



Education Committee

Oral evidence: Children's social care - HC 372

Tuesday 16 April 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Vicky Ford; Andrew Lewer; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 154-237

Witnesses

[I](#): Dr Lucy Peake, CEO, Kinship, Emily Frith, CEO, Adoption UK, and Sarah Thomas, CEO, The Fostering Network.

[II](#): Mary Jackson, CEO, Frontline, Professor Lucille Allain, Co-Chair, Association of Professors of Social Work, and Matt Clayton, Strategic Lead for Children in Care and Care Leavers, Coventry City Council.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Lucy Peake, CEO, Kinship, Emily Frith, CEO, Adoption UK, and Sarah Thomas, CEO, The Fostering Network, gave evidence.

Q154 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session of the Education Committee, which is on children's social care. We are taking oral evidence from our first panel: Dr Lucy Peake, chief executive of Kinship; Emily Frith, chief executive of Adoption UK; and Sarah Thomas, chief executive of the Fostering Network. You are all very welcome. We have heard already in this inquiry about some of the positive outcomes from fostering, adoption and kinship care, compared with other forms of care, when it comes to the longer-term outcomes, so I wonder whether each of you, just as an opening point, could talk about the longer-term outcomes from the types of care that you represent. We will start with Emily.

Emily Frith: Thank you. What I would say first is that it is really difficult to compare outcomes between different forms of permanence and what is really important is getting the right decision for every child. However, adoption does have very positive outcomes for young people in terms of their educational attainment and that longer-term permanence and stability for young people where it is the right decision for them. There is also the benefit that most adoptees will have a continuing relationship with their parents in adulthood; it provides that longer-term stability. But what really matters is making sure that we get the right solution for each child. That would be the overarching message.

Q155 **Chair:** You gave us an overarching snapshot there; thank you. Sarah, may I come to you?

Sarah Thomas: I would flag to the Committee that the children that we talk about are all the same children. The experience that they have once they are removed from their family is very much dependent on so many different factors as to where they end up, and whether they are placed in adoption, fostering or kinship care. The outcomes are different, and the thing that we should not be seeing is such a level of difference between the outcomes. When these young people become adults, they should have the same opportunities. They should have had a good life, because either way, we as a country removed them from their families.

I think we need to really look at this and to think about what it is that is producing good outcomes for children. We should take that back to its core: what is best for these children, and how can we ensure that we achieve that? The decisions that are being made are clearly not necessarily resulting in good outcomes. When you look at fostering, when you look at children who are raised in our care system, they are not necessarily becoming the adults that we would want them to become and they don't necessarily have access to the things that we would want for our own children. I think it is time for us to be thinking about these children as if they were our own children and to be making informed



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decisions and providing the funding to local authorities so that they can think about these children as if they were their own.

Q156 Chair: You mention that there are different outcomes. Also, within fostering, there is a very wide range of levels of permanence, and sometimes short placements are necessary and important. Is there anything further you would say on the importance and relevance of permanence within the fostering picture?

Sarah Thomas: I think it is very, very important that our care planning process looks carefully at what is right for each child. Permanence, whether it be through adoption, kinship care or fostering, should be that. Children should not be moved once they are placed in permanence. The matching process should be good enough. Another issue is the sufficiency of the foster carers, the location of the foster carers and the access of the foster carers, which does not work in the sector as it stands, given the way the fostering provision has grown from local authority-only provision to being a much wider sector, with a huge number of other opportunities for foster carers to be attracted to and other companies and private provision. We need to think about how well that is working. I am not talking about that in relation to profiteering or any of that; I mean genuinely where children are living, because the provision is no longer just in the local area.

Then, in relation to transition, I would say that we really need to think about how well we reunify children back to their families. That is an area that could be hugely diversified in respect of fostering. We run a service called Step Up Step Down, which is entirely a service where foster carers support children to return to or remain with their families. I think that is a key area for us to be looking at in this country.

Q157 Chair: Thank you. Dr Lucy, may I come to you on the outcomes for children in kinship care? We heard some very positive things in some of our previous sessions. Again, you will be dealing with a very wide range of children in different circumstances and different arrangements. Can you talk about that a little bit? What does the evidence show?

Dr Peake: The evidence that we do have will indicate that kinship care is better, for most children, than foster or residential care, so that would be across employment, education and health. But within that, as you say, there are differences. I think the reasons for that are some of the things that have been talked about already. It is about continuity of care, stability, prior relationship with a kinship carer, somebody who knew and loved you already who steps up and says, "I will care for you forever." We do not have, in kinship care, the same cliff-edge as we have for some children in the care system and that means that that stability and that continuity does contribute towards those better outcomes.

To add to what Sarah and Emily have already said, it is really important to recognise that, while we might talk about better outcomes within this small group of children, outcomes for children in kinship care are not as good as for children in the general population. We need to focus on that



and think: what is it that we could do to improve support for our children—whether they are adopted, in foster care, or residential care, or kinship care—to encourage those better outcomes right across? So I think there are recognised lack-of-support issues that we need to focus on.

Emily Frith: May I come in on that? I think Lucy is absolutely right. I think we need to think about all children who are care experienced and how we can support them to have the best outcomes, no matter which route they come through, because—while we are talking here about the positive outcomes that the forms of care we provide can deliver—in comparison to their classmates and the general population these children need additional support.

Chair: Absolutely. The purpose of this inquiry, in general, is to look across the piece at that but I think it is useful to draw out the different arrangements and perhaps the different levels of support that they might need.

Q158 **Mrs Drummond:** This question is mostly to Sarah. In your evidence, it said that the most effective form of care for looked-after children is fostering, yet we hear that there is quite a lot of breakdown in fostering and children get moved to different places. I just wondered what your thoughts were, and possibly those of the other panellists too, but can I start with you, Sarah?

Sarah Thomas: There is a national crisis in foster care and I touched on this just a moment ago. The fact is that, in the last 25 years, we have transitioned from a place of local authorities recruiting foster carers to their local area so that children were always—or primarily, where it was in their best interests—placed close to home, close to school, close to family connections. The ability to reunify to families was better. The ability for children to maintain many of the strengths that were part of their life was better. We are now in a position where children are moving hundreds of miles to find the most appropriate foster placement, and not always the most appropriate: it is just the foster placement that is available.

There is a national crisis, so I think the key thing that we need to do is look at how we can build recruitment and retention for foster carers. I do not pretend to represent every single foster carer but we do represent those that come to us and tell us the experiences that they are having. Primarily, the support, the finances and their ability to see fostering as a realistic alternative for them to provide 100% of their time and care for children are no longer an option for many, many people. A very small percentage of the population—a very small but special group of people—will come forward to foster. At the moment, the way that the sector is set up, there are too many people trying to fight for that small population of individuals that will come forward to foster. I think that is what is key and needs to be addressed.

Q159 **Mrs Drummond:** Too many organisations, do you think?

Sarah Thomas: Yes, I think so, and I think the fact that there is no oversight and transparency—so we do not have, for example, a register of

foster carers in the same way we do for social workers in other parts of the sector. There is a register for care workers; there is a register for youth workers; there are a number of different registers. That enables services to make sure that they can maintain quality, consistency, ensure learning and development remains of standard practice, give independence to foster carers, and ensure that they feel respected and valued as part of that team around the child. A register of foster carers would also enable local authorities to see where foster carers are, and where services are, and make sure that availability of foster carers was transparent, so that they could make the best, informed matches for children.

I believe the stability issue is because we are not able to make effective matches for children. We are moving them out of their communities, we are putting them in temporary arrangements because we were unable to find what was right for them. It is about being able to find the right foster carer, at the right time, in the right place.

Q160 **Mrs Drummond:** There is a problem with keeping siblings together, I think, too.

Sarah Thomas: There is a significant problem with keeping siblings together. We need to consider legislation around this in the same way that other countries have. We may not always be able to keep all sibling groups together, but I believe, having been a social worker for more than 20 years, that we were able to do that better in the past than we are doing currently. It would be an important area to scrutinise in relation to children being placed out of their local area, siblings being separated, and the long-term impact that has on them.

If we cannot keep them together in their fostering placement, we should be looking to services such as our “keeping together” principles, and the work of the Family Rights Group—Lifelong Links—to make sure that those children do have a relationship as siblings, because we are effectively removing their support networks as adults. We turn to siblings and family—these young people are very isolated when they leave the care system. We need to have done everything we can to enable them to have the best supports possible around them when they reach adulthood, and they are no longer within a system that should care for them.

Q161 **Vicky Ford:** You just made a passionate request for this register. Why do you think that did not happen when we just had the major review of children’s social care?

Sarah Thomas: I am not entirely sure. I could not speak for the decision-makers, but—

Q162 **Vicky Ford:** Why would you not have it?

Sarah Thomas: I cannot see any reason why not. There are safeguarding issues around it. There are significant safeguarding issues connected to the register of foster carers. There is important evidence in respect of foster carers feeling valued, and there was a review of fostering by Mark



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Owers many years ago, which clearly recommended that we needed a register of foster carers. That is now being considered in Wales, and I would urge that we look at that in England as well.

Q163 **Vicky Ford:** We might need to have only certain people being able to see it for safeguarding reasons.

Sarah Thomas: There would definitely be restrictions on it. There would definitely need to be a number of measures. It could be layered. There could be different layers to that, but something needs to change to enable local authorities to find the foster carers they need.

Q164 **Nick Fletcher:** You have touched on this a little bit already, but the biggest issue is surrounding recruitment and retention. I would like to address that issue, but on what Vicky has just said, if you put another layer in like a register, will that deter foster parents from coming forward? I hear a lot that there are so many barriers to helping and volunteering. I know that the argument is always, "Well, if you really want to do it, then you would do this," but sometimes you need to take barriers away to help. I do, however, completely understand the need for a register—I am quite surprised there is not one. There is a lot around there, if you can unpack that for us.

Sarah Thomas: In relation to the barriers, there is a significant barrier that would be removed if you had a register. Right now, when a foster carer decides, "I no longer wish to foster with this service; I wish to foster with this alternative service," they have to go through the process from the start. Our regulations require that they are separately and independently assessed by a separate agency. If we had a register that maintained their approval status and said, "You have met the requirements on an annual basis to continue to foster. This is your approval status, this is what we know about you, and you have met all those requirements," they would be able to transfer with ease. They would have ownership of their fostering status and they could go to an alternative service, which could check the register and say, "Thank you very much, you have maintained the requirements."

We lose thousands of foster carers—more than we gain—every single year, and many of those people tell us that it is because they were unable to continue fostering with that particular service. If a service is not being utilised in the way that it needs to be—this is not necessarily local authorities; I do not think local authorities have got vacant placements of foster carers, but there might be some that do—they struggle to transfer and then be utilised. If foster carers are unhappy with their agency or service for one reason or another, they cannot transfer like a social worker or any other worker can. I believe it is really important that we have that register. I do not think it would be an additional layer; I actually think it would be an ease to the sector and would remove many of the barriers that exist.

Q165 **Nick Fletcher:** Why have we had a drop in the number of foster carers?



Sarah Thomas: I think that is because, as I have said, there is a small pool of people that come forward to foster. They go through a process that can be seen as very extensive. It needs to be—it is rigorous for the right reasons. You are caring for vulnerable children in your home, 24/7, with no oversight whatsoever of your day-to-day practice. We must do a vigorous assessment and make sure that is the right thing for children, but it is becoming less and less appealing. There are a number of people who are very vocal, and explain that the key way to recruit foster carers is word of mouth. That has been the case for decades. We know that that is what works best.

Foster carers may be unhappy with the way they are receiving remuneration, support and with the matching of children, and it has got to a point where people are no longer positive about the experience—or too few people are positive about the experience. We need to turn that on its head by investing in recruitment and retention and ensuring that we have a strategy that makes sure that those things are fulfilled across England.

Q166 **Nick Fletcher:** You talked about siblings and legislating to keep them together. I am interested in how you would legislate for that. If I want to be a foster carer but say, “I can only cope with one child”, how does the legislation work in that case?

Sarah Thomas: What it would do is place a duty. What we do not have right now is a duty in the same way that we have for contact with siblings, for instance. There is no duty in law that says we need to ensure that siblings are placed together wherever possible. It is child-centred, and we should be practising in a child-centred way, but because of the pressures on the system and the lack of provision, we are not always able to. Because we do not have full transparency of every fostering provision that is available, we cannot always keep siblings together. There could be foster carers around the corner that we need to access, but we cannot, because there is no way of ensuring that our commissioning processes access all available foster carers. I believe that bringing in a duty would go some way to support that and would ensure that we place a duty on services to identify when there are available foster carers, so we could do better and take a step in the right direction.

Q167 **Nick Fletcher:** So you would not be forcing foster carers to take these children but putting a duty on local authorities to do all they can to keep siblings together? Do they not do that already? Everyone would understand that it is best to keep siblings together.

Sarah Thomas: They absolutely try their best, but they are working in a state where barriers are preventing them from accessing all available foster carers. I believe that the duty would support them in that.

Q168 **Nick Fletcher:** What can the Government do to improve trauma-informed care in the foster system?

Sarah Thomas: Some of this goes back to talking about the register. We need to improve trauma-informed care, because these are some of our most traumatised children. If we want to ensure that those who are caring



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for them are informed in the way that they practise, we need to think about providing consistent levels of learning and development. The only way we can ensure that our fostering workforce understands trauma and delivers trauma-informed parenting is to have an approach that says, "This is how we should go about it." We need to ensure that the workforce, and everyone else, is well informed in what these children need in order to ensure that the approach is trauma-informed. So that goes back to the register. There could be minimum requirements, standards and expectations within a year's time. We could potentially look at the national minimum standards and the regulations that sit around fostering and see where we can strengthen this. We need to think about, from what we have learned and what we know that we need for our children, how the regulations can be strengthened to ensure that we deliver for our children and young people.

Q169 Andrew Lewer: I will ask my question to Sarah first and then broaden it out. How far do you think the Government's children's social care strategy—Stable Homes, Built on Love—goes toward addressing the issues you have highlighted in the fostering system? What more could be done or could be differently done about that?

Sarah Thomas: I think it goes some way to addressing the issues, and there are very important recommendations within the strategy, so it is very important that it has been undertaken. The time now is to act. There have been a number of reviews and inquiries. There is a process by which we go around continually asking questions and researching and learning, and what we need to do now is act. We need to implement the changes and fund the changes properly. The thing that has not happened yet is that funding, which local authorities require to deliver on the changes and ensure they provide best practice for all the children and young people who need them.

For me what is key in relation to gaps is the real focus on where children are living and what their experience is. I am not sure we have gone far enough. There are things we need to do to ensure we have more requirements around children being placed locally to their homes. On reunification, we need a stronger evidence base for why, how and when we should reunify children back to their families.

We should make sure we have a much stronger process around matching and the retention of foster carers. We need to build up fostering. For years and years now, the number of foster carers leaving is greater than the number that join. We have got to address that. That tide has got to turn in the next 12 months, or we will struggle to provide fostering provision and we will end up with more and more children being placed in residential or other unregulated provision that is not in their best interest. I think that is what we should really focus on.

Q170 Andrew Lewer: It is now 15 years since I became a county council leader, and I spent four years then hearing exactly these issues being expressed, so it is something of a dismaying spectacle to see all these things still being as difficult and challenging as ever, if not more so. Emily



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and Lucy, do you have any thoughts on the Government's report and what we need to do further?

Emily Frith: In terms of fostering or—

Andrew Lewer: Yes. We will move on other things later.

Emily Frith: To add to the conversation around fostering, I would say that, from our perspective, sometimes there are barriers put in the way of foster carers wanting to adopt a child, and I think that is unnecessary. I completely agree with everything Sarah said. If we can boost the number of foster carers then that will probably be less of a risk for local authorities. On the point about siblings being together, absolutely, that is something we want to see. It is not right for every child, so it has to be in the child's best interest. Often, you will end up with one sibling in kinship care, one in foster care and one in an adoptive family, and we need more support for all these families to manage those really challenging situations where you are trying to bring children together. Our family days are often a venue for two adopters to come together and bring siblings from the same family to meet. Providing those kinds of supportive environments can help. Often, adoptive families are just left to deal with this themselves, and it can be really challenging for the child. More support for that contact is vital.

Dr Peake: From a fostering perspective, what I would like to say is that there is an overlap between kinship care and foster care. About 10% of children in kinship care are in foster care. For whatever reason, a decision has been made for that child to be in the care system and for their kinship carer to become a foster carer. In some ways that opens the doors to support—they are the most supported children and kinship carers—but it highlights that there is almost a perverse incentive for some kinship carers to become foster carers. Stable Homes, Built on Love and the strategy give us an opportunity to think about how we build a kinship care system that is right for kinship carers and pivot some of the support so that it follows the children and it is not determined by legal order.

I think that would make it better, almost, because we can structure the foster care system so that it is right for foster carers, who typically are not family members, but then build the kinship care system that is right for family and friends who have stepped in to raise the children. They do need different support, and some of the things that Sarah outlined actually would not be right for some kinship carers. They might not want to go on a register because they have stepped in to care for a particular child in a particular set of circumstances. There is an amazing opportunity to think about what the children's social care system looks like in the future: how we build the kinship care system that is right for kinship care, but get the fostering and adoption parts right as well.

Q171 **Andrew Lewer:** I recently wrote a paper for the Centre for Policy Studies about looked-after children and the role of charities such as SpringBoard and local authority placements for children in both state and independent boarding schools in terms of providing a wider opportunity for fosterers



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who may not be able to be 24/7 but want to provide that sort of background. I accept it is not for everybody and I make that point repeatedly in my paper, but do you feel there is a role for that sort of placement, to widen the fostering network?

Sarah Thomas: Yes, absolutely. For foster carers to support children and for them to remain within their families?

Andrew Lewer: The whole range: to provide opportunities for kinship carers not to be as full-on but to be there so that fosterers have an opportunity to look after the interests of the child but also not be 24/7, and just to widen the pool.

Sarah Thomas: I think that is an interesting area, and it is right for some people. I would say that foster carers should have their own support networks. You cannot foster in isolation, just like you cannot parent in isolation. You need support networks around you. When we have separate foster carers who provide traditional respite or that sort of provision, it can actually damage the relationship between the child and their foster carer. In some cases, it might be of use, but we should be far stronger in promoting and ensuring and potentially regulating that every foster carer who comes forward is also approved with a support network around them—someone who can care for children alongside them, be there, have their back and support them as they go through that fostering journey. We need to be looking at this from a child-centred perspective, and it is much better for a child to remain stable in their foster family without the use of unrelated and unknown foster carers coming forward to support them. Children see that as a punishment for them: "I have to go away this weekend, to give my parent a break from me." We have to be careful how we use that.

There are other settings, like our Step Up Step Down service, where foster carers are matched with families and specifically provide respite—overnight breaks, sleepovers; lots of support—but the primary aim is to keep those children within their families. That has seen a 95% success rate where it has been trialled so far, keeping children at home and reducing the number of children who become looked after. That is the key thing: prevention should be our focus. The number of children becoming looked after is rocketing, and we need to do something about that. We need to ensure that we look back at where we can fund preventive services, such as those that go hand in hand with families, because what we are not doing right now is supporting those families to care for their children.

I talked about how these are all the same children, and they really are. They really need us to be thinking more about what we are doing to keep them with their families. Before we start asking, "What is the care order? Where should they live for the rest of their life?", we should ask, "What have we done to make sure that we have strengthened everything we can to support that family to look after that child?" The majority of children who are looked after in England are going back to their families at the end of the day, and we haven't worked with them or done anything to support



and enable them to prevent future generations of children from becoming looked after.

Q172 **Andrew Lewer:** In terms of broadening out the network, do you think that regional care co-operatives have any use, or are they just a bureaucratic distraction?

Sarah Thomas: I don't think they are going to solve the problem, but I can see that there are some benefits. Certainly, working on a regional basis can be supportive. Unfortunately, due to the pressures on the system, we are in a place of competition. Local authorities compete with each other, independent fostering agencies compete with each other—everyone is competing, because there is a shortage of provision. If we move to a position of collaboration and start working together, pooling resources and working together with our resources, we will definitely go some way to solving the problems that we face in providing the right provision for children.

I think that more work needs to be done in relation to RCCs to explore exactly what problem they will solve. We really need to think strategically about who the children are and what difference this will make to them. Is it going to make the difference that we think, or is there an alternative way to ensure collaboration and regional working?

Q173 **Chair:** Your point about collaboration is interesting. Certainly in my experience, being in a part of the West Midlands that does not always feel like a part of the West Midlands, we often look to Gloucestershire rather than to our neighbours to the North, yet they are in a different region. Sometimes these regions can feel very artificial. Being able to look to work with all your neighbours is sometimes more important than doing things on a regional basis.

Sarah Thomas: Absolutely. The way that neighbouring authorities can work together needs to be looked at and strengthened, and it takes really strong leaders to think, "Actually, we won't be protective of our resources; we'll think about how we are working together and how we can collaborate." That is critical.

Q174 **Mohammad Yasin:** Emily, we heard that adoption can be painful and that adopted children are more likely to be excluded from schools, more likely to have social, emotional, and mental health issues, and more likely to leave school without any qualifications. How big is this problem?

Emily Frith: Yes, absolutely—adopted children have a really difficult start in life. Adoption is for those children who are unable to grow up safely with their birth family. Eight out of 10 adopted young people experienced neglect or abuse before they were adopted. We are talking about children who have had a really challenging start, and then they are unable to grow up with their birth family, so there are all those issues around identity. Out in the wider world there is a myth that adoption is a happy ending. While adoption can be a permanent, stable solution for children, those families and young people need our support throughout their lives in order to combat some of those really challenging early situations.



We are calling for a support plan to be in place for every child, which is reviewed, particularly in the teenage years, when the child reaches secondary school, to provide support around the family so that families can help those young people deal with those challenges, and support within the education system. We need trauma-informed teaching and we need children to have an automatic right to an education, health and care plan assessment. Eight out of 10 adopted young people have special educational needs and disabilities, so it makes sense for them to have an automatic right to an assessment. We need schools to understand the impact of early childhood trauma, so that those children can have the ability to reach their potential and have happy, lifelong futures.

Q175 Mohammad Yasin: We have the national adoption strategy. Is that working? If not, what more can the Government do to improve the emotional and educational outcomes of these children?

Emily Frith: One of the things we are really supportive of is the adoption and special guardianship support fund. It is a lifeline for families, and families who access it tell us in our barometer survey that it really makes a difference. I was speaking to a young person who has had access to that therapy and is now studying art at college. She said that without that therapy she would not have been able to reach where she is today. She still really struggles: she was unable to stay in mainstream school, because she said it was like hell to her. She had a huge amount of issues and that support fund really makes a difference. However, there are issues with the way it is run. There is a bit of a cliff edge every year. We have to campaign for it at every spending review. We need a permanent support fund and permanent access to that specialist support.

There have been really positive changes in the adoption strategy around education, with things like access to pupil premium plus, but we really need a review of that to see whether it is working and whether support is getting to the families who need it. So, yes, there is good progress, but there is more to do.

Q176 Mohammad Yasin: 2023 saw the lowest rate for adoption since 2000, with only 2,960 looked-after children being adopted. What is the reason for that, in your view?

Emily Frith: We would say there is no right number of children who should be adopted; what really matters is the right solution for each child. There are risks around the wider system with the support available. Sarah talked about word of mouth. If we don't get the right support for families we may see fewer people coming forward, particularly in a cost of living crisis; we have seen that that is impacting the number of people coming forward to adopt. That means that children are waiting longer. The average time before a child finds the right family for them is two years and five months. We are seeing waiting times go up, particularly for children in sibling groups, as we have talked about, and children with additional needs. We really need to make sure that the right support is available, so that families are able to come forward and support children and we are able to get children adopted where it is the right plan for them.



Q177 **Mohammad Yasin:** Sarah, is the system working as it is, or should the Government do more to find better alternatives for children in care?

Sarah Thomas: I think we need to improve in a number of areas. Emily talks about the adoptive families. Remember, children who are not adopted end up in long-term foster care. They are in our system until they turn 18. When they turn 18 we provide some level of provision, but it is not properly funded. We really need to look at how long we should care for the children we have removed from their families and raised as our own. Ultimately, that is what we are doing as social workers and social care services. We really need to think about what we would want if these were our children. At the age of 18, and sometimes 16, children are finding themselves with no support network, no adult to care for them, no siblings in their life—and the outcomes are really concerning. We should be able to do better, and we should have our sights on what futures we want for these children and young people. I believe that we really need to start thinking about them all as a group. We need to think about whether they have gone through adoption, whether they are in kinship or whether they are in fostering. These children need alternative outcomes. They should be having better support from us across the board, and we should have a focus on what they need and what we put into the system to meet those needs.

Q178 **Mohammad Yasin:** What is the rate of forced adoption, where a child is taken away from the parents without their consent, and what problems are related to that?

Emily Frith: I am glad you asked that question, because I think it is an area of confusion at the moment. Nearly all adoptions nowadays happen where it is really unsafe for a child to grow up with any member of their birth family. That is why they are adopted. It is something that is really unfortunate. We would say that where a child can be supported to stay in their birth family, that is absolutely right, but there will be some children for whom it is not safe. Those children will get a permanent, stable solution through adoption, but support then needs to be provided, because even though they are not growing up in the care system, the decision has been taken for this child to be adopted. There is a responsibility on us as a society to support those children as they grow up.

Historical forced adoption is a term that refers to when, in the '50s, '60s and '70s, unmarried mothers were coerced into giving up their babies. That was an inhumane practice and we as a charity have called for an apology from the Government, as has been done in Wales, to say that that practice was completely wrong. What that has shown is that anyone who is adopted needs support throughout their lives. We have called for therapy where it is needed and peer support for adult adoptees—anyone who is an adopted adult, including those from the forced adoption era.

Q179 **Anna Firth:** My question is also to you, Emily. Do you think that the Government's intervention strategy—Stable Homes, Built on Love—includes enough measures for the adoption system?



Emily Frith: It was slightly unfortunate timing in that we had a national adoption strategy and then quite quickly afterwards we had Stable Homes, Built on Love, which was, again, slightly unfortunate timing, coming towards the end of a Parliament. Looking forward, we need to think about the whole system. In Stable Homes, there are some measures that don't include adopted young people as care experienced. We would like to see a wider definition of "care experienced" that includes anyone who is growing up outside of their birth parents. That includes informal kinship care as well as adopted young people. As we have talked about a lot, these are children who are not necessarily going to have the same outcomes as their peers without the right support in place. We would like to see some of the measures in Stable Homes extended to adopted children and young people, and more collaboration between the two strategies.

Q180 **Anna Firth:** That is very helpful. What more do you think can be done to deal with the waiting times and decrease them for children waiting to be adopted? It is very troubling to see that those waiting times have increased in the last few years.

Emily Frith: Yes, and we are now starting to see a reduction in the number of adopters coming forward. That is absolutely the issue to think about: why are children for whom adoption has been found to be the right support waiting longer? It tends to be particular groups of young people. We are looking at sibling groups, children with disabilities, older children and black children particularly. We need to make sure that recruitment strategies are targeting people who will come forward. We want to see a more diverse range of adopters coming forward, particularly black adopters, who are able to adopt children with the same heritage and help bring them up with the understanding of that heritage. That is really important.

Overall, it is really important to make sure that when a family comes forward to adopt, they know that they will get the right support. If a child has additional needs, unfortunately time and again I talk to adopters who feel like the biggest challenge for them is fighting the system to get the support their child needs. That is not right. One of the young people in our advisory group had 15 different homes before he was adopted at the age of three, and his parents have had to fight for the right support for him in education. When he hit secondary school, he could not leave his room. The trauma caught up with him and his parents were fighting to get the right support. He said, "What I would have liked is just to have a room in school where I could go to calm down, and not to have that confused with the idea of shutting me in a closet," which is what happened. We need a system that supports these young people through their families and in education. Unfortunately, at the moment that is just not happening.

Q181 **Anna Firth:** To come back to your first point about needing to diversify and encourage more families from other ethnic groups to come forward, how do you think we can do that?

Emily Frith: Some really good work is being done out there. There is a project in London called the Black Adoption Project, and the national



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adoption recruitment steering group is really looking at this. There are things we can do across different sectors as well. There is really good work in kinship care from certain communities, and we need to think about this in foster care as well, because it is really important for a young person to understand their heritage and identity. So we need to make sure that the system is welcoming of all adopters and that additional barriers are not in place for certain groups of adopters. We have not got that right yet, and much more could be done.

Q182 Caroline Ansell: Lucy, we are going to focus a little on kinship care. You touched on some of the advantages earlier in the session. You talked about the prior relationship, which of course is very important. You talked about the continuity; there aren't the same cliff edges. In relation to some of the other issues that have been raised, is one of the advantages of kinship care about geography? Are you more likely to be closer to other family members, your schooling and other structures in your life? Is being around siblings another potential advantage? Waiting times were previously mentioned. Some of the kinship carers in my constituency say that waiting time clearly wasn't an issue when they got the call at 2 am and the social worker arrived with the child, as happens in those really distressing situations. So will you talk about some of the wider advantages?

Dr Peake: It is really important to recognise that kinship care is quite different from fostering and adoption. People do not put themselves forward, go on training and go through some form of matching process. It is often in response to a crisis. They do get that call and they do step up at whatever time of day.

You are right about geography: you are more likely to remain in the place where you are living. And I know of kinship carers who will drive quite a long way to make sure that the child goes to the same school, because they have experienced so much trauma in being separated from, maybe, mum that the kinship carer thinks one bit of stability in life is really important. So they will spend every last penny they have on driving to school. I knew of a kinship carer who was so impoverished by that that she used to sit in her car all day while the child was at school, but that was so important.

I did want to come back on the issue of siblings. Kinship carers are far more likely to try to keep siblings together. What we are really concerned about is, in our last survey, the number of kinship carers who said they wanted to do that but they were not able to, because of financial pressure and also the constant fight of trying to get support for their children. So we know that sometimes siblings have been split up: babies have been adopted and older brothers and sisters are in the care system.

Kinship carers are often playing that thing in their minds, "Maybe it would be better for my child to go a different route," because by going a different route, the child is eligible for different support. That is the real issue in the system as it is structured at the moment. We should be making sure, whatever the decision, that we are trying to keep siblings together. We



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should be making sure that whoever the carer is, they are able to access the support they need. I think we would all talk about one of the biggest challenges being trying to get the support for the children—fighting constantly in a system that is not very well designed.

Q183 Caroline Ansell: That touches on the follow-up questions I wanted to ask about the main issues—those perverse incentives that you spoke about. There is potentially a very different level of support, financial and otherwise, between the formal and the informal kinship care settings. Are you able to speak any more about that and also about guardianship orders and that process?

Dr Peake: We do not have great data about kinship care. The census from 2021 tells us that there are about 130,000 children in kinship care in England, so it is by far the biggest group of children; I think the number is three times more than in mainstream foster care. We think that, within that group, 10% are in kinship foster care. Those kinship carers and their children will be eligible for all the same support as any other child in the care system or foster carer.

What we know about the other group is that there is a growing number with a special guardianship order. More children now leave the care system on a special guardianship order than on an adoption order. That has been happening for a few years now, but the data is not very well linked; there is some Department for Education data and some MoJ data. As part of the strategy, the Department for Education is doing a data-linking project to try to look more at who those children are, what decisions are being made about a legal order and why.

If we roll back from that group, there is this much larger group with informal arrangements. That is where the family has stepped up on their own and taken on the child, or perhaps because of circumstance, the way that they have stepped up has led to them being told that it is a private arrangement. That could be that a teacher makes a call, or a police officer makes a call, and the carer runs to that child as quickly as they can, for all the reasons you describe, and they are told, “Well, social workers were not involved. That is a private arrangement, why you are asking for any help?” We have a huge group of kinship carers in that bracket—we think the majority are there. That matters because in kinship care, legal order determines access to support. Most people do not have a legal order that is going to give them the right to a financial allowance and the right to get their child therapeutic support or additional educational support if they need it. Even where they might have a special guardianship order, for example, it depends on whether the child has previously been in the looked-after system. It is a really complicated system to navigate.

Q184 Chair: On that, do you have any figures for what proportion of the children in kinship care have been in the looked-after system? I presume it is a minority. Do you have any more detailed breakdown?

Dr Peake: The data is not good enough at the moment. The Department’s data project will be really important. It has acknowledged that one of the



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problems is that we do not have good data. We have good data about the group who are in the fostering system. We have some data about the group who have special guardianship orders, but that depends on whether they go through what is called a public or private law route. Those routes determine access to support. It is quite a confused picture. Based on the families we work with, we find that most carers will say, "If I had not stepped in, the child would have gone into care." They are definitely diverting children from the care system, but there is also that group who are exiting the care system.

There is potential for kinship carers to look at whether they can divert, but also potential for some children who are in the care system to move into another form of kinship care. If we supported special guardianship better, could some of those children who are still in the fostering space move into well-supported special guardianship? Their carers have said, "I am going to care for this child until they are 18 and beyond. This is a permanent arrangement." If it is better for the child to move there, why would we have a system that is holding those children in the care system because that is the only way we can access support for them?

Q185 Caroline Ansell: Understood. Is there a tension here? You described the motivation of kinship carers moving forward, and it is of a different nature. They are not likely to want to subscribe to being on a register. You talked about training. Is there a tension between more formal recognition and officialdom moving into that very domestic scene, and also providing the very necessary support? My sense is that if we could better support kinship care, that would be a very significant move on some of the recruitment issues that we have more widely in the system. Every child has a family, so I sense there is an untapped potential there, if we could better support families to support the children within.

Dr Peake: We go back to the points that were made by my colleagues. We have to make the best decisions for each child. For some children, it will be the right decision that they are adopted or go into foster care. For the vast majority, we think it is right that they stay within their family. That is what Stable Homes is saying about this untapped potential within family networks. Certainly, within some local authorities where they are investing long term in supporting kinship carers, we can see that their numbers of children in care are falling, because they are saying long term to their kinship carers, "We will support you. If you need financial support, we are here for you. If your children need additional support as they grow up, it will be available."

At the moment, there is a legacy issue within kinship care, where most kinship carers have struggled to get any support whatsoever. As we move forward with the strategy, we need to rebuild the trust among families that if they do step forward and take a special guardianship order or a different order because that is right for their child, they will still have access to the support.

We talked about word of mouth earlier. There are many Facebook groups where kinship carers are advising each other to become foster carers, and



you can understand why. What is special about family is that it is not regulated—you do not have to keep records, you do not have to get authority from social workers if the child wants to go on a sleepover. I know that should not always happen in fostering, but family is different. What is different about kinship care is that it is family; it is what we would want for most of our children. We need to find the space that safeguards children appropriately, but gives those families access to the support that they and their children need.

Q186 Caroline Ansell: You talked about economic circumstances. It is very costly and some kinship carers have had to give up employment altogether, overnight. Presumably you would look to see some greater protections to recognise that role, even if kinship carers do not want to recognise themselves as that sort of formal kinship carer? That is often the case in carers—they describe themselves as husbands and wives, or family, rather than that carer role. There are some moves, presumably, you would like to see being formalised?

Dr Peake: Financial hardship is a defining characteristic of kinship care. The Government's own strategy quotes the 2021 census: 67% of children in kinship care are in a deprived household. We would like to see the introduction of an allowance that is on par with that for fostering. Foster carers are given that allowance to cover the cost of raising someone else's child. We think that is the right thing to do for kinship carers as well; they have stepped in to raise someone else's child.

The other thing that we are campaigning for is parity with adoption leave. Eight in 10 kinship carers say they either give up work or they reduce their hours when they take on the child. These are typically women, and they are often leaving the labour market for the second time—they have raised their own children already. They are forced to turn to the benefits system.

I have carers ringing in my ears all the time who will say I would not change that for the world, I did that because I wanted to do it, but I have impoverished myself, today, tomorrow and forever. It is not just their income now that they are struggling around; it is that fear about their pension; the fear about living the rest of their life relying on the benefits system, when they had been people who were working, were saving, were doing everything that they were supposed to do.

So I think the Government need to go further on both of those. They have introduced a pathfinder, so there will be eight local authorities where they will be pilots of allowances. Again, eligibility is an issue. You have to be a special guardian and the child has to be previously looked after.

Q187 Chair: So a very small subset?

Dr Peake: Very, very small. You can imagine if you are one of those kinship carers in one of those local authorities who is not eligible, or you are in the neighbouring local authority—you just live over the road—that is a really impossible situation. We have kinship carers contacting our advice service all the time where their primary issue will be money—they just do not have enough money. They are turning to food banks; they come to us



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wanting us to help them get grants for beds for their children. There is no parity across most kinship carers and fostering. That is why there is this perverse incentive for some of our families to say, actually, to do this I need to become a foster carer.

Q188 Chair: You mentioned some local authorities supporting kinship carers better than others. Are there some good examples you can give the Committee of local authorities that are doing this most effectively?

Dr Peake: Leeds City Council has invested in family for a long time. They have a view where they say: what is it that this family needs to support this child? It is a really empowering message. They have had a kinship care team for a long time, and they have better financial support than most places.

There are a lot of other local authorities that are starting to invest in kinship care. We are working with Bromley, Nottinghamshire, for example, where they are commissioning our Kinship Connected programme. They can see by bringing the voluntary sector into their transformation journey, they can build trust with the families, because we provide support. We develop peer-support groups with them. We change the relationship between them and their kinship carers, so there is more of a trusting relationship.

I think that is all about those local authorities saying kinship care is a key pillar. It is like the national strategy saying if we can keep more children in well supported kinship care, that does reduce the pressure on foster care and residential care. If we do not need social workers to be working with those children who have moved out of kinship foster care into special guardianship, there is more social worker time to be doing other things, where that time is really needed. I think increasingly local authorities are seeing that it makes sense to invest in well-supported kinship care.

Q189 Vicky Ford: Thank you. So what is good about the Government championing kinship care strategy?

Dr Peake: The first thing is they recognised kinship carers. They deserve that recognition. They are caring for the most children, they are generally doing a phenomenal job despite not getting support. It has been a really key message to them to say thank you, we see you, and we want to improve support. The other thing it does, there is a good problem diagnosis there. The Government has not shied away from acknowledging some of the issues. They are quoting 67% of children in kinship care in a deprived household and they are setting out a vision to say that despite all those problems, we think more children can grow up in well-supported kinship care.

The issue is that there is no investment that matches that ambition. We are at the end of a spending review period, so we have low investment, time-limited investment. They have not grasped their own ambition, and set out a clear, long-term road map with long-term investment to realise that. There is a danger right now that there is a shift towards placing more



children into kinship care before that system has been developed, before that support exists. There is no comprehensive support system.

Q190 Vicky Ford: We will come on to what else needs to happen in a minute, but I wanted to make sure we got what was good on there. Looking at what other measures could happen, I want to talk about kinship leave. Someone suggested it should be called kinship break, that has absolutely raised every hackle down my back. Having had three children, maternity leave is not a break, and it is not a break if somebody else's child arrives in crisis in the middle of the night. I have had many kinship carers tell me that when they have taken a child in crisis, which it usually is, they have had to give up their job because they did not have that legal right to take a break. You mention eight out of 10. Is that across all kinship carers? I thought that often kinship carers might have retired. How many would it help?

Dr Peake: One thing we recognise is that women are working longer now. If women are expected to work until 67, then actually most people who become kinship carers will still be working age. So there has been a shift. Although most kinship carers are grandparents, they will be in their 40s, 50s, 60s, so they can be all kinds of ages. I think what happens for those giving up work, is it affects them differently depending on their career stage. If you are 22, you have just left university and you become a kinship carer for your siblings, you are not at that critical career-building time. Whereas if you are in your 50s and you leave the labour market, you might just be leaving early and never returning. I think it is important to recognise that it will affect kinship carers in different ways.

Q191 Vicky Ford: Would you suggest it needs something very like the adoption leave rules? Or are there differences?

Dr Peake: We are calling for parity with adoption leave. That feels like the right thing to do, because we have people that are picking up babies and being faced with the choice of either taking their four weeks' leave and then going back to work, while the baby goes into some kind of daycare, or leaving their job. Most kinship carers are leaving their jobs.

Emily Frith: May I just add to that? I completely agree with everything Lucy is saying, but one of the learnings from the adoption leave is that self-employed adopters were left out. I would say absolutely we should make sure that kinship carers and adopters who are self-employed also get access to leave in the same way as maternity leave.

Q192 Vicky Ford: Should it only be for unexpected cases of kinship care? I think it should be for all.

Dr Peake: If you are taking on responsibility for looking after someone else's child, you need time to bond with that child and to settle them. As we have talked about a lot, all of these children have experienced some form of trauma. They have often experienced neglect, abuse and all of kinds of things, and they need to have time with their primary carer.



The other thing is just to acknowledge that there are, for people going through the court process, often lots of meetings and lots of representing yourself in court and preparing for that. It is a really tumultuous time for people. Even those who try to remain in work often just say, "I just can't do this any more. It's not fair to my colleagues. I've explained it to my boss." We have a scheme called "kinship friendly" that is about working with employers to say, "What can you do to support your kinship carers?" Some of that is about providing really good information, because who might you tell when you become a kinship carer? Probably someone at work. It is about providing really clear information so they can get good advice and make informed choices, and it is also about flexibility around leave. At the moment, some employers are doing that in different ways. Some, like B&Q, have matched the adoption leave, which is amazing. Others, like John Lewis Partnership, have said, "We can give a fixed time for people when they need it, and that might be different for different people." But actually, most employers are saying, "We need statutory paid leave for this group." They can see that this group of families are in their workforce and they want to retain their good workers.

Q193 **Vicky Ford:** So having it statutory to match it?

Dr Peake: Statutory would match.

Q194 **Vicky Ford:** That's it—I am mindful of time. Do we need more clarity on international kinship carers? How big an issue is that? Your child was living overseas. It must be a growing issue and the grandchild—

Dr Peake: I think it is an issue for some local authorities, and there is an organisation called CFAB that specialises in that. It is not something that we specialise in; we are much more focused on supporting carers who live in England and Wales.

Q195 **Vicky Ford:** Are there any other things that you think we should be doing urgently, as recommendations from this?

Dr Peake: My recommendation would be to recognise that the kinship care support system does not exist. It is piecemeal, and it is often carers being put into different pots. I would say that this is a brilliant opportunity to think about what this group of unique families needs and to put those things in the right order. At the moment, it is a piecemeal response through the strategy. We need to be thinking: what is the ecosystem that we require to support these families? What is the role of local authorities, the voluntary sector and peer support? What do we need those different actors to do in the future?

Q196 **Vicky Ford:** I am thinking aloud here, but I am not necessarily convinced that children who are with a kinship carer—an aunt, an uncle or a grandparent—as a cohort need the same level of support as children who don't have any of those relatives to fall back on and are either in foster care or children's homes. While I can see that you are fighting to get the level of support for the former cohort, I also think that, if I were a teacher or a social worker, I might want to focus on the latter cohort more—there may be some overlap between the two. I am guessing that



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you are saying, “We need some more support for children who are still with their own families, but not necessarily to all the same levels as those in that latter cohort.”

Dr Peake: I think I would see that as going back to how we framed this discussion at the beginning. It is about what an individual child needs. Every child has gone through different experiences and, irrespective of who their carer is, they might need support. I think we have a system that is making those carers and adoptive parents have to fight for that. Actually, I think we need to take a child—

Vicky Ford: There is pupil premium and other things.

Dr Peake: I would say that actually we should be equalising up for our children in kinship care. Some of them will need more and some will need less, which is true of children in foster care or children who are adopted.

Emily Frith: There is both a moral and an economic case for this. If adopted young people are twice as likely as their peers to be not in education, employment or training, and if we want to meet our educational goals for the whole system or to encourage every child to have that opportunity to thrive, actually investing in the child and their family, whether it is a kinship carer or an adopter, has to make sense economically.

Q197 **Chair:** Or indeed reunification, which Sarah touched on and I know we are going to come to in the next panel.

Emily Frith: Absolutely.

Chair: I will wrap up the panel here. Thank you very much for your evidence today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mary Jackson, CEO, Frontline, Professor Lucille Allain, Co-Chair, Association of Professors of Social Work, and Matt Clayton, Strategic Lead for Children in Care and Care Leavers, Coventry City Council, gave evidence.

Q198 **Chair:** For our second panel, we have Mary Jackson, the chief executive of Frontline; Professor Lucille Allain, co-chair of the Association of Professors of Social Work; and Matt Clayton, the strategic lead for children in care and care leavers at Coventry City Council. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to the Committee today. The Government’s 2023 children’s social care strategy, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, aims to ensure a high-skilled social worker for every child who needs one. Does the strategy sufficiently meet the recruitment and retention needs of the sector?

Professor Allain: Good morning. The strategy offers a number of very helpful approaches to the social work workforce. Acknowledging that there are a range of routes into social work, so there is a mixed economy, we are all on the same mission to work collaboratively to recruit good students who go on to be good social workers. However, data shows that



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there is a great deal of turnover within the social work child and family sector, and social workers are leaving very quickly after being qualified. More focus could be given to considering what additional support is needed for students and newly qualified social workers moving into employment—although Stable Homes does refer to a new workload action group and the early career framework, which I think will strengthen things.

Q199 Chair: Thank you. The Committee is very familiar with the concept of an early career framework from the work we have been doing on teacher recruitment and retention. Of course, some of the same challenges persist in that space. Mary, can I bring you in on this?

Mary Jackson: I completely agree. What we would say at Frontline is that it perhaps doesn't go far enough, certainly in the areas of culture and leadership. I think a lot of the challenges we see day to day, both in developing social workers' practice and encouraging them to innovate and in looking at leadership, is that culture and leadership underpin a lot of the challenges in local authorities. I really welcome the early career framework, especially the opportunity to learn from the education—what has gone well and not so well in that space. But that is the first five years of people's careers, and actually, who we are losing at times are those people who we most need: the ones with more experience. I think it is the opportunities for those people through careers for developing both their practice and their leadership, so that they can do the modelling and the mentoring of the more junior members of the team, but also as a pipeline for future leaders into the system.

In the submission, I think we referenced the fact that we were commissioned to deliver the Pathways programme. We have trained 1,800 managers across the whole of England in different levels of the social work system. That was a two-year project with a possible two-year extension, but we found out last week that the programme is not being extended. That is a really great example of where we think that was very much welcomed by local authorities and very popular, and it was trying to catch people at the first step of their career right through to just prior to director level. More on that space would be what we are campaigning for.

Q200 Chair: We might come back to that point about the rationale for non-extension, but Matt, as a practitioner, you are dealing with the consequences of these programmes. Where do you see this, in terms of the recruitment and retention challenge, and what the strategy does address versus, perhaps, what it might not?

Matt Clayton: I think the strategy is really strong on recruitment, but less strong on retention. I do think that the wider strategy does help retention because, ultimately, a lot of social workers leave the profession because they are not able to practise in the way they want to.

What was shared about culture is really important. In the previous session, we heard that social workers come into the profession because they want to help improve outcomes for children and families. They want

to work to keep families together. They want to help to see young people in care go on to succeed. I think sometimes they become quite demoralised by the system, the culture, and about the opportunity for children to have the right placements. We saw in the news at the weekend some things about unregulated placements. As a social worker, it is really demoralising if you are not able to achieve the outcomes you want. That drives some people out of the profession.

I think the Pathways programme is a good example of trying to build a good culture for children. What I see is social workers staying when they feel they can have manageable work caseloads and make the differences they want to make. When they start to think: "I'm working my guts out and I'm not able to work against this system," that is when people leave.

Obviously, money and pay come into it, but ultimately it is a vocation, so people want to stay in it when they can see that they are making a difference. I think the overall strategy does help with that because it focuses on some of the things that matter for children and families.

Q201 **Chair:** Thank you. What are your views on the recently published national framework for children's social care and whether that goes far enough?

Mary Jackson: It is a baseline. The national framework is a fantastic starting point. A lot of areas, in my opinion, have not had that clarity before. It is starting at a straightforward place and presumably will be built on, but those four outcomes very clearly state the absolutely fundamental baseline of what the expectation is of social workers and other people working with children and families. I think, as with so many of the proposals, the ECF being one of them, the next steps are looking at how it is implemented, and at what pace and scale.

Chair: Implementation is really key.

Mary Jackson: 100%.

Q202 **Chair:** Any further views on that, Professor Allain?

Professor Allain: I would agree that it is incredibly important that the workforce is equipped and effective, and the principles set out in the national framework can be met by the workforce—responding to the wishes and feelings of children, and supporting children who are looked after and subject to child protection plans. Also important are the consideration of equality and diversity, and ensuring that cultural practices are understood and responded to by the social workers who are working with families, and that that is a clear part of it.

Q203 **Chair:** There was some criticism. I think the British Association of Social Workers criticised the framework for not referencing a commitment to anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory practice. Is that a concern that you share?

Dr Allain: I think that point could have been identified and focused on a little more, but many of the points that are made regarding children being raised within their families, children being raised within their communities,

and children's welfare being paramount are part of the broader dialogue regarding a focus on the importance of anti-racist and culturally sensitive practice. If that could have been stated a little more clearly, I think that would have been helpful.

Q204 **Chair:** Anything to add, Matt?

Matt Clayton: Yes, I think overall the framework is really helpful. I really like the emphasis on helping families stay together—the importance of family networks. We see the power of family group conferencing, the work Family Rights Group have done over recent years, as well as the introduction of Lifelong Links across the country and the difference that makes. That emphasis on loving relationships for children is so important. With lots of experience with young people, you see the importance of those relationships—whether it is with birth family, a teacher or a foster carer. Actually building and maintaining those relationships is so fundamental.

What is disappointing, I would say, is that you have got a really strong framework, and then a scorecard that has been produced alongside it, which kind of measures what has already been measured. The scorecard, and what local authorities are actually being measured on, does not reflect the strengths of the framework—so there could be further improvement there.

Q205 **Chair:** Okay. That is an interesting point; thank you. Your point about the importance of stability and certainty for children also feeds in to why it is so important to improve retention for social workers and so on. A complaint that we get from people who are engaging with children's services in my neck of the woods is that they often find they are dealing with a different person—in fact, in almost every meeting. It is that issue of trying to build continuity and trust, which is so important.

Q206 **Mrs Drummond:** Going into a bit more detail about recruitment and retention—which is important, given that some 83% of councils report that they are having difficulty in recruiting—what would you suggest to improve the recruitment of social workers?

Mary Jackson: I think Matt touched on it perfectly—that is, what people come into the profession to do. So, it is harnessing that, but also recognising why people leave, which is that the culture and conditions in which they work don't enable them to do the work with children and families that they started or wanted to come in to do. We have done a lot of work around attraction, prior to recruitment. At Frontline we have 10 applicants for each of our places on the programme. This year it is 14 applicants. It is about harnessing that potential and the opportunity and energy behind a great social worker, and the power they can have in the lives of children and families—perhaps with a national campaign. I know this has been raised on multiple occasions previously.

My view is that social work is such a private endeavour: it happens behind closed doors. The only time we hear about it—probably rightly in some cases, given that it is private—is when something goes wrong. Compare

that with teaching, where we all have contact with education and teachers, and other more generic council offers, which get a lot of the retention notice because the whole public is behind them. The need to focus a little bit on social work and the whys and hows, as well as the successes, might mean that you would be able to tap into a whole group of young people, all those leaving from different careers, who are a larger part of our applicants for the Frontline programme. We have more applications from career changers than from new graduates, so there is a wider market. Something to attract them would be brilliant.

Q207 Mrs Drummond: Tim Loughton and I worked on this—you may have read about our findings—though it is nearly 20 years ago now, which is shocking. One of the things we suggested was to have a television programme, or something like that, which would show how it worked.

Mary Jackson: I met Tim in Hackney at the time to discuss that very project.

Q208 Mrs Drummond: Some of our recommendations have been adopted, which was really good. I have been excited about that, because he made me write it—I had to do all the hard work.

On the early careers framework which is coming into place, do you think that will help with retention?

Mary Jackson: I think possibly, exactly as Lucille said, in that first five years. There is something about knowing the trajectory—that is, what is on offer for the first five years of social workers' careers. Some 83% of people who have completed post-programme are still in practice. It is back to the implementation: if it is done well, absolutely, it could make a real difference. I really welcome that structure and focus for new starters in the profession. It is not an easy profession to navigate. It is not just the work, but the culture in local authorities that makes it really challenging. I hope that will send a signal about the support that people will gather across the first five years of their career.

Q209 Mrs Drummond: One of the recommendations we made, nearly 20 years ago, was that there be a career pathway for people to stay on the frontline as opposed to going into management, which was the only way they were going to get promoted or get more money. Is that still the case?

Mary Jackson: It is absolutely still the case. I think I am going to say the word "leadership" 200 times in this conversation. Essentially, a strong leader will recognise that. I know lots of local authorities where there are opportunities to become a consultant social worker, so that you are the guide and steerer to those less experienced, so that you can maintain experience and knowledge in practice. The upshot is that not every great social worker is a great manager, so multiple paths would be ideal.



Q210 **Mrs Drummond:** As far as pay goes, is that an issue? They are saying that they haven't had pay growth.

Mary Jackson: Funding full stop is challenging. I am sure that you have heard that in lots of these sessions previously. Again, the leaders who recognise the importance of that would make the pay commensurate. As part of the Frontline programme, the structure requires one quite experienced social worker to look after four or five trainees, for want of a better expression. We strongly advise local authorities to pitch those consultants alongside a team manager salary. Very few do. The purse strings will absolutely be dictating some of these decisions.

Q211 **Mrs Drummond:** Has anyone else got views on how we improve retention and recruitment?

Matt Clayton: Some of what has been shared already has really helped. The public image of what a social worker is—that is why a national campaign would be really helpful.

I think back to my own journey. When I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I didn't have any idea what a social worker was. I just thought they were someone that stole babies. I just had the luck of chatting to a family friend who was a social worker and worked with young people in the criminal justice system. I never even knew that was a possibility. I went that route because I enjoyed doing voluntary youth work at the time. That was a lucky conversation.

I don't think people really understand social work as a profession, and the media image of it is really just when things go wrong. One of the reasons that in Coventry we took part in the "Kids" TV documentary was to promote that social work can do some amazing things. Inspiring people, so that this is a profession that they want to go into—anything that can be done around that—would be really helpful.

Q212 **Mrs Drummond:** Continuing professional development—is that easy to access? Or does the nature of the work mean that you don't have time to do it and so on? Is that the same as in the teaching profession—it is quite hard to find the time?

Professor Allain: On continuing professional development and leadership, the early career framework offers that in the five years. I agree that it is a really positive thing. That is also the case with having specialist teaching on subjects that may be slightly outside child and family social work—perhaps in relation to addictions, mental health or leadership—and understanding those particular specialist areas. Also, there is developing leadership skills in therapeutic practice, working in terms of trauma.

Thinking about the early career framework, which I think will be part of the discussion, one of the things is how to deliver excellence for children and families in a caseload model that is more manageable. A number of child and family social workers say that it can be extremely challenging to do that.



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Q213 Mrs Drummond: One of the things they complain about is the amount of bureaucracy. How can you cut down on that when obviously you have to provide evidence for all sorts of things? Has anyone looked at how to improve that side of it?

Matt Clayton: There is some interesting innovation going on in the sector. We have been exploring the use of AI recently in Coventry. That is one of the things that we are starting to pilot—to do smart things like take case notes and put them into chronologies automatically, to try and reduce some of that bureaucracy.

Ultimately, we want our social workers to be spending as much time as possible with children and families, so that is always what we are working on. There are better systems than there were five or 10 years ago and it is improving, but there is still a long way to go.

One of the challenges is around, what do you need to do? I often think that the whole social work system is a very bureaucratic system and actually that is not always right for children and families. It is really hard to get that balance, because you need the right checks and safeguards, but I often think that, if you are a 15-year-old looked-after child sitting in a room of professionals for a looked-after review, discussing your whole life, that is not a normal childhood experience either.

I think sometimes we put so much bureaucracy on them. We ask, “Why hasn’t this child had their annual health assessment?” but what other 15-year-old has an annual health assessment? They go to the doctors when their carer takes them. Can we trust our foster carers more to make those decisions for children? I do think we overregulate the sector sometimes, which makes it quite hard.

Mary Jackson: There is a whole sway around the suggestion that process and procedure keeps children safe, which I think is hardwired into the system at the moment. We are trying to move to a much more relational system; I think all local authorities, or certainly the vast majority, recognise that that is the best and has the best evidence base for bringing good outcomes for children and families. Yet we are stuck in this machine.

I have a great example that I heard about last week. There is an initiative around encouraging people to foster or support by taking children for weekends. That is an innovation that we are supporting and is being developed and piloted in two local authorities. One of them gave me an example of going into an office, having a DBS check on screen, having it printed out, having it faxed, having it printed and having the physical copy taken to another office where half of the same process happened again. It is so far away, as are the IT systems—yes, they are way better than they were, but not compared with where we are in the world generally.

There is a great initiative in North Yorkshire at the moment, where AI is being used to identify people of support around a young person, which with previous files would not have been pulled together into a map and a network. However, those ideas are few and far between, and as for that



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sense of a person-centred, multi-agency IT system that police could log into and see things, I do not understand why we have not cracked that nut yet. It just feels so logical and essential. Obviously, it is not easy, because it has not happened, although people have been trying, but that would be an amazing step forward.

Q214 **Mrs Drummond:** There is always that block of GDPR, which is ridiculous, because it blocks a lot of things like that.

Mary Jackson: Yes.

Q215 **Chair:** To come back to the issue of the funding of the Frontline programme, it is about developing leadership, better culture, and so on and so forth. This is not something that has been made in any great announcement, but I was alerted to it before this meeting. Is it planned to be replaced with something else? Is it planned to be out for commissioning? Is it simply that it has run for two years, and that is it?

Mary Jackson: I guess I should clarify. It is not the Frontline programme. Obviously, the Frontline programme brings 500 new graduates into the profession every year, and we have that contract until 2026, with a possible extension for three further years, so hopefully that will not be going anywhere. On the Pathways programme, the Government have funded some form of leadership development since 2015. In 2015, we won the contract to deliver the Firstline programme, which was the programme for team managers. We then recognised that there was not anything for the next level up, so through philanthropic income we funded another programme called Headline—not very creative with the names—and the idea was that we could test and make a case for the need at that level, too.

After Headline, the Pathways programme contract was out for tender. We were out in the two middle spaces, but the contract included two more levels—the first level and the next level up—and we won that contract, which was for two years, plus a two-year extension. We had been given all the signals that the extension was going to come through. We were waiting for signing—we had been waiting for it since December—and then, with real surprise, we found out a week and a half ago that funding had been pulled. You might not even know that yet. We are telling local authorities today.

My sense is that that will not be popular, because it has been very welcome. We paid a proportion with Firstline local authorities, because in Frontline we think there is something about skin in the game and that sense of local authorities having some involvement. Local authorities pay about a third of that cost per person. The Pathways programme, the DfE was completely clear, had to be fully funded, so local authorities get that entirely free—it is available, and we work with all but 10 local authorities in the country.

Q216 **Chair:** From a local authority perspective, presumably that is welcome, if the DfE is standing behind it.



Matt Clayton: What is also welcome is that it was a national programme. Several managers who report to me, practitioners who have gone on the course, have found the sessions really useful. They have had mentoring by senior leaders and they have gone to visit other authorities doing well. I have seen improvements in practice, and people are excited about doing the programme, so this will be a bit of a kick in the teeth to the profession. It feels as if nothing is really given time to happen: we have a two-year programme, which is just starting to embed, and then it is, "Oh, we'll try something else", and that is difficult.

Chair: It is the certainty and length, the time for these things to bed in. That is something we might want to raise with the Department, when we have the opportunity. Thank you for explaining that and setting it in context. I apologise if I inadvertently implied that other aspects of what you do might be affected. I now bring in Nick Fletcher.

Q217 **Nick Fletcher:** I have to talk about agency social workers. The rise in their use between 2022 and 2023 was 6.1%, so I want your thoughts on the use of them. What can we do about it—good, bad, indifferent—and why have we ended up in this position? I will start with Mary.

Mary Jackson: This feels like an age-old problem. I absolutely accept that it has got worse, but again it feels like we have another of those problems that we have not resolved over many years. I have been working in local authorities for 20 years, and there was talk of a price cap when I first started. For me, it feels as if there is something about people not wanting to work permanently in local authorities, because the culture, leadership and structures do not enable them to do the work that they want to do. That is a bit simplistic—there will be other reasons as well, including financially motivated reasons. My nervousness about price caps or bands is about the roles played in looking after children and families in the system. We have a dearth—we have newly qualified, but we do not have experienced people. I do not have a winning answer on this one, but my nervousness about price cap or any kinds of universal changes is that they might hamstring local authorities more than currently.

Q218 **Nick Fletcher:** There is a social worker assigned to a family over a set period of time. Does the use of agencies mean that you can end up with different social workers going to different people?

Mary Jackson: 100%. I have worked in authorities where agency workers are used. It is entirely down to how the local authority wants to set itself up, so it goes back to that leadership point. I have worked in local authorities where fantastic people work through agencies. They are known and have stayed with the organisation for four years. Everyone bends over backwards to try and keep them. It goes right through to, "I don't like it here, so here is my week's notice. I'm off." That is the worst of those conditions.

The flipside is that they do not get holiday pay. There is the whole commercial interest and they are not part of the workforce. Things might have changed since I worked in local authorities, but when I did, no local



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authority offered training. CPD was not on offer to agency workers. There is almost this “othering” that happens, but the best local authorities bring the people who are going to stick around for a long time and do great work and include them as part of the workforce, and then try to convince them to join permanently.

Q219 **Nick Fletcher:** That happens in every single industry. I can understand the difficulties. Matt, would you like to add anything?

Matt Clayton: For me, there is obviously a role for agency workers. We have reduced our number, but when we had maternity vacancies, agency workers could come in and fill an important role. I think two things have significantly changed over the last few years. First, people are going to work for agencies a lot earlier. Often, we get CVs from agency workers that are basically just newly qualified social workers. I find that concerning because they have not had the time and investment in a local authority with a CPD to get to a level that you need to be at to come in. The expectations on agency workers are quite high because they are paid a premium and often come in to cover work. We invest in them in training, but we would not expect to treat them like a newly qualified social worker and give them the protections that a newly qualified social worker has, so that is concerning.

The other thing is the use of project teams. That has become really concerning. Some private companies have hoovered up a sector of the market. You might need a couple of agency workers to cover some roles, but all you can get is a project team to come in, with management costs et cetera, and you are faced with that dilemma in a local authority role. We only needed two or three social workers, but do we need to bring in this project team because that is the only way we can get the staff we need to deliver a service to children? That has been a fairly new development in the market over the last few years. It all comes back to the shortage of social workers in the market. It forces people to make decisions that maybe they are not comfortable with as local authorities to make sure that families and children still get the service they need.

Professor Allain: To follow on from Matt’s point about newly qualified social workers and students going into agency work quite early, we say to our students: “We really recommend that you do not do that. Go to a local authority, complete your assessed and supported year in employment”—soon it will be the ECF—“and become part of the workforce, the profession. You have all the rights and the training.” It would be helpful if we did a campaign about social work recruitment and included messages like that around the importance of newly qualified social workers coming into local authorities and learning how to be a social worker in practice. As I say, I hope the ECF builds that strong model where workers will feel happy to do that.

Q220 **Nick Fletcher:** Mary, you have stated that “local authority culture and leadership” must be changed in order for Government reforms to be effective. What changes would you make?



Mary Jackson: I think back to the principle around removing some of the process, bureaucracy and structural old schoolness. When leadership is done really well it is very relational. At the moment, what we sometimes see is those directors and, on the next level down, practice leaders. The best practice leader and director combinations between them understand the children in their borough, council or county and their needs, and keep close to those 20 to 30—whichever number it is—really high-risk kids, making sure their workers understand what is going on with those families. The directors I am most impressed by still see and work with families and mentor and model social workers; they are close to the work. At the same time, they are sitting at the table alongside the chief exec and are able to petition for the voices of children to be on par with the voices of those needing their bins collected. The very structure of local authorities can sometimes get in the way of what the director will be holding as absolutely dear and central—their primary purpose.

I know lots of work has been done around what sort of different system might be in place; again, I do not have an answer. I know the trust system has worked effectively sometimes, and not so effectively at other times. It goes back to the fact that people do not vote for a great child protection service—they vote for good services across a local authority. There is something about the structure getting in the way of that culture. It goes back to the incentives we heard about in the previous session. I know that social workers get a bad rap, and a lot of our work is to try to stop them getting that bad rap. Exactly as both Lucille and Matt have said, people go into the profession to make a difference; they will only not be working in that way because of the structure in the local authority—how many times they have to visit a child by x date, having to complete forms and so on. That will be what gets in the way of social workers doing the work they want to do. It goes all the way up.

Nick Fletcher: It is relational, obviously, if you have a child in front of you. You mentioned the other panel talking about when children get to 18, and they are just—it would break your heart. I am not a foster parent, but I couldn't just say, "Right, at 18, you're gone." I just couldn't do it; I know I couldn't. I would have to be careful taking one on, because I know it is a lifetime commitment, just as it is with your own children. It's not up until they are 18; it is lifetime. Mine are 25 and still causing me grief.

Caroline Ansell: This is in public!

Q221 **Nick Fletcher:** We have created this tick-box exercise and all these rules and regulations because there are bad actors there as well, aren't there? There are poor social workers and there are difficult children, and if you get both together and there is no tick-box exercise being done, then somebody's job is on the line. It is difficult because it is about human beings. I am not ticking a box for a TV being made; I am ticking a box for a child, aren't I?

Mary Jackson: I completely agree. I think it is a really fine line. I think excellent practitioners walk that line very well, and that is what we should be working towards: developing those excellent practitioners across their



careers and teaching them the things that will enable them to focus on that, and talking to their manager when they are feeling stressed about missing their timelines, and the manager then agreeing on the next steps. It has to be more around that. I think "Stable Homes, Built on Love", and the care review more specifically, describes that well.

Matt Clayton: I think it takes brave leadership as well. It takes leadership that puts the question of, "What is important to this child?" over, "What is the right box to tick?" There are times where we have to make decisions; adoption is a really good example. You can speed up your adoption timescales by ensuring that you only have the children being adopted who are easy to adopt. However, I am ambitious that if a child should be adopted, that is the right thing to do, and if that means our average adoption timescales go up, because we have some complex children who should be adopted, and that is the right thing for them, then that is more important than what our scorecard reads for adoption timescales.

There are so many examples across the system where you have to make decisions that might not hit a box but are the right thing for that child, and I think leaders have to really demonstrate that. That builds a culture where social workers feel more confident that they can make decisions in the best interests of the children, and sometimes you have to do that. Sometimes you have to ask, "How are we going to find the right solution for this child?" Sometimes you are looking at kinship carers, which is another good example, where they might not meet the fostering regulations, and that puts you in a different conundrum: we cannot regulate the placement even though these people really care for this child, and we have to think how we can do that in a system that does not necessarily allow us to do it.

There are some real complexities, but, fundamentally, as leaders, we have to think about how we are making sure that we get the best outcome for each child. We then have to make sure we find a way to make that work, as opposed to just saying, "Well, the system does not allow us to do that, so we are going to do something different for the child that might not be what is best for them because then we hit all the boxes we are meant to hit."

Professor Allain: On the leadership and not focusing on box ticking, we also need leadership that can tolerate social workers not always getting it quite right. There can be some mistakes, and the social worker should be able to approach a senior leader—a practice leader in their borough—and say, "I did this. This is why I did it." Nurturing and welcoming that sort of learning approach would make social workers say, "I want to stay here because I have these leaders around me who are experts and will listen when I'm not sure or don't get it quite right." That is what social workers tell me in the contact that I have with them.

Q222 **Andrew Lewer:** The Fostering Network has told us in evidence that there are often difficulties in the relationships between foster carers and social workers. A cohort of foster workers reported that they feel undervalued. I can tell that you are already aware of that, but how can it be addressed?



I would add to that the distinction between social workers working with agency foster parents and those that the authority recruits in-house.

Mary Jackson: I recognise that. I think, again, it is born out of social workers not necessarily being able to do the job they want and some of that friction, but I also think it goes wider than foster carers. There are tensions across many disciplines. Social workers feel very clearly that they have the young person's interests at heart. They work closely with them and feel that they are theirs, and yet a teacher might feel quite differently about what they see in the classroom, and foster carers have a different perspective.

In the previous session, all the panellists said, "Let's forget about us as a system and think about those people in the middle of it." Every single young person, full stop—particularly those in care and those who have had mental ill health or negative experiences—needs someone around them, and ideally more than one person. Again, the system does not enable that. On supporting foster carers, an example was given of the DBS being passed off. In the previous session, examples were given of family members and kinship carers who feel they need to badger local authorities for support. That all feeds into that fractious relationship.

Underpinning all that is a lack of understanding of each other's perspective, so it goes back—although there must be a structure to put around it—to that relational element of understanding different perspectives and how I can do what supports you. We don't have those conversations because the whole system is built up to be in silos.

Q223 **Andrew Lewer:** Do you think there is an issue of process? There are so many process requirements. Every time something goes wrong, as Lucille touched on, someone—usually in this building—says, "Ah, there must be a new set of forms that we have to fill in and a new set of checks that we have to do." It all becomes about fulfilling the process rather than having the time to talk about the actual emotional and relationship issues.

Mary Jackson: I absolutely agree. That goes back to the Now Foster initiative, which is supporting local authorities to identify new foster carers and almost does the "processy" stuff by stealth. It builds the relationship first and doesn't do any box-ticking stuff in that first conversation, and it gets great results. It is not finding huge numbers of people, but those it finds, it takes through. It is almost having to go around the local authority, because the process is what guides it and leads things. That is just one example.

Matt Clayton: I think that some of what has been picked up on already is key. Some of the things around relationships are key. For foster carers, some of the things are similar to social workers, in terms of having the autonomy, time, space and freedom to make the right decision for the child. Foster carers can get very frustrated that they have to chase social workers to make simple decisions for children, so we should empower foster carers to make some of those decisions. As Mary said, those relationships are key.



The fact that people fulfil slightly different roles can sometimes lead to conflict. For children's social workers, their primary focus is on the child, which means working with the foster carer, but sometimes—I think back to the days when I was a social worker and sometimes I would have a young person telling me how unhappy they were in their foster placement. As a social worker, you have to manage those dynamics and sometimes have difficult conversations.

A good social worker will be able to manage those relationships, but there is always going to be some challenge in there. I think that where it is really difficult is when you have change after change of social worker. When you have that stability of the social worker, it doesn't matter if there is a bit of conflict, because you work that through with the foster carer and the child, and you deal with it, just like any other family situation or relationship would.

What is hard is if you have a social worker who goes in and has a difficult conversation, and then the next week a different social worker comes along, because that is where foster carers get really frustrated. They're like, "I'm here every day with this child and I've got a different person coming in every week telling me something different." If we can stabilise the social work workforce, I think that would deal with a lot of the challenges between social work and foster carers.

Professor Allain: Changes of social workers can be a huge challenge for foster carers, as Matt said. Also, there can be differences in views around care planning. The foster carer may feel that it is better if the child or young person attends a certain activity or is engaged in a certain way, and there can be differences around that.

Yes, there are many process requirements in fostering, and foster carers can sometimes feel that the processes are taking precedent over the work they are doing with the child. We would hope that foster carers do feel valued and can feel valued for the excellent work that they do; that they get the support to attend the fostering panel when their renewal comes up, so that they are able to talk about their successes and the things that have gone well; and that the social worker is alongside them doing that, and is a consistent figure in their life.

Q224 **Andrew Lewer:** To build on that, some of the evidence that we have received has said that working with social workers has made people feel stigmatised rather than being helped and supported. But the NSPCC has also said that social workers sometimes feel that they are able to act only when a situation has become chronic, rather than being able to help and provide assistance earlier.

Again, I wonder whether that is due to resource—that they can only act when a situation becomes chronic because they are chasing their own tail—or is it an issue about the relationship between carers and social workers? I will start with you, Lucille.



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Professor Allain: Are you referring to that in terms of foster carers or working with families—

Q225 **Andrew Lewer:** Yes. Foster carers is the specific focus, but the reflections are helpful.

Professor Allain: In my experience—I am part of a fostering panel—foster carers get really good support at an early stage and have really strong relationships with the local authorities that they work with. There is a reasonably stable workforce and that actually works really well, including for kinship foster carers—connected persons foster carers—who are perhaps grandparents, as a colleague said. There is understanding around that process, but perhaps it isn't like that everywhere and foster carers can feel that they are not getting support early enough to help them.

Q226 **Andrew Lewer:** I think it is about where asking for support makes social workers or the system feel not that someone needs some support, but that if they are asking for support, there is a problem—something is going wrong.

Professor Allain: In the work that I have done and am involved in as a fostering panel member, that has not been my experience. The foster carers respond well and are able to express their needs. There is quite a partnership approach, but there are challenges in the system. A foster carer or a connected persons—kinship—foster carer asking for help should not be seen as, "You're not coping. We need to do something drastic to change that."

I can appreciate that there can be some worries about that, especially if a child has made an allegation, which can make foster carers very, very nervous about what has happened and asking for help in those circumstances. Again, as Matt said, if there is a turnover of social workers, that exacerbates the problem. A stable workforce really does centre the system, and carers, social workers and parents just feel more secure within it.

Andrew Lewer: Matt and Mary, do you have anything critical to add to that, or shall we move on?

Matt Clayton: No, I am happy to move on.

Chair: We come to Caroline, on reunification.

Q227 **Caroline Ansell:** Thank you, Chair. The—I think—final theme and series of questions is around the very important challenge of reunification, which is obviously one of the most important ambitions here. Are the Government doing enough to reunify children with their birth families?

Matt Clayton: I don't think they are, no. I think the recent report from the NSPCC and Action for Children focused on the fact that only about 20% of authorities have separate reunification teams. When you look at how many failings there are in the care system, not to be visiting regularly to see whether the situation has changed for a family, and whether we can



support children to return to their family, is a real failure of the whole system.

Q228 **Caroline Ansell:** So do you think the Government should direct local authorities to establish these discrete and separate teams? Is that the failing you are describing?

Matt Clayton: For me, the Government should direct local authorities for there to be an emphasis of reunification and measure how local authorities are doing around that. On how local authorities do that, it could be a separate team or they could put resource within teams to do it. There are different models, and you could argue that they have differing success. One of the things that the report argues for is more research in that area; as only a small number of local authorities are doing that work, there has not been the level of research to see what works. Does a separate reunification team work better for local authorities in practice?

Q229 **Caroline Ansell:** Is the Government's role there to enable the sharing of good practice?

Matt Clayton: Yes, I think there is a real role for the Government in sharing good practice and putting an emphasis on reunification as well. The Children Act talks about the importance of family and says that children should be with their families wherever possible, but once children are in the care system, historically too often it has been a bit of a tick-box exercise: you have a looked-after child review, and the care plan is to remain in care. Are people really visiting? We know that, by the time they are 25, the primary source of support for 80% of care-experienced young people is their birth family. Well, why are we not thinking differently at an earlier stage?

Q230 **Caroline Ansell:** What would the emphasis look like, if not a tick box about achieving a certain level of reunification? How else might an emphasis manifest itself?

Matt Clayton: To me, there is a need to revisit a situation and reassess family members, and to not think that, because a situation looks like this once, it is always there—to go back. That does not mean a full assessment, but it means saying, "Have we spoken to family members? Has their situation changed? Have we looked at that situation from where it was previously?" There are plenty of situations where older children have been removed and parents now have younger children in their care, but people have not gone back and thought, "Wait a minute: now they are caring for younger children; can they care for their older children?"

Q231 **Caroline Ansell:** Does the local authority not have the autonomy to act in that way, then? Are you saying that national Government would need to mandate this change in procedure?

Matt Clayton: Local authorities do have the autonomy to do that. We have done a lot of that in Coventry and have been quite successful, but that has taken us going and doing it and changing the approach. It takes a bit of a push, in terms of a policy steer. We have done it through an investor save-type argument, but does it need a bit of a kick-start to get it



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going, like the Government releasing funding for things like the friending and mentoring programmes? Is this something that we are going to really push in 20 authorities to see the impact of it, put a bit of money in to start that process, and see whether the success that some local authorities have can be replicated?

Q232 **Caroline Ansell:** Develop the evidence base.

Matt Clayton: Yes, to develop that evidence base. In this climate, it is hard for authorities to go, "We are going to invest a bit, because we think we can have results." It probably needs that push.

Mary Jackson: I absolutely agree. What we are talking about is a giant liner—that is the overused analogy. We are trying to change the way a whole system, which is very complex and has lots of moving parts, thinks. When you are changing a culture, there has to be an element of carrot and stick, doesn't there? It is a nuanced balance, but I think we need the incentives and then examples of where it has worked more effectively, what went wrong and what got in the way.

Regional variances are really relevant here: London has lower rates of children in care per 10,000 than other parts of the country. More could be done, but I think it is absolutely within the local authority's gift, as is a lot of this stuff. I am sure you have heard in lots of previous sessions that local authorities do not feel that they have any wriggle room with budgets at the moment—it is really stripped bare. That will absolutely be making it more complicated.

Q233 **Caroline Ansell:** Their constraint is financial rather than policy? Rather than direction and shaping the service, it is just financial?

Mary Jackson: Yes, I think so. Financial and also that sense of, "This is how we have done it, and it makes me nervous to think about taking that away." There are some things around the cultural shift, where the general sense will be that it would be unsafe to do lots of stuff that it really would not be unsafe to do. It is that kind of sense.

Matt Clayton: I think the partnership stuff is key to that as well. When we started our reunification journey in Coventry, one of the real challenges was working with police—health colleagues too, but particularly police—around some of these young people. They are young people who have maybe moved out of area to be in expensive residential placements. Police were quite nervous about them coming back into the city. What if there are missing episodes? It really took a bit of a partnership approach, and that sort of understanding being not just in children's services, but across the public sector. With Stable Homes, Built on Love, we want children to be with their families wherever possible, and that partnership approach is key.

Q234 **Caroline Ansell:** Lucille, the same question.

Professor Allain: I agree that it is really important to develop the evidence base and listen to the learning that Matt has talked about around



partnership working. We also need to think about the child or young person, their legal status, their networks, and how it might feel to them that this is being considered or approached. Lots of work is needed, as Matt has done, to inform local authorities about how to do that and approach it. As Mary said, I am sure they would be quite nervous about going into something without really exploring each step that they have to go through.

Q235 Caroline Ansell: That was obviously the role of national Government; I am going to move to local government. On the specific role of the social worker or social work team, when it comes to this very important time, how do you see that playing out in practice, particularly in the context where you are describing not the most stable workforce around these very key moments? What is the role for the social worker or team?

Matt Clayton: I think the role of the social worker or team is crucial. Interestingly, since we have had the reunification project, we have had no turnover of staff in that team, which I think shows something about it being an area where people want to work, and they are being allowed to do the work. They have got quite small, protected caseloads and are given the time and space to really work with those families. It is not just social workers in that team; we have a mix of professionals in it. I think it is quite important that there are people with different skillsets. We have some therapeutic practitioners within that team as well.

One of the big things we say about our reunification project is, "This team is with you for as long as you need it." That is really important. These are children who ultimately, if they had not gone back to their parents' care, we would have been paying for placements until they were 18 and would have been supported as care leavers to 25. These families and these children both need to learn to trust one another again, but also trust us as children's services. We are really clear in saying, "We will be with you for as long as it takes."

For some of those families with our reunification project, where we have now stepped back and their care order was revoked, they have had that for a period of time and then phoned up and said, "Can I have a bit of support again?" We say, "Yes, the door is always open. We are here when you need it." Some of them have continued to have very intense support throughout to make that work. For me, that is led by them.

The practitioners all love being part of it because they can see the difference they are making. They have been in court celebrating care orders being revoked, and then going out for celebratory meals with the families and actually seeing the difference that it makes. They are doing the social work that they got into the profession to do. It is just fascinating that the retention has been really high in that area, and it shows that when social workers are doing what they are passionate about, it really helps you to retain good people.

Q236 Caroline Ansell: Fantastic—that is so good to hear. A final question for all the panel: what are the challenges within the reunification process and



how can they be mitigated?

Mary Jackson: I think the multi-agency point is a massively important one, so I am thinking back to that, as well as the idea that the local authority create the conditions for people to practise in a way that is going to both bring about change and help them feel satisfied.

On the wider piece around multi-agency, off the top of my head I can think of West London Zone, SHiFT, Football Beyond Borders and the reunification team who offer lifelong support and are wraparound. That funding probably comes from four different Government Departments, including DfE and the Ministry of Justice. There is something on a broader level about a focus on children specifically from all the different lenses that children are supported through, which I think Matt was describing in a mini version in the reunification team. That would be an absolute game changer, I am sure.

Matt Clayton: For me, it is that we are there for as long as it takes, and we accept that it is not a linear process. For all the families we have seen go through reunification, there have been ups and downs and blips where stuff goes wrong. I can remember powerful examples of families in reunification where things did not go as well as we wanted at times. I got nervous as a manager and thought, "Should we pull the plug on this or not?" It took a couple of brave participants to say, "What did you expect? These families have always failed. They are expecting to fail, and they are expecting us to say that they have failed. We are going to have to work differently and trust them and give them second or third chances, with the safeguards around that." We have to accept that people make mistakes in life. It is how we support them through those mistakes and work with them on their journey that is important.

Q237 **Caroline Ansell:** So you would have a grace period in place?

Matt Clayton: Yes, definitely.

Caroline Ansell: Lucille, you have the last word.

Professor Allain: In terms of following on, it is a focus on creative approaches to working with children and families, and having families, children and young people themselves design how the system works best for them—thinking about their family culture, identity and having the approach that Matt has talked about, where the social workers stay with them. It shows that social workers want to be part of positive change for children and stay with them. Even when things are getting difficult, we do not give up. That is what social work is all about really.

Chair: Very good. That is a positive note on which to finish the session. Thank you very much for all your evidence.



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