

Barriers to change in the social care of children

A major aim of current government policy is to improve things for looked after children. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned a 'thinkpiece' to contribute to the debate about what gets in the way of making improvements for children in the public care system. Young people who are looked after, senior managers and frontline workers, people who have a 'vision' of how things needs to change were all asked 'What gets in the way of changing things for the better?' and 'What helps or would help to bring about change?' There was a remarkable consensus amongst those consulted about what needs to change and what would help: the young people consulted were particularly clear on what needs to change. Amongst the issues identified were:

- f** **Public attitudes to children generally, and to looked after children in particular, can get in the way of listening to children and acknowledging their human rights.**
- f** **Young people highlighted the importance of their relationships with social workers.**
- f** **Social workers and senior managers felt more attention should be paid to the skills and support needed to build good relationships with looked after children.**
- f** **There is a need for a national strategy for residential care, in order to ensure sufficient provision – including specialist provision – and to raise the quality and status of the sector.**
- f** **There is a need for better resourcing of foster carers, including payment, training and social work support.**
- f** **Residential care workers and foster carers require support if they are to help children to maximise their educational potential.**
- f** **The researcher concludes that a human rights perspective should be the underpinning moral framework of the social care system. All services should be measured against whether they promote children's human rights and whether they can adapt to meet a particular child's needs.**

There is considerable research about how the care system has failed looked after children. Current government policy initiatives, such as Quality Protects, aim to turn this situation around. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned a 'thinkpiece' to contribute to the debate about what needs to change.

Young people who are looked after, senior managers and frontline workers, people who have a 'vision' of how things needs to change were all asked 'What gets in the way of changing things for the better?' and 'What helps or would help to bring about change?'. The views of young people were particularly revealing as looked after children have not often been consulted about the system which cares for them.

There was a general consensus amongst those consulted of the barriers to change and what action is required. This *Findings* highlights a few of the issues identified.

What gets in the way of changing things for the better?

- **Public attitudes towards children generally and looked after children in particular**

"Public attitudes toward children affect every level of all organisations and everybody. ... It is really quite difficult to convey that these are individual human beings with rights of their own."

Sir William Utting

"Everyone thinks you're a no-hoper when you're in care."

Stephanie

Children are considered to be inconsistent, untrustworthy and, because they lack the experience of age, unable to make valid decisions. These attitudes undermine the requirement placed on social workers by the Children Act to consult with and involve children in decisions about their care.

- **The human rights of children are often not the dominant value base of social services departments**

"It's almost as if children and young people are like objects...We're just on the receiving end of budgets and things like that."

Tommy Turner

"It feels as if our management don't understand what 'working with children and families' is about. All

they're interested in is budgets, bedspaces, how many assessments you've done. You have to build up a relationship with these kids in order to have any impact. But we've got no time for that."

Social worker

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides an important moral framework. However, this has often lost out to more dominant values: those associated with an emphasis on business efficiency. When a social services department focuses more on the cost of doing an assessment than on how the assessment is done, the quality of social work will suffer. If managers have inadequate social work knowledge and skills to nurture good practice, the quality of work with children will be undermined.

- **The concept of 'being a good parent' is not one that local authorities have generally applied to their relationship with looked after children**

"The current focus of public care is on the protection of the child, with relatively little attention being given to the role of nurturer and educator – roles which we would expect of a 'good parent'."

The Who Cares? Trust

The organisation as a whole needs to care about what happens to each individual child, whether they are happy, doing well at school, are healthy, have friends, and so on. In reality, the responsibility for children's welfare is fragmented amongst different people, different organisations, and those who are in the closest contact with looked after children – foster carers and residential care workers – are the most undervalued part of the whole structure in that they receive low pay, little training, and often have generally poor working conditions.

- **Responses to children's needs are often dominated by a service-led approach**

"I was put in this short-term placement and I stayed 9 months and I didn't want to leave by then. And they said they wanted to keep me. But my social worker said no, that's a short-term placement, we have to find you a long-term placement."

Ray Jackson

Decisions and services are often not geared towards a particular child's needs because the way services are organised prevents flexibility, or there is a shortage of available resources such as specialist residential or foster care provision.

- **Social workers are often not able to fulfil the role that children want from them**

Many of the young people consulted said that social workers didn't have enough time for them, and that when they did see their social worker, they felt that they weren't being listened to.

Social workers expressed the same concerns. They felt their caseloads were too high to give children the attention they needed; that there was barely enough time to fulfil their statutory duties to carry out reviews, fill in Looked After Children forms, and arrange alternatives when placements broke down.

"I always feel that there are other things I should be doing. I'm juggling which child has priority and in the back of my mind all the time is the worry that the situations I don't put the time into could collapse."
Social worker

- **Not enough emphasis is put on the inter-personal and communication skills needed by social workers and other child care workers**

"Probably the two most important things about social work are inter-personal skills and communication. And I have to say that those are the two things that I think we do worse as a business."
Assistant Director of Social Services (Children and Families)

People at all levels of the looked after children system said that relationships were the most important thing in children's lives but that there wasn't enough attention paid to helping social workers and carers build good relationships with children.

What would help to change things for the better?

- **Listening to, and involving, children and young people**

More attention is now being paid to the need to consult with and involve looked after children and young people. It is also important to recognise the strength that children get from coming together with those who have similar experiences.

- **Developing a culture within local authorities and child care organisations based on recognising children's human rights**

Human rights are about recognising our common humanity, about aspiring for all human beings what

we would want for ourselves. A rights-based perspective needs to run through everything that is done by all those involved with looked after children. Some social services departments have adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and it is important to develop ways of ensuring these rights can be implemented for looked after children.

"It is very important the councillors and senior managers understand the nature of their parental responsibilities. They should always ask themselves whether the arrangements they make for this child are the ones they would want for their own child. If you apply this then you will be doing the best you can with the resources you've got."
Sir William Utting

- **There needs to be a national strategy for residential care**

Various reports have identified the need for a national strategy to ensure sufficient residential provision, including specialist services, and that the quality and status of the sector is enhanced.

"Something needs to be done about the image of residential care, upping the status of residential work, giving it a clear function. Certainly people in residential work feel undervalued and at the butt end of the service."
Steve Hart, Social Services Inspector, London West Inspection Group

"I know we should work with neighbouring authorities and the independent sector to plan services – but the reality is that we don't. It needs a much bigger intervention than we're ever going to do on our own if we're to have the residential provision we need to make good placements."
Senior manager, Social services department

- **Increase the number of foster carers, pay them, train and support them in the work they do**

If social services departments have an adequate pool of foster carers from which to choose when placing a child, then placement decisions are more likely to be needs-led rather than service-led and placement breakdown less common. Research has found the following factors help to create this situation:

- A clear foster care strategy
- Specialist placement teams
- Targeted recruitment campaigns
- Payment which recognises the levels of expertise and care required

- Ongoing support for foster carers
- Ongoing training for foster carers.

- **Recognising the importance of the relationship between social worker and child**

One of the most striking things that came out of talking to the young people was their high expectations of social workers. They were full of praise for those who did their job well.

"He took me out places, he did things with me, he did things that got my spirits up, that made me feel what's the point of just sitting about mucking around. He kept me on a straight line."

Sean Linney

There needs to be much greater recognition of the personal skills required of social workers and of the time they need to build relationships with young people.

- **Ensuring looked after children get the most out of the education system**

"Deciding to do a lot about education is probably the most worthwhile investment social services can make for looked after children. It is something which is going to last and go with that young person."

Barbara Fletcher, Education Policy Officer, Local Government Association

New government guidance and Quality Protects targets help focus local authorities' attention on the education of looked after children. Again, there needs to be recognition of the skills required of residential workers and foster carers, and the time and support they need to help children to maximise their potential.

Conclusion

Those consulted identified some fundamental, and detailed, issues which need tackling if the Government's aim of improving the looked after children system is to be achieved. More attention must be paid to the relationships that social workers and carers have with looked after children, to the organisation and funding of services, and the training and recruitment of staff. A failure to recognise children's human rights can get in the way of change. All services – the way they are funded, organised and what they do – should be measured against two criteria:

- Does this service promote and protect the human rights of children?

- Can this service be tailored to meet the needs of an individual child – even if these needs are different from the majority of the children who use the service?

About the study

The research was carried out by independent consultant, Jenny Morris. She consulted a range of 'stakeholders' in the care system:

- children and young people who are or have been looked after
- people who hold or have held senior positions in the childcare field and who have a vision of how things need to change
- people (both at a senior management and frontline level) who are currently involved in bringing about change.

The report also sets their opinions in the context of what research tells us about the care system.

How to get further information

The full report, "Having someone who cares?" **Barriers to change in the social care of children** by Jenny Morris, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau (ISBN 1 900990 56 3, price £10.95).