Regional variations in care planning in Northern Ireland: An infringement of the children’s rights


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AN INFRINGEMENT OF THE CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

WHAT? = the placements of children taken into care

In the Care Pathways and Outcomes Study, we found a significant relationship between the type of placement the children ended up living in and the Health and Social Service (HSS) Board area responsible for them.

42.2% of children who were in care in Trust E were placed in a foster care group, compared to 36.5% in Trust D, 36.1% in Trust C, 36.8% in Trust A, and 44.9% in Trust B.

WHY these differences?

This study aimed to explore the reasons behind it. Between Jan 2015 and May 2016, we conducted focus groups with senior managers involved in care planning in each of the 5 HSC Trusts in NI.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Based on the study findings, we developed an ecological model of decision-making in care planning.

**Regional Practice Factors**

In terms of policy frameworks, all the participants mentioned permanence and stability, and followed the broad regional policy principles. However, practice, structures and Trust guidelines contribute to the differences observed. With these in Trust A, B & D, the supporting adoption at greater speed. In Trust E, Trust B & C argued, that social workers were confident, participants, in Trust E felt that some social workers weren’t confident enough to fight battles such as contact. Participants in different Trusts talked about specific mindsets (eg children have to be ‘perfect enough’ to be adopted, in Trust C the organisation that influenced the type of decision-making focused on particular children).

**Local Context Factors**

In terms of social workers’ confidence to stand by their assessment, in Court, while participants in Trust A & B argued that social workers were confident, participants, in Trust E felt that some social workers weren’t confident enough to fight battles such as contact. Participants in different Trusts talked about specific mindsets (eg children have to be ‘perfect enough’ to be adopted, in Trust C the organisation that influenced the type of decision-making focused on particular children).

**Global Context Factors**

Participants in small Trusts referred to the difficult relationship they held with the Courts, particularly in terms of large disagreements and a rise in the use of independent expert assessments. Participants also mentioned a range of different socio-economic and cultural factors, particularly when trying to place children (in poverty levels, ethnicity, and sectarian divide). Participants in Trust B explained that the endemic rural poverty and in Trust, coupled with the economic downturn, had impacted on the ability of care to take on Residential Orders for Year of leaving orders. In Trust C, participants talked about kinship placements being located in high deprivation areas. Participants in Trust E suggested there is more reliance on kinship care in an other Trust than there is in a recent one. In Trust E, there was a significant DMI population in the Trust, which was overwhelmed in their LAC statistics.

BACKGROiUND

Children are being born abroad or coming to care at early ages. Decisions are made whether or not to remove them from the care of their birth parents, and about alternative placement. In Northern Ireland, Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts (Equivalent to Local authorities in Great Britain) have a duty to investigate when it is believed that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. In some cases, children are then removed from their parents, and placed into either foster care, non-kinship foster care, or residential care (primarily for teenagers). Those, in some cases, children who continue living with their birth parents whilst the Trust makes an application for a Care Order (CO), and in some occasions thereafter, when a CO is granted. In cases where children are deemed unlikely to be able to return to their birth parents, adoption can be pursued, where birth parents lose their parental responsibility for the child. Sometimes, kinship and non-kinship foster care might apply to have the CO superseded by a Residence Order, which takes the child out of the care option.

BASiED ON THE ARTiCLE:


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