know that they have a future and that they will be supported in future, and they need to understand who they are and understand their life story.

Conclusion.

This paper is an outline of the current situation. There are many opportunities to make significant changes and improvements to the current care system, and there needs to be the commitment from Government if this is to be achieved. It is achievable.

Could you be a foster carer?

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on behalf of the Unitarian Penal and Social Affairs Panel

¹ The term “children” includes young people from this point on.

² Critical Report on the roll out of Universal Credit: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Rolling-out-Universal-Credit.pdf>

³ Current consultation draft: https://consult.education.gov.uk/child-protection-safeguarding-and-family-law/working-together-to-safeguard-children-revisions-supporting_documents/Working%20Together%20to%20Safeguard%20Children.pdf

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/social-care-crisis-uk-children-figures-per-day-a7995101.html>