The Muslim Fostering Project: summary of key findings and recommendations

The Muslim Fostering Project, funded by the Better Community Business Network (BCBN) and led by The Fostering Network and our partners Mercy Mission UK and My Foster Family, set out to explore the experiences of Muslim children in foster care across England and that of Muslim foster carers.

For many fostered children and young people, their foster family will provide them with their first experience of loving, stable and positive family life. Foster carers are trained and supported to help these children work through the difficulties of their early years, and to help them transform their lives.

Specifically, the project aimed to identify the number of Muslim children being fostered at any one time and to build a picture of the number of Muslim children being placed with non-Muslim foster carers, and the reasons for these decisions. We also sought to identify the barriers as to why more Muslims do not come forward to foster and use our networks to showcase good practice in this area.

Ultimately, the project aimed to highlight areas of challenge in the current fostering system in England and encourage a focus on providing the right support to children and young people from the Muslim community.

The full report and literature review are available at www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/muslim-fostering-project-report

Context

This project took place against a background of a rising number of children coming into care in England. On any given day in England, there are 70,000 children in the care system living away from home. These children are formally looked after by their local authority which acts as their corporate parent, and it is their responsibility to find a placement for each child which is best matched to their individual needs. The majority of these children – over 55,000 – will be looked after by foster families, with assessed and approved foster carers who can meet their emotional and practical needs. The Fostering Network estimates that a further 7,220 new foster families are needed in England in the next 12 months.

Children can enter the care system for a range of reasons but most commonly this will be due to abuse and neglect. In addition, a small but not insignificant number need care because they are seeking asylum in the UK from countries such as Albania, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria. In 2017, 2,206 unaccompanied children applied for asylum, down from a peak of 3,290 in 2016. These children often arrive without basic information relating to their identity, name, background and age and often with very limited English language. Regardless of the reason for entering care, ensuring stability and security for all these children and young people is crucial, as is ensuring that they are placed with a foster family best matched to their needs.

The project also took place at a time when the national media can often present a very negative picture of British Muslims including, for example, two high profile media stories in 2017 relating to cross-faith placements involving Muslim children and foster carers.

There are also a number of other potential barriers to Muslims engaging with issues of social care, including fostering. These barriers are exacerbated by the socio-political climate, the economic status of many Muslims and, in the eyes of some, the Government's Prevent agenda. There is also a perception by some Muslims that fostering is inconsistent with the Islamic faith. Islamic teachings promote fostering and the report lays out the clear Islamic mandate for the care of children.

The report also looks at the importance of identity in a developing child and the formation of an Islamic identity in Muslim children, especially looked after children.

A lack of data

What became clear throughout the project was that there is limited existing research on the experience of Muslim looked after children and Muslim foster carers. In particular there is very little data as to the number of Muslim looked after children and how a child or young person's faith is taken into account when being placed with a foster family. The report lays out a number of possible ways to estimate the number of Muslim children in care, but makes the recommendation that this is data that ought to be collected by Ofsted in the future.

The importance of matching

Finding the right foster carer for each child in care is of paramount importance for local authorities. And this is no easy task – a child comes into care in need of a foster family every 20 minutes in the UK, and fostering services are always looking to recruit more foster carers to provide these children with a home.

A key theme explored throughout the project is that of whether it is essential that Muslim fostered children and young people are matched with (live with) Muslim foster carers. The report presents case studies of Muslim children in care with both Muslim and non-Muslim foster families. It seeks to provide a better understanding of the support both can provide to young Muslims in care, as well as what needs to be in place to ensure the success of cross-religious placements.

The report sets out the importance of recognising that each child is different and will have a personalised hierarchy of needs which a fostering service will do their best to find a foster family to meet. For some children, their faith may be very high on their hierarchy of needs, for others it will be lower down. In other words, a child's faith is just one element of the matching decision and there are many positive examples of where non-Muslim foster carers have enabled a Muslim child in their care to thrive.

However, training to help non-Muslim foster carers meet the faith needs of a Muslim child in their care remains inconsistent. The research also found that information about the child prior to placement is often incomplete or missing, further impacting a foster carer's ability to meet the needs of the looked after child. This is an issue for all children but particularly pertinent for Muslim children being cared for by non-Muslim foster carers.

Barriers facing potential Muslim foster carers

Our research has identified that many fostering services are seeking to recruit foster carers with the Muslim faith to offer the supportive, stable and loving family environment for children unable to live with their families. Many though are struggling to do so and a crucial part of the project was looking at

what might prevent Muslims who have the right skills and experience to foster from becoming foster carers.

Some of the barriers identified include:

- Misunderstanding and mistrust of the role of the state. Families are at the heart of every Muslim community and, as such, children are often cared for as part of the wider community. State intervention for caring for children is therefore not aligned to the fabric of the traditional family. The structure of the community is more akin to private fostering. Therefore, informing the Muslim community as to the purpose of state intervention and working collaboratively on a local basis is highly important.
- Compatibility of the Muslim faith with English fostering practice and regulations. Like all religions, Muslim families practise their faith to a greater or lesser degree. For families that, for example, strictly follow the teaching of mahram, fostering teenagers could be problematic. It is important that social workers have knowledge of the variations in practice and take into account the wishes and feelings of the fostered children in their own religious and cultural practices.
- Lack of cultural confidence, competence and humility. Matching children to foster carers requires skill, knowledge and sensitivity. Culturally competent social workers need to nurture cultural humility to gain cultural confidence and require the respect and support from a management team which is committed to providing their social workers and foster carers, and ultimately their looked after children, with the best possible outcomes. Non-Muslim social workers interviewed within this project shared feelings or reticence and a lack of confidence to conduct assessments of Muslim families at the risk of causing unintended offence to that family.
- Poor recruitment practice. One of the main reasons identified during the project why more Muslims do not come forward to foster is the apparent lack of targeted materials – marketing information designed to resonate with a Muslim audience. The report explores some examples of how materials and recruitment messages can be tailored to a Muslim audience.
- Economic conditions and the need for a spare room. Many Muslims living in England are considered to be living in poverty, often in overcrowded accommodation. A spare room is often a basic requisite to enable a family to foster and social workers sometimes discount potential foster families' homes for being over-crowded, however many south Asian Muslim families live together in multi-generational settings, with children commonly sharing bedrooms. This raises the question of whether local authorities should make exemptions to place Muslim children in familiar family settings.
- Literacy. There is a reality that fostering in the 21st century in England is a professional occupation. It involves a high level of literacy in order to comply with the safe care of both children and foster carers. The Fostering Network maintains that communication is key to the fostering role and the ability to work in a multi-disciplinary environment is vital. During the assessment process an applicant's poor English could be supported via the assessing social worker writing down verbal accounts from the prospective foster carers. However, the reality is that good written and spoken English are a requirement for the role and it will not be enough to get through the assessment if the foster carer fails to undertake the training, written and verbal tasks thereafter to help them develop the English literacy skills which will enable them to fulfil the fostering role.
- Obtaining references. It can be difficult to obtain references for a Muslim foster carer who has not lived in England for all their adult lives.
- Community relationships. Some Muslims reported a fear of embarrassing a family within the community whose children have been taken into care. Developing culturally competent and

confident practice will enable fostering services to understand the dynamic within the local Muslim community.

Recommendations

- Ofsted to include mandatory recording of child's faith or religion on the annual fostering statistics return to ensure a comprehensive and standardised approach to capturing and utilising this data across the country.
- All fostering services to fully explore a child's identity, including their faith or religion, and document this information in the child's care plan and data base.
- All fostering services to review their recruitment literature and assess how it responds to the needs of a prospective Muslim foster carer and the wider Muslim community.
- Development of FAQs and factsheets to disseminate to fostering services to support them in processing initial enquiries from Muslim communities.
- All fostering services to consider how fostering service staff are trained and supported to conduct initial visits and assessment of Muslim applicants to fostering.
- Wider dissemination of the Guide for Foster Carers Caring for Muslim Children.
- All fostering services to engage in Foster Friday and disseminate Ramadan gift boxes to their non-Muslim foster carers caring for Muslim children.
- All fostering services to explore the Engagement Realisation Approach (ERA)
- Fostering services to explore the potential to implement the UASC Arise mentor programme as appropriate.
- All fostering services to identify the resources needed for its foster carers caring for a child with a different faith to their own.
- All fostering services to record faith, culture and ethnicity of foster carers.