

Caring for looked-after children - not the cost

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With pressure on public expenditure, even enlightened local authority officers with responsibilities for fiscal management will find themselves having to disregard arguments about looked after children's emotional wellbeing. Surprisingly it is the financial argument that makes addressing emotional wellbeing compelling. The recent Demos report 'In Loco Parentis' by C. Hannon and her colleagues compared a stable care journey with an unstable one and found the average additional cost of the latter to be £32,770.37 per child, per year.

The official statistics show that over 20,000 children in care (33%) had placement moves during the two years up to the 31 March 2009. Given the calculations in the Demos report, that is potentially an annual avoidable cost to the taxpayer of over £650m. This figure does not take account of the long-term costs which result from unstable care, such as crime, prison, health, mental health, and the impact on the next and future generations. It seems ironic that focusing on the issues which achieve stability and emotional wellbeing, such as professional parenting, children's emotional trauma and attachments are the very issues which will protect the public purse, both in the short term and for generations.

What needs to change?

Mr Cameron and his coalition government bear no responsibility for the excesses, abuses, failings or indeed the achievements of the care system. The credits and blame belong to previous administrations. To understand what needs to change he could start by asking the simple question: "What ugly aspects of policies and practices towards these vulnerable children are prevalent in today's society?"

To help answer this question, imagine 30 years into the future, a balding grey-haired King William, gravely addresses the nation to apologise to Britain's forgotten children from the beginning of the 21st century. Why should he need to apologise? Perhaps the King will apologise to those surviving adults who had experienced the care system.

The King may say:

'We are so sorry that you had to endure a childhood starved of human affection, with unnatural 'sideways hugs' and where spontaneous affection was replaced by artificial and inhuman procedures and intrusive record keeping. We are sorry that your development was stifled by well-intentioned risk assessment and 'safeguarding' practices, which we now know, prevented natural physical affection and blighted

your ability to make decisions or distinguish between minor risks and life threatening dangers. We are sorry that because of this and frequent placement moves, we robbed you of opportunities to enjoy healthy attachments and for many, this treatment has effected your enjoyment of your own children and your ability to be ordinary Mums and Dads or to sustain warm and meaningful adult relationships'.

Lawsuits

On the other hand, our glimpse into the future may reveal that thanks to an over emphasis on education by the previous Government we will see children who have been in care use their intellectual skills to pursue large compensation payments in legal actions against the state, local authorities and, in the case of individual social workers, claims of professional negligence. Much of the evidence for such claims would come from individual case files and the published policies and practice procedures of local authorities. The legal arguments would use the extensive body of published psychological research and theory to demonstrate that the relevant knowledge was available to link the harmful impact of the practices and therefore could have been used to prevent the damage, but this was ignored. Just imagine for a moment what it must be like for a child to have to start again, relating to a different set of adults, a different bed, a different school, again, and again. For many children the lack of stability is beyond belief, some have endured over 20 placement moves. The creation of thousands of nomadic children moving from place to place, through the risk adverse, no-touch, safeguarding world of the care system, is a national scandal.

Preventing harm to children

While most people will have little interest in saving the future king's blushes, preventing harm to children is a widely shared priority. If you are involved with any of the children currently going through 'multiple' placements, now is the time to stand up and be counted, highlight the problem and hold colleagues to account, ask what can be done to support the child, the carer and the placement, use the Demos report to add financial credibility to your concerns. If you are a local councillor, find out if children in your local authority are being moved from 'pillar to post' and ask officers to explain why this is happening.

If you are one of the four children's commissioners in the UK, take note, your name will be associated with this 'ugly chapter' in our nation's history. So stick your head above the parapet, these children need a champion!

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