

Care Matters: Placements Working Group Report

Lord Laming

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Foreword

I am in no doubt that one of the most onerous and important tasks undertaken by local authorities is that of acting as a substitute parent to those children and young people who have to depend on the State for their care during some or all of the most formative years of their lives. Because of the earlier disruption to almost every aspect of their lives these children need more than the basic standards of help. On the contrary, the State has both a duty and a moral obligation to be a "Good Parent" to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society. It is not a matter to be undertaken lightly and, it is generally accepted, the record so far leaves much to be desired.

It is to the credit of the Government that the consultation document "*Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care*" combines values, commitment and ambition for each child. As the Secretary of State for Education and Skills states: "It starts from the premise that our goals for children in care should be exactly the same as our goals for our own children: we want their childhoods to be secure, healthy and enjoyable – rich and valuable in themselves as well as providing stable foundations for the rest of their lives".

Against that admirable hope is a formidable challenge. The reality is that most of these young people will not have been given a social framework, many will have had chaotic experiences and some will have been abused. Many will, for understandable reasons, feel let down, be angry and distrustful and most will lack confidence and self-esteem.

Perhaps the most salutary message to emerge from the work of the Placements Working Group is the need for every child coming into the care of the State to be given, from day one, the chance of a new beginning; for the most part the legislation is in place to facilitate this. The care plan for each child should reflect not only the uniqueness of each child but moreover demonstrate a dynamism in addressing both the remedial work and hopes for the future. The ambition must be to secure a good outcome for each child working toward the fulfilment of real potential. As the Secretary of State says: "it is inexcusable and shameful that the care system seems all too often to reinforce this early disadvantage, rather than helping children to successfully overcome it".

Social Care text books are not given to quoting Shakespeare. But admission to care should be such a milestone in the life of the child that it is captured in the spirit of Julius Caesar's Brutus: "*There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries*". We need to move to the point where the State can take pride in the parenting of each child and, more particularly, each child can look back on the experience of being in care with satisfaction.

Most of the recommendations of this Working Group are directed at the development of good practice, the more flexible use of resources and a balance between good outcomes and value for money. Each of the key statutory services must demonstrate both an ability to deliver to every one of these children a quality service but also willingness and skill to work successfully across

organisational boundaries. The activities of “A National Voice”, working for children in care, and of the Children’s Rights Director deserve encouragement.

I was indeed fortunate that the members of the Group encompassed such a range of expertise including one with direct experience of having been in care. I am indebted to each of them. We have made 36 Recommendations which, taken together, will we hope create momentum towards the full realisation of the best hopes of children who have to look to the State to safeguard their upbringing. They have considerable implications for the training, support and management of the staff doing this extremely demanding work. The staff of residential homes often face the challenge of meeting the needs of a child or young person at the first point of admission to care. They need great skill in helping the child begin to overcome the trauma of earlier experiences and to start to look to the future in a positive way.

There can be no doubt that there is much to be gained by the use of residential and foster care in more flexible ways. Foster parents deserve special mention because, with generosity of spirit, they open their homes to look after a child hitherto unknown to them and they provide this personal care 24 hours a day. What is for sure is that whilst the child is in care, for a short or long period, and whatever the circumstances of the birth parents, the State must fulfil the duties of a parent in an exemplary manner. Nothing less will do. Whether the needs of the child are most likely to be met in a residential setting, a foster home, care by a relative or boarding school every local authority must have in place access to sufficient provision to allow choice and a match between need and provision. The Group is in no doubt about the nature of the challenge to existing practice across all of the key services and independent agencies.

The Group has undertaken a huge task in a very short time. In that we have depended greatly on the Secretariat of Department for Education and Skills officials. Thankfully their work has been outstanding as we could not have managed without them. They are a credit to the civil service.

“A history of childhood can easily become a history of what adults have done to children. Children become the victims or the beneficiaries of adult actions.”

(The Invention of Childhood, Hugh Cunningham, 2006)

Lord Herbert Laming

1 Background

“A happy, stable home life is fundamental to the successful development of all children and for children in care a successful placement is the most important factor in enabling them to flourish. Unfortunately, not all children are in placements which meet their needs and many are moved between placements far too frequently. We need radically to improve children’s experience of placements, responding directly to what children themselves have told us is important and putting their views at the heart of placement decisions.” (*Care Matters*, 2006)

1. Chapter 4 of *Care Matters*, ‘Ensuring children are in the right placements’ sets out proposals for radical reform of the placements system, by improving the number and quality of residential and foster carers and increasing the stability of placements for children in care. The proposals in Chapter 4 focus in particular on the need to develop a more coherent and skilled workforce, with greater opportunity for training and career progression.
2. The Placements Working Group was established to take forward thinking on a number of the proposals set out in *Care Matters*, including the idea of a national ‘tiered’ model of placement types underpinned by a national qualifications framework for foster carers and residential carers. However, these issues have to be considered in the wider context of changing needs and a greater range of services. Discussion has therefore been more wide-ranging and this report reflects that by identifying a number of key issues which the Group felt were significant.
3. The Placements Working Group met on six occasions. The Group was made up of ten members representing a breadth of knowledge and skills, including the experience of having been in care, and was supported by Department for Education and Skills officials. Full membership is shown in *Annex 1*.
4. The terms of reference for the Group are set out below:
 - To generate a vision of what excellent practice looks like in both foster and residential care, including consideration of existing EU models;
 - To assess how a tiered workforce would operate in practice, including how carers would progress through the tiers, how children would be matched with carers, and the type and range of skills that would be needed, building on the broad picture set out in *Care Matters*;
 - To consider how we will achieve a greater supply of foster carers and secure high quality residential carers, in order to establish a dynamic system which responds appropriately to the needs of the individual child;
 - To ensure effective interaction between the new approach to placement choice and quality, and a continued focus on promoting adoption and other options for permanence; and
 - To report and make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in spring 2007.

2 Introduction

5. Meeting the increasingly diverse needs of the most vulnerable children and young people in society lies at the heart of the issues which the Placements Working Group has considered over the past four months. These are children often with the most complex of needs and the greatest deficits in basic areas of their lives, for example in terms of their ability to trust and form relationships with others, their educational achievement, their ability to socialise constructively with their peers, and their mental and physical health. They are often extremely damaged; they may exhibit severe behavioural problems; they may abuse drugs or have serious disabilities. Some may be unaccompanied asylum seeking children, with no network of support; some may have a child of their own.
6. The factors leading to a child's entry to care are wide-ranging but by far the majority come into care as a result of abuse or neglect. Prior to their entry into care the lives of these children are often characterised by instability, chaos and abuse. Feelings of rejection and failure will have a massive impact on their ability to relate easily to others. For many, entry to care will lead to further feelings of insecurity, suspicion and fear combined with the sudden loss of family, friends and familiar surroundings. This is why the first contact of being in care is so important.
7. The duration of children's stay in care will vary – for many care will be an appropriate option for a short time at a particular stage of their lives; others have no hope of continuing links with their birth families. Entry to care should wherever possible be planned but in too many cases it is on an emergency basis, happening at any time of the day or night.
8. Although it is clear that the circumstances and needs of each child and young person vary greatly, and that each individual case is unique, it is essential that the provision is in place to meet those needs and that the care system is sufficiently flexible to offer the right care for every child. This is not just about a choice between residential or foster care, or other placement types; it is about ensuring that each child is seen as a whole person with a range of needs, including health and education, and that appropriate packages of support are available, comprising the right ingredients to address those identified needs.

Recommendation 1

Government must take action to ensure a better trained, supported and managed range of staff and carers. Central and Local Government must recognise that children and young people entering care have more diverse and complex needs than in the past.

9. It is the responsibility of the State to make sure that care is a positive experience for the tens of thousands of disadvantaged children and young people for whom it is the only option. It must offer each child the basic entitlements such as stability, safety and security. But it must do much more than this.

10. Children in the care system have often been let down by adults in their lives, and even by their own families. The State must compensate for the past experiences of children, and provide an environment which nurtures, develops, encourages and which really does care. It has a lot of ground to make up for each child who enters care, and a moral duty to be not just an adequate parent but an excellent one.

Recommendation 2

Care must be, from the outset, a more positive experience for all young people in care.

11. Sadly the reality of care contrasts all too often with what every child should be able to expect. Poor choice of placements for example may lead to instability, disruption and ongoing feelings of insecurity and hopelessness. But the point at which a child enters care is a critical one; the actions which are taken by the State, as corporate parent, determine the very direction of a child's life. Effective interventions, and the right environment, can equip the child with the skills needed for a happy and successful future but a lack of proper support can ensure that the opposite is the case.

12. Young people within the care system must not in any way be treated as second class citizens. On the contrary, the State should do its best to compensate for their past experiences by giving them access to high quality support, excellent opportunities to develop and to the best schools. This support must extend to arrangements for leaving care. For example seldom, if ever, in day to day life would someone be expected to move into accommodation without having first seen it – not least at the age of 16 – yet young people leaving care often have to do just this, all too often on estates which others would not accept. This is a particularly important factor for young people leaving care who are parents.

13. This report discusses some of the key issues which have been raised in the course of meetings of the Placements Working Group and puts forward a number of recommendations, aimed at transforming care into a positive experience. Some of these may need to be considered as part of the review of National Minimum Standards which is currently underway.

3 The State as a Substitute Parent

14. The challenges facing the care system, and the scale of the task, are considerable. If we are to succeed in this task, we must first recognise the responsibilities of the State as corporate parent to those in the care system and consider how this can be translated effectively into action at a local level. This means looking at what it means to be a good parent since, regardless of the duration or circumstances of an individual placement, the State is fulfilling a parental role for the time when the child is in care.

Recommendation 3

The State must fulfil the role of a substitute parent, with all that it entails, in both residential and foster care.

15. The State assumes this responsibility at the point at which a child enters care. It must do as well as or better, in carrying out this role, than a good parent would be expected to do. The responsibility of the State is not simply to provide a roof over the child's head, security, stability and safety from harm; these are the basic necessities. In addition to these fundamental requirements the State must demonstrate the determination, ambition and love needed to support each young person in fulfilling his or her potential. It must demonstrate a strong commitment to securing good outcomes. And it must enable a range of professionals to adopt this parental role, supporting them in taking decisions in the best way.

16. Many of those in the care system have no experience of a stable framework of support or of effective role models. The lack of points of references which most of us take for granted – and from which we learn basic skills – makes it crucial for the State to provide a supportive, nurturing and educational environment. Without such a foundation it will stand no chance of compensating for the negative experiences which these young people have faced, not least in social and educational terms.

17. The point at which a child enters care should therefore be the beginning of a process aimed at healing the damage which has been done up to this point. Our expectation should be that the State will behave as any good parent would and should provide the support and encouragement needed for a child's development.

Recommendation 4

Children in care should always be supported at events such as parent/teacher meetings, plays or sporting events. The State has both a duty and moral obligation to be a good parent to each child in care. This means much more than physical care – it is about demonstrating love, encouragement and an interest in every aspect of the child's life at school, sport and recreation.

18. Like any good parent, the State should be able to take pride in its performance and in the achievements of the children in its care. Determination and ambition are central to the achievement of positive outcomes for these children and young people and must be demonstrated not just by social services departments, but by education, health and other services across the local authority. As in any well-functioning family, those fulfilling the parental role accept responsibility for a child's development in all areas of his or her life.

19. Social care is a dynamic process which has to make a big impact over a short period of time. Drift is therefore unacceptable. If it is to succeed in its aims, the process must not only centre around high quality provision and skilled carers, but must display energy and determination on behalf of the children in its care – in whatever setting.

20. The role of the State as parent becomes particularly significant for those young people in care who are, themselves, parents. In such cases, the allocated accommodation and the continuing support must be directed to the future well-being of both the child leaving care and their child or children. The cost of supporting the development of good parenting skills, usually on a very low budget, is much less than the breakdown of the family unit.

4 Placements

- 21.** It is inevitable that there will be differences in the systems and provision which 150 local authorities across the country have in place to meet the needs of their looked after children. Local authorities must demonstrate the ability to evaluate specific needs of their own populations and commission provision on the basis of those needs. But, regardless of local differences, it is essential that we have in place a set of core values which mean that the expectations of those entering care, and the ambition of those providing it, are consistent across the country.
- 22.** Any care setting should provide safety and security; placements should be made on the basis of proper assessment of need; and assessment should lead to care plans which include clear timescales and which provide the means for measuring improvement.
- 23.** Our expectations of those caring for children in care are very different today from how they have traditionally been. It is no longer enough for carers simply to 'look after' a child; we want them to be enabled to transform outcomes. In that sense in particular there has been a real shift in the focus of the care system and the care plan has become more important than ever.
- 24.** Despite the ambitious expectations around the care system, there are many basic shortcomings at present which, put right, have the potential to make a real difference to children and carers. For example, all too often basic requirements around recording information in the case record are not met. Case records should always demonstrate the following key elements:
- Presentation of the child as a unique person, including accurate details;
 - The child's history;
 - A detailed assessment of need;
 - The care plan. This should set out the reason for the placement, expectations and desired outcomes (with timescales) around the placement and arrangements for review (with timescales). The care plan should also set out the services and interventions which will be offered to achieve the desired outcomes.
- 25.** There is much evidence too of carers being given insufficient information about children in advance of the placement, and of children and young people themselves not being informed or consulted adequately about changes of placement. Except in an emergency, there is no excuse for this lack of information.

Recommendation 5

Those who provide the care for the child should be given the fullest possible information and involved in case conferences and other decision making processes.

- 26.** And it is widely known that many local authorities have in the past used dustbin bags to move children's clothing and other belongings when placements change. The message which this

sends about the extent to which these young people are valued as individuals is a clear one. Currently, 95 local authorities have signed up to the 'no bin bag campaign', but every child should be accorded dignity which extends to the way in which his or her personal possessions are treated.

Recommendation 6

Every child should be accorded dignity so that in any move the personal possessions of the child are transported appropriately – and not in carrier or bin bags.

27. In many respects, it seems that legislation is already in place to achieve some key objectives, but that compliance is poor. Matching between children and carers provides yet another example. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering set out clearly Government's expectations, however, we know that "only 52% of local authority fostering services and 60% of independent fostering agencies meet the matching standards" (*Care Matters*). There is not enough evidence either that outcomes are given due consideration when decisions about matching are taken.

28. It is clear, therefore, that the answer to these problems does not lie necessarily in new solutions or legislation; much work must also be done to enforce existing legislation. The considerable array of information and data about local authorities' performance in different respects represents a valuable tool for driving forward change. Stability, for example, underpins the drive to improve outcomes for looked after children but more effective monitoring of breakdown rates, and of the reasons for breakdown rates, could potentially make a real difference to success in this area.

29. The following sections discuss some of the key issues facing residential care and foster care, and set out a vision for the future, in which different placement types form part of a more flexible approach to meeting children's needs and supporting those who care for them.

4.1 Residential Care

30. For many young people, residential care is a necessary experience at certain stages of their stay in care; it will often be the most appropriate placement choice and it may be the young person's preferred option.

31. Despite its enormous value, the perception of residential care is often a negative one and much work needs to be done in order for it to become the dynamic and positive option which it should be. Young people should not be consigned to poor performing care homes and written off; they must be supported in moving forward in their lives and the State must be ambitious on their behalf. Residential care provides a valuable means of achieving this, and of supporting other aspects of the care system.

32. The motivation in placing children should be finding the best possible placement. We must therefore be committed to there being a proper place for residential care and to an acceptable range of choice. We must recognise the value of residential care for its own sake, but also its role in a wider context, such as its potential contribution to shared care and in supporting foster placements. Boarding schools should be considered as one possible option within this context; there will be children in care for whom a boarding place in a residential school is an appropriate placement. Joint assessment, planning and support are therefore key principles which should underpin the system in recognition of the broad contribution which residential care can offer.

Recommendation 7

Residential staff have an important role in helping prepare a child for a move to a foster home and in the provision of continuing support. The resources, knowledge and skills of residential staff should be used more flexibly in the interests of securing stability of the child. Shared care arrangements should become more commonplace.

33. In terms of what makes good residential care, there are clear parallels with what makes a good school, yet lessons from school improvement work do not seem to be applied to the care system. There is, however, evidence that statutory requirements relating to residential care are sometimes undermined at present by financial constraints. This has implications in terms of the quality of residential care, in some cases leading to the departure of high quality staff. Compliance with National Minimum Standards is a real issue and it is widely known that much provision fails to meet the National Minimum Standards yet remains open. Whatever the setting, there must be clear, robust standards as to quality of care which is expected and these must be properly enforced.

Recommendation 8

The National Minimum Standards for both residential and fostering services should be more rigorously enforced. There should be no collusion with inadequate service provision for these most vulnerable children.

4.2 Foster Care

34. The majority of looked after children are currently in foster placements. These children have a wide range of needs, many extremely complex and challenging. Foster care gives children the opportunity of living in a family environment, and of experiencing positive role models. With the right support, it offers an effective means of meeting children's needs and at the same time recognises that these young people are likely one day to have their own families. In that respect it looks beyond current needs and helps equip young people with the skills they will need for the future, with respect to building relationships with others.

35. Although foster care is generally presented as a single category of care, as opposed to residential care, in current practice it comprises a number of key categories, including: "stranger" foster care; family and friends placements; remand foster care; short and long term foster care; and intensive ("treatment") foster care. Carers therefore require a variety of skills as well as high levels of training, development and support.

36. Local authorities and independent fostering providers have a great deal of flexibility in how they operate their fostering services and the variety of specialist schemes, payment systems and training or development programmes which are in place across the country is considerable. The foster carer workforce is moving towards increased 'professionalisation' but the role of foster carers truly is unique; no other activity impacts in quite the same way on private home life. In this society we are more fortunate than we might sometimes realise to be able to recruit people of such generosity of spirit and compassion that they are willing to open their homes and families in response to the needs of an unknown child or young person. We should treasure foster carers.

37. Whilst the high cost of residential care is widely acknowledged, foster care must not be seen as a "cheap" option. The service should be determined by the needs of the child, with placements

properly matched and appropriate packages of support in place to address needs. Clear information must be provided in advance of placements, both to carers and to young people themselves and introductions must be managed properly – except of course in emergencies, when this is not possible. The good will of foster carers must not be exploited; the State needs to value them and respect them for the huge contribution which they make to the lives of our most vulnerable children.

Recommendation 9

The Government should anticipate the need for increased funding for fostering services in view of the growing number of children and young people in foster care, and the increasing complexity of their needs.

38. The Government stresses frequently the importance of placement choice for young people but much more needs to be done to turn this into a reality. We are reminded often of the significant shortage of foster carers which already exists. Action is needed to address this, and to ensure that there is a surplus of placements rather than a shortage. Only then will there be real choice. It is unrealistic however to expect to maintain sufficient vacant placements to enable placement choice without incentives for carers, such as the payment of retainers. The regional commissioning pilots taking place in 2007 will explore whether increased placement choice can be delivered at a reasonable cost through better management of placement markets.

Recommendation 10

Local authorities must demonstrate the ability to access a wide range of placements as a means of matching effectively.

4.3 Vision for the Future

39. It is clear that there are problems at present with regard to young people's experience of the care system. We must, therefore, seize this opportunity to think more fundamentally about what the key features of the overall care system should be. The starting point for this should not be the differences between residential care and foster care, but the similarities.

40. It should never be forgotten that the child is at the heart of the system and of any decisions made. Regardless of the child's needs, the care system must offer maximum flexibility. A child will not necessarily be suited to one placement type or another; it may be that a mixture is appropriate for some children. Categories of placement such as residential care or foster care should therefore not necessarily be viewed as separate provision. As discussed under 'residential care' above, one type of placement may play a valuable role in supporting another.

41. So, the system needs to support individual children across different settings. But this goal will only be achieved if practitioners focus more on the idea of a 'package of care', ensuring that care plans reflect the totality of a child's needs. We therefore need to think beyond the confines of the current system and look at more holistic approaches to meeting the needs of children.

Recommendation 11

Residential homes, foster care and boarding school provision must be of equal status and their facilities used flexibly according to the changing needs of each child.

Case Study

Shaftesbury Homes and Arethusa

Anna is 13 and has been in care for the past 3 years because her Mum is unable to look after her.

Anna has been very torn between being loyal to her Mum and being angry with her. Anna's first foster placement disrupted after 15 months after some very challenging behaviour and a second shorter placement ended when she began to go missing.

Anna has now been in residential care for 18 months. She has been much more settled in this placement after building good relationships with staff who have helped her with appropriate ways to manage boundaries and to maintain positive contacts with Mum. She is receiving some 1-1 support which has helped her maintain her place in school.

Anna would like to live in a family **and** have a good relationship with her Mum. She does not want to go through another fostering breakdown. Three months ago she entered the Residential to Fostering programme devised by Shaftesbury Young People/ TACT and Families for Children.

Over the course of this year staff from the programme will work with Anna to help her prepare for fostering and will seek to identify a suitable local family. By next year they will have begun a programme of introductions which among other things will assure the foster family that they will have the backing of the residential staff that Anna knows and trusts. By the time Anna moves to her new family both foster carers and residential staff will be working in a close partnership to support her. This relationship will develop over time and will ensure that a whole range of resources can be easily used to meet Anna's needs. Whatever happens, the foster carers will always know that they can call on experienced and knowledgeable support 24 hours per day.

Anna says 'I want to live in a family but I know that the children's home will always be there for me if I need them. So will my Mum.'

42. The driver behind the care system should be good parenting and this has already been discussed in detail above. The State must have ambition for each child and this must be realised through practitioners' and carers' skills in providing motivation, encouragement and support. The Government's parenting agenda has a high profile but more effective links need to be made at national level between such initiatives and the care system.

43. In any ordinary family there is an expectation that children will remain at home until they are ready to leave, or receive ongoing family support. It is essential that the same assumptions are made for children in care. Adoption is intended to provide a permanent home for a child, but it will not be the right option for every child. Greater focus is therefore needed on alternative forms of permanence and the processes by which these are considered for individual children should be strengthened. There is, currently, insufficient planning for permanence; in many cases a child in long term foster care, for example, will have drifted into that placement more by chance than as the result of a properly planned and considered process. Whether through adoption, foster care or residential care, the State should be planning for permanence, throughout a young person's childhood and into adulthood. Joint planning and funding between Primary Care Trusts, local authorities and other children's trust partners must underpin this process and coherent policies must be in place to address the whole of a young person's needs and promote their well-being.

44. Where a child is in a long term placement, whatever the setting, some sensitivity is needed to help ensure that the young person remains settled in that placement. In that context, particular thought needs to be given to the best way of approaching discussions around leaving care.

Case Study

The Hammersmith and Fulham Adoption and Permanency Panel

The Hammersmith and Fulham Adoption and Permanency Panel is set up to deal with all forms of permanency arrangements for children – adoption, Special Guardianship, permanent fostering; as an adoption panel it considers the plan, the approval of the carers and the proposed adoption match, but as a Permanency Panel it extends this consideration of plans, carers, and matches to the other forms of permanency.

Given the lifelong nature of the decisions, the local authority wants to ensure that the same level of independent scrutiny is applied to all forms of permanence and that standards of practice are equally rigorous. The best way to get this “level playing field” is to apply the adoption requirements across the board.

Thorough assessments of permanent carers by experienced Adoption Team social workers is a skilled task that maximises the safety of children and applying the same standards to the Special Guardianship and permanent fostering ensures that shortcuts are not taken in this key area and assessments are just as thorough. It also means that the permanent commitment required from carers is tested more fully.

The wider brief gives the panel an overview of the quality of the local authority’s permanency work and its feedback is therefore more useful.

The panel must operate under one set of regulations for each individual case. The panel’s membership reflects the different requirements of the adoption and fostering regulations. Social workers must always propose a specific form of permanence and not seek a dual arrangement. All carers are encouraged to attend panel. The significance of the permanent commitment by the carer is reinforced at panel.

Social Pedagogy

45. In many parts of Europe social pedagogy is fundamental to the support provided to children in care and its value is widely recognised. Experience from Scandinavia or elsewhere is not necessarily directly transferable to our own care system but the essence of this approach can certainly be applied to our system.

46. Essentially, pedagogy is a system of theory, practice and training that supports the overall development of the whole child. It can be defined as ‘education in the broadest sense of the word’ (Petrie et al. 2006). Pedagogues work with all age groups and in a range of settings, including residential care for young people, adult services, youth work and early childhood education. Whilst our existing infrastructure and systems may prevent the introduction of models used in other countries, in their precise form, we should recognise the importance of a broader skills base among those working with children in care, and should embrace social pedagogy as a means of securing the range of support which young people need.

47. It is crucial that greater focus is given to multi-agency approaches and to the importance of working across boundaries in order to enable each child to receive a comprehensive package of support. We should therefore take the essence of a social pedagogy approach and apply it to the training and practice of those who, together, are responsible for meeting the needs of children and their families.

Recommendation 12

The Government needs to look at lessons from those areas in the UK which are already employing pedagogues, as well as those where pedagogy students are on work placement. It should also seek ways of implementing a pedagogic framework for training and education which adapts to the English situation and builds upon it.

48. In terms of future development, the *Every Child Matters* agenda provides a real opportunity to break down traditional barriers and enable pedagogy to be considered in a developmental context. In particular, the establishment of lead members and Directors of Children's Services provides an opportunity to adopt a more holistic approach to the development of children's needs.

49. Regarding the balance between different categories of provision, local authorities should be able to demonstrate that they have the right mix of provision for their circumstances but it is not for central Government to prescribe what that mix might be; this is clearly related to local need. However, Government's assessment of the degree to which local authorities are succeeding in this aim should be informed by exploring the link between outcomes (including performance against stability targets) and the provision which is in place.

Recommendation 13

The Government needs to consider how best to make use of the considerable amount of data available to support local authorities in improving their strategic planning.

50. Wherever a child is placed, local authorities' decisions must be underpinned by a commitment to minimise disruption for the child concerned. Even if a placement changes, the child should be supported in maintaining continuity as far as possible – for example in terms of school, out of school activities etc. For this reason, the assumption must be that out of authority placements should be used only when clearly in the best interests of the child.

Recommendation 14

Decisions about the future care of the child should be on a planned basis in order to minimise the further disruption to the life of the child. Admissions at a time of crisis should be confined to those situations that were unforeseeable.

51. For some children, a placement away from their home community out of their local authority area will be the right choice. However, lack of available local placements combined with limited commissioning capacity may mean that children are placed out of authority with little real matching or prior planning. This is a matter of concern, since children placed out of their local authority may be particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes. These children often have difficulty being able to access appropriate local services so that, for example, they can get the right support to help them with their education, or are able to use local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Children and young people can feel isolated in such placements and miss

contact with their friends and with their local communities. They may also feel that they may not be able to depend on regular visits from their social workers to make sure that plans for their future care reflect their wishes and feelings. We know too from the work of the Children's Rights Director that some children placed out of their local authority have even been threatened with the abrupt ending of their out of authority placements even though they feel settled and happy.

52. *Care Matters* included a commitment that Government would "introduce a requirement that local authorities can place children out of authority only if no suitable more local placement exists". A measure of this type, combined with proposals aimed at encouraging more people to come forward as foster carers, will enable children who have to come into care the opportunity to benefit by remaining in their local communities.

53. Of course, it is not realistic to expect that every need will be met locally. But where an out of authority placement is being considered, it will be important that this option is discussed with the child and, wherever possible, that he or she is able to visit the placement before moving in. Whenever an out of authority placement has to be made, the child concerned should be provided with at least as much support as would have been provided had the placement been closer to their home.

Recommendation 15

Distant placements should be avoided unless it can be demonstrated that they are in the best interests of the child. Wherever possible a child coming into care should be helped to maintain contact with familiar aspects of their life such as the wider family, school and friends.

54. Currently, far too many young people leave care before they have fulfilled their educational potential. Fundamental action is needed to address this, and to support the education of children in care. This is a real priority; children who are in the care system have already had to overcome huge challenges; data shows that they are disadvantaged in comparison with their peers in many respects. The data show that looked after children do less well on education indicators across the key stages of compulsory education. At key stage 4 only 64% of looked after children sat an exam, compared to 98% of all children, and only 11% achieved 5 good GCSEs in 2005, compared with 56% of all children. This makes it particularly important that children in care are supported in completing their education and are given access to high quality opportunities, with the right support in place to help them succeed. As far as possible, disruption to a young person's education should be avoided. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 to promote the educational achievement of the children they look after. That means they must take account of the educational implications of any placement decisions they make, especially if it will require the child to move from their school.

Recommendation 16

Children in care should be given special consideration when addressing their educational needs. Any child studying for qualifications should have the assurance that their placement is secure and they will be given proper support.

55. With respect to the age at which young people leave care, *Care Matters* announced the Government's plans to pilot a veto for young people in care over any decisions about leaving care before age 18, and a scheme under which young people may remain in foster care until the age of 21. Both of these initiatives are to be greatly welcomed, not least because of their potential in supporting the educational goals above, however they should not be restricted only to those in foster placements. The opportunity to remain longer in care is potentially equally beneficial to those in residential or other placements and it is crucial that a consistent approach is taken across care settings.

56. In any case, we know that many young people are not ready to leave care at the age of 16 or even 18 and the abrupt change in which the current system results at these ages is unhelpful. No regard is given to the individual young person's developmental stage, which should be an important factor in decisions about leaving care. Indeed the State must recognise that there will be some children for whom it will have long term responsibility and for whom it will need to play a continuing role beyond the age of 18; a multi-agency approach involving a range of services would help ensure that the needs of such individuals are met in a coherent way.

57. At present, for those young people who leave care at 16, discussions around leaving care begin at the very young age of 15, serving to create an atmosphere of insecurity and unease which may unsettle the existing placement and have a wider impact, for example in educational terms. Young people within the care system would benefit greatly from a more flexible approach to leaving care, mirroring arrangements already in place in schools, whereby a young person may stay on beyond the normal leaving age in order to retake exams for example.

Recommendation 17

Every local authority should be required to demonstrate it has in place an effective "Leaving Care Policy".

Recommendation 18

The Government should monitor carefully the number of children leaving residential or foster care before their 18th birthday and publish this information.

58. Whatever the age at which the young person leaves care, there is certainly much scope for greater co-operation across services in local authorities, including, for example, the local authority Housing Department, to ensure that coherent packages of support are in place.

Recommendation 19

Special consideration should be given to providing safe, secure, affordable housing deliberately selected to facilitate the move to independence. All children in care need help when the time comes to live more independently. Too often these young people are placed in accommodation which no one else will take.

5 Involving Young People

59. The introduction to this report made clear that young people are at the centre of all the issues which this report considers. Listening to young people is therefore essential, and will have a significant impact on outcomes. Yet too often, young people are not properly involved in decisions which affect their lives and their futures; this is not acceptable. The establishment of the Children's Rights Director is a welcome step and we must make full use of this resource to effect change.

60. The agreement of a coherent, comprehensive and achievable care plan which addresses the unique needs of each child in care is essential. The greater the degree of planning, the more likely it is that a placement will succeed; it is unlikely that the goals set out in the care plan will be achieved without 'buy-in' from the young person concerned. It is therefore in the best interests of all concerned that young people understand the options available and that they are properly involved, at the appropriate times, in the planning process.

What children said about care plans

According to the *Being Fostered* report, when a sample of children were asked about their care plan, six out of ten children (59%) knew what was in their care plan and 44% had been asked about what it should say. 27% knew that they had a care plan but did not know what it said, whilst 26% had not been asked what they thought it should say. One in twenty did not think they had a care plan.

(Being Fostered – Dr Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director, 2005)

61. But we need to think more imaginatively about other means of empowering children in care. Organisations such as A National Voice, for example, play an extremely valuable role and there is a danger that without the support of such organisations, the voice of children in care will not be heard loudly enough. The Government should therefore support these organisations in their efforts to let young people be heard.

Recommendation 20

The Government should take steps to secure the long term funding of "A National Voice" and of the Children's Rights Director.

62. The question of choice is often discussed in relation to placements, and *Care Matters* sets out further proposals for increasing the choice available to young people. No one disagrees that young people need real, supported choices but precisely what we mean by choice, and by giving children choice, is not clear. It is not necessarily realistic to expect young people to be able to choose their placements, but certainly more thought needs to be given as to how they can feed

into and influence important decisions which affect their lives and their futures. The reality though is the number of choices will be limited by availability and financial constraints and that the element of choice which a young person has is restricted. The real issue, therefore, is finding a balance between choice, outcomes and value for money.

Recommendation 21

Young people must be involved in the decision making processes relating to their future care.

63. *Care Matters* recognises the value of placements with ‘family and friends’. One element of choice should therefore be about being able to express a preference to live with a member of the extended family before care proceedings or a period of accommodation begin, hence the importance of family group conferencing. But where a child does enter care, mechanisms need to be in place to allow children to be accommodated whilst the right placement is found. Whatever the placement, there should be proper introductions ahead of the start of that placement and young people should always be given the opportunity to express their views about new placements (including changes of placement for those already in care). For young people already in the care system we must continue to enable them to express their views and demonstrate that they are listened to. If a child is settled and happy in a placement then the system should make it difficult for that placement to be changed without very good reason.

Recommendation 22

Whenever possible, young people should be introduced to a new placement gradually. For a child moving from residential care to a foster home this should begin by short visits so that both the child and the foster carers can decide if they like the proposed new arrangement. Too many placements currently break down because of precipitous decisions.

64. All placements will, however, come to an end and when that happens, greater efforts should be made to learn lessons from both the child and the carer, for example by conducting exit interviews. Learning from previous experience, in particular from those in the best position to offer views, is a valuable way of improving future practice. This principle should extend to the inspection process itself; young people’s views and experience should be given much greater prominence in the inspection process with a view to reinforcing good practice and reducing poor practice.

Case Study

LILAC Project (A National Voice and NLCAS, supported by The Fostering Network, SCIE and CSCI)

In a new initiative known as the LILAC project, 10 young people are training to become inspectors of local authorities' care services. The purpose of LILAC is to draw upon the experiences and expertise of care experienced young people to improve the policy and practice of local authorities in how they involve and consult with looked after children and care leavers.

LILAC inspections will concentrate on how well local authorities involve looked after children in their own care, in the planning and evaluation of care services generally, and on how effectively authorities handle complaints.

The intention is for LILAC to be viewed as a useful quality assessment framework and used by local authorities, community and statutory organisations to assess and improve policies and practices in involving young people in and leaving care.

6 The Tiered Model

- 65.** The tiered model set out in *Care Matters* provides a framework to support local authorities in putting in place the right range of provision for their care population. It recognises the different complexities and types of need, as well as the different purpose of placements – for example respite care, or long term care.
- 66.** But decisions about the placements of individual children are highly complex and take account of a range of factors so diverse that a single model cannot be drawn up to determine the correct placement. The tiered model is therefore too crude to be of real use at the level of individual placement decisions; in practice a far more complex system is needed which takes account not just of the characteristics of the child and the carer but of other factors, such as whether the carer works or is available to stay at home with a child all day, or whether the carer would be involved in training other carers.
- 67.** Whilst it would not be practical to use a model based on only three basic tiers to make placement decisions, nevertheless the model provides a useful means of establishing a national benchmark for the standards expected of carers. At present there is no consistency across the country in the way in which decisions about the approval of foster carers are made, with the result that an individual who is approved by one agency may be turned down by another. The tiered model could therefore provide the basis for the development of national guidelines to be used in the approval process. Any such guidelines would of course need to take account of the new Training, Support and Development Standards for foster care produced by the Children’s Workforce Development Council.
- 68.** The application of the tiered model to the residential sector is not made explicit in *Care Matters*. However, as previously discussed in this report, a more flexible and comprehensive approach to meeting children’s needs is required and it is therefore crucial that the introduction of any such tiered model does not marginalise residential care. On the contrary, the Government’s aim should be to produce a framework of competence applicable to all placement types; it would then be for the local authority to carry out an assessment of need and match children to appropriate placements using more sophisticated means. It is absolutely clear though that the tiered model should not be used to categorise individual children.
- 69.** *Care Matters* also proposes the introduction of a national framework of qualifications, and of a training framework, to underpin the tiered model. Greater coherence in this area is to be welcomed, in particular its contribution to the creation of a highly skilled workforce, with transferable skills and high morale. However, further thought is needed as to how skills, qualifications, support and payments might be reflected in the tiered model. Whilst all of these issues are all related, no single factor determines the others and the relationship between them can be highly complex.

7 Commissioning

70. Much work has already been funded by Government to improve commissioning at local authority level and there is considerable evidence of good practice across the country. Many local authorities, for example, work together on the basis of regional consortia to commission more effectively and have developed effective links with a range of providers in the independent and voluntary sectors. Such a partnership approach leads to real extension of choice in terms of available placements and is to be welcomed.

Case Study

Sub-Regional Placement Commissioning (Devon, Cornwall and Torbay)

Devon have developed an innovative approach to commissioning residential placements for children and young people, which has demonstrated reduced costs and improved outcomes. By working together to manage the process, Devon, Cornwall and Torbay have made significant improvements in choice and quality where possible, contributing significantly to improved outcomes for children and young people. Within 24 hours the needs of the child or young person are assessed, a competitive tender is undertaken, and a placement agreed which is designed to meet needs and deliver outcomes. **Initial Aims included:**

- improving sub-regional market management;
- implementing fast competitive tendering;
- sharing back-office functions;
- ensuring consistent and high placement quality and
- building placements around needs.

Evidence from this initial evaluation shows improvement in choice, quality and costs – with specific examples of efficiency savings. These savings have helped Devon to meet Gershon efficiency targets (2 placements alone contribute £177,000 annual savings). Initial evaluation also shows:

- £250,000 annualised savings from tenders in the first 3 months;
- 450% increase in placement choice;
- Improved placement quality;
- More efficient use of time for practitioners, commissioners and providers;
- Evidence of innovation, efficiency, effectiveness from providers.

71. However, more needs to be done to embed good practice further. Local authorities should be required to demonstrate good commissioning practice and should be more accountable for their performance in this area. There should be clear evidence of a focus on outcomes and consideration of available evidence around the quality of providers/placements and outcomes. At present this is not the case.

72. The greatest value of the tiered model lies in its use as a tool in supporting local authorities in assessing the needs of their care populations and developing appropriate provision.

73. Effective commissioning strategies are particularly important in the context of highly specialised provision, such as secure children's homes. For some children and young people a placement in a secure children's home will be the right, and indeed the only appropriate placement. These are young people whose welfare needs can best be met through this type of setting; their needs may relate solely to the safeguarding and promotion of their own welfare, but they may also relate to the protection of others. It is essential therefore that there continues to be a sufficient number of welfare places in secure children's homes across the country; further thought needs to be given to the best way of commissioning these services in order to ensure sufficient availability of this highly specialised provision. The development of a more strategic approach to commissioning, taken forward in collaboration with the Youth Justice Board, will be of particular importance to the future of the secure estate and any revised Children Act 1989 guidance which is issued should cover welfare placements in secure children's homes, stressing the need for local authorities to ensure that such placements are viewed as a positive intervention, rather than simply being a last resort.

74. More generally, it is not always clear at present that wider commissioning decisions feed into everyday practice and there appears to be much greater scope for one supporting the other. There might, for example, be a link between the approvals process for foster carers and effective commissioning; in particular through the way in which the panel process is operated. Under such an approach the process for approving foster carers could be linked directly to assessed need. Similarly, targeted recruitment campaigns could make better use at local level of identified needs within the area or region.

Recommendation 23

Every local authority must have a Commissioning Strategy based on the assessment of the needs of the children in their area. The Tiered Model should be further developed as a means of securing a wider range of more appropriate services. Local authorities are likely to need to enter into consortium arrangements and they must clearly use the knowledge and expertise of the voluntary and private sectors.

8 Workforce

75. The issues which the Placements Working Group has discussed cannot be developed in isolation from wider workforce issues; the tiered model and associated proposals for qualifications, training and development have significant implications for the workforce.

76. *Care Matters* recognises that only 5% of foster carers have an NVQ level 3 relevant to working with children, and social workers report that the quality of educational support which foster carers are able to offer children in their care is often limited. We know too that over 40% of managers in residential care lack a relevant qualification for working with children, and only 5% of children's homes can demonstrate that at least 80% of their staff have a relevant NVQ or equivalent qualification.

77. No one disagrees that the supply of high quality residential carers and foster carers is crucial, but issues around supply and skills of social workers must also be addressed if *Care Matters* is to become a reality. Without sufficient able social workers, skilled in providing advocacy for each young person, these reforms would not be workable. The supply of skilled staff is fundamental to the success of these reforms and sufficient emphasis has not, thus far, been given to this issue.

Recommendation 24

The Government needs to take action to ensure a greater number of high quality carers, and more effective use of family and friends carers. Choice of placement and better matching of the needs of the child and the placement will only be secured through a wider range of provision.

8.1 Development of Skills and Competences

78. In addressing the requirement of a wider range of placements there is much debate about the 'professionalisation' of the foster workforce and different views as to what this means in practice. Foster care is truly a unique occupation; both loving relationships and a high level of competence and skill are key to successful placements. We cannot determine the 'right' kind of carer simply by assessing their educational background, qualifications or level of training. We need to focus on their ability to care, and on their capacity to meet the needs of this group of children. For that reason there will always be a place in foster care for those who are not seeking career progression as such. The development of a high quality workforce must take account of such people and recognise that expectations around training, development and qualifications may vary according to the individual. However, fostering is a challenging task which brings with it huge responsibility and all carers must be properly equipped with the skills they need to do the job.

79. On a day to day level it is clear that much more can be done to ensure that foster carers feel valued as part of a professional team, and that their status is recognised. Often foster carers are not involved in discussions about children's care, or in decisions about their care planning, and they may not be empowered to make basic administrative decisions. As a result they sometimes

feel like second class members of the workforce. The reality is that these are the people who care, often 24 hours a day, for children with the most challenging needs, opening up their homes, their families and their hearts to other people's children. Good parenting skills are an essential aspect of fostering in supporting, developing and encouraging children to move forward. But fostering involves much more than good parenting skills. The value of foster carers' contribution to society cannot be overstated; it must be recognised and rewarded. One essential ingredient of good outcomes is the availability of 24 hours appropriate support.

Recommendation 25

For those who provide 24 hour care there should be the availability of 24 hour support.

80. Efforts to raise the status of carers and to equip them with transferable skills may enable some carers to take on higher levels of responsibility than has previously been the case, thus impacting on other sectors of the workforce. For example, a more highly trained foster carer workforce may enable carers to participate more fully in other areas of work undertaken by social workers. This is not an issue which was discussed in detail in the Group but it does highlight the need to consider proposals around residential and foster care in the context of wider workforce issues.

8.2 Training

81. As this report has already highlighted, the complex needs of children in the care system demand a range of skills from those who care for them. The term training needs to be given a broad interpretation: formal training courses play a part in enabling carers to acquire new skills but less formal development is crucial, as is effective support and supervision. For that reason the Government also needs to consider the competence of supervising social workers and those in supporting roles within the local authority.

82. As far as carers themselves are concerned, however, training, development and support must be appropriate and serve to equip them with the skills and competences they need, whether they are in a residential or a foster care setting. The overlap between the two placement types is considerable and in both cases a balance is needed between the parenting role and professional skills. In this context too, the Government must move towards a more coherent approach which builds on the similarities rather than highlighting the differences.

Recommendation 26

The status of both residential and foster carers must be addressed, including through greater access to training and continuing professional development, proper recompense, and through strong leadership and support.

83. Although it presents a picture of a structured model with opportunities for progression through the tiers, *Care Matters* does not indicate how carers might progress through the three tiers proposed. Carers of young people with complex needs require a high level of skills and competence but the tiered model does not reflect the importance, in effective caring, of an individual's capacity to respond to the particular needs of a young person. The assessment of an individual carer's competences is difficult since it must necessarily take account of the needs of the young person in placement and of the desired outcomes for that young person. For these and other reasons, progression through the tiered model should not be solely via an academic route.

Recommendation 27

The usefulness and standard of training currently available should be robustly reviewed. Emphasis should be given to a wider understanding of Child Development and carers must be properly equipped to deal with challenging behaviour.

84. In considering the issue of training and development, thought must be given to demographic issues, particularly with regard to the foster care workforce. The level of educational attainment among foster carers varies widely and the content and delivery of training should reflect this. This gives rise to a number of questions, including whether all carers should receive the same training or whether bespoke training should be available.

85. Although the focus in this report is on the training requirements of carers and social workers, local authorities need to take account also of the training needs of others who may be involved in the life of a looked after child. A lack of understanding on the part of a teacher, for example, can have a negative impact on the young person – and in some cases on the success of the placement itself.

8.3 Fees

86. It is estimated that, at present, around 60% of foster carers receive a fee for their work, in addition to the allowance which they receive for the cost of caring for a child. However arrangements for paying foster carers vary widely: the payment of a fee may be linked to levels of training, to the needs of the child in placement or to experience and time served. In some local authorities, a small number of foster carers are now paid fees at a level which equates to a salary. There is no uniform approach either to the way in which carers are paid, or to the level of payment which they receive, and this contributes to the lack of clarity around how foster carers are perceived. The payment of a fee is certainly associated with the development of a professionalised workforce. But, as the section on Workforce above sets out, the foster carer workforce is a unique one which does not lend itself readily to a single solution.

87. However, in developing payment systems for carers, local authorities must be mindful of a number of issues, not least the impact of fostering on a person's availability for other paid work. In many cases a foster carer will be unable to take up paid employment because he or she will be required to stay at home in order to meet the needs of the child in placement. The demands which are made of foster carers, the skills required and the outcomes being sought are also highly significant factors.

88. It is not appropriate for Government to prescribe a single payment structure to be applied across all local authorities, tied in with particular levels of training, qualification or competence. Evidence suggests that a system which is successful in one local authority will not necessarily work for a different authority. Foster care services across the country often have unique identities and have grown up over time – they need to reflect the characteristics of their own service in the way in which they structure their payment systems. But there are many examples of effective payment systems, which recognise the diversity of the workforce and the role of foster carers in transforming outcomes for children in care. Every local authority must be able to demonstrate that it has in place a properly structured and fair system and more should be done by Government to encourage the sharing and take-up of good practice in this respect.

Recommendation 28

Every local authority must be able to demonstrate that it has an effective policy on payments to foster carers. Foster carers must not be exploited – since generally they will be denied the opportunity to pursue other gainful employment, their work should often attract a fee.

8.4 Registration

89. *Care Matters* suggests that the tiered model of placement types would be underpinned by mandatory registration of foster carers. Members of the Placements Working Group strongly advocated the introduction of mandatory registration and felt that it would have the following benefits:

- Create parity with other members of the children’s workforce;
- Help ensure consistency in the approvals process;
- Set clear standards with regard to foster carers’ conduct;
- Enforce requirements around training and development;
- Strengthen measures to safeguard children; and
- Raise the status and profile of foster carers.

90. These objectives are undoubtedly valid and the Government should focus on achieving them in order to raise the quality and morale of the workforce. However, further thought needs to be given to the implications of a national registration scheme for the way in which fostering services currently operate, as well as to the extent to which some of the benefits outlined above might be achievable through other means.

91. It is certainly the case that there are some flaws within the current system, in particular regarding the exchange of information when a foster carer leaves one provider and applies to a different one, perhaps because he or she is moving to a different part of the country. This has led to concerns about safeguarding, since it is possible that the approval of a carer could be terminated by one provider as a result of worries about standards of care or potentially abuse of a child, but the individual concerned could apply to a different provider without this information coming to light. The current system relies to some extent on the honesty of the applicant and his or her willingness to disclose potentially incriminating information.

92. However, foster care is – as this report has already highlighted – a unique occupation and this is reflected in the nature of the local approval process which currently applies. The process is designed to take account of a range of detailed information about carers and others within their fostering household. The importance of up to date information about carers’ circumstances, including where and with whom they are living, is reflected in the current requirements for regular reviews. Foster carers themselves may attend meetings of the Fostering Panel to discuss specific issues or areas of concern. The introduction of a national registration scheme could have significant implications, therefore, for the way in which foster carers are approved and on the extent to which social workers’ knowledge of particular carers’ circumstances feeds into decisions about both approval and placements. Registration should not be seen as a substitute for strong management.

93. The final two of the benefits listed above provide the most powerful argument for registration. A national register of approved foster carers would highlight the importance of foster carers in the children's workforce and help raise their status. It could also be used to facilitate information sharing among fostering providers, helping to strengthen measures to safeguard children.

Recommendation 29

The Government should explore ways of introducing a national register of foster carers. In doing so it should be mindful of the potential impact on the existing local approval process, and of the need for the bureaucracy involved in any new scheme to be minimal for foster carers.

8.5 Recruitment

94. The proposals in *Care Matters* include funding by Government of a locally delivered campaign to recruit foster carers from a range of backgrounds. No detail is provided as to what this means in practice, and it is widely acknowledged by local authorities that campaigns need to be planned and delivered locally if they are to be effective, since they must be tailored to the specific characteristics of area or region.

95. Evidence suggests that local authorities would, however, welcome increased efforts by Government to raise the status and profile of foster care in particular, and to improve understanding more generally of the work of those who care for looked after children. Increased understanding of these issues at national level would play an important part in supporting local efforts to recruit carers.

Recommendation 30

The Government should conduct a national awareness campaign aimed at improving the understanding of the needs of children in care and the work of those who care for them.

9 Inspection

96. Inspection plays a crucial role in supporting the development of high quality provision for children in care. Proper assessment of provision also assists local authorities in understanding how effectively they are using their resources and enables good providers to flourish as a result. However, the information available to purchasers currently about what their money is buying is not good enough. The nature of care settings and their focus on particular types of need can make it difficult simply to compare one provider with another. For that reason it is important that inspection findings take due account of the context, in order to enable a like for like comparison by those commissioning services.

Recommendation 31

The Government Inspectorates should be required to inspect the quality of the services delivered to children in care by each of the key agencies and to assess the effectiveness of inter-agency co-operation.

97. The inspection regime therefore needs to be reviewed in order to establish a more robust means of assessing the quality of the service provided, and whether the desired outcomes are being achieved. The current arrangements could usefully develop a sharper focus and evaluate outcomes more effectively. From the point of view of the young person, basic questions, such as how happy the young person is in a particular placement or setting, are often not addressed. Indeed young people's views generally are often not given sufficient weight in assessments of the quality of provision.

Recommendation 32

All inspections should include the views of children in care about the quality of their experience.

98. The role of the local authority as corporate parent has already been considered in detail in this report. The extent to which the local authority succeeds in carrying out this role should be considered as part of the inspection process since it is an essential part of the function of the local authority, with significant implications for those children within the care system. Formal inspection provides the obvious means of ensuring that there are consequences for poor performance in this area.

99. But the role of corporate parent is a substantial one, involving a coherent package of support from a number of agencies including health and education. Local authorities should therefore have in place their own internal quality assurance processes and these should be considered as part of the inspection process.

Recommendation 33

Every local authority should be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems.

10 Funding

100. Whilst there is doubt that existing resources are being used flexibly and to the greatest effect, it is clear that the Government will need to fund many of the recommendations in this report.

101. The overriding principle with regard to placement decisions must always be to meet the needs of the individual child as effectively as possible, and to place the child in the most appropriate placement for his or her individual needs. However, cost will necessarily enter the equation. Judgements will need to be made about individual placements in the light of available resources and, inevitably, a balance will need to be struck. However, at present there is insufficient information for commissioners to determine whether a particular placement offers value for money, and significant differences in the cost of care across local authorities.

102. As far as overall levels of funding are concerned, there has been considerable investment in social care by Government in recent years but resources are often not used efficiently. Investing to save requires up-front funding which many local authorities are unable to find, although there are some notable examples of good practice whereby local authorities have targeted resources effectively in order to reduce the number of children needing to come into care, thus making savings elsewhere.

103. As corporate parent, the whole of the local authority should be involved in planning and managing budgets for children in care. Too often children in care are viewed at present as the responsibility of social services, or of a residential or fostering team. In practice however a child in care may have cost implications for a range of services, notably health, education, CAMHS and housing. Joint planning of budgets is therefore essential if the proper packages of support are to be put in place around every child.

104. The annual budget cycle does, however, cause problems for local authorities. It impacts both on the way in which local authorities are able to plan internally, and on the services which they themselves commission. A move away from this annual budget determination, towards a longer budget cycle, would enable more effective management of budgets and support longer term planning.

105. This would also fit with the Government's commitment via the Third Sector Compact to ensure stable funding for the voluntary sector and social enterprises.

Recommendation 34

The Government should consider ways of moving away from annual budget rounds in order to facilitate longer term planning of services for children and families.

11 Family and Friends Placements

106. *Care Matters* highlights the importance and benefits of family and friends care and stresses that social workers should, as a priority and in line with the Children Act 1989, consider family members as possible carers and promote the use of Family Group Conferencing.

Recommendation 35

Family Group Conferences should be used whenever appropriate to ensure that the possibility of a placement with family and friends is explored. When such placements are made, proper support should be available to the substitute parent.

107. The issue of family and friends care spans the work both of the Placements Working Group, and of the Working Group considering the Future of the Care Population. Some of those placed with family and friends carers will be looked after; others will not. However although the needs of these two groups are not necessarily different, there is considerable variation in the levels of support – including financial – which carers receive.

108. We know that there are a significant number of non looked after children in the care of family and friends who are struggling financially and who receive little or no support from local authorities, despite the fact that the children concerned may have the same or similar needs as children within the care system. It is clear that much greater equity is needed in the system, in particular with regard to assessing the needs of children and carers and providing support necessary to meet them.

109. It is generally agreed that family and friends carers do not fit comfortably within either the usual parenting or foster care support structures and that there is a perceived need to provide support targeted at this specific group in view of its distinct characteristics. The Government must therefore first agree a clear definition of what is meant by family and friends care before it can take action to improve practice.

110. A number of local authorities are already providing services to family and friends carers under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, which is intended to enable children to undergo an assessment and receive help in order to be maintained within their wider families. However, there is a perceived lack of clarity about the legality of long term use of Section 17 financial payments and very wide variations among authorities in the use of Section 17 to support family and friends placements. Government guidelines covering the intended use of this section of the Act would therefore be welcome and would serve to clarify expectations for all concerned.

Recommendation 36

The Government should take steps to inform local authorities that it expects them to make better use of the freedoms they have under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 in support of children and families.

111. Improvement in practice does not necessarily require an amendment to existing legislation but action is certainly needed to ensure that there is clarity both within local authorities themselves, and among families and carers of children concerned, as to the level of support which should be provided. In taking any such measures, Government must take care to avoid unnecessary interference in informal family arrangements which are functioning effectively.

112. *Care Matters: Transforming the lives of Children and Young People in Care* is to be admired as a document which combines values, commitment and ambition for the most vulnerable children in our society. Its potential will have been realised when the Government and every local authority can take pride in their achievements as a “good parent” to every child in care. That is an admirable ambition. Everything must now be done to move to full implementation and maintain that momentum.

12 Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Government must take action to ensure a better trained, supported and managed range of staff and carers. Central and Local Government must recognise that children and young people entering care have more diverse and complex needs than in the past.

Recommendation 2: Care must be, from the outset, a more positive experience for all young people in care.

Recommendation 3: The State must fulfil the role of a substitute parent, with all that it entails, in both residential and foster care.

Recommendation 4: Children in care should always be supported at events such as parent/teacher meetings, plays or sporting events. The State has both a duty and moral obligation to be a good parent to each child in care. This means much more than physical care – it is about demonstrating love, encouragement and an interest in every aspect of the child's life at school, sport and recreation.

Recommendation 5: Those who provide the care for the child should be given the fullest possible information and involved in case conferences and other decision making processes.

Recommendation 6: Every child should be accorded dignity so that in any move the personal possessions of the child are transported appropriately – and not in carrier or bin bags.

Recommendation 7: Residential staff have an important role in helping prepare a child for a move to a foster home and in the provision of continuing support. The resources, knowledge and skills of residential staff should be used more flexibly in the interests of securing stability of the child. Shared care arrangements should become more commonplace.

Recommendation 8: The National Minimum Standards for both residential and fostering services should be more rigorously enforced. There should be no collusion with inadequate service provision for these most vulnerable children.

Recommendation 9: The Government should anticipate the need for increased funding for fostering services in view of the growing number of children and young people in foster care, and the increasing complexity of their needs.

Recommendation 10: Local authorities must demonstrate the ability to access a wide range of placements as a means of matching effectively.

Recommendation 11: Residential homes, foster care and boarding school provision must be of equal status and their facilities used flexibly according to the changing needs of each child.

Recommendation 12: The Government needs to look at lessons from those areas in the UK which are already employing pedagogues, as well as those where pedagogy students are on work placement. It should also seek ways of implementing a pedagogic framework for training and education which adapts to the English situation and builds upon it.

Recommendation 13: The Government needs to consider how best to make use of the considerable amount of data available to support local authorities in improving their strategic planning.

Recommendation 14: Decisions about the future care of the child should be on a planned basis in order to minimise the further disruption to the life of the child. Admissions at a time of crisis should be confined to those situations that were unforeseeable.

Recommendation 15: Distant placements should be avoided unless it can be demonstrated that they are in the best interests of the child. Wherever possible a child coming into care should be helped to maintain contact with familiar aspects of their life such as the wider family, school and friends.

Recommendation 16: Children in care should be given special consideration when addressing their educational needs. Any child studying for qualifications should have the assurance that their placement is secure and they will be given proper support.

Recommendation 17: Every local authority should be required to demonstrate it has in place an effective "Leaving Care Policy".

Recommendation 18: The Government should monitor carefully the number of children leaving residential or foster care before their 18th birthday and publish this information.

Recommendation 19: Special consideration should be given to providing safe, secure, affordable housing deliberately selected to facilitate the move to independence. All children in care need help when the time comes to live more independently. Too often these young people are placed in accommodation which no one else will take.

Recommendation 20: The Government should take steps to secure the long term funding of "A National Voice" and of the Children's Rights Director.

Recommendation 21: Young people must be involved in the decision making processes relating to their future care.

Recommendation 22: Whenever possible, young people should be introduced to a new placement gradually. For a child moving from residential care to a foster home this should begin by short visits so that both the child and the foster carers can decide if they like the proposed new arrangement. Too many placements currently break down because of precipitous decisions.

Recommendation 23: Every local authority must have a Commissioning Strategy based on the assessment of the needs of the children in their area. The Tiered Model should be further developed as a means of securing a wider range of more appropriate services. Local authorities are likely to need to enter into consortium arrangements and they must clearly use the knowledge and expertise of the voluntary and private sectors.

Recommendation 24: The Government needs to take action to ensure a greater number of high quality carers, and more effective use of family and friends carers. Choice of placement and better matching of the needs of the child and the placement will only be secured through a wider range of provision.

Recommendation 25: For those who provide 24 hour care there should be the availability of 24 hour support.

Recommendation 26: The status of both residential and foster carers must be addressed, including through greater access to training and continuing professional development, proper recompense, and through strong leadership and support.

Recommendation 27: The usefulness and standard of training currently available should be robustly reviewed. Emphasis should be given to a wider understanding of Child Development and carers must be properly equipped to deal with challenging behaviour.

Recommendation 28: Every local authority must be able to demonstrate that it has an effective policy on payments to foster carers. Foster carers must not be exploited – since generally they will be denied the opportunity to pursue other gainful employment, their work should often attract a fee.

Recommendation 29: The Government should explore ways of introducing a national register of foster carers. In doing so it should be mindful of the potential impact on the existing local approval process, and of the need for the bureaucracy involved in any new scheme to be minimal for foster carers.

Recommendation 30: The Government should conduct a national awareness campaign aimed at improving the understanding of the needs of children in care and the work of those who care for them.

Recommendation 31: The Government Inspectorates should be required to inspect the quality of the services delivered to children in care by each of the key agencies and to assess the effectiveness of inter-agency co-operation.

Recommendation 32: All inspections should include the views of children in care about the quality of their experience.

Recommendation 33: Every local authority should be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems.

Recommendation 34: The Government should consider ways of moving away from annual budget rounds in order to facilitate longer term planning of services for children and families.

Recommendation 35: Family Group Conferences should be used whenever appropriate to ensure that the possibility of a placement with family and friends is explored. When such placements are made, proper support should be available to the substitute parent.

Recommendation 36: The Government should take steps to inform local authorities that it expects them to make better use of the freedoms they have under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 in support of children and families.

Annex 1: Membership

Placements Working Group

Lord Laming – Chair

Andrew Christie – Association of Directors of Children’s Services

Hilton Dawson – Shaftesbury Young People

Jane Haywood – Children’s Workforce Development Council

Barbara Hearn – National Children’s Bureau

Pam Hibbert – Barnardos

Pat Petrie – Thomas Coram Research Institute

Professor Ian Sinclair – University of York

Robert Tapsfield – The Fostering Network

Benni-Jo Tyler – A National Voice and Shaftesbury Young People

Department for Education and Skills

Natalie Acton – Deputy Director, Children in Care Division

Mark Burrows – Children in Care Division

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