

MEMO III

[06/01/07]

Social Care Practices and Independent Fostering Providers in the UK

There is evidence of the more recent non-governmental independent fostering sector providing specialist services where these are absent or under-resourced within Local Authorities (LAs). The established voluntary child-care organisations have long been regarded by LAs as repositories for pioneering new ideas and providing related specialist services, often in the fields of adoption and fostering¹.

In a review of fostering practices in the UK four main factors emerged: 1) the growth of partnership and service level agreements between sectors, 2) the impact upon placement provision and related services from the increased use of information and communication technology, 3) the near absence of independent evaluation of the effectiveness of fostering practice despite a rapid expansion in its service development and investment throughout the UK, and 4) the role and function of the non-governmental fostering in traditional voluntary organisations and the newer independent fostering agencies².

While developing a model of Social Work Practices (SWPs) for looked after children and young people, defining their roles and responsibilities, and identifying appropriate working arrangements between LAs and the SWPs, we may draw some lessons from considering a) how Social Care Practices are to be situated within a myriad of voluntary foster care organisations, independent fostering agencies, Children's Trusts³, and various voluntary child care organisations in Britain which form a somewhat patchy network of services for children up and down the country, b) how these organisations operate in relation to the LAs child care and fostering services, and thus c) what might be the implication for the SWPs.

Somewhere between 11 and 17 percent of looked after children are in placements provided through independent fostering providers (IFPs)⁴. Studies have found that while the number of foster carers listed on IFPs' registers has continued to increase, LAs have continued to experience supply difficulties. These LAs' supply difficulties have contributed to widespread purchasing by LAs of fostering placements and related services from IFPs. This purchasing has mostly taken place on an unplanned or "spot-purchased basis"^{5,6}, a method of commissioning foster-care services which has been widely criticised for three main reasons: 1) it is extremely costly and causing many LAs to overspend their child placement budgets, 2) neither the LAs commissioners nor the IFPs are able to plan for their respective needs and services, and 3) it takes little account of the individual care needs of the children, "they are slotted in wherever there is a vacancy"⁷. However, a recent study based of interviews with LAs and IFPs managers in 2004-2005 shows a shift towards LAs commissioning services from IFPs and an emerging new commissioning approach⁸. In this study, Clive Sellick, a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia, brings out three models in respect of contracting services and discusses advantages and disadvantages of contracting from the perspectives of managers in both sectors. The emerging three models are:

1. Some LAs created large regional clusters which allowed them to collaborate in controlling costs when purchasing foster placements and related health and educational services from a number of approved or preferred IFPs.
2. Single LAs and single IFPs entered into discrete contractual arrangements with one another, primarily to determine placement volume and costs.
3. A single or a small number of LAs purchases from a single IFP, usually a more established voluntary child-care sector one such as Barnardos or NCH, specialists fostering services for instance for young offenders on remand from the courts or for children with severe and enduring disabilities.

A clear set of advantages for commissioning fostering services had emerged and these fell into two categories associated with service delivery: 1) the importance of inter-sector collaboration, 2) each sector's managers wanted to establish better business arrangements for planning, costing and

developing placements and education and health care provision for children and young people in foster care.

Most of the IFP managers were qualified social workers with a background in LA child and family services. Some of them and the LA managers had once been colleagues in the same social services departments. A crucial element in the building-up of the working relationship was seen to be this common background and the same mind-set, "both of us have a sound, solid child care background and we share views about the process around child care planning"⁹.

With regard to collaborative relationship, the LA and IFP managers had each their own position very clear: The LA Directors required their managers to avoid overspending their placements budgets in "an untidy and unpredictable world of supply and demand"; the IFP Directors required their managers to have enough foster-carers, social workers, counsellors, educational liaison workers available when the calls for services came from the LAs in "the same untidy and uncertain world". In the absence of a more long-term contract, IFP managers were concerned about the risk involved in this business and some had developed a way of reducing risk by not having more than 30 percent of their business coming from any single local authority¹⁰. The director of children's trust at Hammersmith and Fullham has indeed pointed out that the looked-after children budget was very volatile and practices would have to be very large to manage it¹¹.

Experience of hostility and antagonistic behaviour towards the IFPs on behalf of LAs' managers was present and clearly a disadvantage for the development of a working relationship across the sectors. Sellick's study showed a lot of mutual scepticism between the LAs and these IFPs. Both sides expressed reluctance to undertake inter-sector commissioning on grounds that such arrangements were either unreasonable or unrealistic. There was a sense of exploitation in which the LAs were seen to be asking for too much in their tenders to IFPs, but offering too little payments, for instance, an IFP manager claiming that too many service level agreements or other contracting arrangements were "just about screwing down, not about development"¹². This sense of exploitation cut both ways as LAs managers were particularly critical of some large IFPs requiring a commitment for many placements in order to achieve some cost savings, for instance, an LA manager asking "why would I want to put all my eggs in one basket?"¹³

The study, however reported some evidence that attitudes were shifting, in particular among LAs social workers in favour of fostering services provided by the IFPs. Government inspections of IFPs over the past decade have been positive about the IFP mix of support services to their foster-carers and social work staff, and fostering and related services to the children and young people. Despite a residue of hostility towards IFPs as expressed above, attitudes are changing and fostering agencies managers from both sectors are finding ways of working together.

Continuation of "spot purchasing", however, leaves the control of fee-levels within the IFPs, but some contracting and outsourcing arrangements move the control somewhat towards the LAs. A more balanced position between needs, resources and strengths of the two sectors was suggested in the study in which "a middle position" is seen as more positive than either "spot-purchasing" or "outsourcing" of fostering placements and related services.

In this "middle position" Sellick suggests the establishment of small networks of LAs and IFPs which would allow these to contract with two or three partner agencies and thus go some way to avoiding the risk of monopolies as identified in an Australian study, in which providers were squeezed until one became a monopolist provider at the cost of service development^{14 15}.

References.

¹ Sellick, C. and Howell, D. (2004) "A description and analysis of multi-sectoral fostering in the United Kingdom". *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**(4), pp.481-499.

² Ibid.

³ Department for Education and Skills (2005) Every Child Matters: Change for Children, available online at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/planningandcommissioning/.

⁴ Sellick, C. and Connolly, J. (2002) "Independent fostering agencies uncovered: The findings of a national study", *Child and Family Social Work*, **7**(2), pp. 107-120.

⁵ Sellick, C. (2006) "Opportunities and risks: Models of good practice in commissioning foster-care." *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(6), pp.1345-1359.

⁶ Sellick, C. and Howell, D. (2004) "A description and analysis of multi-sectoral fostering in the United Kingdom". *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**(4), pp.481-499.

⁷ Sellick, C. (2006) "Opportunities and risks: Models of good practice in commissioning foster-care." *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(6), p.1348.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. p.1350.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.1351.

¹¹ Community care website. "Practices "could set social workers free"". An article posted October 12th 2006 available online at www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/.

¹² Sellick, C. (2006) "Opportunities and risks: Models of good practice in commissioning foster-care." *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**(6), p.1357.

¹³ Ibid. p.1353.

¹⁴ Barber, J. G. (2001) "The slow demise of foster care in South Australia". *Journal of Social Policy*, 30(1), pp.1-15.

¹⁵ Barber, J. G. (2004) "The systematic abrogation of practice standards in foster care". *Australian Social Work*, 57(1), pp.31-45.