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Citation for published version

Kirton, Derek (2014) (In)sufficient?: Ethnicity and foster care in English local authorities. *Child and Family Social Work*, 21 (4). pp. 492-501. ISSN 1356-7500.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12166>

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(In)Sufficient?: ethnicity and foster care in English local authorities

Abstract

This article examines the place of ethnicity in local authority foster care in the context of the sufficiency duty to secure adequate local placements for looked after children. The analysis draws on two main sources, namely OFSTED's annual survey of fostering agencies and inspection reports for around half the local authority fostering services in England.

Sufficiency is gauged in two main ways, comparing numbers of Black and minority ethnic (BME) foster carers first with numbers of BME looked after children and second, with local adult (age 25-64) populations. Statistical analysis shows very wide variation on both measures and a significant minority of authorities that perform poorly in terms of the ethnic diversity of their foster carers. Inspection reports also vary widely in the degree and nature of attention given to issues of ethnicity with many offering limited (and sometimes no) challenge to poor performance. These findings are discussed within the broader context of recent trends towards de-emphasising the significance of ethnicity in child welfare.

Keywords: Race; looked after children; foster care; Minority Ethnic Families

This article draws on statistical and inspection data to consider issues of ethnicity in England's local authority (LA) fostering services, set within the context of government policy on 'sufficiency' in respect of placements for looked after children. Official statistics are used to map the ethnic profiles of foster carers with those of both looked after children and local populations, while inspection reports are analysed to gauge how LA performance is assessed in this regard.

The ethnicity of foster carers has received relatively little attention in comparison with the highly public controversies surrounding matching and transracial placements in adoption (Rhodes, 1992). Although this differential treatment may be partly explicable in terms of the ‘finality’ of plenary adoption, and the manifold differences between fostering and adoptive careers, the ethnicity of foster carers is important for a number of reasons. First, to the extent that ethnic matching is perceived as advantageous for black and minority ethnic (BME) children (and even many proponents of transracial placements concede this (Aldridge, 1994; Narey 2011), then facilitating its possibility should be an important aim for fostering services. Second, the ethnicised patterns of fostering and adoption placements are often connected, whether in the cases of white foster carers applying to adopt their BME foster children, or in the latter’s pre-adoptive experiences (Selwyn *et al* 2010). Third, there is a legal requirement that in their fostering recruitment, LAs ‘have regard to the different racial groups’ of children in need in their area (Children Act 1989, Schedule 2(11)(b)) and hence it is interesting to note how well this is met.

While various research studies have revealed something of the ethnic profile of foster carers in the UK (Bebbington & Miles, 1989; Triseliotis *et al* 2000; Kirton *et al* 2003; Sinclair *et al* 2004), a more comprehensive picture has become available through OFSTED’s Fostering Agencies and Fostering Services dataset (later renamed as Fostering Quality Assurance and Data Forms). Starting in 2008-09, this annual report based on survey data from LAs and independent fostering providers (IFPs) has achieved steadily increasing returns, with the survey for 2011-12 securing responses from 99 per cent of LAs and 92 per cent of IFPs (OFSTED 2013). Importantly for our purposes, LA (though not IFP) data have been made public. As will be explained, the data are not without their flaws nor other limitations for the study of ethnicity. Nonetheless, they offer valuable insights into the ethnicised make-up of the foster care workforce and its variation across LA areas.

Sufficiency, Ethnicity and Foster Care – Policy Contexts

In addition to analysing the data from the OFSTED survey, a further aim of the article is to examine the place of ethnicity within the policy requirement for LAs to secure sufficient accommodation for looked after children (Children and Young Person Act 2008 section 9, inserted as s22G of the Children Act 1989). This will entail examination of national policy documents and inspection reports on LA fostering services.

The ‘sufficiency duty’ has been defined in guidance as a requirement for LAs *‘to take steps to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority’s area which meets the needs of children the authority is looking after’* so long as this is consistent with their welfare (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2010 p.3) Although our primary focus rests with LA fostering services, it should be noted that sufficiency covers all forms of accommodation and assumes commissioning processes within a mixed economy of provision. **For the year under review here (2011-12), IFPs accounted for roughly 30 per cent of foster placements (Department for Education (DfE) 2012).**

The sufficiency duty can trace its immediate history to the New Labour government’s *Care Matters* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2006) Green Paper, where key proposals included enhancing foster carer recruitment and placement choice through specialised campaigns and regional commissioning. A further concern was to generate more local resources, on the basis that many children suffered detrimental effects from out of area placements (Holland *et al* 2005; DfES 2006, p.44). Following its incorporation into law, the sufficiency duty was fleshed out in guidance produced by the New Labour government but retained under the coalition (DCSF 2010). This made clear that ‘reasonably practicable’ could not be judged merely on the basis of difficulty or lack of resources, seemingly creating a strong message (p.13).

For our concerns, it is noteworthy that the guidance, which is strongly managerialist in tone and market-oriented, makes almost no reference to ethnicity. The latter is restricted to mention of the duty under the Children Act 1989 section 22(5)(c) to consider religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background as part of a list of relevant pre-existing requirements. This relative neglect can be seen as part of wider de-racialising trend within public policy (Williams & Johnson 2010; Craig *et al* 2012) and is clearly traceable through shifts in official discourse. For example, *Care Matters* (DfES 2006, p.50) explicitly notes the value of ethnic matching and promises to highlight BME families in its recruitment campaigning, but there is no equivalent emphasis in the subsequent guidance on sufficiency. Comparison between the respective 2002 and 2011 National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Fostering Services is equally instructive, with declining attention given to ethnicity (in the latter document identity and diversity are construed in individual, largely ‘consumerist’ terms (e.g. lifestyle choices and managing finances) and the disappearance of explicit support for ethnic matching (Department of Health (DH) 2002, DfE 2011).

Thus, while many commentators have continued to emphasise both the continuing challenges and importance of recruiting foster carers from BME communities (Clarke 2010, McDirmid *et al* 2012), any such concerns have largely been removed from official discourse, including that relating to sufficiency.

Sufficiency, Ethnicity and Foster Care – Statistical data

In this article, an attempt is made to explore the ethnic profiles of LA foster carers along two axes, namely in relation to those of looked after children in the authority (and hence potential for internal ethnic matching) and of local populations (potential recruitment). Although the needs of individual children may be best met in residential homes or IFPs with foster care as

the dominant (and preferred) form of placement, and LAs still its majority providers, it is useful to consider this particular aspect of sufficiency.

While the OFSTED survey provides information on fostering households, number of places and foster carers, ethnicity is recorded only for the latter, which presents certain limitations. First, the ratio of carers to households cannot be held as a constant, due both to ethnically mixed households and the over-representation of Black single carers in foster care populations (Kirton *et al*, 2003; Sinclair *et al*, 2004). Secondly, number of foster carers does not translate neatly into placements, though in aggregate they are very similar. Despite these limitations, however, the reported data give valuable insights into the profile of foster carers and its broader relationship with that of looked after children.

[insert Table 1]

Table 1 shows the national level relationship between foster carers (LA and IFP) and looked after children by ethnic group. In percentage terms, it reveals that there are relative ‘shortfalls’ of foster carers for most groups (most obviously so for those of mixed backgrounds), the exceptions being those of White British, Indian, Pakistani and Black Caribbean backgrounds. The ratios between foster carers and children reflect the combined effects of looked after populations (including the long established ‘over-representation’ of Black and mixed race children and ‘under-representation’ of those from Asian backgrounds) and foster carer numbers. Importantly, the OFSTED (2013) survey shows that the proportion of BME foster carers is greater in IFPs than LAs, accounting for 20.2 and 10.7 per cent respectively in 2011-12. Nationally, BME children are modestly over-represented in

placements with IFPs, totalling 26 per cent compared with their comprising 22 per cent of the looked after child population (OFSTED 2013).

Local authority foster carers and looked after children

The OFSTED survey reports 42,220 places available through LA fostering services.

However, there are some missing data due to non- or incorrect returns (some LAs seem to have reported respite/short break figures in place of short-term foster care). Allowing for the omissions and under-reporting, a more accurate estimate would be close to 45,000. In practice, services typically operate well below nominal capacity (OFSTED 2013), but taking this figure as a benchmark would suggest a ratio of approximately 1.5 looked after children to each LA foster care place. The median value for 139 LAs was 1.45 but the range was from 0.93 (Derbyshire) to 3.2 (Newham).

As indicated above, it is only data on foster carers that are broken down by ethnicity and these will be utilised here, with their limits, discussed earlier, acknowledged. The ratio of White British children to LA foster carers was just over 1.3, while the corresponding BME figure was 3.1. The ratios for both Indian and Black Caribbean populations were below one, due largely to low looked after children and high foster care populations respectively.

Elsewhere, however, ratios were higher with for example, those for Bangladeshi, Black African and Chinese populations approximately double and Other Asian and Any Other background four times the White British figure. Predictably, given their relative youthfulness and historic over-representation in public care, the ratios for mixed race populations were dramatically higher, ranging between 10 (white and Black African) and 14 (white and Asian). Variations are also dramatic at the LA level. Against the mean of 3.1, ratios of BME children (excluding unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and on the assumption that almost all are from BME backgrounds (Wade *et al* 2011)) to foster carers ranged from 0.58

(Central Bedfordshire) to 28.5 (Peterborough), with 14 LAs having ratios in double figures. Relatively 'low scoring' (favourable ratio) LAs were highly diverse, encompassing several that were small and/or predominantly white, with low (and hence potentially volatile) numbers of both BME looked after children and carers, but also many London Boroughs generally with fairly large numbers of both groups. High (unfavourable) ratios were similarly diverse. In almost all lower quartile authorities, the number of BME foster carers was low (with only 7 reaching double figures), and in some cases, the number of children also relatively low and hence the ratio volatile. However, seven lower quartile LAs had between 50 and 100 BME looked after children, while a further six exceeded 100. In some cases, the mismatch reflected high numbers of UASC, but even excluding all such children, five LAs with more than 50 BME looked after children exceeded a ratio of over 10:1 to BME foster carers (Worcestershire, Staffordshire, East Sussex, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough) with Coventry only fractionally under this ratio.

Foster Carers, Ethnicity and Local Demography

A second means of considering ethnicity and sufficiency is to examine the number of foster carers relative to local adult population. In this instance, 2011 Census data have been used for the population aged 25-64 which can be taken to reasonably approximate the age range of foster carers (McDermid *et al* 2012). Again, it is useful to acknowledge certain limitations. First, not all LA foster carers will be (currently) resident in that authority. Second, foster carer numbers are small relative to population, and especially for particular ethnic groups and/or small LAs, there is consequent scope for volatility. Nonetheless, the data reveal interesting patterns and local variations.

Nationally, the reported number of LA foster carers represents roughly 1.6 per 1000 of the adult (25-64) population. Regional data show higher representation in the North (around 2 in all three northern regions where care populations tend to be higher), while the figure for London is just over 1. **At the local level, although there were significant variations within all regions, foster carer numbers relative to population broadly followed the regional pattern, with for example London Boroughs and northern authorities disproportionately among the lowest and highest recruiting LAs respectively. In terms of individual authorities, figures ranged from 0.5 per 1000 in Richmond on Thames to over 4 in Kingston upon Hull.** Turning to the ethnicised patterns of the foster care workforce, the rate for white LA foster carers was a little over 1.6 per 1000, while the global figure for BME foster carers was roughly 1.2. However, this in turn masks great variation between ethnic categories. Regional level data are available for broader ethnic groupings (Table 2)

[insert Table 2]

Table 2 shows how ethnicised patterns interact with the regional variations discussed above. Among white foster carers, the particularly low level of recruitment in London is noteworthy. For those of mixed race, rates loosely followed regional patterns, being fairly high in two of the Northern regions (but also in the South East), and very low in the East of England. Similarly, rates for Asian carers were at their highest in the north, whilst being markedly lower than average in the East Midlands and the South West, in each case leading to relative 'shortages'. Involvement of black foster carers relative to population was markedly higher than for other ethnic groups in most but not all regions.

In relation to individual LAs, small numbers make it feasible only to compare white with BME numbers overall, rather than with the latter sub-divided, even into broad umbrella groupings. For white foster carers low numbers are particularly found in London (0.3 carers per 1000 in Westminster and Lambeth) with the highest rates mostly in northern authorities, peaking at 4.4 per 1000 in Kingston Upon Hull.

For BME foster carers, almost a quarter of LAs had recruitment rates of 0.5 per 1000 or below and these were spread relatively widely across the country. High recruiting authorities were concentrated in London, with Haringey having the largest figure at 4.2 per 1000. Using aggregated BME statistics to gauge sufficiency is of course problematic given the divergent patterns of recruitment across ethnic groups. To address this, an 'expected' figure for each LA was generated by weighting local ethnic population groups by their respective regional means (see Table 2) and aggregating these figures. 'Expected' figures could then be compared with the actual BME totals found in each authority. Discounting those where numbers were small (interpreted as either the expected figure or the differential between actual and expected failing to reaching a minimum of 10) – a total of 14 LAs achieved at least 1.5 times the 'expected' recruitment and six exceeded double the rate – Westminster, Luton, Tower Hamlets, West Sussex, Solihull and Haringey (the latter's BME foster carers representing 2.35 times the 'expected' figure). Conversely, and again discounting low (single figure) numbers, nine LAs had BME figures less than half of those 'expected'. Four of these (Bexley, Havering, Hampshire, Surrey) had between 0.4 and 0.5 of their predicted figure, but five fell below a third – Staffordshire, Coventry, Kingston upon Thames, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. As noted earlier, several of these authorities also fared poorly in the ratio of BME looked after children to foster carers and overall there was a moderate but significant Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.48 ($p < 0.01$) between the two measures of BME sufficiency. Further analysis showed evidence that the size of BME populations was

influential. In particular, evidence was found that larger and smaller BME populations are reflected *disproportionately* in foster care numbers. Thus, the percentage BME adult population in LAs was found to be correlated significantly with both sufficiency measure one (Pearson correlation -0.300, $p < 0.001$) and two (0.229, $p < 0.001$). The reasons for this are worthy of further investigation, but may reflect ‘critical mass’ in the workings of recruitment, whether network or publicity based (McDermid *et al* 2012) and perhaps ethnicised agency priorities.

To analyse the respective influences of looked after children and local adult populations, stepwise multiple regression was used with BME foster carers as the dependent variable, and BME looked after children (non-UASC and UASC separately), the Foster Care Adjustment (a government measure to gauge the degree of difficulty LAs are expected to face in recruiting foster carers) and BME adult populations grouped as Mixed, Asian, Black and Other as independent variables. The regression showed that size of (non-UASC) BME looked after population was by far the most powerful predictor, explaining 73.7 per cent of variance ($F_{1,145} = 406.30$ $p < 0.001$), while size of (ethnic) Other adult population ($F_{1,144} = 40.39$ $p < 0.001$), higher Foster Care Adjustment ($F_{1,143} = 14.01$ $p < 0.001$), and Mixed ($F_{1,142} = 6.51$ $p = 0.012$) and Black ($F_{1,141} = 6.30$ $p = 0.013$) adult populations made (very) modest contributions to the model, accounting for 5.8, 1.8, 0.8 and 0.8 per cent of variance respectively. In all 17 per cent of variance remained unexplained within this model, and while some of the reasons for this may lie beyond the control of agencies, this suggests that their performance in recruitment and support may also be a significant factor.

Inspection, Sufficiency and Ethnicity

Alongside statistical analysis of the ethnic profile of LA foster carers, a second concern was to examine how OFSTED identifies and comments upon ‘performance’ in relation to ethnicity and sufficiency. Inspection reports most recent at the time of writing (autumn 2013) were examined for all LAs appearing in the highest or lowest decile on either measure of ethnicity and sufficiency. This comprised 44 reports (to which were added four large LAs very close to the lowest decile) and a one in four sampling of the remaining 99 authorities generated a further 25 reports, making a total of 73 reports surveyed. In each case, a range of search terms was used – ethnic*, raci*, cultur*, divers*, minorit*, black, white, Asian, mixed, asylum, trans*, religio*, faith*, sufficien*, recruit* - to examine pertinent issues relating to ethnicity and sufficiency.

Reports were then assessed both for the degree of attention given to ethnicity and related issues and the overall tone of the commentary. The former was divided into three categories – first, where there was no mention at all (4 cases), second, a low coverage (judged as three or less references/points raised) (29) and third a higher, more developed treatment (four or more references/points) (40). On the basis of the statements made, overall commentary was also judged as positive, mixed/neutral or critical. Only one fell clearly into the critical category, with 48 reports judged positive and 20 mixed/neutral. Results from the first form of classification show both the heterogeneity of coverage and that in a substantial minority of inspection reports, treatment of ethnicity is at most fairly slight. Those from the second suggest that inspections may be somewhat gentle with weaknesses relating to ethnicity, a theme reprised below. While in broad terms, there was some correspondence between the tone of inspection commentary and ethnicised sufficiency measures, it is noteworthy that of the 19 LAs appearing in the lowest decile on at least one measure, 10 still received positive appraisal on ethnicity issues.

Sufficiency can be seen to have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and this prompts consideration of recruitment (and retention, though this was rarely mentioned) and policy and practice in areas such as assessment, training, support, matching and wider ethos and values. While reports clearly bore the hallmarks of common methodologies, what was also striking was their variability, including in treatment of ethnicity and related issues.

Equality, Diversity, Culture and Religion

References to ethnicity were often subsumed within wider discourses of equality and diversity, a coupling that was sometimes (partially) deconstructed, yet at other times treated as an overarching term (or with a simple listing of terms such as ethnicity, culture, religion and less frequently, race). This included instances of services being rated as outstanding on promotion (valuing or celebrating) of equality and diversity, yet with minimal provision of evidence. In many cases, however, aspects of equality and diversity were accorded fuller treatment and applied to specific fields of activity within fostering services, such as recruitment, assessment and training. Generalised comment on diversity was overwhelmingly favourable, based on an amalgam of achievement and aspiration, and varied little in relation to recruitment of BME carers. Only one authority (North Somerset) was strongly criticised, with references to ‘minimalistic treatment’ of diversity in documentation and poor, outdated understanding on the part of foster carers, while in less critical tones, Doncaster was upbraided for lack of incorporation of diversity in its assessments and training. However, most of the authorities performing poorly in terms of BME foster carer recruitment were rated as good and a few outstanding in relation to promotion of equality and diversity. Such ratings included situations where there was no direct reference to ethnicity and recruitment

(e.g. Coventry, Barnsley) and more surprisingly perhaps, in cases where there was significant criticism of performance in this regard (Kingston on Thames).

Discussion of ethnicity in reports was often linked to culture and less frequently, religion. The dominant narrative was that of recognising that children had needs in these areas, sometimes elaborated with mention of language, diet, hair and skin care, observances, identity and heritage. Inspection commentary in the domains of ethnicity, culture and religion (though not all reports made specific mention of them) was also overwhelmingly positive, with references to LAs being sensitive and proactive, taking into account, addressing or meeting children's diverse needs, providing relevant training, identifying 'culturally appropriate' placements or providing good matches. This applied equally to 'poor recruiting' LAs as to others with almost no critical commentary, save in West Berkshire where discussion was linked to recruitment needs for BME carers. It is possible that this absence reflected successful transracial/cultural placements **or commissioning arrangements involving IFPs**, though neither was articulated explicitly. An alternative explanation may rest with inspections not probing too deeply into these areas and a key question to be asked here is whether those LAs that are poor at recruiting BME carers are likely to perform (particularly) well in dealing with the needs of BME children more broadly. A significant minority of reports touched on supports for transracial/cultural placements (through peer support, links to community groups, mentors, additional training or specialist support staff), but this occurred more often in 'high recruiting' authorities. This suggests that the major variable may be the overall weight and attention given to issues of ethnicity, culture and religion but if so, then the degree of inspection challenge to poor performers could be seen as inadequate. In similar fashion, amid generally positive references to training, the most detailed reports were again found among the higher BME recruiters (e.g. Walsall, Solihull).

Sufficiency, Ethnicity and Recruitment

While sufficiency is by no means reducible to recruitment, the latter is clearly central to its delivery and given the very wide variations found in BME foster carer numbers, it is interesting to note inspection assessments. Unsurprisingly, recruitment featured in almost all reports and many made reference to issues of ethnicity, while others used the less specific discourse of diversity. Only around a third of reports refer explicitly to issues of sufficiency, including a small number with (general) recommendations relating to its improvement.

In broad terms, OFSTED commentaries followed the underlying statistical picture, with the most confident proclamations that LAs had recruited (ethnically) diverse groups and conversely, those on the existence of shortfalls, almost always according well with the published data. Local authorities in the top decile for BME recruitment and many others above average received positive judgements on both their aspirations and achievements in terms of foster carer diversity. These were typically phrased in terms of success in meeting the needs of children (an implicit endorsement of matching) and sometimes related to local populations. When more expansive, accounts tended to praise those LAs that were (pro)active, strategic, creative and targeted in their recruitment efforts. In several (all in or close to the top decile), the ethnic diversity of fostering staff was highlighted as an important factor in their successful carer recruitment. Conversely, in Kingston on Thames, its all white staff group was mentioned in the context of poor BME carer recruitment, but it is not known how far this applied to other poorly performing authorities.

Inspection reports on LAs with low BME recruitment provided an interesting amalgam of the critical and the laudatory, the latter perhaps reflecting a desire to acknowledge and encourage but sometimes seeming to gloss over weaknesses. There were virtually no examples of strongly critical reports, an exception being North Somerset, where it was stated that the ethnicity of looked after children '*is not reflected in the ethnicity of the foster carers that have been approved*', and as noted earlier, wider criticisms made. From reports viewed, only

three recommendations relating to ethnicity were found, two referring to improving support and training and only one (Kingston on Thames) to recruitment. Given the many other poorly recruiting LAs, it is pertinent to examine how they were treated in this regard within reports. In some instances (mostly in 'white' LAs), issues of ethnicity were effectively ignored, with either no, or only very minimal and oblique, reference (Rotherham, Redcar and Cleveland, Rutland, Havering). In others, they were minimised or obscured, usually in one of two ways. The first entailed claims regarding recruitment that appeared simply to be at odds with the reported data. For example, in Barnsley's report there was reference to a regularly reviewed recruitment strategy to ensure diverse recruitment of carers, while Cambridgeshire was described as having '*effective arrangements ... to recruit and retain good quality carers who can meet a diverse range of children's needs*'. Yet these authorities were firmly in the lowest deciles on both sufficiency measures. Similar examples can be found in Staffordshire and East Sussex, both around the margins of the lowest deciles, where very favourable comments were made on recruitment strategies and processes, but without any sense that they may not be working well in respect of BME foster carers. If many of the LAs concerned are predominantly white (and here it should be noted that the sufficiency measures are adjusted to populations), similar coverage could also be found in more ethnically diverse areas. In Coventry, also occupying a marginal position around the lowest deciles, the service was described as proactive, as having '*an effective recruitment and selection process*' and placements '*provided by a wide and diverse range of carers*'. Again, there is nothing in the report to indicate any weaknesses in BME recruitment. The second approach was to emphasise that the children's needs in respect of diversity, culture and so forth were being met, found for example in reports for Sefton, Stockton on Tees and East Sussex, but without reference to what were presumably significant numbers of transracial (**and/or externally commissioned**) placements.

Finally, several LAs were described as ‘having acknowledged’ or ‘shown awareness’ of the need to recruit more BME foster carers and/or having made recent efforts to do so. Such findings are of course positive, and in the context of inspection, likely to play well in terms of self-reflection and future trajectory. However, they also beg questions about why the realisations and actions were so recent and why OFSTED appeared relatively ‘accepting’ of this (evident in a near total absence of recommendations), including in situations where recruitment remained very low (e.g. Bournemouth, Southend and Peterborough).

Matching and use of IFPs

Discussion of matching is interesting in its various and sometimes diffuse articulations with ethnicity. Ethnic matching per se is rarely addressed directly and similarly, in reports viewed, there was relatively little coverage of the ethnicised aspects of matching, although discussion of support for transracial/cultural placements might be taken as such. Within reports, two distinct discourses could be discerned. In one, a link was drawn between BME recruitment and capacity for matching, either positively, as principle/attainment or negatively as lack:

Every effort is made to place children within their own cultural, racial, linguistic and religious communities. (Hackney)

The service is promoting more recruitment of carers from ethnic minorities to help better match the culture and ethnicity of children being looked after. (Northamptonshire)

In one instance (Newham), difficulty in finding matches was attributed to the scale of its ethnic diversity, echoing Vertovec’s (2007) concept of ‘super-diversity’. A second discourse, however, appeared to make no link, giving highly positive comment on matching within LAs where there was a very significant ‘shortfall’ of BME carers (e.g. Sefton, Staffordshire).

As noted earlier, it is not possible from the data to accurately gauge the extent of placements in IFPs nor any ethnicised patterns in commissioning, especially at the LA level. Twelve of the reports made reference to use of IFPs in situations (and three to regional consortia) where no appropriate (ethnic) match was available in-house, **although there only appeared to be a very weak link with sufficiency measures, with LAs drawn widely across the spectrum of BME recruitment. Statistically, the national over-representation of BME children in IFP placements (noted earlier) suggests that the latter are specifically if modestly commissioned to provide better ethnic matches and perhaps address internal shortfalls. Importantly, however, no correlation was found between LAs' use of private and voluntary sector placements and either of the BME sufficiency measures. This (in tandem with the inspection report data) would tend to work against any generalised proposition that it is those authorities with the greatest 'shortfalls' which are making most use of external placements**

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to explore ethnicised aspects of sufficiency as they relate to LA fostering services, both statistically and in policy terms, with the latter focusing particularly on inspections. Various limitations to publicly available statistics are acknowledged, such as the lack of cross-tabulated data on the ethnicity of children in foster or residential care, in-house or external services (**including IFPs**) and crucially ethnically matched or transracial/cultural placements. For foster carers, limitations arise from ethnicity being aggregated for carers, but not households or number of placements and from the use of wider (and hence less meaningful) ethnicised categories for reporting below the national level. Nonetheless, the data available from OFSTED's annual surveys do allow insights that go far beyond the findings of smaller and less representative research studies.

Two measures of BME sufficiency were used, comparing foster carer numbers with looked after children and adult (25-64 years of age) populations (weighted according to ethnicity) respectively. Set within a national context of ‘shortfalls’ (on both measures) relating to most but not all BME groups, LAs varied dramatically in the ethnic profiles of their fostering workforces. In some, notably London Boroughs, BME foster carers were ‘over-represented’ by up to five or six times, with two inspection reports (Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham) referring to shortages of white carers. Conversely, eight LAs had over five times as many white as BME carers relative to adult populations. There are doubtless complex reasons behind these statistics, but this enormous variability invites closer scrutiny and in that context it is interesting to see how inspections addressed issues of ethnicity.

Analysis of over 70 OFSTED reports revealed wide variation in the depth of coverage of issues relating, directly or indirectly, to ethnicity. Much of the commentary was positive in tone, but often light in terms of supporting evidence, raising questions about inspectors’ probing. OFSTED (2012) guidance refers to how *‘there will be references to equality and diversity throughout the report’*, while its ‘Equality Impact Assessment’ for fostering services highlights children’s various ‘diversity’ needs (including ethnicity) to be addressed and considered in placement decisions (OFSTED 2011). This document also refers to gauging the support offered to foster carers and specifically BME foster carers. Yet, from a reading of the reports, these expectations were not met on a consistent basis. For example, as noted, there was often limited deconstruction of equality and diversity, a lack of depth in exploration and tellingly, almost nothing on the supports offered to BME foster carers. Among LAs that appeared to perform poorly on BME sufficiency, variability of reports prevailed, for while some were challenging, many, perhaps a majority offered little if any critical commentary, with authorities often deemed good or outstanding on issues of equality and diversity. Given the obvious paucity of in-house ethnically matched placements in many LAs, one might have

expected more developed inspectorial commentary on commissioning **through IFPs**, or the quality of transracial/cultural placements (including for children of mixed race backgrounds), but with some exceptions, they were notable in their absence.

OFSTED weaknesses in respect of race and ethnicity have been noted elsewhere, with researchers identifying their low profile, and lack of probing, challenge and recommendations, mirroring findings here (Osler & Morrison 2002, Parsons 2008). Studies have also noted the limited training offered to inspectors and hence reliance on their own degree of knowledge and interest, an important contributory factor to inconsistency (Simmill-Binning *et al* 2007).

Grappling with issues of diversity in organisations is undoubtedly challenging, entailing difficult navigation of commonalities and differences in respect of race and culture and dealing with the varied expectations and priorities of service users (Audit Commission 2004; NICE 2010). Yet it is precisely this challenge that must be addressed to adequately meet the needs of BME children. In relation to sufficiency, this might include emphasis both on recruitment of BME foster carers (Ridley & Wainwright 2010), but also the supports in place for all those fostering BME children. This secondary analysis of OFSTED data and reports suggests that these features are weak in many LAs and importantly that there is often limited challenge to this stemming from inspection processes. **As regards the consequences of (lack of) ethnic matching for children, space does not permit an extensive review and as noted earlier, there is a relative paucity of research specifically on foster care and its outcomes for BME children. However, studies and research reviews have generally found that while there are few headline differences in areas such as disruption and standard psychological test measures, there are nonetheless important advantages to ethnically matched placements and conversely for a small but significant minority, negative consequences from those in white families, notably in relation to issues of identity and**

experiences of racism (Barn *et al* 1997; Rushton & Minnis 1997; Ince 1998; Thoburn *et al* 2000). There has been very little study of foster carers' experiences of transracial placements, and that has been largely confined to discussion of ethnic matching policies and their impact, notably in cases of removal of children from white foster carers (Sinclair *et al* 2004 p.98).

Historically, it is debateable how far the interests of BME children have enjoyed meaningful priority within government, and the recent trend towards de-emphasising ethnicity in law, policy and guidance has made its stance on equality and diversity ever harder to discern. This may at least partially explain the inconsistent scrutiny provided by OFSTED in relation to similarly divergent practices and performance in LAs. In many cases, sufficiency appears to be considered without reference to ethnicity, seemingly at odds with OFSTED's own policies and with wider statutory duties. From this study, while the challenges relating to ethnicity and sufficiency appear generally more acute in predominantly 'white' areas, there is enormous variety here and in multi-ethnic areas and hence scope for lessons to be learned from those LAs that perform well in their recruitment and support. In turn, this requires much greater consistency and commitment within the governance arrangements for foster care, including leadership from government.

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