

Children in Care During Covid-19

My parents are foster carers so we have a lot of contact with social workers and I thought it would be interesting to speak to them about how they have found working during lockdown with vulnerable children and the families that care for them. I have asked two social workers (so far) and here is what one of them said.

- 1) Has there been a change in the number of people coming into the foster care system during lockdown?

This has been consistent with last year, what has increased is the work in fostering in the preventative way, we were unsure if we would have more children so we worked to increase the number of placements available just in case. This increased the workload for the team.

- 2) Has your job/work changed at all during the pandemic?

This has changed greatly, we have stopped or greatly reduced face to face meetings, meaning that those are now completed over the phone or skype, this does allow conversations to occur and where there is Skype or Whatsapp we can still see people's faces but this does stop some of the natural observation of being in people's homes and environments, means more screen time and less breaks in between meetings and visits. This does add pressure to workers.

- 3) You're meant to go to peoples' houses and speak to them every so often, obviously that's not been possible, what are the challenges with that?

As above with the lack of observation of general life and the people's surroundings, less opportunity to notice things in the environment, also some more delicate or challenging conversations have needed to be done over the phone which is harder for people receiving difficult messages or having to talk about difficult issues. For some this may have been easier, I guess.

- 4) What have been the biggest challenges for the families you see?

The isolation of not seeing as many people, feeling nervous about the lack of control they may or may not have about people coming into their home.

- 5) How has the pandemic affected your team and how you work together? Have there been many changes? Are there any changes that you'd like to keep?

Less team contact and office support, miss the general discussion in the office about cases which can lead to less support and help. Changing the way that we work and communicate – more regular meetings and touching base – will keep this.

6) What has been the hardest to deal with during the pandemic?

Communication – making sure there is enough but people do not feel overloaded

7) Are there any themes emerging from the families you work with or have all their experiences been unique?

Most are unique and individual – need to respond and keep in touch

According to ITV News the number of children being referred to care homes rose by 50% during lockdown, due to the 'pressures on families during lockdown, a rise in abuse and neglect has led to soaring demand for children's homes'. Children's charity Barnardo's say that there were 2,349 referrals to their fostering services between 1st March and 23rd April this year (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) which is an increase on the 1,629 referrals in the same period in 2019. Barnardo's also reported that the number of people who inquired about becoming foster carers was just 161 down 47% from the same period last year.

This differs from the information that the social worker gave me, she said that the number of children coming into care was consistent with last year. Of course, this is only for West Cumbria and the Cumbria County Council. Barnardo's is separate to both of those things and reflects the UK (excluding Scotland) rather than just West Cumbria.

Also the fact that the new cases are the same in Cumbria as they were last year is likely due to children not being at school and clubs etc. so they were not 'seen' and no one noticed the signs of them needing to be in care.

These web pages would be good to look at:

<https://www.nafp.co.uk/blog/covid-19-webinar-report-children%E2%80%99s-principal-social-workers-network-association-what-works>

<https://www.nafp.co.uk/blog/staying-curious-why-have-some-children-foster-care-thrived-lockdown>

The ITV News articles with the facts and stats:

<https://www.itv.com/news/2020-06-23/children-needing-foster-care-rises-44-during-coronavirus-pandemic-charity/>

<https://www.itv.com/news/2020-06-23/exclusive-50-rise-in-children-referred-to-care-during-coronavirus-pandemic>