

**'Bring our Social Service System into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' Article written for Community Care**  
**by Carolyn Housman, 2020**

Children born in the UK in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will experience a social service systems still stuck in the last century. While the anti-immigration rhetoric permeates politics and even coronavirus fears, the fact is that in London two out of every three children have at least one parent who was not born here. Across England and Wales, it is one out of every three children. If you include second or third generation immigrants, a high number of whom are from former British colonies, the UK is an exceedingly international nation.

However, if you are an 'international' child taken into the care system, it is unlikely that your social worker has received training on how to navigate the international social care system. The chances are that your favourite auntie abroad – the one who always brings your favourite biscuits - will not be considered as a potential carer for you. You will enter the labyrinthine foster care system which, despite many caring people with good intentions, statistically results in children with lower attainment rates than their peers. According to the May 2019 publication by the Department for Education on Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities, the average Attainment 8 score for children who left care through an adoption, Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order was 31.1 compared to 18.8 for looked after children, 44.4 for non-looked after children and 19.0 for children in need.

Putting aside divided opinion about whether a child will have a better life in unrelated foster care in England or with family in Poland (for example), the key message is that each child deserves to have every viable family option explored – all the more so if they are vulnerable child who has suffered from the traumatic removal from their parents. Relatives must be rigorously evaluated to assess whether the child would be better off with them. However, many local authorities do not understand this is their statutory duty, do not know how to go about international assessments, or (most worryingly) place children abroad without properly doing their due diligence to ensure the child will be safe.

Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) ran a campaign in October 2019 (#OutofSightOnourMinds) to raise awareness about these 'hidden' children with family links abroad. The campaign received insufficient attention as the common refute was 'what is the scale of the problem?' Without a full picture of what all local authorities were doing, there is little that policy makers can do.

Consequently, CFAB made a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on all UK local authorities (96% returned a response) and found that 78% of local authorities in the UK either did not explore family members abroad for children in their care or they refused to respond to the FOI. The FOI requested data from a three-year period (2015, 2016, 2017), a crucial period due to the announcement of Brexit and the increased importance of keeping in touch with the EU family of children in care. However, only 11 local authorities explored at least six family members abroad (or two per year on average). Perhaps most surprising was that only 17% of London local authorities reported exploring family members abroad during the time period – despite two out of three children in London having a foreign-born parent. With over 78,000 children in care in England alone, something has gone wrong in the system if more family placements abroad are not being explored.

The bottom line: social service guidance must join the globalised, 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which we live and start tracking family links abroad. The right to family is, after all, enshrined in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 2014. If not, we run the risk of denying children their right to family or repeating the mistakes of local authorities in the post-war period who separated Looked After Children from their families and sent across the commonwealth as part of the UK child migration programmes – with disastrous results.

But wait! There is a silver lining in all of this. Of the 47 local authorities that confirmed they explored family members abroad, *all of them* were able to place children with family abroad. Over the three-year period, 180 Looked After Children had foreign family members considered. In the same period, 128 children were placed with family abroad. Although the two numbers are not necessarily directly correlated, it is clear that family members abroad *are* worth considering.

CFAB estimates that there are at least 18,500 children in care with family members abroad in England and Wales. If this is the best option for them, using a conservative placement rate of 30%, there are 5,500 children that are currently in care that could be with their families.

Don't we owe it to them to protect their best interests and explore their right to family?

*Carolyn Housman is CEO of Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB), the only UK charity with a children's international social work team, and the UK's only member of the International Social Service network, which can alert social services and professionally assess long-term care options for children in the UK and over 120 countries. It is the only non-statutory body in the UK recognised by the Hague Permanent Bureau as an expert in cross border child protection and family reunification. For more information: [www.cfab.org.uk](http://www.cfab.org.uk)*