



The importance of a Level Playing Field

Placement stability is known to be of the most critical factors to enable a looked after child to feel safe, supported and able to fulfil their potential. The Quality Protects programme was launched in 1998 with a key objective *'To ensure that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of childhood'*, with the more specific sub-objective *'To reduce the number of changes of main carer for children looked after'*.

Despite the programme, countless research reports, new legislation and political change we know that, sixteen years later, many children in our care system still have to experience the upheaval and trauma of numerous placement moves and do not achieve the outcomes they are so capable of. The consequence of poor placement stability is a significant reason that our care system is groaning under the pressure of associated and increasing costs.

Research on placement stability has focused mainly on the efforts that are made once a child is in their placement. But are we focusing enough on making sure the right placement is chosen in the first place?

Having managed a placements team for a local authority, I know from firsthand experience how difficult it is to match a child to a care placement. The task should never be underestimated. Each and every child that comes into care has different needs and for each there is a unique set of criteria to consider. Getting the right placement from the offset is critical and to do this, the person searching for a placement needs to have the widest choice available so that they can identify the right match.

And here lies the problem. They don't.

Almost every local authority in the country places a restriction on where placement officers can look to find a placement. In the majority of instances, those seeking placements are only authorised to consider placements within the council's own provision. That's a little bit like asking them to play snap with only a small portion of the deck of cards. A truly perfect match may be available in the independent sector, but it may never be considered or even known about.

If someone is looking for their perfect home, they wouldn't restrict themselves to one estate agent. Yet, this is comparable with what our sector does when sourcing care placements for vulnerable children, who each have very specific and different needs. It's little wonder we have a problem.

Children in care and Care Leavers tell us that getting the right placement from the offset is critical, yet the suitability of placement matches continues to be one of the greatest concerns shared by Independent Reviewing Officers and Social Workers.

In 2006 I implemented a level playing field approach to commissioning placements for the Local Authority I worked in. When children came into care, placement officers had autonomy to look wherever they wanted for a placement match, on condition that the provider met key quality criteria. No permission was needed from Management regarding where to look, but permission was required as to where to place a child. It was key to ensure that the council's in-house placement services and independent providers were contacted simultaneously with information about a child when we began to look for a placement. Sending referral information to as many providers as possible at the same time resulted in increased placement choice and better matching. The result of the change in placement procedures was astounding; a significant improvement in placement stability, outcomes improved, emergency placements became a rarity, budget forecasting became more accurate, there was reduced spend on placements and social workers praised the new arrangements claiming they had a beneficial impact on their work and job satisfaction. There was also positive impact for the councils own fostering service which went on to gain an outstanding OFSTED rating.

Opening up a councils own placement services to competition from the independent sector can feel threatening and daunting, but we owe it to our looked after children to ensure they are placed in the best placement to meet their own unique and individual needs, whether this is provided by a council, a private organisation, a charity or connected person.

The elephant in the room of course is cost. An area too complex to go into here. However, surely we need to be talking about value and not cost? The Treasury defines value for money as *"...the optimum combination of whole-of-life costs and quality (or fitness for purpose) of the good or service to meet the user's requirement. Value for money is not the choice of goods and services based on the lowest cost bid."*

Commissioners need to get better at assessing the likely impact that a care placement will have on a child. The right placement can transform a child and support them onto a positive life pathway avoiding future costs associated with mental health services, unemployment, crime, domestic violence, child protection, poor health etc. By commissioning placements that deliver outcomes, the sector will stem the demand for social care services that is brought about by an ever growing cycle of family dysfunction.

To get true value, we have to put each and every child in the right placement to meet their own individual needs. Local Authorities and the Independent sector need to be supported and encouraged to work in partnership to develop processes, tools and trusting relationships that facilitate this.

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