



Problem child

Local authority reliance on independent fostering agencies is increasing, find **Clare Connell** and **Henry Hunt** of Connell Consulting



Over the last decade local authority fostering services have struggled with recruiting and retaining care staff to replace their ageing workforce. Over that time, Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) have grown their market share and this trend is likely to continue as more local authorities realise the cost effectiveness and quality of independent agencies. Essentially, fostering has changed significantly over the past few years and independent agencies are better at meeting these new challenges.

Over the past 10 years, the proportion of children in IFA placements has gone from roughly a quarter to over a third. This is partly because the growth of local authority placements has stalled – over the last five years there has only been annual growth of 0.34%. That's compared with growth of 1.68% in IFA placements. The local authority carer base is ageing and shrinking so they struggle to recruit carers.

For many foster carers the role has changed significantly over time – it is more time consuming

and it's harder. Children and young people tend to be more challenging and safeguarding oversight is, quite rightly, much more robust. As a result, rather than join local authority foster banks, carers are joining professionalised independent agencies. Recruitment to IFAs is made easier by the promise of invaluable training that foster carers receive when they first join, and the continued on-going support when they are signed up. IFA carers are also paid a stipend that better reflects the demands of a 24-hour role associated with high-risk young people in need of a stable environment.

This growth is in spite of the fact referrals to IFAs tend to be more challenging – as a proxy for challenging situations in general, 4.7% children in independent placements had been assessed as being at risk of sexual exploitation prior to being placed, compared with 2.6% in local authority placements. The support provided by independent agencies is so robust that foster carers with IFAs are also more likely to take on the responsibility

of multiple young people; 40% of IFA households are approved to take three or more children compared to 26% of local authority households.

Indeed, there is also clear evidence that IFA placements are more effective even with more challenging children, including looking after unaccompanied asylum seeking children. There are fewer cases of 'unplanned endings at the request of a foster carer' – that is, fewer placements that break down because the foster carer was unable to cope with the needs of the child in their care. And, when children go missing, they tend to go missing for shorter lengths of time – both local authorities and IFAs return 85% of children within six days, but independent agencies manage to get 54% home within 24 hours, compared to 46% in local authority care.

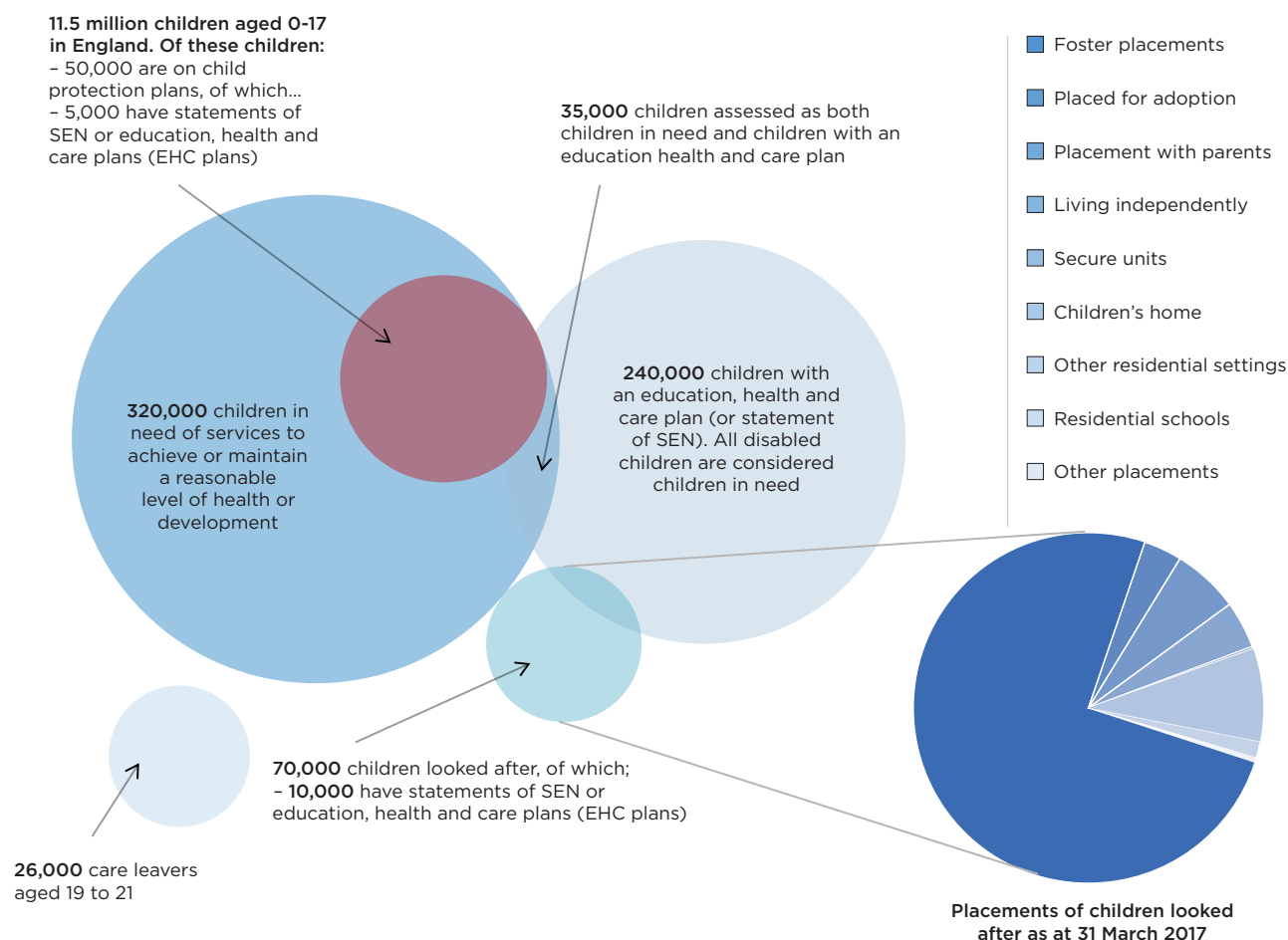
These improvements are in part explained by the training that foster carers can expect to receive with independent agencies. In independent agencies 77% of carers achieve the minimum Department of Education training, support and development (TSD) standards compared with only 60% of local authority fosterers – it's important to note this figure does not need to be 100% as the TSD standard only has to be achieved within 12 months of becoming a foster carer.

The evidence suggests that IFAs should have even greater market share; stakeholders with the responsibility of placing children and young people should increasingly be looking to use independent agencies. However, this isn't the case and often the opposite is true – commissioners will generally try and use local authority placements where possible with independent agencies sought when no other options are available.

This is because local authorities baulk at the prices for IFAs. And, it is true, there is a gap between headline prices for the two forms of placements – in Cambridgeshire for example, the local authority paid IFAs £50,803 per child or young person per annum, versus £43,586 for internal placements. For the commissioning



FIGURE 1: CHILDREN IN THE SOCIAL CARE SYSTEM (ENGLAND)



- There are c. 70,000 looked-after children in England with overlapping care needs in many different settings
- Of these children, around three quarters are in foster placements
- Within these foster placements, just over a third are placed with independent fostering agencies

Sources: Ofsted Social Care Report 2016

officer it's simple maths; local authority foster carers are cheaper than those from IFAs. But, this is a false economy and doesn't consider the other costs associated with local authority services. For most authorities it isn't economical to set up and maintain the administrative aspects of an internal agency, let alone provide the money needed for recruitment campaigns as well as carer and child allowances. Moreover, there is a huge additional cost when placements breakdown because the foster carers cannot cope. There is the financial burden in terms of the hours required to source a new placement as well as the lost progress with the child in question.

In reality, outsourcing to IFAs is comparable in price, and manages to pay carers an allowance that reflects their responsibility for vulnerable children. Steadily local authorities are cottoning on to the cost effectiveness of independent provision, hence the growth in IFA placements.

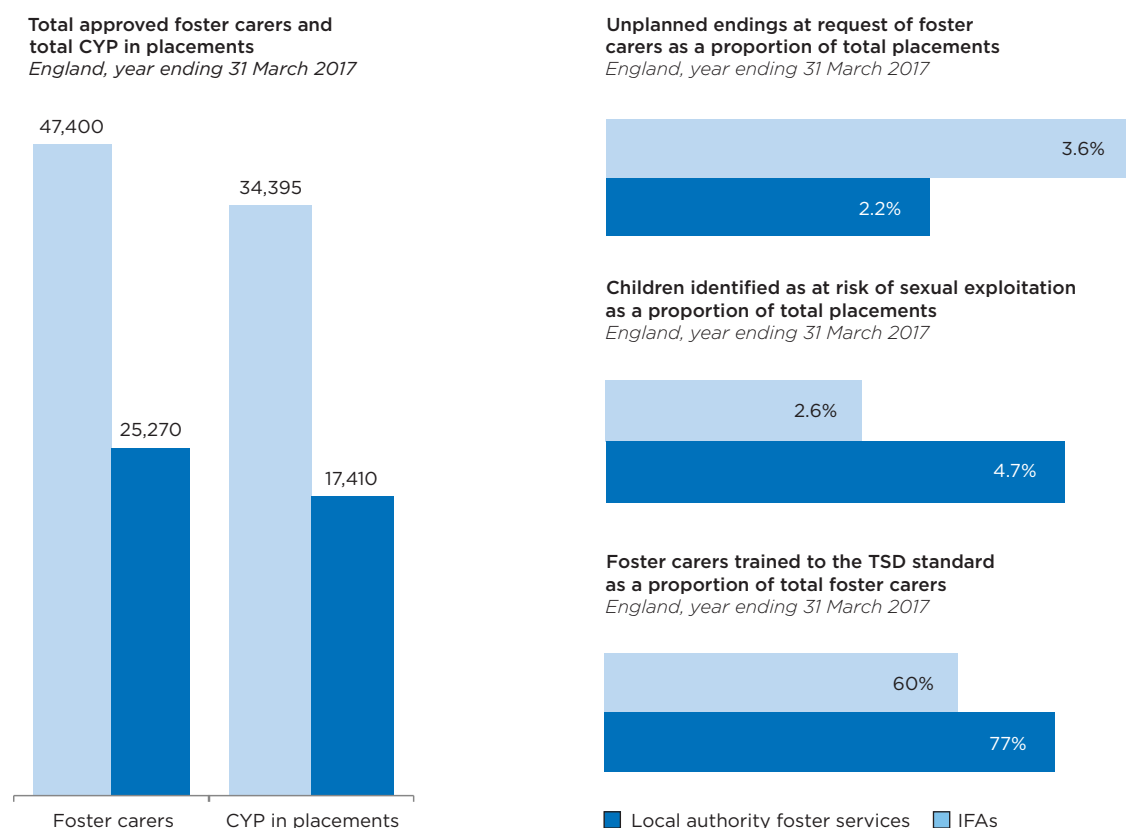
However, there are local authorities that have continued to champion local authority services. Bradford Metropolitan Council has continued to operate an internal service despite, "the recruitment of new carers declining at an excessive rate" due to quality issues within the agency itself. In a damning internal review, "it was felt that there has been a downward

spiral of support and respect [from the council]" threatening the good will of foster carers. The senior management had "become much less approachable", and social workers were "less empathetic". To make matters worse, the local authority controversially reduced their allowance to carers. The local authority seems to be doing everything they can to push carers toward independent agencies while complaining about a precipitous drop in carers.

Bradford Council's fostering agency is still operating, and has recently increased their recruitment budget 900%, up to £100,000 a year. Interestingly, there is no talk of increasing ►



FIGURE 2: IFA VERSUS LA FOSTERING SERVICES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (ENGLAND)



- Roughly 34% of children and young people (CYP) in foster care placements are with foster carers registered with an IFA
- CYP placed with IFAs tend to be higher acuity and present with greater needs than those with local authority carers
- Despite the increased difficulty of IFA placed CYP, the robust support network provided by the agency means that fewer placements have unplanned endings driven by foster carers being unable to cope
- Additionally, CYP are at a lower risk of going missing when placed with IFAs, despite children in IFAs tending to present with more challenging behaviours
- Foster carers with IFAs are better suited to high-acuity children, and have more effective placements with fewer incidents because of the support and training available from agencies. This is evidenced in the proportion who have adequately met the training, support and development standards for foster care when compared to local authority foster carers

Note: excludes children or young people who are disabled

Source: Department for Education

► the allowance for carers or developing a more robust support framework – this is money to be spent on a marketing exercise according to the deputy director of children's social care for Bradford Council, Jim Hopkinson. With an attitude that does not address the retention of carers, the market share in IFA carers and placements will increase.

Some local authorities will find that they struggle with recruitment more than others. Bradford's problem seems to be a lack of support for carers but different local authorities will be hampered by other factors. In London for example, there is robust demand for fostering services but a lack of space; few homes in London can afford

to keep a spare room open for foster children. Homes in rural areas may have plenty of space for two or even three children but if there is an undersupply of carers, placements may involve moving a child from their school which can be the only constant in a very disruptive upbringing and is thus undesirable.

Independent agencies can increase the number of recruits by emphasising the rewarding aspects of the role, and by reducing some of the downsides – a lack of support for challenging cases and the financial cost of looking after a child.

The increase in independent placements is a good thing, as these agencies are better equipped to deal with growing demand. Local authority

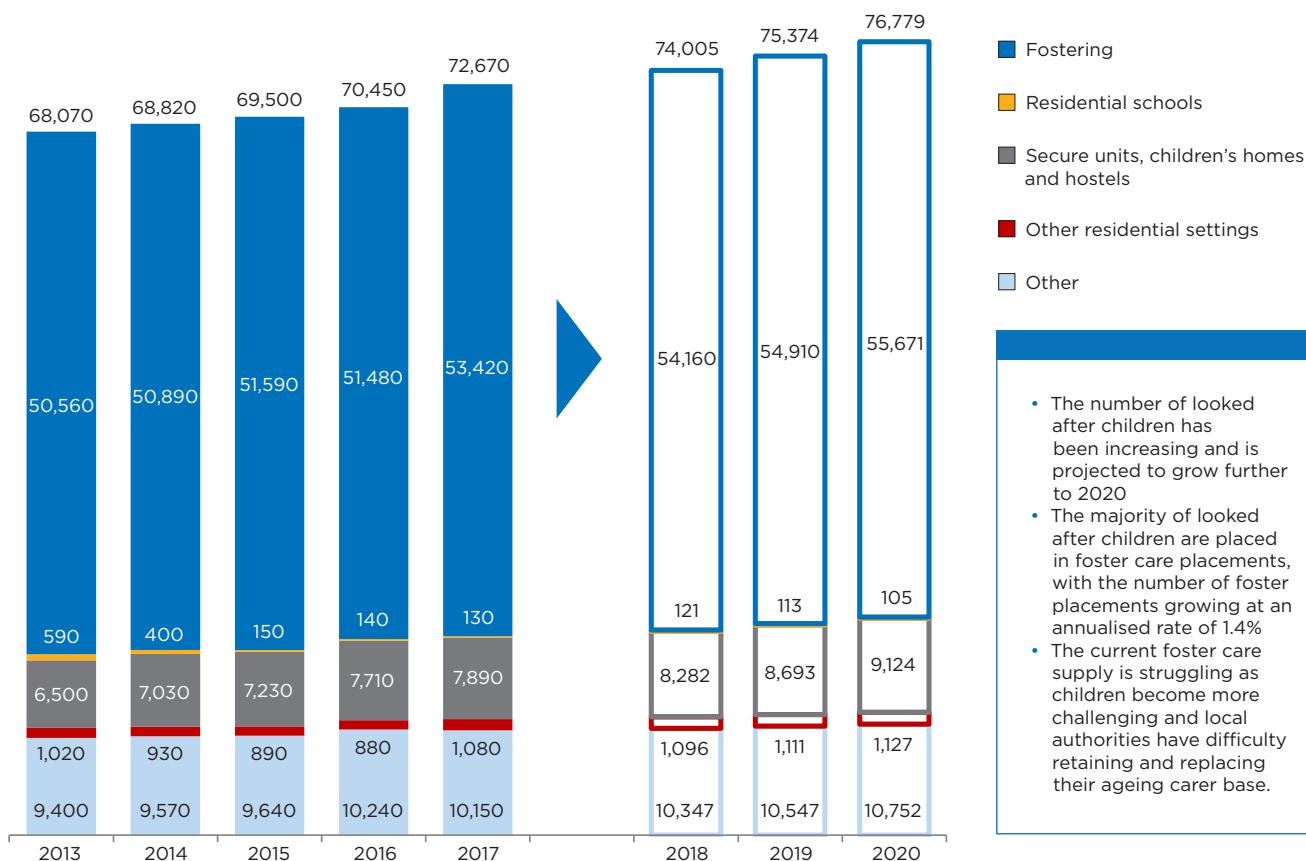
services, like Bradford Council's, are not suited to the more challenging demands of the mix of children currently looked after. According to commissioners and stakeholders, children are increasingly presenting with dual diagnosis and additional complexities.

One area of concern is the growing number of unaccompanied migrants who pose their own difficulties when placing. For example, children and young people may have lost identification on their journeys to the UK, making it difficult to verify their age. Some young adults are likely to have wilfully misplaced their documentation and are happy to lie about their age, the motivation being that it is easier to be granted asylum as a



FIGURE 3: DEMAND TRENDS FOR SERVICES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (ENGLAND)

Looked after children by placement, actual (2013-2017) and projected (2018-2020)
England, year ending 31 March



Note: 'Other residential settings' includes; residential care homes, NHS trust, family centre, young offenders institution or prison.

Sources: Department for Education

child than an adult. The result is safeguarding concerns for other children within fostering households – as well as dangers to the foster carers themselves.

An additional concern has made headlines recently with the attempted bombing of a train at Parson's Green Station. The young man being charged is an Iraqi national who was in foster care in Surrey. CoramBAAF, a charity representing foster carers and adopters, has written to the Department for Education suggesting that foster carers are not getting the support and resources they need to spot and deal with radicalisation of their wards. Foster parents of the arrested refugee, Penny and Ron Jones, 71 and 88 respectively, had flagged that he was a "problem", and that they had

been having difficulty coping, but whether they had the training to spot the warning signs and the support to deradicalise is another question.

It's telling that there are agencies that are dedicated to placing asylum seeking children as well as dedicated teams within larger fostering agencies. They provide the specific support necessary to cope with the demands of asylum seeking children in care. This is something that local authorities are trying to do, but they lack the resources and focus to do it cost effectively. IFAs are well placed to cater to growing demand and will be the preferred destination for fostering children going forward.

Even without the influx of challenging asylum seeking children, the demand for foster

carers is going to increase as the number of looked after children grows – over the last five years total placements have increased by 6% to 72,670 and are projected to reach roughly 76,800 by 2020. This is because as a cheaper, and more effective alternative to children's homes and residential special schools, fostering will continue to be a first port of call. There will always be a place for those types of residential services, but for most children and young people foster care is the preferred option as it provides the closest equivalent to a 'normal' home life. IFAs will be well placed to serve the continued high demand for foster carers, particularly in light of their ability to better cater to those more high-risk children. ■

Clare Connell is managing director at Connell Consulting, a strategy consultancy specialising in the health, social care and education markets.
020 7371 8142 / clare@connell-consulting.com

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