

Fostering

Promoting Foster
Care in Scotland

Issue 5 Winter 2002

in Scotland



Featured above are the participants who met with Cathy Jamieson and a number of her officials.

Representatives from the Fostering Network in Scotland met with Cathy Jamieson, Minister for Education and Children, in July.

The group, including social workers, carers, children and young people in care and sons and daughters of foster carers, highlighted issues currently facing the foster care service in Scotland.

Following the meeting, the group prepared a paper outlining some of

these concerns, at the Minister's request. Trying to Meet the Standards, enclosed with this edition of Fostering in Scotland, is an amalgamation of the issues coming out of the focus group structure across Scotland over the last two years and those discussed with the Minister.

Whether any of these suggested reforms actually happen is, to a large extent, up to all of us. Next year we

have an election in Scotland for Holyrood, and this is an ideal opportunity to talk to politicians about the need for change in the foster care service.

The Fostering Network will be campaigning over the coming months to try to ensure that foster care in this country is able to offer all its partners a positive experience, but will require your support as we push for improvements.

We would welcome your contributions on any news, views, articles, ideas.
Please send to Anne Fisher, The Fostering Network, 2nd floor, 227 Ingram Street, Glasgow G1 1DA
t 0141 204 1400 e anne.fisher@fostercare-scotland.org.uk

Letter from Anne Black

It is hard to believe that “autumn” is almost over as I write this letter. Only a few shopping days until Christmas!

The Fostering Network has had another eventful few months with the highlight being a meeting with Cathy Jamieson, the Minister for Education and Children.

A lot of work was done by Bryan and others to ensure that we were able to give the Minister a clear picture of the issues faced in the service as well as of the benefits for young people of foster care services (see front page).

I have been involved with a small working group of the Fostering Network’s trustees looking at how the organisation’s structure can reflect the devolution of many key political functions to the four nations which make up the UK. The working group will present a paper to the board in September on the future focus of the Fostering Network and how the different needs of the partners in foster care in all four countries can be best met.

So far we have had interesting discussions and I have been lucky to have the experiences of working with you all in the range of meetings across Scotland to hear what you want from the organisation.

The group was envious of the work we can do in Scotland and particularly of the Scottish newsletter and the high quality of it and its contents. We will, however, need to do a lot of work in Scotland to raise funds to enable our membership project to continue once the Community Fund support ceases.

The Scottish Executive has recently published a report on adoption services. It contains an acknowledgement that foster care services also need to be fully reviewed so that they can be strengthened for young people who are looked after and accommodated by local authorities.

The Fostering Network’s biennial conference took place at the beginning of November in Cardiff and there was an opportunity for some Scottish members to attend. There is a round up of the conference in the next issue of Foster Care magazine.

I am looking forward to meeting many of you over the next months at various venues across Scotland. There is going to be a lot going on over the coming months!

Young people’s meeting with the Minister

Representatives from the Fostering Network’s Young People’s Project recently met with Cathy Jamieson, Minister for Education and Young People, in conjunction with other young people’s organisations, to discuss throughcare and aftercare issues.

Two young people with the project attended the meeting, Ellen (currently in foster care) and Matthew (son of foster carers).

Details of the meeting have been outlined by Matthew below.

On Thursday 5 September, Kausar Karim, Ellen and I went along as representatives of the Fostering Network to meet Cathy Jamieson, Minister for Education and Young People.

I met up with Kausar and Ellen at Waverley train station after a hard morning at college. We firstly went for lunch and a short discussion on what we needed to put across to Ms Jamieson, then made our way to meet up with the other people who would be going along.

We arrived at the Scottish Parliament offices where, after a long and painstaking task of getting put through metal detectors, we made our way upstairs to a conference room where we would meet the Minister.

After a brief introduction we started to put our views across to Ms Jamieson, who seemed to be very interested in what we had to say. Slowly the conversation came round to me and I had to say my bit:

“I am here as a representative of all the young people whose parents are foster parents and I feel strongly about the great role that we play when a child is in care, and the support that we give is valuable to the child in their upbringing.”

Kausar then read out the story that Ellen had written, which was very interesting and the Minister also seemed very taken by this. We had a short interlude and Cathy had to rush away to take part in Question Time. We then had 30 minutes to have a coffee and conversation on what we thought, and then make our way across to the debating chambers. This meant more metal detectors and then into the gallery to hear the views that we had just put across being brought up and discussed by all the ministers! It was great!

I had a great afternoon and an even bigger learning experience.

Care and Control of Children and Young People in Foster Care

The Fostering Network believes that

The care and control of children and young people is becoming an increasingly important aspect of foster care as more children and young people with challenging behaviour are being cared for in foster homes. Foster carers need to develop a range of techniques to deal with this behaviour and help the foster child learn more acceptable ways of coping with the tensions and frustrations, which are part of daily living.

However, they also need to know their agency policy on care and control and what sanctions are acceptable and discuss these in detail with their supervising social worker.

In the absence of guidance from the Scottish Executive, each agency will need to develop its own policy to support foster carers in this difficult area.

In Scotland some agencies have offered their foster carers training in restraint techniques, although there are concerns about how appropriate these are for the fostering environment. The Fostering network has begun to explore these issues with two membership meetings looking at care and control issues and will be publishing articles in the next newsletter. We are hoping to hold a seminar event next year to identify the issues, share experience about how these have been handled by various agencies and consider whether it is possible to draw up recommendations about best practice.



Training Team in Scotland

The training team in Glasgow has been growing rapidly over the past year and now consists of Sue Robertson as acting training manager, Kathleen Brolly and Janette Harkin as training officers and Anne Currie as administrator. Between them they have a wealth of experience with backgrounds in training, foster care, social work and education.

The expansion of the team has been in response to the growth in demand for training in all areas of fostering. So far this year we have undertaken 62 courses with over 700 participants. One of the courses most in demand this year has been our new three-day course in Child Development, Attachment Theory and Separation & Loss.

This year will see every foster care service provider in Scotland being registered and monitored against new standards by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care. These standards mean that agencies need to consider mandatory training for all foster carers, with the option of this career path resulting in a professional qualification.

We feel strongly that Scottish Vocation Qualifications and Scottish Progression Awards should be available for all carers who wish to undertake one and have the necessary experience. All our training courses provide underpinning knowledge for the Scottish Vocational Qualification in Caring for Children and Young People Level 3. With this in mind many agencies are choosing our Post Approval courses, which are based on the training workbooks developed by the National Extension College (NEC) and the Fostering Network.

Training is never static. All our courses are updated and tailored to meet the specific needs of individual agencies. Our catalogue lists a wide range of in-house courses on offer and in addition we run a series of open courses over the year throughout Scotland. These include Men in Foster Care, Training for Trainers and Role of the Link Worker/Family Placement Worker. We are also happy to discuss how we can individually design a course to suit your particular requirements.

As the experts in setting standards for fostering, our training courses will help take the foster care service above and beyond national requirements.

If you would like further information on courses or you would like to discuss your training needs informally, please contact Sue Robertson on **t** 0141 204 1400 or **e** training@fostercare-scotland.org.uk

Protection of Children (Scotland)

In September 2002 the Scottish Executive published the Protection of Children (Scotland) Bill. This will establish an index of persons unsuitable to work with children, similar to the one that already exists in England and Wales.

Employers will refer people to the list if they have been sacked or moved as a result of unsuitable behaviour towards children, even if they have not been convicted of a criminal offence.

The courts will refer someone if they are convicted of an offence which demonstrates their unsuitability.

It will be an offence for an individual on the list to continue to work with children or apply for a job working with children. There will be a legal duty on organisations to check the list before employing someone and this will be done via Disclosure Scotland criminal record checks.

These provisions will apply to foster carers and the Fostering Network submitted these comments to the consultation.

"We agree that the welfare and safety of children must be the paramount concern but we consider that the rights of adults also need to be recognised and the system must operate in a fair and transparent manner.

Foster carers look after children whose early life experiences have led to difficult and challenging behaviour. The majority of foster carers who are deregistered following an allegation have not been charged or appeared in court, because a decision has been taken by the police or the procurator fiscal that there is not sufficient evidence to support a criminal prosecution. The local authority, in considering their future career as foster carers, takes decisions on a balance of probability basis and, if they consider there is any element of risk to children, will deregister the carers. Often it is not clear to carers on what information this decision has been reached.

If consideration is now going to be given to placing carers who have been deregistered on a list of adults unsuitable to work with children, local authorities have an obligation to set out clearly the facts (as well as opinions) on which this decision has been reached in order that foster carers have this information and are able to challenge the decision via the appeals procedure. It seems likely that the majority of carers will use the legal process to challenge their inclusion in such a list."

Caring or Parenting?

The place of long-term fostering in the “permanence” debate.

Over the last two years the Westminster Government, under the personal direction of the Prime Minister, has drawn attention to the small proportion of looked after and accommodated children who are placed for adoption. Various initiatives and pieces of legislation in England and Wales, including Quality Protects Performance Indicators, the Prime Minister’s Review of Adoption, the Adoption White Paper and the Adoption and Children Act, urge social workers to consider adoption as the permanence placement of choice and to put this into effect with as little delay as possible.

In Scotland the recently published ‘Adoption Policy Review Report Phase 1’ appears to be echoing the concerns expressed in the various pieces of English and Welsh legislation. It urges better planning for “permanence”, shorter time scales, more coherent recruitment of potential adopters, resource sharing among authorities and better resourced post-adoption support.

Yet in Scotland last year, 200 children were adopted by “strangers” i.e. not step-parent adoption, compared with 4,000 children who were being looked after in foster care.

The recent emphasis on adoption with the tightening of timescales and the creation of “targets” for local authorities to meet in terms of numbers of children and young people placed for adoption, has therefore caused a tangible ripple of disquiet from social workers, academics and researchers and many long-term foster carers. Paradoxically this very emphasis on adoption at all costs may well have sparked off the first real attempts to define and research the concept of long-term fostering for almost 20 years.

Two recent publications – Growing up in Foster Care by Schofield, Beek, Sargent & Thoburn and The Plan for the Child by Lowe, Murche, both published by BAAF Adoption and Fostering – explore the role of long-term fostering in the current “permanence” debate.

In Gillian Schofield’s book she describes long-term foster care as “one of the best kept secrets of the child care system” while Lowe and Murche describe it as having become “something of a Cinderella option”. Both studies highlight the ambivalence with which social workers have approached the idea of long-term fostering over the last 20 years. Both comment on the general understanding of foster care as being a service which either cares for children until they are returned home or, increasingly, cares for a group of very challenging children in a variety of “professional” schemes on a contract basis.

The ambivalence about long-term foster care and the apparent unwillingness of some child care professionals to promote this form of family placement as a “permanent” option for many children, seems to centre around what Professor Triseliotis describes as “its unpredictability and

the uncertain and ambiguous position in which the children find themselves”.

Schofield et al. ask “Do long-term foster carers ‘care for’ or ‘parent’ children?” and “Is long-term foster care a positive option or a last resort? Are security and living with uncertainty compatible?”

Lowe and Murche say, in their study “There is a need for policy and planning for long-term fostering to be sharpened up, with clear answers as to what it is and positive reasons for its use.”

The most recent writing about permanent placements for children and young people stresses the need for choice and flexibility. Children who have attachments to birth families, older children and children with very challenging behaviour may not be found adoptive placements and, indeed, for many it will not be appropriate to consider an adoption plan. It is essential that long-term fostering is not seen as a “second best” option for those or any other children. Rather, child care workers, academics, researchers and foster carers themselves need to devote time and energy to tackling the issues which can make long-term foster placements “unpredictable, uncertain and ambiguous”.

There is some agreement now that breakdown rates for older, more complex children are similar whether the placements are adoption or long-term fostering. Professor Triseliotis believes that the main defining difference between the two forms of placement relates to a sense of security and belonging. His recent review of the relevant research suggests that the majority of children and young people placed in long-term foster care “feel less secure and have a weaker sense of belonging” than those who are adopted. Even arguing from this standpoint Triseliotis seems to believe “long-term fostering still has a firm place in planning”.

What can be done to make long-term foster care a positive choice for the many hundreds of children and young people currently living in these placements? What could make long-term foster care more predictable, less uncertain and less ambiguous?

Schofield et al in the conclusion to their book Growing up in Foster Care suggest there are two systems which need to be addressed if the structure of long-term foster care is to be strengthened. Firstly there is the legislative and procedural system.

In Scotland the Children’s Hearing System is ill equipped, even given recent changes, to promote permanence, yet many children and young people remain within its system. To be told annually that your current placement will continue for another year does not inspire confidence in a sense of permanence. Is it not possible for the Hearing to formally acknowledge the existence of a permanence plan

for this child with this family in a way that might reinforce rather than undermine the child's sense of security?

Since the introduction of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, legal routes to permanence seem to have entered a kind of limbo from which they are only now beginning to emerge. There was for some time a general reluctance to pursue Parental Responsibility Orders (PRO) because of a belief that the "no order" principle would mean Sheriffs would be unlikely to grant a PRO other than in exceptional circumstances. This position seems to be shifting but there remains the obvious deterrent of a PRO being seen as a complex and time-consuming piece of work, which many social workers and seniors would be reluctant to undertake. Perhaps foster carers should be more vocal and more persistent in their demands that their children need the legal security which such an order confers.

The system of six-monthly looked after and accommodated reviews remains for many children and young people a major reminder of the impermanence of their situation. This situation is worsened by the increasing turnover of social work staff so that many children and long-term carers are subjected to the "new broom" approach with each newly allocated social worker. It should not be beyond the wit of the social work professionals involved in each child's life to draw up some form of agreement at the point of reaching a "permanence" decision, which ensures some kind of continuity despite changing social work personnel.

The second system that Schofield suggests needs to be addressed is the system of relationships created with each permanent placement "between children and their foster carers and birth parents, but also between social workers and children, family placement workers and carers, social workers and birth families".

This network is hugely complex and relationships within it will shift and change over time. The challenge for the adults involved is to maintain a system of communication which helps and does not hinder the child's sense of permanence.

For many of the children and young people who are looked after and accommodated, their experience of foster care will be a "long-term" or "permanent" foster placement. This kind of placement remains often ill defined, and subject to the vagaries of current child care practice. If this Government in Scotland is serious about its intention to promote a "permanent" placement for every child who needs one, then the dilemma of long-term foster care needs to be addressed with the same vigour as adoption is currently being addressed. There are some signs that this may be the case in England, where a major review of fostering and placement choice has been introduced. There are plans for similar reviews in Wales and Northern Ireland. To date, the Scottish Executive and the Minister for Children & Young People have refused to consider funding such a review for Scotland.

Children of Foster Carers



At membership and focus group meetings one of the topics most frequently raised by all participants is how fostering affects the children of carers.

There are many challenges within the foster care field for local authorities. One of these, which has perhaps been camouflaged in recent times by more obvious issues, is the need to recognise the problems faced by the existing children of carers. In particular, the challenge of providing a foster care service which meets both the needs of young people in foster care and those of foster carers is one of which local authorities (often within limited resources) have to be fully aware. Within this equation, the needs of the children of carers often get lost. While some authorities are now trying to address this, is it a case of too little too late? What has been the cost of fostering for this group of young people?

Historically, the children of foster carers have not had their needs formally recognised by the social work department. The identification of their individual support needs has not been a focus for most authorities. While each foster care family may be allocated a family placement worker, this is essentially a worker for the foster carer(s). Even when the needs of the carers' children are recognised the focus of support remains for the foster carer. Children of carers who have attended the Fostering Network's advisory groups have repeatedly identified their needs as being unrecognised by the social work department.

They are often supplementing the care given by their parents by providing emotional and practical support to children who are being fostered in their homes. Some of these children have witnessed aggressive behaviour in their homes as a result of their families fostering. This can range from the young person in foster care shouting, to furniture being destroyed, or even to being violent towards their foster carers or their children. This can at times be linked to alcohol or drug use. Exposure to this and for a minority of children exposure to the issue of self-harming can also lead to the children of carers being open to situations which are difficult to deal with and to understand.

Some of the sons and daughters of carers who have attended the Young People Project's advisory groups have stated that as a result of these experiences, they would consider themselves to be more mature than their peers, especially as they have had to adopt a more responsible role within their families.

While these children recognise that they have to share their parents' time with the fostered child, this for some can still be a difficult thing to do. The lack of time spent with their parents and with siblings is an issue, which some carers' children believe has affected their relationships and caused them some problems.

Foster carers' children have a clear need for support and training which is at present being largely unmet. Local authorities may find themselves having to deal with the results of overlooking these issues at an earlier stage.



Comings

Scott Telfer is the latest edition to the Fostering Network staff team in Scotland. As Project Worker for the Scottish Care Leavers Mentoring Project, it will be his responsibility to work with six specific local authorities over the next three years to set up pilot schemes trying out different forms of mentoring support to young people making the transition into adulthood.

Scott comes to post having worked for ten years for Barnardos, almost all of which spent managing a project offering accommodation and support to young people making the transition from care settings to an accommodation of their own choosing.

If you are interested in the Mentoring Project, please contact Scott on 0141 204 1400.



Goings

Leaving the Fostering Network in Scotland is Margaret Sim, one of our Membership Development Officers for the past two years. Margaret is returning to the City of Glasgow on a full time basis to head up their Level 4 Foster Carer Scheme.

Margaret will be sorely missed as she brought strength of character and a determination to take forward the issues for foster carers in Scotland. Margaret will continue to act as an associate freelance trainer for the Fostering Network in Scotland, and we wish her all the best in her new endeavour.

Diary

A day in the life of Melanie,
(daughter of a foster carer)

Tuesday 17 September

7.00 am My mum calls everyone. Brian's taxi leaves at 7.30 am, John's at 8 am and my bus comes at 8.15 am.

7.15 am My mum has made drinks and breakfast for all of us. Brian is in a 'strop' because my mum talks to him about how he is going to handle a situation at college. She is trying to tell him to talk to staff, rather than shout abuse like yesterday. He screams and wriggles about on the sofa then shouts "If you talk about it once more, I will poke my eyes out with a needle". John and I laugh but mum says, "OK, if that's what you do, fine, but we still need to talk about this".

7.30 am The taxi arrives, but Brian still hasn't decided what to do. John gets loads of forms out of his bag that should have been back at school yesterday. I tell him he is stupid for leaving it until the last minute and he swears at me and we have a bit of an argument. He also has lost his rugby kit.

8.00 am John's taxi comes and mum and I have 15 minutes to talk. I ask if I can go out tonight, she says "No" and so I get in a bit of a mood with her, but manage to cheer up a bit before I go out of the door.

8.35 am On the bus my mobile rings. Another foster carer has phoned to ask the name of a member of staff at school who has been bullying their foster child. Mum phoned to ask me and I tell her.

10.15 am I meet the foster carer who rang mum this morning in the corridor at school, he is just going into a meeting with management.

4.10 pm I arrive home on the bus. John goes to his parents' house tonight for a home visit. John deliberately wrecked his bed recently, it was only 18 months old and he smashed it up. Today mum has been to the shop to choose the replacement that the social work department is going to pay for.

5.00 pm Brian arrives home by taxi. He says he got one yellow slip and two blues at college today, yellow is good, blue is bad.

5.40 pm My big brother Joel goes to Brian and John's bedroom to get the bike pump. He finds a Stanley knife on the floor. Brian says John brought it in to cut up his foot. John isn't here so we cannot ask him, but it is more likely Brian had it because my dad had to take a 6" blade knife from him less than a week ago. Joel brings the knife downstairs and puts it away.

5.45 pm Teatime. Pizza, beans and potato. No pudding today. Scott, a boy we had for three weeks last month, phones to see how we are doing. He is nice.

6.30 pm I phone my big sister, also a carer. The girl she has at the moment has severe learning difficulties and is at my school. She is causing problems for one of my mates. I want my sister to try and stop her.

6.40 pm Brian phones one of his friends who lives quite close to us.

7.00 pm I check my emails and find one from the Youth Parliament asking if I would be willing to be interviewed by an independent journalist for an article about Young People in Parliament for the Daily Record. I email back OK. Then I wonder why I said OK, I am so busy. Still, got thrown out of Art today so that eases the pressure! (I hadn't done homework).

8.00 pm I phone my friend for a chat.

8.10 pm Do some homework. Brian comes into my room and starts throwing things at me (cuddly toys and clothes), this is friendly for a change and we have a laugh.

9.00 pm Go for a shower, get some supper and go to bed.

(Note. Brian is 15 and has learning difficulties. John is 14 and is very clever but both his parents have learning difficulties).

Advisory group young people's project update

Finding out what young people involved in foster care think about foster care has been the main priority for the project this year. Advisory groups have been set up across the country. The purpose of these meetings has been to find out what young people's experience of foster care has been and to find ways to improve the foster care service.

The project worker has met with all 32 local authorities and has attempted to involve all of these authorities in the advisory groups.

Both young people in foster care and the children of carers have attended these meetings in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The ages of those attending has varied from nine years to 19 years. The meetings have not only provided an opportunity for the project to find out about young people's experiences but have also provided an chance for these young people to meet others in the same situation. This has been welcomed by those attending and has highlighted some of the support needs these young people may require.

Comments from young people who have attended meetings include:

"It was good to speak to other people in foster care. I do not know anyone else in the same situation".

"My friends do not understand what it is like for me as their families do not foster. Speaking to other children of carers helped me to realise that I was not being silly about some of the things I was worrying about".

The vast majority of young people's experiences of foster care have been viewed as being positive. However,

there are clearly many areas within foster care that young people would like to see improved. The views are from young people from across the country, including those living in the cities and in rural areas.

The issues raised by young people in foster care include the lack of placement choice. Many young people have said that have rarely been involved in a situation where they have been matched to a placement according to their particular needs. Unfortunately it is often the case that a young person is placed where a placement at a foster home becomes available rather than according to their individual need. Multiple placement moves is another area which is of concern. When placements break down the young person can be moved elsewhere. Having to move home frequently is very disruptive to the young person's life, affecting their relationships with family, friends and their schooling. It is then not surprising to find that the educational outcomes of young people in care are often poorer than their counterparts.

The lack of contact with family members (including extended family) and with childhood friends is an area that concerns many of those in foster care. The loss of long-term relationships often further increases young people's sense of isolation and rejection. The lack of contact with social workers has for many of these young people developed the sense that you have to be in a crisis before you can get to spend time with your social worker. While most young people recognise that social workers' time is very limited, due to staff shortages, they would like to

spend more time doing planned pieces of work with their workers.

The question of overnight stays is one where there is inconsistency across Scotland between local authorities. For young people in foster care the issue is very simple. While they do not want to be treated differently to their peers there is a recognition that some checks need to be made for their safety. However, there is a feeling that social work departments could use a lot more discretion at times depending on each individual case.

Finally an issue which is common to both groups of young people is the feeling that they are not being listened to and that they do not feel they have any real influence in many of the decisions which affect their lives.

The project will collate these issues and raise them with both the Scottish Executive and local authorities.

Questionnaire

The Young People's Project has recently compiled two questionnaires with the help of young people working with the project. One of the questionnaires is for young people in foster care and the other is for the children of carers, and both have recently been sent to all the Fostering Network's members across Scotland. The information gathered from these forms will provide extensive information about foster care. The project is relying on as many of these forms as possible being sent back, and would therefore urge all foster carers to encourage young people to complete these forms.

Children and Young People's Carers' Course

In October 2001, as a pilot scheme run by North Highland College, we embarked on a Scottish Programmed Overview designed to assist us with our fostering care.

With great trepidation all ten of us turned up on the first night wondering what we had let ourselves in for. Our tutor calmed us all down and reassured us that we could all do it. A year on, not eighteen months as

expected, we have all "done it" – we have finished the course and passed all seven modules (child development; the family, the community and the child; the child with special needs; promoting positive behaviour; promoting equal opportunities; working with people with special needs and child protection).

This would not have been possible

without our tutor's guidance and encouragement throughout; she was always available in the college or at the end of the telephone. We are now looking forward to our next challenge which is the Community Carer, followed, as far as we know, by an SVQ in Foster Caring – these are the challenges for the next twelve months and after that, who knows?

Written by a foster carer in Highland

Men in Foster Care

The role of men in foster care and residential work has been the subject of increased debate. For this reason the Fostering Network developed the course Men in Foster Care, to allow men the freedom to discuss their concerns and address the issues raised.

The course is run three times a year, in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Perth, as an open course and there is always a number of participants on our waiting lists. Recently several local authorities have run the course in house, encouraging a wider audience.

The course is for men only and is facilitated by men, and it allows a confidential, relaxed and informal atmosphere for discussing issues.

It is also widely appreciated that it gives a positive view of men in foster care by:

- Examining how gender influences work in child care;
- Considering the role of men in work with children who have been sexually abused;
- Helping identify why sexism must be challenged and how to do this effectively;
- Challenging the myths and stereotyping surrounding single male carers and gay men and promoting anti-discriminatory practice.

For further information contact Anne Currie, training administrator or Sue Robertson, training manager on t 0141 204 1400 or e training@fostercare-scotland.org.uk

Men as Foster Carers – A Challenging Role

Ron Henry has been a social work manager and practising social worker for many years. He is currently a part-time social worker in the fostering and adoption resource team in East Lothian, the only man in the team!

Ron was encouraged to develop his initial thinking about the role of male carers in providing an appropriate model of alternative fathering following the Fostering Network's 'Men in Foster Care' course and a Health Education Board (HEBS) conference on the importance of fathers in the care of children.

Ron was surprised to hear that attendance at the 'Men in Foster Care' course was the first opportunity very experienced male carers had to share their concerns and feelings freely, without being concerned about judgements being made about them. He says:

"In essence, while social workers made global statements about fostering being a shared task, the men carers took the view that in fact there was often little or no commitment to working with them, or to promotion of the shared nature of the task, and they often felt excluded."

As a result of the very interesting discussions at this course and the feedback provided by the carers who attended it, Ron adds "A little momentum (within the organisation) gathered, bringing some positive changes to social work practice e.g. all letters always being addressed to both carers and colleagues discussing issues with the male carer who answered the telephone rather than immediately asking for the woman carer, to men beginning to appear in greater (though still small) numbers at training events.

Following his attendance at the HEBS conference about the importance of fathers in the care of children, Ron and the carers who had been involved in their discussions tried to think of a way of sharing this material with other male carers. This led to the inaugural meeting of what has become the 'Men Carers' Group', which was very well attended.

A successful meeting was held in May 2002, focussing on 'Safe Caring' and very well and enthusiastically presented by Joe Nee, an independent consultant psychologist. Another meeting took place in October 2002 focussing on 'the Role of Men Carers'.

Ron believes the May meeting was so successful, with 21 men carers attending, because "It was beneficial for the men carers to have a man with experience of working with young people and with sex offenders who was able to speak comfortably about several matters and to assist men to think about issues in a challenging but supportive way".

Summarising his involvement in the 'Men Carers' Group', Ron says "Things that have remained with me are the strong feelings of some men carers who said that the opportunity of having an all male meeting allowed them to speak openly about their feelings for the first time".

This is a brief summary of a very full and interesting paper written by Ron Henry about the role of men in foster care. A copy of the complete paper can be obtained from the Fostering Network's Glasgow office on t 0141 204 1400 or e anne.fisher@fostercare-scotland.org.uk

Next Edition

2002 Overview of Focus Group
2001 – 2002 Scottish Committees
Annual Report

Happy New Year