

THE CHALLENGE OF ACHIEVING PERMANENCE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

REPORT OF A SEMINAR AT CORAM 22nd OCTOBER 2015

Introduction

Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent
Director of Operations and Deputy CEO, Coram

Renuka explained that the Coram charity had been caring for separated children since 1739. This was a remarkable achievement as it demonstrates that the organisation has learnt and changed to deliver to children's needs. Some of what was offered in the intervening 276 years did not work, although past practice that is now perceived negatively was applied in good faith and probably seemed right at the time. What has been learnt is that there is no quick fix to helping children needing substitute care and practice has evolved in the light of experience, evidence and changing expectations. In recent years, developments have included introducing stronger safeguards, focusing on the key elements that assure the child's long-term welfare and promoting 'resilience' after separation.

But the process relating to adoption is rather like constructing a 'Volvo' where separate sections have to be put together to make a coherent whole BUT in the adoption process in various different factories e.g. Cafcass, IROs, The courts, children's social care teams, etc. The child can get lost in this maze and their needs, wishes, feelings and well-being can get overlooked in delivering the defined process. This raises key questions about caring for separated children: is it possible for them to have a good life without being overwhelmed by a sense of loss and isolation, and what does the corporate state have to do to be a good parent?

One concept frequently used to identify what is needed is 'permanence', but this has meant different things at different times to different people. So the aim of today's seminar is to consider what this concept means in practice and its relevance to the needs of separated children in 2015.

Culture and Leadership to Support Service Quality throughout the UK

Dave Hill
Executive Director, Essex County Council

Dave began by focusing on the importance of leadership in children's services and the courage needed to succeed in the present political and financial situation. These are necessary because they help generate a culture that support the development of quality services and create conditions auspicious for success. This has to include systemic thinking supported by team work - a change from

much past practice where the bits did not connect, options were pursued in isolation and it was possible to squander money.

The current situation is undoubtedly challenging. Social work is at a crossroads, there is ambivalence about success, a prevailing expectation of governance for service users and not us, austerity that is here to stay and a stress on prevention and early intervention without clear ideas on how to implement them effectively. In these difficult situations, it is easy to internalize problems and keep looking in the mirror hoping that a solution will leap out; but what is needed is for such viewing to reflect back and transform into a beacon for possibilities and positive change. To complement this, we have to be courageous in saying what needs to be said, reconciling the consequences of failure and balancing risks.

Armed with this confidence, we can then turn attention to the conditions necessary for success. These include: a robust theoretical underpinning, a well-articulated vision of service aims, a systems perspective, a clear map of available resources and manageable staff workloads backed by effective support, with opportunities to pause and reflect. What should emerge is a range of interconnected services supported by trained staff, efficient technology and incorporation of messages from user feedback and evaluation.

The results of this approach are manifest in Essex. I would hope there is now a strong focus on the child's journey, professional generosity to other professionals and more relation-based and motivational social work in terms of sensitivity to emotions and positive interaction with children and families. In service terms, there are now fewer children in care, better risk management, more early help, less child protection and more effective targeted support for individuals. There are also financial savings which can be reinvested in new services and, lastly, less anxiety Ofsted inspections leading to better ratings.

In closing it is important to note that although In Essex we were motivated by the model developed in Hackney, it is important to stress that while the approaches adopted by other agencies are helpful for learning, there is no one model, and you simply can't copy other places as the circumstances in each location differ so much.

Operating in Local Partnerships to Achieve Permanence for Children Now and in the Future Lives

Philip Segurola

Director of Specialist Children's Services, Kent County Council

The focus of the talk was the development of local partnerships but Philip began by reiterating Dave Hill's stress on the need for courage – because initiatives often fail and we have to live with that fact.

Adoption work in small authorities is often hampered by limited matching options, recruitment difficulties, inadequate support services and limited resources. Adoption can also be viewed in isolation, with weak synergy with

other possibilities. So the opportunities and improved efficiency emanating from linking with a wider group of agencies are obvious.

But it is not always easy practically or administratively. Agencies have their own cultures and views on innovation and Kent has 7 clinical commissioning bodies, 4 adoption panels, 5 political groups, 1,400 looked after children and 963 unaccompanied children. But the message is to not let this complexity frighten you because the benefits of partnership are considerable. Kent's association with Coram has led to big changes in terms of permanency arrangements for children: a rise in placement orders from 67 to 138, successful matchings from 78 to 145 and placements made from 68 143.

Part of the process is understanding how to deal with complexity. Complexity theory helps us extract order and structure from disparity but this will only be useful if it is simple, easy to follow and relevant to the children it is designed to serve. Cross agency agreements also have to be reached on all kinds of matters: not just aims but also such things as information systems, ownership, accountability and the value of a systems perspective. The more staid agencies (usually the local authority) need to welcome the radical ideas that other agencies suggest - examples in Kent are adoption days, family finding, new service combinations involving CAMHS - and the challenges to orthodox practice they present.

The Contribution of the Voluntary Sector

Anne Crombie
CEO, Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

The track record of partnership between local authorities and voluntary agencies in the field of adoption and permanency is quite encouraging – more than perhaps outside observers, such as staff in the Prime Minister's Office, might think. There are many examples of innovative practice which originated in the voluntary sector, such as having a single front door to services.

The main contributions to adoption and permanency of voluntary organizations are strategic thinking and specialisms, both of which can be valuable augmentations to existing local authority services. They can also act as a forum for specialist knowledge, providing information, delivering services and facilitating change. The fact they are external to huge bureaucracies means they can be flexible, swift, innovatory and able to bypass bureaucratic and political hurdles. When Anne worked at the DfE, she wanted to put the guidance regarding the complicated eligibility criteria for receiving early years pupil premium on the department's website only to be told by another part of Government that only very simple information was allowed. Voluntary bodies can also operate across borders so are not constrained by geographical boundaries or by the fact that target groups may be widely dispersed around the country.

The Meaning of Permanence

John Simmonds

Director of Policy, Research and Development, CoramBAAF

In reviewing how John has come to understand the concept of permanence and understand what it involves, he looked back at some of the research findings and discussions that have influenced his thinking over the past years.

While a student in early 1970s, one study that was particularly influential was Wilmott and Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*. This observational study showed that children experienced themselves as a part of three generational 'family' networks of households within a 'community based, geographical locality. Although the area was described as a slum, there was huge sense of belonging and many sources of informal support amongst families, focused on three generations in which the mother-daughter bond was especially strong. When the slums were cleared and the people rehoused, much of this social capital was lost. So what did this mean for the idea of 'permanency' - is it a matter of family networks, continuity, predictability?

In 1973, Jane Rowe and Lydia Lambert produced their study *Children who Wait*, (published by BAAF), which demonstrated the risks associated with the absence of proactive planning for children resulting in 'drift' with little sense of the family to whom they belonged and experienced as 'family'. In practice, the process of 'wait and see' seemed to be dominated more by 'wait' and not enough 'see'.

In the 1990s, Ian Sinclair and colleagues at York University began to look at the care careers of children and disaggregated their characteristics and needs. They confirmed a pattern found in earlier studies that if children stayed in care for more than six months, there was a 60% they would be there for at least four years, a figure that rose the longer they stayed (80% if in care for 12 months). Thus, there was a build-up of unsettled children but where there was little professional or organisational concern because many of their placements seemed to be stable.

The researchers then looked at different groups of looked after children and identified a number of groups with their own characteristics. Children over the age of 11 comprised the largest group at 57% with 26% having entered care under the age of 11. The rest of the adolescent group consisted of abused adolescents 9% (with significant placement instability), and 14% adolescent entrants. These figures are based on a snapshot view, but also a pathway of care experiences and their implications for placement stability, and consequent emotional and behavioural issues, achievement at school and other related matters. They all illustrate the struggle between continuity and discontinuity faced by a large number of children in the care system.

The theme of continuity and discontinuity are core to our understanding of human experience. Human beings have a powerful drive to survive, adapt and

learn from one generation to the next. Trust is key to this and relies on stable, secure and predictable relationships. Looked after children are at a serious disadvantage where trust may have become seriously damaged resulting from abuse and neglect, and in care where identifying and establishing a secure and stable family life is challenging.

Trust is an individual experience and is also at the centre of social groups. Family life and experience are critical in this. To illustrate the point, John displayed a family tree of a three generation family where the court had ordered that the three children move live with grandmother rather than be placed for adoption. At the heart of this decision is the establishment of a new set of relationships and the building of trust in those relationships. There are key issues in moving the children from foster care to live with their grandmother - how do we prepare the children for such a move? How do we help them settle in? Who does the life story work that will help the children understand what has and is happening to them and why? What will the contact arrangements be with the birth mother and father? In short, we have to ask what does rebuilding trust and relationships with children like these involve and what can services realistically be expected to achieve that centre on the fundamental welfare and needs of children in the relational world of family and society?

What do we know about Special Guardianship and what do we need to Know?

Judith Harwin

Director, Centre for Child and Youth research, Brunel University

Judith presented the interim findings from a study of special guardianship orders (SGOs) and supervision orders (SOs). The aim was to update information available from previous studies by Jim Wade and Julie Selwyn, analyse recent statistics and identify trends over the four year period 2011/12 - 2013/14.

The SGO was introduced as a complement to adoption, probably to provide security for older children who have ongoing relationships with relatives or other people in the local community. The research looked at the use of SGOs alongside the use of four other orders to see if there their use was distinctive and had changed over the study period.

The data revealed some convergence between all five orders over the four year period with a rise in SGOs and a fall in placement orders. In addition, the use of SGOs for children aged 0-3 has risen although the age spread is still very wide with the 4-10 band especially high. Although there is some concern that SG is replacing placement orders for very young children, this is a slight exaggeration as the latter option still dominates for this age group.

Three other issues were explored. One is whether the overall fall in the number of orders of all kinds has affected SGOs – to which the answer is no more than for the other orders. Another is the extent to which SGOs are accompanied by SOs,

and here the study shows that this is an increasing trend. The third concerns the time taken to complete proceedings and although SGOs used to take the longest of all the orders, this has levelled off recently.

Finally, it is important to note that there are considerable regional differences and that these will be explored in phase two of the study along with more detailed studies of children's pathways and the personal experiences of those involved.

Calculating the Cost of Permanence, a Case Based Approach

Lisa Holmes

Director, Centre for Child and Family Research, University of Loughborough

Researchers at Loughborough University have produced a cost calculator for children's services (www.cfcfs.org.uk) which seeks to link children's needs, the services provided, the costs incurred and the outcomes in terms of children's welfare.

The calculator adopts a bottom-up approach focusing on what happens to the child and not on budgets or organisational structures. The underpinning conceptual framework and methods have been applied to various groups: children in need, disabled children and specific groups and services, such as adolescents in residential care or child protection, so it is not confined to looked after children. It looks longitudinally from first referral to case closure at the costs of packages of services and considers wider issues like cost avoidance and possible savings. The research team has developed a methodology to incorporate the costs associated with the provision of direct services, organisational supports, interventions by other agencies and case management activity. It is intended that this analysis will provide transparency and mollify elected members and finance officers bewildered by the fact that a fall in client numbers often leads to a rise in expenditure.

One of the benefits of using the tool is its ability to calculate the costs of different care pathways and specialist services, those incurred by particular groups, such as children who drift and difficult adolescents, and specific episodes in the care process, such as family reunification and oscillations in and out of care. In terms of understanding permanence, the data show that getting decisions right early on, which can be very costly as they involve a lot of social work time, saves a considerable amount of money later, whereas poor initial decisions lead to expensive and a seemingly unending series of interventions.

Software packages of the cost calculator will be available as a free download for local authorities in late 2015 and details can be obtained from the Centre at Loughborough University (www.cfcfs.org.uk).

Tools for Improvement and their Deployment in a Large Agency

Kevin Yong
Head of Consultancy, Coram-i

Kevin outlined the sorts of help that Coram-i can provide to local authorities and other agencies. They comprise a mixture of seminars and discussions, on-line practice tools for people to use and direct work to analyse and interpret what is happening to children in a particular area. These have many uses: for example with regard to adoption they can identify children awaiting family placement, chart adopters' journeys, help with family finding, safeguard children's links with siblings and produce case level analyses. Moreover, the emerging results can be used to help complete statutory statistical returns and inform policy documents.

The launch of Coram-i

Coram-i was then launched with a wine and cake reception.