



Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel

Foster Care in Jersey

Witness: The Minister for Children and Families

Friday, 7th February 2025

Panel:

Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central (Chair)

Connétable M. Labey of Grouville (Vice Chair)

Deputy H.M. Miles of St. Brelade

Witnesses:

Connétable R.P. Vibert of St. Peter, The Minister for Children and Families

Deputy M.R. Ferey of St. Saviour, Assistant Minister for Children and Families

Ms. D. Marriott, Director, Children's Services

Mr. A. Waugh, Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption

[9:32]

Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central (Chair):

Welcome to this hearing about foster care and today is 7th February. I would like to draw everyone's attention to the following. This hearing will be filmed and streamed live. The recording and transcripts will be published afterwards on the States Assembly website. All electronic devices, including mobile phones, should be switched to silent. Starting with introductions, I am Deputy Catherine Curtis, the chair of the panel.

Connétable M. Labey of Grouville (Vice-Chair):

Connétable Mark Labey from the Parish of Grouville, and I am vice chair.

Deputy H.M. Miles of St. Brelade:

I am Deputy Helen Miles of St. Brelade, panel member.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Constable Richard Vibert, Minister for Children and Families.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Deputy Malcolm Ferey, Assistant Minister for Children and Families.

Director, Children's Services:

Donna Marriott, Director of Children's Services.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Andy Waugh, head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Thanks, everybody. Our other panel member, Deputy Porée, cannot be here today. We have 1½ hours for this hearing about foster care in Jersey. Minister, with Jersey's population and economic dynamics evolving, how is the department preparing to meet the growing and changing needs of foster care in the next 5 to 10 years and how far ahead do you plan for?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Fostering will form part of our reform plan for the whole of Children's Services. At the moment that is a 5-year plan and we will be looking to improve the service to recruit more foster carers. Of course, that will be happening in 2025 but we have been running a number of campaigns to recruit more families. It is a tough thing to do. I would like to thank all the people who are foster carers. They do an incredible job. It is not one that is for everyone. It is not even one for everybody who shows interest when we run our campaigns. I think after that initial enthusiasm and when they find out what is actually involved you will have a number of people dropping off, as you do during the training. I cannot overemphasise what a fantastic job those people do in providing a family, and that is the important thing. It is the fact that it is a family and children do not go into a care home. I think everyone knows that the more difficult areas are finding families who will take a number of siblings or families who will care for teenagers. But we are working constantly at improving that service, and perhaps Donna can tell us a little bit more.

Director, Children's Services:

As part of the reform programme, a focus of that has been on the residential estate, but also on fostering because we need both things to be strengthened. You will know there have been a lot of

campaigns the last couple of years. We had one running recently about teenagers with empty nests as well. The plan, I think, going forward is to try to target some of our recruitment a bit more in the areas where we have the greatest needs, so that is 5 to 11 and in the teens as well. We have a plan in the reform programme to look at creating a mockingbird project, which is quite a well-utilised model they have in the U.K. (United Kingdom) that they have been doing as part of the whole of the reform of children's care in the U.K. They have been providing funding around to create a small ... almost like a hub-and-spoke model of foster care where you get a foster carer that is really skilled and experienced. They are used to support the network of another small group of foster carers that sit around them and you put support around that with like C.A.M.H.S. (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), psychology support and other intervention that helps to get more strength, more capacity, because that foster carer has not necessarily got children placed and they support the network and there is a respite mode. So the carers that are wrapped around them have a carer that comes and support them, offers respite, and the children have consistency in their care. That is our plan to start to roll out ... to look at rolling that out and recruiting for that model this year, because I think our teens are probably our most challenging area really currently. It is not unusual, I suppose. You have got a small Island and it is quite challenging to get the right level of care in a small population.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

The next question I was going to ask was about that there is ... we have previously highlighted a lack of up-to-date policies in children's social care, so is this reform programme going to include all the policies, and it is part of that?

Director, Children's Services:

Yesh, we have - Andy will probably put more detail - but we have already started that work. Policies and procedures have been something across the whole of the system that we have been working on. We have had that work in progress since April. Obviously, across our whole system, we have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of policies and procedures. That work is almost finished. There is a new handbook that is out at the moment for consultation with foster carers that provides a bit of an A to Z really and it enables them to see the whole of where they need to go for what, what the rules are, and also the fees and everything is all included in there. So there is a whole procedure for them in one place but all of the policies and procedures are nearly written, are they not? I think Andy might be able to just ... they are more or less there, about to launch now?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes, absolutely. We have targeted the key policies and procedures, particularly around safeguarding foster carers and children in foster care, but also the handbook covers a tremendous amount of areas where foster carers will be made clear to them what their expectations are and

what they can expect of services as well. I would say within the next 2 weeks the fostering policies will be finished and ready for uploading; about 2 to 3 weeks.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay, because I was going to ask about timeline but you think it is all going to be complete within a few weeks. You have mentioned the handbook, you have mentioned safeguarding, are there any other specific policies around fostering which we would expect to see?

Director, Children's Services:

All of them, there is loads. Give some other examples Andy. Matching ...

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes. There is matching. There is ...

Director, Children's Services:

Managing allegations.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

... how to manage allegations. There is understanding the role of the supervising social worker, the role of the children social worker, the policies around smoking, safeguarding, record-keeping. It is almost endless in terms of foster carers; they have a lot to do. But the handbook, they have welcomed the handbook and they have given me some suggestions that they want added to the handbook, which will make it a lot bigger but I think it is a good thing in many ways that there is clarity around roles and responsibilities.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay, thank you. My next question is, Minister, your department or has your department reviewed fostering practices and services from other jurisdictions - so we are not particularly talking about the U.K. - such as the Isle of Man, for example, who are looking for people who can spare a few days or weeks at a time to support permanent carers by taking care of children for short breaks?

The Minister for Children and Families:

We have certainly had, in my visits to the Isle of Man, discussions with them to see if there are things that we can learn. I think Donna has recently been in touch with Guernsey as well.

Director, Children's Services:

Not specifically on fostering but obviously we have just started to build some connections with the Isle of Man and Guernsey for myself with the directors there. So that is a new link to try to share

best practice. I think we have some arrangements in progress to plan to do some shared visiting across the system around residential. Fostering will be part of that discussion. We have had some link with the regional adoption agencies and fostering in the U.K. as well to try to look. I think the short breaks practice is being reviewed generally. We have quite a few short breaks carers. I suppose the challenge we have is around some children and some special needs, I think, that cause more of a stretch on that respite offer. We need to review the whole of our fostering plan really about how you recruit. There was a really large part of work last year and a relaunch of all our recruitment that has had some success. You will see there are, I think, 9 new approved carers, which is good in a year in a tiny borough like this, tiny geography like this. But I think you need to start to keep thinking about have we engaged the right communities, the different communities that will be on the Island that might offer different things for fostering. We need to do a piece of work around that, which is what we have been looking at with the fostering side of it.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is good about the discussions and so on, but does the department review practices and services from other jurisdictions as a comparison?

Director, Children's Services:

Not to my knowledge specifically in relation to fostering. We have certainly done that about some of the residential estate. We have looked across the U.K., which covers a much broader ... obviously it has a much larger population which you would normally benchmark against. We have started to develop those connections with other jurisdictions, other islands, so you can start to get some similarities.

The Connétable of Grouville:

My question was about sharing resources with others, especially perhaps our sister island Guernsey being so close. Is there a thrust to enhance that collaboration?

Director, Children's Services:

I think that is the discussions I have been in with the director there. They have obviously got a secure estate, they have challenges and they have shortfalls and challenges in capacity there the same. I think they are part of those discussions. We have not spoken specifically to fostering, no. But that does not mean we will not because it will be ... as we start to collaborate, we will start to consider lots of shared practice areas, I think.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Sharing successes.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, absolutely.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Improvement measures such as that.

Director, Children's Services:

Yes.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Thank you for your honesty there. How does the department ensure emergency placements are handled in a way that minimises stress for both children and foster carers while providing necessary support?

Director, Children's Services:

I suppose, firstly, you would always try to avoid emergencies where we can. So trying to be more thoughtful, pre-empt, I think, about having good planning helps. We are not there yet. Children do obviously always come in an emergency sometimes. Part of that is trying to make sure that the social work teams are thoughtful about the child's needs, that the communication happens with carers. We have had a couple of incidents lately where I have been out in the office or involved in calls where you will have the whole team on the call; the foster carer, the foster carer's fostering social worker, the social worker, the manager from the team, and that is the best way to do it because that will help to prepare that placement happening in the best way. Make sure the carers are supported, they have all of the information, and that they are ready.

[9:45]

I think some of the criticism has been historically that we have not always been as good at that. Part of the work we have been doing is trying to make sure that is much more joined up. Part of that helps to have the fostering handbook, because that helps carers to be clear about what the offer is going to be and what the information needs to be. We need to be stronger at information sharing with the foster carer, and that work has been happening, I think, with fostering and supervising social workers as well. So work in progress, but starting to be more joined up and seeing that as a whole team.

The Connétable of Grouville:

So avoidance and planning is something ...

Director, Children's Services:

Critical.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Critical, yes.

Director, Children's Services:

I think communication and information sharing is really critical, and the thing that I think carers will sometimes say we do not get right, and the thing that we need to put our effort and energy into. So the policies and procedures, the handbook, we started to be meeting with foster carers as a group to learn from them about what does not work. There has been a survey recently about them sharing about the stuff that we do not always get right and we could do differently and how to make them come to the fore of that a bit more, I think, in helping us to see it.

The Minister for Children and Families:

The foster carers have helped us with that survey, have they not?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Which is good. It is a survey where there has been collaboration and I think that is a good sign.

Director, Children's Services:

Andy's been meeting with all of the foster carers and the Foster Carers Association, so I think starting to use their experience to help shape some of what we do. There has been quite a lot of thinking about a lot of that.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Just a really straightforward question: how many current foster carers have you got?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Currently we have 31. That is a mixture of foster carers who can look after children long term, short term and only respite. We have quite a few respite carers who will look after children up to a week at a time. We are actually quite limited on placements for children that need longer-term placements, but we have 31.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

So when you say you have got 31, is that foster families or ...

Director, Children's Services:

Households.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

That is households?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Households, yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Because obviously if you have 2 partners in a household you still count that as one not 2. Okay, thank you. You have talked a little bit about the strategies that you are implementing to increase and encourage carers to remain in the system. You have talked about procedures and processes, handbook, et cetera. Just a silly question: is the handbook electronic or is it a book book?

Director, Children's Services:

It will be online, will it not, later on but at the moment it is ...

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption: I

It is currently a book book at the moment. Once it has been signed off it will become a procedure online through our tri.x company that we use for policies and procedures. But we can print it off if that is what they want.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, but otherwise it is dynamic. They can ...

Director, Children's Services:

So we have just procured in ... I do not know what month it was, but not long after coming, so maybe May, we have procured tri.x. It is a company all across the U.K., and probably the islands use them as well, that do online procedures. It basically means that you can get a much better quality procedure that people can access for all of our procedures but they are updated regularly through that. There is a system for it.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

So the handbook, the procedures, the processes, are they public?

Director, Children's Services:

They will be. I think we will make our tri.x open to the public. Yes, we would do.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

So the public can see, and equally foster children can see what they ...

Director, Children's Services:

So we have got separately a piece of work going on to start to look at a website for the department, and that website will ... part of the work we are starting to look at is that being about a child-friendly part of the website that young people and care leavers will be able to go on and access. We will build that, but it will take time.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I think for a lot of us that have been around in Jersey a long time, the retention of foster carers has become an issue. How are you coping with the legacy issues and the reputational damage that has been done to the fostering adoption team which are putting people off coming forward? Things like the lack of support, the constant change of social workers, not getting paid; Jersey's a very small island and these sorts of things go around. What are you doing to tackle those sorts of issues?

The Minister for Children and Families:

We have got some very positive things as well.

Director, Children's Services:

I think that is there, and part of any improvement programme anywhere you have to rebuild trust with the system. That has certainly been going on, I think, last year from what I have seen, with more connection and more involvement with carers. I think that is critical. The work that Andy has just started in the last few months to now set in train a process where we will have a better interaction meeting much more regularly with foster carers, hearing their views and rebuilding trust, then that builds reputation significantly. Being clear, having ownership of things about when they are not going right and making sure we put things right if there is an issue, I think will really help foster carers to rebuild trust with those children.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Just to build on that, Deputy Miles, so from the political point of view, the Minister and I meet with the Jersey Foster Carers Association on a quarterly basis to hear their concerns and take that feedback back, as well as, of course, to thank them. But what we did directly 2 weeks ago is we met with the senior leadership team and front line staff, and both the Minister and I went out on personal visits. We are really grateful to those young people for opening up their lives to us. But

we saw first-hand what the challenges are throughout the system; across children's social care, across fostering and adoption. That was a really valuable exercise for us to understand how it works on the coalface and what the challenges are.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We are going to be doing more of that throughout the year.

Director, Children's Services:

We have got them booked in for a senior leadership visit.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You talked briefly about diversifying the fostering community, trying to recruit individuals from hard-to-reach groups, different demographics, et cetera. Have you got any specific examples of how that has worked well?

Director, Children's Services:

I have not started that yet but it is in the plan for us to do. We want to try to connect with some of the communities, like the Portuguese community. We have got some discussions about some of the perhaps church communities, so that is the work we have just been modelling up now about and started to look about how we might best be able to do that and through who, who are the best connections for this.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You have mentioned church communities. Is there any work going on around broader community and third sector organisations?

Director, Children's Services:

We have just started to connect with a couple of people across different parts of the system like some of our charitable sector. I think that is what we will create and we will build that probably with the foster carers as well, the plan for recruitment across the system. We have just put some extra comms capacity into the service that will help us to think about how we might do that well, how to target some of the communities we do not think we are probably connecting to that would reflect our child population.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Do you have any initiatives as well, partnerships with local businesses that would be allowing time off for fostering emergencies for settling children in, et cetera?

Director, Children's Services:

We have not done that as far as I am aware. But certainly would be something ... we have started to, through the work in children in care and the Children in Care Council where we started to ... we created a subgroup under the Corporate Parenting Board. There is one in there about participation across the system for children and we are starting to engage different parts of the Island in some of that work. I think that will provide us a good space about how we can connect and get the right people at the right place.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Also has there been any exploration of local businesses and partnerships offering discounts to foster carers?

Director, Children's Services:

We have some of that that has been, yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Certain attractions and things, Active Cards and things like that?

Director, Children's Services:

They do have an Active Card already or for some of the things some of the children ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

That they want to do so that that would reduce, okay.

Director, Children's Services:

We already pay for some of that as well as partner offer.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

The last question I had on this is a bit out of kilter but we did not have it in the question plan. Any plans for bail fostering?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes.

The Minister for Children and Families:

In the 5-year plan.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Because we have been trying to get bail fostering for about 25 years.

Director, Children's Services:

In the 5-year plan, we are looking at both an emergency ... so you will not have seen the plan yet, the improvement plan, but in there is a proposal that has been agreed by C.O.M. (Council of Ministers) that will have an emergency bed, and that emergency bed we are suggesting will probably work as a remand bed as well.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

In a home as opposed to a children's home?

Director, Children's Services:

Well it will be a children's home but we are looking at being a fostering and a residential by arrangement that we will come up with something. We are just about to have conversations with the J.C.C. (Jersey Care Commission) about registration of what that might look like. Knowing the economies of scale we have on the Island and the volume of foster carers we have, expecting that you will have a foster carer available 365 days a year may be a challenge. We are thinking that the model we want is to have a site-based model that has resilience in there for a children's home. But the home is left ... it is not open all the time. It would be purely for an emergency bed and a remand facility. We might be able to have an arrangement that is joined up with fostering and residential we can make doable to make it work. So there will be a family type of arrangement ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Good luck with that. Okay, thank you.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Just asking some questions now about financial support. Minister, the panel understands that there were discrepancies in the 2023 allowance adjustment provided to foster carers. Can you tell us about this and advise if the Government will commit to addressing the shortfall retrospectively?

Director, Children's Services:

I do not know that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

No, nor do I.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

There was a 7.9 per cent increase in the 2023 allowance over the 2022 allowance to replace it with a 10.4 per cent increase with retrospective application. We spoke to foster carers who talked about how some had not been paid expenses for approximately 6 months. There were several issues over outstanding overpayments.

Director, Children's Services:

I do not know that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We would have to come back to you on that because that is ...

Director, Children's Services:

We probably would need the detail so we are clear about the query.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We would need a lot more detail on that. But it is not something I am immediately familiar with.

Director, Children's Services:

It will come to my attention because I have been here ...

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

So you will come back to us on that.

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

The individual cases, we would gladly hear.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We would need some starting point to look at that. We will have to ask you to ...

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Because I have got the information there about the change in the increase on the allowance and with retrospective applications, so there is that part of it. Presumably people would have been expecting to get paid an extra payment after that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I am not familiar with ... no.

Director, Children's Services:

That is unusual because you have an uplift fee at the ... you normally set that at the start of the year about what the uplift fee is. That normally runs in with your G.P.R., whatever it is, it will go with whatever you have. From my understanding, I think everything we have had where there has been a query or a concern about a payment or a dispute about that, I thought we had dealt with everything.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I thought so as well. If it is possible, if you can ask somebody to contact directly we are happy to look at that. But it is not something that I can say has been raised with me.

Director, Children's Services:

I am not aware.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Or the department. Nobody has ...

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Just looking at the notes I have got here, there were also concerns around payment delays and the reasons have been given as systems errors and sometimes people ... apparently the responsible person was off sick or on holiday and this seemed to be quite a problem but we will perhaps look at that ...

Director, Children's Services:

I can answer that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Most of the payment issues, and I think this needs to be understood, are not ... we are not responsible ... our staff are not responsible for those. They are central Government issues with the payment system. Even the last one that we had, the one-day delay, that was not our staff who were responsible for that. It is very difficult ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

But they are responsible for dealing with the fallout though, are they not?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes. And I have to say they acted very quickly on that.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

We cannot really expect the foster carers to subsidise all the costs from their own income necessarily, can we?

The Minister for Children and Families:

No, and we would not expect that. But I have to say that our staff are good at reacting to this, and I cannot speak more highly of the staff when they are dealing with something that is outside of their control.

[10:00]

I have to say, that certainly the last time they reacted very quickly to that. Yes, Donna.

Director, Children's Services:

There have definitely been systems issues that do impact. There has been a piece of work that has been happening for quite a few months now to look at the payment system to create a bit more sustainability and autonomy to it. That work has been done, and I think all of Andy's staff have been trained now in the new system, and in April a new system will roll out where it is much more automated. It will take away some of the options for errors that there have been. My sense is, from what I have seen, is that when those errors happen the team have tried to act quite quickly to try and make sure that people are assured that if there is a problem we would always ... if someone was going to be affected and impacted, we would not expect ... we would try to help. I think there have been issues sometimes where we do not always get things quite right and where payments have not worked well, and that might be about our own error, but they have been rectified. I think there has been much less of that. I think the system feels much more structured than what it was. I think the procedures are clearer. I think those things are improving.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

So a better way to deal with any potential problems like that. But then as another quick example, we heard about the extra expenses Christmas payment being paid on 23rd December. Whereas of course people buy all the presents long before 23rd December, so it is not very practical if the foster carers do not actually have a large amount of spare cash of their own. It would be better to pay that much sooner.

Director, Children's Services:

Can you answer that, Andy? I do not know the answer.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

There was an issue. Somebody had not pressed a button because it is off an Excel sheet that identifies when that needs to be paid and it was brought to our attention. I totally agree that the foster carers should be receiving that money 3 weeks early. I met with the J.F.C.A. (Jersey Foster Carers Association) on the Monday 2 or 3 weeks ago after the most recent payment issue. We talked there about how we need to provide birthday allowances earlier and how to provide any allowances that are additional in good time so that foster carers are not using their own money. Absolutely.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay, thanks, that is good. Now another question. Considering Jersey's high housing costs, has the department considered a separate property element in the maintenance allowance?

Director, Children's Services:

Not that I am aware of, but we have been reviewing fees. If you look at our fees across the system in a benchmarked way, our fees are really good in Jersey. That is taking account of cost of living being higher here. When you take all of those things into account we think that there may be a little bit of the system that probably needs to be looked at which ... but not really in relation to housing because your fee for fostering would be looked at in a benchmark way like anybody's salary. It is the same as any role - obviously it is a much tougher role in lots of ways - but the same as any salary you try to make the fees work that it would be salary compliant. That work is being reviewed. We have agreed to review the fee structure and just make sure and see if there are any changes needed. There are some things that foster carers have asked about, things like after-school clubs that all need to be reviewed as part of that work. That work is underway now along with the specialist fee and things.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

We are reviewing any additional fees that foster carers get above and beyond the child maintenance that they get as to how that impacts upon them as the children and the placement.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I know that you mentioned before that the review of policies is going to be ready within a few weeks but reviewing things like fees and so on, when might that be complete?

Director, Children's Services:

Is it 3 months?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes, we have targeted 3 months.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Minister, fostering agencies in the U.K. provide bridging payments to retain carers during periods without placements. Could Jersey adopt similar practices? I know that you are reviewing this but is that part of a review as well?

Director, Children's Services:

We have not actually looked at bridging placements. I do not think it is very universally used in the U.K. from my experience. But we have not got it on the list, but we could look at it. We want to look at making the offer the best we can.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That may help retain some really good foster carers perhaps.

Director, Children's Services:

We could certainly look at whether that is an option. There are quite a number of issues that come with bridging and availability of placements that we need to think about, especially in terms of sufficiency. When you have such a small cohort, it might be quite challenging to create a bridging system. It does not mean we cannot look at it.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

My last question, coming back to the problems with payments, was just how many times have payments been missed to foster carers in the previous year? Do you have that information?

The Minister for Children and Families:

We would have to look at that. I certainly have not got it to hand, and there have been a number of incidents across government where there have been issues with payments. A definitive answer may be challenging.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

This data is not captured centrally in any way by look of it.

Director, Children's Services:

Andy will know that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Well, it would not be captured by us.

Director, Children's Services:

I do not think so.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

No.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Would it be the Treasury?

Director, Children's Services:

Maybe. The Treasury will probably have some ...

The Minister for Children and Families:

It would be within the Treasury possibly.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Do you have a single point of contact in Treasury who deals with any issues that you have over payments to foster carers?

Director, Children's Services:

My sense is that we have created ... there has been much more join up over the last months with Treasury and the system people as well trying to create something that is going to be more consistent I think. So that is the whole thing of that move to the automated system. There are definitely links because I get copied in when there is an issue and there definitely is ... that is not just a generic inbox. But I do not know if we have a specific key person. We could ask that.

The Connétable of Grouville:

I think the nub of this questioning and the thrust of this questioning is all about retention and foster carers within the system that have expressed concerns to this panel, certainly are concerned about this issue in particular. Why we are asking these questions is it has been highlighted to us, so it is very important that perhaps the department really looks at this and hopefully you will be in. Most of my questions have already been answered but there is another one I would like to ask about the financial side of it. Can you advise the panel on your opinion regarding pocket money allocations provided to children in care because the panel understands that some foster carers would like this to be discretionary?

Director, Children's Services:

I do not know the answer because I have not heard that.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I have not heard that either.

Director, Children's Services:

Andy, do you know the answer?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

I would need to check but I believe we have put it in the handbook as to what the level of pocket money should be, the child's maintenance allowance.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Discretionary in what way? The amount or the payment?

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I think some concerns were that some children knew what the pocket money element was supposed to be and would say: "This is my right to have this now."

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Entitlement, yes.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Whereas the foster carers might want to spread it on buying a larger item next month or something and the children ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Positive reinforcement for behaviour.

Director, Children's Services:

That should be part of the placement planning really and that should be agreed with the social worker.

The Minister for Children and Families:

They are all going to know what the pocket money allocation is because it is in the handbook.

The Connétable of Grouville:

It is just something that has been ... well not maybe highlighted to us, just we are concerned about retention, are we not? This is part of the problem. Not pocket money, in particular. I am just talking financially.

The Minister for Children and Families:

I think one must not let the financial element detract from the excellent work that staff actually do do. I do not think they get the credit for the ... because as well as foster caring being tough, it is tough for the people actually working in the department because they are always looking at the best interests of the children. I think we have to tell them what an excellent job they do as well, albeit that there are problems with the financial systems. We are not perfect and we know that, we are a long way from there. But we are improving.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Thank you for your honesty, Minister.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

It was just to ask some questions around training and support for foster carers. I think you have alluded to some of it already. Children are being placed who have increasingly complex needs and foster carers really require some specialised skills. What sort of training programmes are being developed to help foster carers handle these challenges effectively?

Director, Children's Services:

This would be better picked up by Andy. I can talk about it, but it would probably be better picked up by Andy.

The Minister for Children and Families:

Do you want to start, Andy?

Director, Children's Services:

He has done quite a lot around training.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

I have just found - if you want to go back - the handbook is very prescriptive as to how much pocket money children should receive at different ages. For example, 11 to 15, the 2-weekly amounts of £25.78.

Director, Children's Services:

I have to say, I think there was always quite a lot of discussion about money. But some of the stuff I have seen here is the best I have seen in terms of generosity. It is not poor.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I think the question was not around the amount of money, it was whether foster carers could say: "Well actually do you know what, your behaviour has not really been up to scratch this week" in a way you do with your typical child, "so actually I am not giving you your pocket money this week." Because that money is allocated by Government, as it were, how does that affect the dynamic with the behaviour maintenance with the foster families?

Director, Children's Services:

That is about making sure that we are clear about the plan for the child and the team; the foster carer, the social worker, are clear about how to spend it. You would want to use pocket money in a way that is ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Positive reinforcement.

Director, Children's Services:

It is a positive reinforcement. If things are not going how you want, you would want to be able to withdraw it. That should be happening. Foster carers have got the ability to do that, as long as the money goes on children. You might not give them the pocket money that week, but that would still be their pocket money, so you think of that.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Yes, it would still be there.

Director, Children's Services:

The foster carers have got the ability to work in that way, have they not, with their supervisor and social workers?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, thank you. Sorry, Andy, back to you regarding the training programmes for more complex needs.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

We have an extensive ... I think our offer of training is a really, really good offer. We offer a mixture of mandatory training as well as a number of ... bear with me, sorry, I am trying to find a document. So we have, as I said, an extensive training programme. So the management training covers record-keeping, safeguarding, managing allegations, safer carer and paediatric first aid. We have changed that, that has got to now be renewed every 2 to 3 years on different ones. For example, first aid is every 2 years.

Director, Children's Services:

Andy, it is for the complex children I think really that Deputy Miles is more asking about. So the complex developmental trauma.

The Minister for Children and Families:

We have understanding neurodiversity and disabilities, that is a specific ...

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Okay. In addition there are a number of specific training courses such as understanding attachment disorder, how can children make sense of their past, hypervigilance disassociation A.D.H.D. and conduct disorders, adolescent mental health.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Can I just ask the question then. If you have a child that has A.S.D. (Autism Spectrum Disorder) or A.D.H.D. (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or an attachment disorder how do you ensure that the foster placement that you place that child in, the parents have had that training? Is that training mandatory before you place the child in that setting?

Director, Children's Services:

No.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

No, it is not mandatory. If carers are interested in caring for their children with additional needs we would expect the supervising social worker to make sure that they are ready, they are already trained within that process. We have also just recently have the "looked after children" C.A.M.H.S. service, who we are working closely with the specific service manager on that, who is going to do some trauma-informed and specific training with carers. Then we are looking at meeting with them on a monthly basis as a reflected supervision really with the foster carers.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

As the current situation stands, it is perfectly feasible that a child with a particular need could be placed in a foster placement where that specific training has not taken place?

[10:15]

Director, Children's Services:

Yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, thank you.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Presumably your plan is to minimise the impact of that through training?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes.

Director, Children's Services:

The new work around fees includes looking at that more specialist level, and it needs ... what we are saying will need to happen across the whole fostering system is that the fostering offer, the payments, and the structure needs to be driven by children's needs and the matching around children's needs and making sure that the carers have the skills and the ability to meet the needs of the children that we are placing. Some of those things will come together I think much more combined with the C.A.M.H.S. offer that will overlap to where we have a shortfall in a skill, that C.A.M.H.S. team will be able to start to help the carers develop the skills as well.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Can I just ask as well around training? When I did this a few years ago we also did what was called the Solihull training. We had to do quite a detailed course where we evidenced through examples of work we have done in specific ways. Is that still there for foster carers or something similar?

Director, Children's Services:

The Solihull is normally part of our early help offer as a rule.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You have got New Forest as well that you offer parents.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

It is not within our training programme

Director, Children's Services:

I think we have had the New Forest, have we not, as part of it? But the Solihull is more of a ... it is probably ... it will be available but it will be in the early help offer for a much more broader range of professionals rather than any foster carers because it is a lower-level broader course, if that makes sense. More generic in its application.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

My next question is around support for foster carers and we know that foster caring is a really stressful job. The fact that sometimes foster carers will be receiving children for which they have not had specific training increases their stress level as well. What resources are being provided to foster carers to ensure that they do get a short break service and that their mental health needs are being met?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Part of the placement planning with a child, there would be a discussion around the levels of respite care that are needed, if they are needed at all. Our short break service is only a short Saturday 3-hour session that we offer for children with complex needs. But for children within a placement it is often where a carer says: "I need to go away for the weekend", we will arrange respite care or it can be part of a consistent package that is put together to wrap around that carer once that child is placed. It is all about the plan at the start. One of the things I think we have learned very quickly is that historically we have not been very good at matching children with foster carers, and that has led to quite a significant number of placements ending unsatisfactorily. We are getting much better at saying: "No, we have not got the carers to meet this child's needs" and therefore we need to look elsewhere. But where we believe we can provide a package, we put a whole wraparound service around, and that would include respite care.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

You have said there, just thinking it from a foster carer's perspective, if that service is not there you have to look elsewhere. Where is elsewhere in Jersey?

Director, Children's Services:

It would be residential. Or it might be off-Island if we had no placement. But that would be court endorsed or family endorsed.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

If, for example, it was residential in one of your existing homes for short-break service, would that displace children that were there for short-break services from their parents or would that never happen?

Director, Children's Services:

We have a finite resource, as you will appreciate, and part of the reform programme and the improvement programme is trying to look at how we make a more sustainable longer-term offer that can meet more children's needs because we have obviously got an uplifting need across the system. That will take us time to build. There will always be a draw on placement activity, whether that is respite and special needs, whether that is children, teenagers. I think the system requires more capacity to be built into it. We would look across the whole system at what we have got, and I suppose you would try to meet need as best as you can. That might mean that some families do not have as much as they want or need, it might mean that some families have to wait for things, and that is hard. But we have to work within a system of the finite resource that we have. But hopefully the reform and improvement programme will help to ...

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Increase that capacity.

Director, Children's Services:

Certainly our residential offer will be much better. We have got work going on reviewing the whole of our short-break offer and how we can make that more extensive so that over the next 5 years, the next year, the short-break offer will be reviewed.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, thank you.

Director, Children's Services:

Will help us to offer more cover, more need.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Can you talk to us about what immediate support mechanisms are in place for foster carers who are managing a crisis such as behavioural incidents or placement disruption? What out-of-hours support is available for them?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

We have a specific fostering support out-of-hours team who is a helpline that will respond if necessary to go and visit in addition to the normal out-of-hours service. But I think we find that if

there are issues, our supervising social workers will work weekends, they go and support families. Most recently, for example, we are moving a child from one placement to another, which has been a really difficult process, and the social worker has been working evenings and weekends to support the placement to make sure that that transition is smooth. In terms of other additional support, in an emergency, I think with the new C.A.M.H.S. officer coming on board, where children are struggling with their emotional health, we have direct access into that and we can access that resource quicker. We have just had an example where it was actually an adoptive parent who was going to go private with the work because she was told by C.A.M.H.S. that she could not access the service. We have expedited that and she is now getting the service through C.A.M.H.S. We are beginning to really wraparound and use our partners to make things better for carers, I think, when there is a crisis. We also talk about respite as well. If there needs to be a break we will look at using our respite carers.

Director, Children's Services:

I think one of the feedbacks we have had quite recently from the survey that foster carers have done was to say that the out-of-hours offer, they value it.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

They really value it.

Director, Children's Services:

It is unusual to see a fostering out-of-hours offer actually; I have not seen one before. To be uniquely fostering, only an independent fostering agency. They clearly value it.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

They do, yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Thank you.

The Connétable of Grouville:

The next part is about communication and engagement. What training is being provided to social workers to create a better relationship with foster carers and how is accountability for poor communication of behaviour being addressed?

Director, Children's Services:

There is quite a lot of detail today. As part of the reform programme, the improvement programme, we have got a big piece of work about the model and practice. Now that practice model, the Jersey Children's First Practice Model has been quite ... I think I spoke to you the other day when we were

in a panel, it has been quite a theoretical model and what we are saying is it needs to be much more embedded in reality. A central part of that is about bringing the team together around the child. It really sounds the most simplest thing that you would not put any weight to but it is the most critical bit of practice. If the team come together around the child, which is the foster carer, it is the social worker, it is the fostering, supervising social worker, together the communication will be better, the information sharing will be better and we will make better plans and decisions for children. So it is a critical part of our practice that we are really trying to drive. There has been a real focus on that. We have just brought the whole of the directorate together last week to look at that. They came together to look at the model itself. We are rolling out that practice across the system. We have started the work with ... Andy's meeting with the foster carers, that we are going to a senior leadership team, but also the heads of service from the social work teams will be attending those meetings with the foster carers because they have oversight for social workers. That is about trying to bring communication together better, to bring the team together to make sure that there is not those opportunities for communication not to happen, so things are more joined up. A lot of it is a leadership and a cultural shift in expectations and standards that we have to set from the top. That is about having the leaders at the right places to get the social workers, and seeing it is important and holding staff to account to make sure it happens is a really critical part of that. Setting standards is all part of that practice model and setting expectations and holding social workers to account. It is a challenging job being a social worker and they have a thousand layers every day that they are trying to juggle. Often they will see those children as being safe and well cared for in a really good home and they will be worrying about the other bits of juggling their job that is not safe and is not the same. We have just got to get them to try and see across the whole really about how they best manage all of those demands and make sure that we give the message in as leaders that fostering and foster carers are important and that communication support. We have had a lot more work in the teams about matching much more oversight from managers, about matching ... because that is often where things are more challenged. They do not happen so well. A lot more around that. We have had more focus on the independent reviewing officers, making sure they are social workers to account, making sure the escalation processes are followed properly. We have had a lot more focus the last 6 months on visiting children, that includes children in foster care. Those things will help to drive practice. I know that visits to children have improved, visitors to foster carers are improving, they have improved a lot. We know those things are starting to happen more. As they do, we could be much more confident that the communication will come together with it, as it should.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That is crucial. The communication with the Jersey Foster Carers Association itself, how do you communicate with them about potential and upcoming changes facing the sector?

The Minister for Children and Families:

We meet with them every quarter and that will be part of those discussions. I hope that they know that they are quite free to raise any concerns with us. But there is 2-way communication. In fact, those quarterly meetings I do not think were happening historically. I am very keen on that.

The Connétable of Grouville:

I am sure any feedback that you get from those very important meetings could and should perhaps be incorporated into any policy changes or into the handbook.

The Minister for Children and Families:

They will be, yes.

The Connétable of Grouville:

They get feedback is so crucial from them.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

I am also meeting with them on a monthly basis now. We have set up our first monthly meeting at the end of this month and from then on we will be meeting monthly with the J.F.C.A. again, as you said, to look at any policies any issues that will then feed into the quarterly meeting with the Ministers as well.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That would include things like out-of-hours support, Andy, in all these sort of issues?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Minister, the panel understands that this new handbook, which we are very keen to see a copy of, was expected to be launched by the end of 2024, but it has not yet been. Can you confirm to the panel why this has not happened and when we are going to see that copy? Can we have a timeline, please?

Director, Children's Services:

The handbook is currently out with the J.F.C.A., and with all foster carers; it is currently out for consultations. We are just waiting for feedback. What is the deadline we have? Is it the end of February, Andy, for the feedback?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes.

The Connétable of Grouville:

End of February, thank you very much.

Director, Children's Services:

It will be launched in March. As soon as we can take account of the consultation feedback it will be out.

The Connétable of Grouville:

That is excellent, thank you.

Director, Children's Services:

And we can show you a copy.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Thank you very much.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I just have a few questions around operational challenges. About supervising social workers, communication gaps with supervising social workers are reported to be a recurring issue. What specific measures are being taken to ensure foster carers receive consistent updates and timely responses?

Director, Children's Services:

I think that will be addressed by the new ... I do not know which specific issues that you are referring to but assuming that is a more generic worry of carers that you are saying. I think last year historically there has been quite a lot of change in the service.

[10:30]

I think that has been quite challenging across the system, across Children's Services, and it has been quite challenging for staff and foster carers and carers in general. Some of the actions we have taken to try to bring stability that helps communication has been to create the fixed-term leadership team so that we create the foundations for something more stable across the whole of the Children's Services, which will help. The fostering social workers have been allocated to ... the permanent fostering social workers have been allocated to foster carers, as I understand it. That will create more consistency for foster carers rather than the recruitment stuff so that they get more

consistency in their workers, which will help communication. The creation of the handbook, the policies and procedures, quite a lot of issues have been about communication and clarity about these standards issues agreements. So bringing in a better structure around the rules and the expectations will really help make communication work better. I am confident of that.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Because that is what I was thinking of more with structure. I know when I was a foster carer I had some really good supervising social workers. But I do not know how much it depends on whether you are lucky to have a really good supervising social worker. How much do foster carers know to expect from their supervising social worker? Will this be in the handbook that you should definitely have this many meetings and so on?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, it is. It outlines there very clearly about what ... it outlines there about the expectations of foster carers, but the expectations of the department that foster carers can hold the department to account for. It is a 2-way handbook.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

It was brought before the foster carers forum, was it not, and they have asked for it to be written into the handbook prescriptively how often they should be visited, what tasks they have to do over a year, what is the role of the children's social worker, how often should the child be visited? So it is going to be very prescriptive and they can then hold people to account.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is good.

Director, Children's Services:

It will make communication work better. Also then when it is not working for you, you can raise it with the manager, it can come to us and we can hold people to account to say we are not delivering on what we promised.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is good. There is still high turnover, though, among social workers which leads to instability for children and foster carers. What strategies are being developed to reduce turnover to try and ensure consistent relationships?

The Minister for Children and Families:

It is a difficult one because, I mean, there is a shortage across not just Jersey but the U.K., and that is part of the issue. Of course with Jersey comes the complexities of accommodation. Donna, you can probably expand a bit more.

Director, Children's Services:

So as part of the improvement programme, some of the work mapped into there is about really the whole workforce, residential but also social workers are really a big part of it. There are a range of things we have put into place in there, the Grow Your Own scheme of social work, so bringing people up through apprenticeships and through the system. We have done some work to try to strengthen that and that will help the offer. We have built that into the reform improvement plan that C.O.M. have signed off. There will be some extra investment around some of that to try to forecast forward that we get more social workers in the system that we train and develop here on the Island. They are part of the people living here that are more likely to stay.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Do you have the practice supervisors within your existing Children's Service to be able to support the apprenticeships?

Director, Children's Services:

We have built the programme in a way that will not start this year, recognising that we are not in the place yet to have the level of practice supervisory capacity where we want it to be to really drive that well. That is forecasted forward a year.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

So 2026?

Director, Children's Services:

The end of 2026, September they come in, I think it is. So not this year. We have some people in the system already but we have made a commitment not to do it this year because we need to get the service in the right place that gives the best start for those practitioners.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Okay, so we will be looking at 2029, 2030 before ... when they have done their post-qualifying year. So it will be 2030, the cohort?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, but we have got some people in the system already. We have got the on-Island degree. We have just been working with Social Work England about some of the on-Island degree to make that

work a bit more smoothly. We have just been looking at the retention payments around social workers and built that into the improvement plan. I think it is not only about money and terms and conditions, it is about what we offer as a leadership team, the stability and the leadership that the workforce have to do their job and they feel held and supported. That is why we have brought in a new leadership team to hold that, so there is extra capacity in our leadership team than what we might ordinarily have, recognising that we have work to do and it needed some extra capacity to hold it. That will create some stability. I have to tell you today - well I am hoping today, certainly last week - we had all of our team managers in permanent posts for the first time. We have the leadership team in a permanent fixed-term arrangement properly. So everything from that team manager up is in quite a permanent and stable point for the next 2 years. That is going to hold the system, that will make social workers come and want to stay because they will be held, supported and have the right conditions. That takes time.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is really good that all the team managers are in permanent post.

Director, Children's Services:

I am crossing my fingers because something might have changed since they gave me the figures. I am saying a little caveat to that but they were when I was looking. Yes, it might look different from when I was told a week and a half ago, so there is a bit of a caveat but, yes, we have got some stability and the turnover is probably held at the moment. We have had quite a lot of success recently, we have had some of our agency staff transferring on to permanent arrangements. So ask us in maybe 9 months. That is really where we are.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Just a comment, I expect that it must be quite difficult for permanent social workers to perhaps see agency staff come in and seem to have better pay or conditions than themselves sometimes, so that does not help for retention either, does it?

Director, Children's Services:

Yes, it is hard. But some of that is the offer. As I have been saying to the agency staff and to our permanent staff, if you come and you commit to being here, you get the conditions that come with being a permanent employee that agency staff do not have. I get my pension, I get my support, if I am sick I am supported. As an agency worker you do get paid more but you take a lot of risk and you have none of that arrangement around you. Some people will make that choice but it does not necessarily mean it is the best choice just because it is paid better, because it does not always come with the stability that you want. We need to make being here and being permanent the thing of

choice, but there will always be a cohort of that. You will always want some agency top up in a social work service.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes, of course. Just a slightly different sort of question now about apps. How is the department exploring the use of apps or other digital tools to help foster carers manage records, track expenses and communicate with social workers? Is that going to be introduced and is there a timeline for doing something like this?

The Minister for Children and Families:

Yes, Andy, do we have anything? No, we have not looked at it, I do not think.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

I am aware that foster carers are keen to have iPads or laptops. Again, we are keen as well that they have access to digital solutions where they can just send their records in or they can access the procedures straight away. It is something that we do need to look at. We have not got there yet.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay. I was going to ask a follow-on question about how you review risk changing processes with software and so on but this is not being looked at yet really?

Director, Children's Services:

It does need to be. It needs to be part of our whole work about bringing things online and all that automation.

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

The governance of it is quite challenging in terms of who owns the laptops, who maintains the laptops. That is something that we have explored slightly but, no, we are not there yet, nowhere near.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Okay, thank you.

The Connétable of Grouville:

It is good that we get that honesty. Can you outline what policy or procedure is in place to ensure that foster carers are given full information about a child's needs before placement?

Director, Children's Services:

We would expect that for any child that is going to be placed that we would share the wealth of information so that the foster carer can make an informed choice. That is required. It is a standard we would expect for any of our children. The supervising social worker should share the information but the social work team need to share that with the supervising social worker first. That should be part of a dialogue and a discussion about what that means for that particular child and matching with that carer's needs. I think, as Andy said earlier on, it has not been a strength historically in the service and we would recognise that as being something that needed to be worked on. There has been a lot of work in place about strengthening and matching, and making it much more coherent. I do not know if you can add to that, Andy, or whether I have covered it?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

I think that has covered it, really. Yes, I mean, the placement planning meeting is really crucial and what we are ... you touched on the matching, Donna. We really try to get detailed profiles of children, we are predicting when children might come into care - so children that are in court proceedings - we are getting profiles ready to share with foster carers to see if they are a good match or not. Things are getting better but it is the ... some carers would say that they do not get all the information, which is probably true. Not probably, it is true. But it is a work in progress and I am keen that my supervising social workers help chair those placement planning meetings and make sure that carers are fully informed of what the needs of the child are.

Director, Children's Services:

We have been doing some work with the social work teams as well because I think a lot of it is about their skills, capacity, about really identifying need and understanding it, and how to articulate that. I think we have work to do in that area still. I think we are seeing that improve a bit but I regularly get drawn into things about children's profiles or matching or different things. You can see that there is work to do to strengthen that. How do you balance bringing the child to life, making them real and sharing the worries without then it becoming a negative list of things. It is a really hard, skilled thing to do and I think social workers really struggle with it. They are trying to balance: "Well, I need to say that this is a really big worry but I do not want to make the child look like they are not matchable" and they have to get that done. I think it is a challenge. They have work to do to strengthen practice still. It is getting a bit better.

The Connétable of Grouville:

We are grateful for your honesty. Have there been occasions, though, where a fostering has actually been rejected? We would like to understand perhaps a little bit more about the primary reasons for those rejections.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes, that is about referrals where schools might highlight issues where they think children are in a harmful place but those children do not go into foster care as younger children and then they end up coming in as teenagers, for example.

Director, Children's Services:

So not really a fostering question, you are talking before fostering. So the children that are at home that are a worry for the school?

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

That is how I understood the question, looking back at our notes. I think it has been the case where a lot of younger children who maybe would have been better off being placed in a safer position with a foster family were not. How many times have these referrals been rejected and what are the primary reasons? Can you give an idea?

Director, Children's Services:

I definitely could not give you an idea about how many times. If you think of the improvement programme and I suppose where we are today, and if you go back thinking about the inquiry and the practice we have needed to change over time, undoubtedly there will be ... when practice is not strong, social work practice is not strong, we will not always get thresholds right and decision making at that point could be quite challenging about when is the right time, when is enough enough for children, when is the worry enough that you need to intervene. It is not a science, it is quite a complex thing. When practice is not strong, people will not always get that right. I suppose we have not had early help until quite recently in Jersey's history. Children in need did not exist in law until quite recently. If you think in the U.K. it was back in 1989 they made the law around children in need and here in Jersey I think we have had it a year or 2. So it did not exist. It is quite hard to say about getting stuff right or wrong because practice has been a bit different here so you will look - and I am looking now - and you see children where you think: "Actually we should have acted much more robustly 5 years ago."

[10:45]

There was not early help then, things did not get picked up in the same way, they are coming into care really late and we are seeing that. It is definitely there and that is a practice thing that is going to take us time to work through, because obviously as our practice gets stronger, the early help investment there has been over the last years, child in need intervention, as that gets stronger we are identifying children earlier, we are taking action earlier to try to prevent need rising, that will get

better. But I could not tell you how many times because that would be probably an impossible thing for me to define, I think.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Could I just ask a question, sorry? Andy spoke before about the level of training that is offered to foster carers, so the A.D.H.D., the autism, et cetera. You have talked a bit about your concerns about children who are kind of edge of care. In order to prevent some of these children coming into fostering, do parents who have got children at home with special and complex needs have the same access to the sort of training that foster carers would have?

Director, Children's Services:

It is not the same but the early help offer I would say is really good. We still need to build on it but it is really good and there is a lot of training, Solihull, lots of training courses that any parent could access on the Island, the general public can access. It is not probably extensive like you are doing with foster carers, it would not be the same as that.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

I think the children that I am talking about are children whose families have a social worker, have a children's social worker. So they may be in special educational placement but parents are saying: "I am really not coping here." So you are getting those children to edge of care because soon enough the parents go: "I cannot cope with this anymore." We have people, in my experience with my autism background, actually crying out for a short break service. They are not getting the short break service but getting offered a fostering placement. Then parents would say: "Well, actually, if we cannot cope as 2 parents with our child, what is going to be different in a foster family?" Hence my question about are we extending that training to children of parents who are under a social worker? Or have you got any plans in the reform programme to do that, to support parents keeping their own children in their own home?

Director, Children's Services:

I would need to go back to look at the extent of the training but we have quite a good offer, I think, that parents will get offered. It is not the same as the fostering offer, though. I can only be honest with you, there has not been a plan to offer that to parents outside of that fostering offer. I think we would always try ... if we thought that a parent was struggling in a particular area and there was something we could do to help, our first option would always be to try and keep those children at home, whatever. If that did mean that someone needed something around training, I am sure that that would be something that we would look at.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Are your social workers aware that that is a possibility to offer to their families?

Director, Children's Services:

I do not know. I would say they are aware but I think they are quite creative and resourceful, so I think generally social workers will come back to the office and ask for things when they want it. We have a resource panel that people go to to ask for ... again, if it is a specialist thing you want and you wanted to fund something, there is a process that they can bring that to, they go to the panel and the panel will look at if that is something we could pay for or not. That is for children in need, any children, because we always would want ... and quite a bit of the reform programme is focused on how to support families to keep children at home, because that is where we need to put our energy and our effort really. Care should be where we do not want our effort.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I wonder if perhaps we could have some of that in writing about what is available for those children?

Director, Children's Services:

I think the early help offer is online about the extent of training but I could ask, certainly, yes.

Deputy H.M. Miles:

Yes, I think this just goes beyond the early help, the early help being almost universal.

Director, Children's Services:

I think they offer quite a good programme of resource that is online. Not online, there are some groups and different things. I think if there was anything out there, outside of that, it would be a bespoke thing and it would have to be someone would ask and we would look at it, rather than we have a list of that.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Thank you. At the beginning of our hearing this morning, the Minister very kindly outlined the incredible value that foster care is giving to the whole community, but how can you ensure those foster carers are recognised and valued as essential partners in the fostering system?

The Minister for Children and Families:

One of the things we have done is we have organised various foster care events to say thank you to families, and we will continue doing that. We had the barbecue in the summer, you had the Christmas event.

Director, Children's Services:

We have an annual awards ceremony, have we not, Andy, for them this year?

Head of Improvement for Fostering and Adoption:

Yes, on 12th December, I think it is, at the Royal Yacht, we have got a celebration event. Because, again, we have consulted with them because they did not want ... we had set it up as an awards ceremony but they do not want awards, they want celebrations. So we are going to focus on long service, people who have done, say, even 2 years or something. We are clearly engaging with them. There are a number of retention events throughout the year but also that includes the foster carers' children, because that is just as important as the foster carers themselves. Yes, I would like to think that they think that we value them. I do not think they do so much at the moment but I think we are really trying to get that better and my forums with them and the meeting with the J.F.C.A. is beginning to help that. We have had some good feedback from the forums actually around the retention bit. So positive.

The Connétable of Grouville:

This panel certainly regards that as absolutely crucial. I hope I am not stepping out of line there by saying that. How does your department collaborate with educational institutions and healthcare providers to provide a holistic support network for children in care and their foster families? In other words, your collaboration with education and health.

Director, Children's Services:

We have a range of connections, I suppose, if you think we are part of the same directorate as education. We have the virtual school head, who is obviously the person that is responsible for education for children in care. It is a whole post that is focused - she does other things as well - purely on children in care and care leavers in that space. That focus is around their education, the links with schools. She is quite critical. We have our focus for the next Corporate Parenting Board on education; learning and development will be the focus of the board to consider about performance. There is a connection with schools through the headteacher forum that I go to that tries to bring that connection together. We have an education subgroup that is sitting underneath the Corporate Parenting Board and a health subgroup that is sitting under the Corporate Parenting Board that we have just mobilised in the last 2, 3 months. Both of those subgroups are now starting to be built up of people that are all professionals, that are all linked around health and education. There is one for housing and home as well. That is getting the critical people together to drive practice and improvement. There will be a foster carer in there so that they start to really join up practice, so that we are getting the right connection for people's health and well-being and the support around children's education. If the children are not getting the offer that they need, how we drive that forward. We have got a looked after nurse role that looks at children's medical needs and their health assessment. The work around, of course, the residential estate in the new reform

programme has much more of a multidisciplinary offer. One of the roles we have put in there is some nursing capacity in the residential estate. C.A.M.H.S. is also into fostering. That is starting to say: “Actually, we know that we need these different roles be wrapped around foster care as a residential estate and children much more as well.”

Assistant Minister for Children and Families:

Of course we just passed some regulations in the States this week for Children’s Advocacy Service and a big part of their focus is around the voice of children in educational and healthcare settings. That was a fairly quick debate that we had, and thank you for your questions as we went through that, but that is a really important piece of legislation to make sure that children’s voices are heard and we have a statutory framework around that advocacy service.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Absolutely, I completely concur with that. Thank you.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Well, I think that is all our questions and we are just coming up to the end of our time, so ...

The Minister for Children and Families:

But you have one more?

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I am trying to think of one but I think we are done.

The Connétable of Grouville:

Obviously, I would like to also pass on, for the record, the feedback we have had about fostering has been over the period of a couple of years and this may have felt like that we were asking questions retrospectively, but we do appreciate the fact that things are now moving forward. It is lovely to see Andy in post and the relationship that you are building with the Foster Carers Association is crucial, the way the panel thinks is crucial, but we are still concerned about a few points, high turnover of social workers, et cetera, so it is good to hear the Ministry is working on all these issues for us. Thank you.

Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Yes, thank you very much.

[10:56]