

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

EZF

Support person present: No

1. My name is EZF My date of birth is 1978. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Personal Background

2. I lived with my parents in Scotland. Following a family bereavement I spent eight months in care in 1994 from the age of fifteen. My time in care included a period of time in foster care and ended on my sixteenth birthday. I was abused in care and that was not picked up or acted upon by the local authority responsible for my care.
3. At eighteen I worked as a carer in a nursing home and thought I might go into nursing. However, I was more interested in chatting to the residents and the social side of the home. My friend had done a social care course and so I thought I would do social care. I found the course fascinating. There was no conscious decision by me to then go into social work and my decision wasn't influenced by my care experience.
4. I was in my mid-twenties when I went to university. Disclosure Scotland did background checks. I had been working in social care in lots of sectors but mainly residential care. I can't remember if you required references for the course. I had been an employee and would not have had to rely on references coming through the care system.

Professional Background

Professional Qualifications

5. I had no confidence when I was young and did lots of courses. I hoped the knowledge would improve my confidence. I have a National Certificate (NC) in Social Care, a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Social Care, a Diploma in Social Policy, an Honours Degree in Social Work and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Child Welfare and Protection. It took me 10 years to qualify as a social worker.
6. I had no higher certificates from school but the NC in Social Care was accessible. The course had lots of modules and taught the equivalent of higher maths and English to demonstrate you were capable of passing them. The HNC qualified me for entry to the Diploma course and the Diploma qualified me for entry to the Degree course.

BA (Hons) Social Work – Course Content

7. I didn't have to do the first year of the degree because of the courses I had already done. The first year was basic psychology, sociology and politics. The second year was the actual social work practice which was criminal justice, adult social work and children's social work. You did a term on each and two assessed placements for between three and six months at a time. There was a lot of theoretical work that you provide essays for. I got an upper second class degree. I could have achieved more but I'm happy with the degree I got.
8. When I qualified, social work training involved working in two placements. That has now changed to three placements. The placements are across a mixture of voluntary and statutory settings, with adults and children. The majority of my placements were in statutory settings with children. I had no experience of working with children but I saw interesting things in my time in care and wanted to know more. During the social work course, some of the topics were painful because of my care experience. I learned all about children, albeit theoretically.

9. I had three placements. I failed the first one because my mental health was nose-diving. The placement was in an education setting. I found it difficult to understand my role because there were no social workers to shadow and I shadowed teachers. Teacher's roles, views and vision is very different from social workers. The placement was extended to see if I could achieve the grades, which I didn't. I then took a year off to consider my options. I wouldn't say I had enough support at the time from the university. It felt like sink or swim. Social work is like that.
10. In that year, I reviewed whether social work was what I wanted to do. I needed the time away from university to figure out my professional identity, what kind of social work I wanted to go into and how much impact I wanted my job to have on my life. My interest always came back to Children and Families social work. I thought I could do something there because I had a lot of passion and energy for the work.
11. I returned to university and passed the next placements. I got on well and found my feet. Finding placements for somebody who has been in care nearby their local authority is tricky. I had been a service user of some of the services that were offered to me as a student placement, and so they weren't suitable. The placements I had were outwith my local authority and I passed with flying colours. I flourished at my second placement and got my first job as a social worker there.

Career

First Permanent Job

12. My first job as a social worker was in a team which was mature and experienced. I now know that is unusual in social work. Everyone was in their fifties and had been social workers since their twenties. I learned a lot from the team and it ran like clockwork. The team had excellent inspection and review outcomes. It was very well thought of. I had intended to stay only for a couple of years but I became very comfortable there.

13. In my first year I had a practice teacher who supported newly qualified social workers. Once a month there was a forum where you checked in with other newly qualified social workers. There was guidance, advice, mentoring and tutoring. There were supervision sessions with your team leader. Those were fortnightly or monthly for the first year.
14. I love the job. It is structured and requires problem solving within chaotic circumstances. You make decisions on the information that comes in and the background information you have on file. You work with other agencies such as the police, education, health and the voluntary sector to determine the risk that a child is at, and how we can intervene with a family to reduce that risk. I can find calm in a crisis.
15. There are statutory requirements, laws, guidelines and national guidance. You need knowledge about child development, the risk of particular harms for the age of a child, and the most harmful risks and risk combinations for a child. You need to know about significant case reviews. You need to be able to quickly build relationships with a child and their family to build an accurate picture of what's going on and to lead them towards a better life. Assessment is based on professional training, research, assessment tools, professional judgment and multi-agency discussion.
16. You must give children a voice. That is not necessarily by sending out social workers who are strangers to many children. Instead, that is by finding people who are close to the child to find out if the child is okay. If the child is not okay, then we find out how we can help them.
17. After a number of years in that team I moved house to a different area. I tried to commute for a while but that wasn't sustainable. There were no jobs in my new local authority area at the time so I did agency work for just over a year.

Agency Social Worker

18. I worked in various Children and Families teams in other local authority areas. The teams did things according to same laws and statutory guidance as the authority where I had had my first job but they did things very differently. It was an eye-opener. A requirement of an agency social worker is that you are quick to learn and hit the ground running. You quickly assess and attune yourself to the environment which you are in and you go with it.
19. I learned so much that year. When a job in my local authority came up I was confident I could do the job. I knew I could bring the bits that work from the other local authorities to the role.

Current Role

20. In my current role, theoretically the work is from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm but this is flexible depending on the needs of children and their families. If a child needs to be accommodated then we work as long as it takes. We can have hundreds of referrals every month, and our job is to identify those children most at risk of harm.
21. I once read that in Scotland only one in every ten children who needs to be protected is ever known to services. I always have that in my head and consider the worst case scenario when a referral comes in. Then I work backwards. For example, if a police report comes in about domestic abuse then you assume the child is being impacted by it and has seen or heard it. By working backwards you may find that the child wasn't in the house or the relationship has ended and you can rule things out. There are families who shout for social work intervention when it is not needed. You need to have confidence to say you are going to signpost them elsewhere to a service that will meet their needs. You build that with experience.
22. There are four key agencies involved in Getting it Right for Every Child assessments (GIRFEC). They are police, health, education and social work. Those agencies attend key meetings and share information. The meetings could be a Child Protection

Discussion/IRD (Inter-Agency Referral Discussion) if a child has made a disclosure, or a child protection case conference. The police wouldn't attend a Looked After Child Review (LAC Review), but voluntary organisations, such as Barnardo's, Includem, Homestart or Action for Children may also be involved and attend meetings. There are core representatives in the police and health who I deal with. Schools each have a Child Protection Officer who attends.

23. There is national guidance which governs child protection. That has recently been updated. Each local authority has policies and procedures and there are policies agreed across the local authorities in police and health board areas. It is a warm and professional working environment. The people who know the children best undoubtedly make the best contributions. It's not about people's experience in dealing with the system but what they can bring to the table in terms of their knowledge of the particular child and their particular circumstances.
24. I'm confident in my ability to do the job, but how my job affects me and how I affect others is always a grey area. I don't like to bring my care experience into my work. My experience is not the experience of other people, and I wouldn't assess circumstances based on my own experiences.
25. There are statistics and calculations which work out how many social workers are required in a team. You can't stop the phone from ringing but the team functions really well. Cases are divided up according to the social workers' skills, and I'm confident that we manage to give each referred child a proportionate service.

Continuing Professional Development

26. Social workers are required to register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). In your first qualified year you complete around 180 hours of study and training. That is easily achievable. You have a responsibility thereafter to complete continuing professional development each year.

27. There is a lot professional training available in Children and Families social work. There is a lot of child protection training. There are various short courses and long courses. You can always move on to the next stage of expertise. As a social worker I learned how to forensically interview children. Attending courses such as that is not required but there is an expectation that you will. Quite rightly, a little bit of pressure is put on people working in Children and Families to achieve the next level of expertise and competence.

Review of Decisions

28. All of the decisions made by social workers are reviewed by managers. There are supervision sessions fortnightly and never less than four weekly. All of the allocated children are reviewed at those sessions. All the risks are established and actions identified.
29. Each local authority follows roughly the same model. There are locality social work teams which are accessible to different communities. If a case is significant enough to transfer to a locality social work team then it can be open for a long time. Those are often child protection cases, statutory cases or cases of chronic chaos or neglect. Relationships between the locality social work teams are effective in my view and there is good team work. No case is closed without oversight and multi-agency agreement. That is commonplace amongst different local authorities.

Complaints against Social Workers

30. All social workers are members of the SSSC, which includes Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) registration. Allegations are often made against social workers, foster carers or education staff. If an allegation was made then the employee would be immediately removed from the risk. They would not necessarily be suspended as that is governed by employment legislation, but a safety plan would be agreed to protect everyone involved for the duration of an investigation.

31. There is a Public Protection arrangement in place where allegations against social workers, foster carers of education staff are discussed around the table with police, health, education, social work and the local authority's Human Resources (HR) team. The purpose is to make a decision about where the allegation goes. The meeting decides if it's a criminal investigation or an HR disciplinary matter, or both, and risks are identified and actions agreed.

References for Social Workers

32. I have provided references for social workers moving on. Some candidates have moved on because they weren't successful in their role and were perhaps subject to performance capability processes. In those circumstances HR references have been provided. Those references just detail a start date and number of sickness days, in line with employment law.

Working with Foster Carers

33. The team works with foster carers with whom children have been placed in an emergency, respite or long term placement. We do not manage foster carers. Placements might be required for example if the child's carer was going into hospital and there were no other family members to look after the child, or if an immediate placement was required due to high risk situations, such as parental substance use or neglect. There are a limited number of foster carers available at any time.
34. The team liaise with the Fostering and Adoption team who provide details of the foster carers who are available. Sometimes only one name is provided and that's that. Sometimes your toes curl. The team has a good working relationship with the Fostering and Adoption team but that doesn't always magic an ideal placement.
35. Ideally, there should be a process for matching children with a foster carer but generally it is on the basis of who is available, who has space and who has been approved to accommodate a certain age group. That can cause a conflict between social worker's values and expectations and the resources available.

36. The team have on occasion highlighted a poor match but those times are few and far between. Within local authorities there can be a hierarchy, social workers can't just say they want a different foster carer. They have to go up a level to report their concerns, and then across a level between management and it can take time to challenge. There is usually goodwill and diplomacy, and managers will listen to you and take your views into account.
37. Social workers by their very nature are quick to assess people. When you repeatedly come into contact with the same foster carers you build up a picture of what they are willing and not willing to do and how far they go for the child. Some foster carers are nurturing and some have a reputation for being distant and cold. That may sound ungrateful. However, when a child is removed from their home and going into care, it's possibly the most distressing time of their life. Even if the child has faced adversity and risk at home there is attachment to and love for their family. As a front line social worker, I have taken a child to a foster placement and thought that it's just not good enough.
38. I can feed that back to the Fostering and Adoption teams. I am part of a team of confident social workers who are not afraid to say when something isn't acceptable. I trust their judgement. Foster carers are reviewed through the Fostering and Adoption teams. They have regular supervision with the team and regular reviews. There are Foster Care Panels where foster carer's approvals are reviewed. That is all outwith my team. I know issues are discussed but they might not necessarily be resolved.
39. When a child needs to be accommodated a social worker from the team takes them to their foster placement. It is a considered process and depends on the child. For example, with a newborn baby there is a lot of time to plan. There is a move from hospital and a negotiation with the parents about how that should look. With older children, personal belongings and important things to the child go to the placement. A familiar social worker would do that where possible and I've known teachers to come along at 11:00 pm so that there is a familiar face.

40. I feel an ethical responsibility to the child and the family from which you are removing the child. No parent wants to be in a position where their child is being accommodated, even if they are responsible for some of the activities that lead up to that. It is good to be able to reassure the parent that the child will be well looked after and there will be lots of contact facilitated by social work. It's a horrible sense of responsibility if that doesn't happen for some reason.

41. I have faced a situation where the plan for a newborn baby was to be placed with a foster carer who had several other children and other competing demands. The foster carer wouldn't be available for the baby and they would be put to a childminder. The baby was being removed because the nurture and care from the parents was not sufficient to meet the baby's needs, and yet we were considering putting the baby into a situation where their well-being was compromised. The team objected to that placement. The only other option was a foster carer whose home which was not very clean and there were additional risks for a newborn baby in that environment. Often social workers go home with a heavy heart wondering if that is the best we can do.

42. I have known situations in the past where children have been dropped off at a foster placement and the previous foster child's stuff has still been in the room. That is not acceptable. The general preparedness and knowledge of foster carers can be questionable. A foster carer might agree to take a teenager who is having a turbulent time at home but may only know half of the points about the teenager's behaviour. At home the child may have had lots of support including parenting support. However, the foster carer does not receive the same degree of support as the parent did.

43. I have experienced many situations where a foster carer has either put in 28 day notice period for a child to leave because their behaviour was poor, or just plainly refused to have them back. This has happened sometimes after the child has been at the placement for only a couple days. The foster carers sometimes do not understand the child's needs and abandon them when the therapeutic process hasn't even started. We're trying to get the child safe from harm and there will be turmoil. Foster carers can have a harmful level of power.

44. For the child, they experience constant rejection. The child will often be aware that the foster carer has rejected them. Often a teenager's behaviour will become uncontrollable in that period. It sends a message to a child that the foster carer is not invested in them and wants them out of their house. The outcomes for children become poorer with each placement they are in.
45. On occasions, I have known foster carers who make no attempt to accommodate family time with the child's birth family. They might refuse to drive the child to contact meetings with the family. Instead, the child needs to get a taxi. That is harsh. From my own experience, little has changed in the last thirty years. We send children to places that are not always meeting their needs. Foster care can be brutal.
46. I am aware that many of these issues have been identified and explored as part of the Independent Care Review, and that a change in focus for Looked After children and young people will be implemented over the next 10 years as part of 'The Promise'.

Decision to become a Foster Carer

47. My partner and I thought about becoming foster carers for a long time. One of the reasons my partner and I went into foster care was because of the unsuitability of some foster placements that I saw children being placed in. Children can't choose where they are born. I saw children having a difficult time in their family and then not getting the chances they should have when the state had intervened.
48. We had decided not to have children of our own and to have children stay with us was a big decision. My partner and I had lots of space in our life to do what we pleased but there were too many children who pulled at our heart strings. We thought if we kept saying foster care wasn't good enough and somebody should do something, then shouldn't that be us.

Experience as a Foster Carer

Background

49. My partner and I decided to become foster carers in the early 2000's and we applied jointly. Once we were approved, we were foster carers for several years. The application process took between nine months and a year. That was partly because we moved house to have more suitable accommodation and that took time. We didn't ask to be approved as long term carers because we were aware of our limitations. We have a child free lifestyle and having a child long term was never our plan. My partner and I wanted to do what we could to help children who were first coming into care or who needed regular respite care from their family circumstances. Being a foster carer was a vocation for us.

50. My roots are in social justice and I had a conflict between what I thought the state should be responsible for and what provision is available. There should be a basic safety net for everybody about what is and is not acceptable. That should carry across into foster care and there should be basic levels of provision. If something is not acceptable at home then it shouldn't be acceptable in foster care.

Becoming a Foster Carer

51. My partner and I were allocated a supervising social worker who was carefully picked because you have to disclose a lot of information. The supervising social worker assessed our understanding of our backgrounds and how that would affect the way we would parent or mentor children in our care. They were looking for, for instance, inconsistencies in values. That took about eight sessions which were two or three weeks apart.

52. There were background checks and we provided four different references each. My partner and I were each interviewed about our capabilities and competence as foster carers. My partner had been married young and divorced soon after. Social work approached his ex-wife and interviewed her. There was nothing remarkable in that

relationship that would cause a risk to children in our care. It wasn't just your allies who were interviewed but anyone with any insight into your life. My mum wasn't interviewed because I had been a child in care.

53. A survey and a risk assessment was done in our home and about nearby roads. I expect there was a survey about the standard of the home, the cleanliness, the furniture and toys available. We didn't have to give information about who would be visiting our home. We were responsible for making sure visitors were appropriate and there was adequate supervision of visitors. I'm surprised at that. I would expect to give that information now although I don't know if that is the case these days.
54. I don't know if the procedures for recruiting foster carers are adequate and mean that the right people are selected. I'm not involved in that and it's not an area I know anything about. Fostering and Adoption teams have a focus on recruiting foster carers but in reality there seem to be the same group of foster carers who have been doing it for years.

Foster Carer Training

55. As part of the process of becoming foster carers my partner and I went through foster carer training. That was group training facilitated by social workers in the Fostering and Adoption team and the team leader. There were between eight and twelve sessions held in a council building. Each session was around two and half hours. Different topics were covered each week. There was group work about how prospective foster carers felt about particular topics. The social workers were looking for values and alignment with what social work wanted in a foster carer.
56. Topics covered included the reasons why children are accommodated; what children's lives had been like and how that might impact on their development; particular behavioural difficulties; social issues; school attendance and anti-social behaviour. There was discussion about adversity and resilience back then. Discussion about trauma has emerged more recently.

57. There was an exploration of your wider social network and how you would cope in an emergency. Social work looked at how well you knew the processes in relation to Looked After children. There was discussion about the expectations of foster carers around LAC reviews. I can't remember specifically what was said about child protection but that must have been covered.
58. The situation was different for me because I had worked in social work and had much of the training. However it was enjoyable listening to how other people reacted to questions. Some people had no experience whatsoever. There was an older lady who was offering supported lodgings and she was concerned because she didn't have a second adult in the household. The discussion was about how to manage that situation.
59. There was on-going assessment in the group training setting. Issues arose during the training, for example a couple joked that they hoped the child had a name that was acceptable to them because they didn't want to call out an unacceptable name in the supermarket. Those people were challenged for their views.
60. Foster carers gave presentations on what it was like to be a foster carer. There were question and answer sessions. Children who had been fostered came and talked about their experiences.

Approval as a Foster Carer

61. The supervising social worker put together her assessment of my partner and I as foster carers. That included our strengths, the areas where we might not be so strong and recommended age groups. For example, we wouldn't be suitable for newborn babies because we had no experience with them. That was all put to the Fostering and Adoption Panel for consideration.
62. The supervising social worker's assessment was reviewed with our medical history, police background checks and references. My partner and I went to the panel. The first half of the panel was a discussion in private between the members. In the second

half of the panel my partner and I were asked questions about what we intended to provide for foster children and how we would do that, particularly because we didn't have children. It felt like a robust system. My partner and I were approved for respite and emergency care for children aged two years upwards. A recommendation is made and is ratified by the chief social worker. We knew that day that the recommendation was that we were approved.

Foster Care Arrangements

63. Where we lived there were no other children around. We found quickly that it was very intense for the children who came by themselves for respite. They had two adults and no other children. The available activities weren't the same activities available to them when they were at home. It would be unusual for a foster care placement to have unrelated children from more than one household.
64. The Fostering and Adoption Panel made an exception in our circumstances and we were given permission for mixed groups of children. We suggested the change and that changed things for the better for the children. The children were risk assessed according to how they might interact and the social workers and the families had to be happy with the arrangement.
65. I worked full-time. My partner worked from home so he was at home for the children who needed to be there during the day. He attended the LAC reviews and case conferences and could facilitate the various activities the children needed to go to. At times we did turn down placements due to our availability. Sometimes my partner was asked to do a half day child care. I did my best to maintain separation of my roles as a social worker and as a foster carer.

Support as a Foster Carer

66. I think my partner and I had good support. My partner felt well supported, confident and comfortable in his role, as someone who hadn't trained in childcare or had children. We had a supervising social worker in the Fostering and Adoption team. Their

role is to recruit foster carers, to match foster carers with children and to deal with issues that are raised.

67. When a child came to us, I would often ask the child's social worker about who they could visit. For example, if a child wanted to go on a sleepover then I made sure it was approved because the home would have to be vetted. It is an example of foster children being treated differently from children who stay with their parents.
68. Most issues arose at evenings and weekends when children were not where they were supposed to be. One girl went to stay with a friend and didn't come back when she was supposed to. I phoned the emergency duty team for advice. I was told if I didn't know where she was then I had to phone the police. There was no evaluation of whether the friend was safe and whether the girl been there before. It is difficult when you don't know the child and I can see both sides of it. The child could be at risk because she was a foster child and hadn't come back when she was supposed to.
69. The police were called and that seemed judgemental. I wondered where the middle ground was. In a parenting situation you would do something very different to what you would do in a fostering situation. A similar thing happened with a seventeen year old girl who went to a party and didn't come home when she should have. The police had to be called for her to return and that is unusual for a seventeen year old.
70. My partner and I did most of our fostering at the weekend when the child's social worker wasn't available. The emergency duty team didn't know the child and could only go on what is in the child's file. It is possible that decisions are made which are not in line with who the child is. If the issue arose in working hours then you could speak to your supervising social worker. If I had informal social work contacts then I would contact them directly.
71. There was informal foster carer support available after training through foster carer forums. They took place once a month and were arranged by the local authority. I went to a couple but I couldn't identify with it. The forums tended to be a grumbling session about the social work department. There were a core of foster carers who had links

with one another and provided respite for one another and the forum could be a bit cliquy.

Financial Support

72. We didn't go into fostering for the money and I don't think anybody would. The financial support was awful. I was shocked by how little it was. At that time it was £20 per child per day for your foster care fee and £20 per day for expenses. You couldn't possibly provide for a child on £20 a day. A half day childcare from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm was £20. My partner was happy to provide that but that wasn't even minimum wage.
73. There is a view that foster carers subsidise local authorities in their responsibilities to children through goodwill. I get the sense that the independent foster care agencies are well paid and people can be on salaries. My partner and I weren't drawn to that. There has been a shift towards having children fostered in their home communities or in kinship care.
74. My partner and I felt that we were investing in children and providing a springboard for them out of difficult circumstances. We didn't want to be spending money on activities or material goods which they couldn't afford when they went home. We improved children's expectations but didn't base that expectation on access to money.
75. I know other foster carers feel differently about that. I know of children who are difficult to persuade to return home where they have a poor attachment with their parents, when in foster care they have material goods being offered to them. Sometimes being in foster care can be materially rewarding, which can be confusing for a child.

Role as a Foster Carer

76. Our role as foster carers was never a role as a parent. All the children who came to us had clear links with birth parents, kinship carers or foster parents. The only exception was a wee boy [REDACTED] who stayed with us for almost a year. We were guardians and mentors for him. We advocated on his behalf when he was getting a

tough time at school. You need to remember how delicate looked after children are. Those children can come across as robust and street-wise but they are vulnerable underneath because of their experiences.

77. When I first qualified as a social worker and before my certificate came through, I had a job in a family centre. They ran a nursery for vulnerable children aged between two and four. A large part of that was to provide nurture when the children came in because they wouldn't necessarily get the nurture they needed at home. I learned how to provide nurture safely and took that into my role as a foster carer. I learned that it was okay to have a child on your knee and have your arm around them, but that there were many ways to provide nurture.
78. You could be in physical proximity to the child and I would kiss the children's heads when they were going to bed. If a child wanted to hug in when we watched TV then I'd put an arm around their shoulder or have their feet in my lap. You could provide comforting things like hot chocolate and have in jokes, routines or songs.
79. My partner and I were always very conscious of physically touching children. My partner was wary because we often had teenage girls who were home whilst I was at work. When a younger child asked my partner to put sun-cream on, my partner was uncomfortable. I talked the child through how he could apply it and I put the sun-cream on his back where he couldn't reach. I think what we did worked and I don't think any child reported feeling uncomfortable.
80. The most rewarding things as a foster carer were all the wee bits, such a child liking warm toast in their tummy or jumping up and down in fluffy onesies because they had never had jammies before. It was seeing that what we did was important to people. Seeing [REDACTED] again when he left us for his forever family and seeing he had disengaged from us was hard but also rewarding.

The Foster Home

81. We lived in two different houses in the time that we fostered. The children had access to the whole house. We didn't have to adapt the houses for fostering. The first had a garden as well as a living room and a games room for the kids to play on their X-Box. There were four bedrooms. Teenagers would generally have a downstairs bedroom to have privacy and young children had the upstairs bedrooms. There was a trampoline and bikes. The second house had three bedrooms and we used two for foster children.

Children Fostered

82. Within a few weeks of being approved as foster carers, we had our first child. It was a planned placement for respite care. Social work wanted to provide the boy with 'enriched' experiences, different from his home life. The intention was great. The boy came a couple of times but all he wanted was to be at home. That placement led my partner and I to thinking about the isolation of a child on their own, at a placement with us. I felt anxious about that placement because the child was the first to be placed with us. I realised it was the child's nature that meant he just wanted be at home.
83. We had nineteen children over the duration we fostered. We had regular children who came to stay. We had a child who came every second weekend for four years, from when he was seven years old. We took him for school holidays as well, for example half of the Easter holidays and a couple of weeks in the summer. Some arrangements were more informal. We had a teenager who came for respite for a few nights and at weekends. It was agreed that the girl could phone whenever she needed a break from home and my partner would go and pick her up. Other children only came to stay once in an emergency.
84. How well a placement went depended on the child and the circumstances of them coming into care. There's no way to predict how children would react. We had a sibling group come to us who had been forcibly removed from their mother's arms by police

that evening. However, when they came to us they experienced it as an exciting time and an adventure. There was never a child who I felt I couldn't cope with.

85. There were a couple of times our approval for emergency and respite care was stretched, depending on the needs of the children. It's a difficult balance because children are involved. The biggest stretch was [REDACTED] who initially needed to stay for four weeks, which we could stretch to. [REDACTED] was with us for almost a year and that was a very different experience to emergency and respite care. My partner and I were resourceful and [REDACTED] was receptive to our style of care. There was a lot of pressure for us to continue and we were exhausted by the end of it.
86. Early on in the time [REDACTED] stayed with us, he was distressed and said he couldn't bear to fall in love with another foster carer. We made a deal with [REDACTED] about how we could meet his needs and love each other in the meantime whilst making sure he ended up with the right family.
87. I unexpectedly fell head over heels in love with [REDACTED]. We knew that sometime his forever family would be found and that was challenging for [REDACTED] and for my partner and I. Quite rightly, the Fostering and Adoption team said they didn't want [REDACTED] to have too many placements along the way. The team supported us in any way they could. For example, in the holidays [REDACTED] went to kid's club during the day and there was regular respite with a carer he knew well. It was hard to see [REDACTED] move on. He thrived in our care, grew a sense of self-esteem and his teachers respected him more, having previously been labelled as a bad kid.

Placement Preparation

88. Information about a child was generally given both verbally and in writing. We had a locked box provided by the Fostering and Adoption team and everything went in the box. There was a profile saying what the child liked to do, the food they liked and things they were scared of. That would be done as an activity with the child by the social worker. We had a general overview of the child. My partner and I also had a foster carer's profile.

89. I think I was given enough information about the children. I was often in a privileged position being a social worker. There were times I was given a little bit more information than a foster carer would usually get, in conversation with the child's social worker. There is a balance to be struck between the child's need for confidentiality and the foster carer's need to protect the child and watch out for particular behaviours. It will be different for each child. For example, if a child has been exposed to sexual abuse and is in a placement with other children, foster carers need to have that information. I can identify a situation where I was given too much information about a child who was placed with us, which wasn't necessary for us to fulfil our role.
90. The children coming for respite care usually came from kinship care where the carers were struggling or from foster carers where the foster carers were going on holiday without the foster children. We got social work information, telling you information you needed to know and information from the carer, telling you about a child's characteristics, preferences and quirks, and advising to steer the child away from certain things or what to do when the child showed certain behaviours.
91. There was preparation for some children coming to stay. I went to their home to meet whoever the child stayed with. We would go for a meal or do an activity for a couple of hours. The child would visit our home with their social worker or the family support worker. I don't think in all the time my partner and I were foster carers that we had a family member visit us.
92. In an ideal world a care plan would have been prepared. The care plan would be formulaic with areas to be discussed. The child might have worked on it along with their profile. However, many children arrived with just what they were wearing. If there were any goals or tasks to aim for with the children then they would be agreed at LAC reviews. We had our own aspirations for the foster children who stayed with us and that was to turn their heads towards achieving their potential according to their individual characteristics. We invested in the children and built up what they had to a degree that was transferable.

93. It is idealistic to expect to always have an appropriate match between a child and foster carer. A girl of South Asian origin came to stay with us as an emergency placement and stayed for six weeks. Due to the risk to her, she was not to have family contact or to go to school. The placement did not meet the girl's needs. We had no knowledge of each other's culture and food. For example, when I was at work all day and my partner was at home, the girl would stay in her room because it wasn't her culture to engage with a man. We did learn a lot about each other in that time and found a balance in our relationship.
94. I don't know if the girl was placed with us because I was a social worker and knew the processes that would be gone through or if we were the only placement available. All the children who were in our care were supported in terms of their needs, apart from that girl. The social worker did not visit her in the time she was with us and I found that very difficult to come to terms with.

Routine in Foster Care

First Day

95. When children arrived as an emergency placement then we followed our usual routines and maybe watched TV or played a board game for a distraction. Those children were generally bewildered and confused. The placements ran smoothly but I don't know if that was the honeymoon period or if those children were unusually resilient in strange circumstances. The children called my partner and me by our first names.
96. As a foster carer, you have to be good at reading children and knowing what children are looking for. Children who have lived with adversity will often present with different needs from their actual needs. Children might be defensive and hostile when they need to sit on the floor and hug.

General Routine

97. The children would get up in the morning and get ready in time for breakfast. Often taxis were provided to take children to school because we were out of town. The children would be ready and prepared for school. It's important to keep up those standards because that is important to be included socially. For example, to have ingredients for cooking activities at school. I developed a love of ironing school uniforms and seeing the children all neat and tidy.

98. After school the children got changed and did homework first, before having free time. Then they had dinner and went to any clubs. It was important that my partner and I were as predictable as possible in our routines, without being regimented. I came to fostering from an attachment theory perspective. If we, as strangers, could build a bond with the children in the time we had them then that was wonderful, and they would transfer that attachment experience to other relationships. Until then you need to provide nurture, whether or not you're feeling it sometimes. There was a lot of fun in the house.

Sleeping Arrangements

99. Each child had their own room. Bedtime was probably in agreement between social work, my partner and I, and the child. There was flexibility depending on how tired children were or if they had something on. We didn't have any children who wet the bed.

Washing and Bathing

100. The children washed or bathed before bed. I was always aware for the potential of questions about what was acceptable behaviour. A lot of the children didn't know how to wash or were anxious about having their nails cut. That became a routine every time they were with us.

101. The youngest child who stayed with us was about four years old. Bath time was always with the door open and he was encouraged to wash all the bits he could. It was always me in the bathroom with the younger girls. [REDACTED] struggled to brush his teeth so we would sing a predictable song at night while he brushed his teeth. My partner said [REDACTED] was too old for that because he was nine years old but it was effective in getting [REDACTED] to take on that routine, and it provided security.

Mealtimes

102. We always had a round of applause for the cook when we sat down to eat at the table each night. It was probably unusual for the children to sit at the dinner table. When one of our foster children went to his forever home, his permanent foster carers came back to us and said the boy did a funny thing and applauded whenever they sat down for dinner. We did nice things in our collective routine that made the kids feel nice.
103. The children could help themselves to food within reason. There was guidance and there were snack times when food was offered as part of the daytime routine. We might say a child couldn't have biscuits an hour before dinner, in the general way a household is run.

Leisure Time

104. It was important that the children had some structure but that activities were accessible to provide ideas beyond their time with us. We had a mix of structured time and leisure time. We were creative with the money that we had from social work. We spent a lot of time in town doing activities. What activities they wanted to do was led by the children. Along with other foster carers, we campaigned for looked after children to have free access to the town's sports facilities. That was approved and we then provided experiences which the children could access for free in the future.
105. At the weekend we always did one inexpensive activity during the day. We'd start by having pancakes for breakfast because children can make them. We then spent lots of structured time at the swimming baths, local parks or sports facilities, or by going to

children's workshops at the museum. We went camping and skating. But there was also plenty of downtime when the children could watch a cartoon before teatime or play football or play hide and seek in the garden. Some preferred to play the X-Box indoors, and my partner and I would play the X-Box with them or sit with them and chat or watch while they played.

106. For the older teenagers, it was more about what they wanted to do and what activities they had already set up. Some went to horse riding all day on a Saturday or we'd help them seeing friends. We'd look in the paper and see what events were coming up in town at the weekend.

Schooling

107. Children continued at their usual school. My partner and I assisted with homework. If a child stayed with us during the week when they went to school then we were actively involved with that school. If the child needed to come home for any reason then my partner would go and manage the situation. If a child was with us for respite then their foster carer or kinship carer would attend parent's night. I have been to a few parent's nights and meetings with the head teacher when a child was with us for a longer period.

Healthcare

108. My partner and I had a health visitor or a looked after nurse visit us a couple of times when a child had just been taken into care. If there were appointments to attend then that was part of the everyday routine. For younger kids we had the Red Book which was a record of their development and inoculations. The health visitor would keep us right. For older kids we had appointments came in for various things including dentists and opticians.
109. There were a couple of emergency medical issues. A teenage girl had lower abdominal pain and my partner took her to the hospital. He stayed overnight at the hospital in a separate room to make sure there was someone there for her. If

emergency surgery was required then there would be agreements from a child's parents or foster parents in their file about who could consent to that. My partner and I would not be making any major decisions about that.

Chores

110. There was an expectation that the children's rooms would be reasonably tidy and rooms would be tidied before we went out for the day at the weekend. My partner developed a clipboard game where he was the room inspector and he made it fun. There were scores and the children got diamonds and double diamonds. Sometimes the children asked for triple diamonds. We didn't make it too challenging.
111. We also had a Friday tidy when the children came home from school and the respite kids arrived, generally before teatime. That was just neatening up the various rooms, putting toys and shoes away and fluffing cushions. It was optional and if someone didn't want to then they wouldn't be made to do it. The Friday tidy was a collective responsibility and the children did races whilst they tidied. It was very low key.

Contact with Birth Family

112. Each child had different arrangements for contact with their family. For example, a child might be able to contact their parent by telephone but the phone had to be on speaker phone with one of us in the room. We could then intervene if necessary. There was an occasion when a child's stepfather came to our house and I had the confidence and experience to tell him he shouldn't be there and he should leave. I reported that to the child's social worker. I don't know how someone else without social work experience might have managed that.
113. The set up contacts were straightforward. They were in a social work centre and were supervised. My partner and I did not participate in those. In less formal settings family contact had to be carefully managed. For example, bumping into family at the supermarket or swimming pool. I worried about that because there were things between a parent and child that I didn't know about, such as winks or sayings. I tried

to balance the child's right and desire to see their parent with the possible harm it might cause.

Visits / Inspections

114. The children's social worker would come to see the child at the house and sit with us. They would chat to child, ask to see their room and see how things are. The social worker would often go to the child's bedroom or the room where they played the X-Box, with the child for privacy. Those rooms had been adopted by the children and they felt safe there.
115. The social worker might take the child out for trips or for their tea. They were attuned to the children. When children came on an emergency basis sometimes my partner and I would take the child to social work offices rather than social workers coming out to them.
116. We were inspected by our supervising social worker regularly. There were a mixture of announced and unannounced visits at all times of the day. Often the unannounced visits were at 8:00 am when you were in your jammies. Everything was fine. On one occasion it was reported that we had dishes on the draining board that could have been put away.
117. The relationship between the foster carer's supervising social worker and the child's social worker is a professional one and that is good. It is good to be able to pass on information and to know what details need to be shared between the two. It is good for each to challenge the other and to say what is acceptable and not acceptable. Open debate is good across all areas of social work and I do think people feel able to challenge.

Review of Care/Placement

118. The placement was reviewed as part of the looked after child processes. If a child came into care on an emergency basis then the review was within 72 hours or at a

children's hearing. Then there were six week reviews, three month reviews and six month reviews. I always went to the more technical reviews such as children's hearings and my partner would go to the LAC reviews. The framework is heavily legal and sometimes it would be difficult as a lay person to know what is being asked of you.

119. The child would attend the review. Sometimes they would attend for a section of the review if it was too intimidating for them. Their views would be taken first by either their social worker or an independent advocate. That happened sometime before the hearing. The child then didn't have to speak when they were in the meeting. Some children stayed in for the whole review. Teenagers in particular would voice their views at every opportunity. The child would have legal representation at the children's hearing.
120. Sometimes it was a cast of thousands with solicitors for the child and the birth family, foster carers, social workers, someone from school and someone from health. Our role as foster carers was to provide feedback about how the placement was going and any emotional turbulence. We did not represent the child. The child was represented by their social worker or an independent advocate.
121. Minutes were kept of the reviews. Whether a child saw and agreed the minutes would be age and stage appropriate. For example, if a parent was using drugs and that was not information that was available to the child then they wouldn't have access to the minutes. When the child is an adult they can apply for their records. Any third party information or information that might be harmful to them is redacted, so they may not know that was the reason they were in care.
122. Some explanation as to why the child has been taken into care would be given to the child in a child-friendly way. It would depend on what was in a child's best interests and that would be decided on a multi-agency basis. That is so no unilateral decisions are made. Discussions would also take place with the child. The child might be given more information as they get older.

Discipline

123. There was never a time when my partner and I had to discipline the children and with almost all the children there was never any punishment required for their behaviour. The children were behaving in a way that was expected given their circumstances. Their behaviour was predicable due to my knowledge and experience and having insight into that was really helpful. We saw a lot of disrupted and dysregulated behaviours. Children would be upset disproportionately in a much younger way than their years. For example, if a family contact hadn't gone ahead. None of the children were deliberately bad or hit other children. There was nothing you had to intervene in beyond providing guidance.
124. There were a couple of times where children faced natural consequences. For example, a young child who had a tantrum on a day out and had to come back to the car was upset that the activity didn't continue. That was a natural consequence because the behaviour was not acceptable in a social setting.

Records

125. My partner and I didn't take records as a matter of course, unless there was a specific reason. For example, if a child was very overweight and had advice from a dietician to keep a food diary. If children were going back to their parent then we kept a record book of how things had been. We wouldn't be providing negative information. Any challenges would be mentioned but it was generally more about activities we had done over the weekend. If we were asked for input about children's routine, behaviour, interests and progress at a LAC review, then we would provide that.

Moving Placement

126. In most cases we knew when a placement was coming to an end because of the child's age or circumstances. The child might not always know. Making memories was part of that. Children went off with drawings they had done and photographs of their time with us. Discussion about moving on was age and stage appropriate and it was

ongoing. Sometimes the meeting would be around the kitchen table with the social worker. It would be different for every child. A visit might be arranged to the new foster carers. If there was to be a change of school then there was a visit to the new school. There was lots of thinking and processing time and time to express views.

127. I was given a very privileged position in relation to [REDACTED] because I was a social worker. I felt I knew [REDACTED] very well and he needed a particular kind of foster placement as his forever family. I was allowed to go with [REDACTED]'s social worker and my supervising social worker to choose a family for him to go to. That is unheard of, however it was a true matching process. We visited four families and met one that I knew would suit [REDACTED]. That was done without [REDACTED]'s knowledge. [REDACTED] met the family and fed back whether he felt that was an appropriate match. He got on well there and stayed into early adulthood.
128. Being able to do that was lovely for me and for [REDACTED]. I think it would be a good thing for foster carers to be involved in the matching process. You have had an unusual perspective of meeting a child and getting to know them in a different way from how a teacher or parent might describe them.

Complaints by children

129. If a child had a complaint about a foster carer or made a complaint to me as a foster carer, I know the process as a social worker but not necessarily as a foster carer. There would be a multi-agency meeting in line with public protection processes to make a decision about the disclosure. That would involve police, social work, education, health and any other agency involved. The meeting would consider whether the looked after child or any other child in the placement needed a place of safety. Depending on the nature of the allegation there would always be a follow-up process.
130. What is important is how safe a child feels. If the child reports bickering between children or feeling a foster carer gives preferential treatment to their own children then that might be resolved without interrupting the placement. It's good to try to resolve

issues without taking the child somewhere else and that depends on the severity of the complaint.

131. If a child made a complaint to me as foster carer then my duty would be to pass the complaint on. That would be my duty even if the complaint is about me. If the child said they didn't feel comfortable with me then I would pass that on. My immediate response would depend on the age and stage of the child. If the child was four years old I might sit with them and talk about it to try and reach a compromise. If the child was an older child who said they didn't feel the placement was working out then that might be raised more formally.
132. My partner and I were not the subject of any complaint but we were the subject of an inquiry. The inquiry was because we had a boy and a girl from different families who were playing in the bedroom next to the kitchen. They were mucking about and building dens in the bunkbeds and then they went quiet. I wondered what they were up to. The door was open and I looked in and asked if they needed a drink. There seemed to be no more to it.
133. The inquiry was a year and a half later after and the girl said that the boy had told to "shush" and there was maybe a kiss. I was asked what I could tell the social worker about the allegation, what my view was and how I had been supervising the children at the time. I could remember exactly what had happened. When children are unsupervised there's always a risk that something is going to happen. I'm aware of that partly because of my work as a social worker and from speaking to parents in the course of my work.
134. Our supervising social worker received the information from the child's social worker. Our social worker asked me what I remembered about it. I was confident in what I'd seen. Both the children were fully clothed and minimal time had passed before I'd intervened. I didn't mind being asked as I knew that was part of my role as a foster carer. We had been foster carers for some time by then and the fact that nothing had been said before then was remarkable. I was relieved that I remembered and had been aware of the situation.

Stopping being a Foster Carer

135. Being foster carers was always going to be time limited for us. We stopped when it felt right.

Helping the Inquiry

136. I didn't have any connection with my foster carer as a child in care. I wish I'd had a better placement and stayed on at school or gone to college. The potential was there but was entirely missed. That gave me a great deal of drive to become a more effective foster carer and to offer children a more considered placement.
137. Following my professional training, I could unpick what would have helped me at that time. While I was in care, the local authority had a short time period in which to either hook me in or cast me adrift, and there are a lot of teenagers in that position who are cast adrift. As a teenager I genuinely felt that nobody cared. I cared about our foster children and wanted them to know we cared. I hoped to do something that would hook children in and give them an alternative path.
138. I couldn't have been a foster carer if I hadn't had a background as a social worker. I had no informal childcare or parenting experience. All my experience has been in formal settings. The underpinning knowledge I had gave me confidence in looking after children. Without that I would have felt out of my depth with some of the challenges that children who need to be fostered present with. My partner and I didn't have big challenges but there were manageable daily challenges with emotions and tantrums.
139. Mainstream children who live at home with their parents are easier to parent than children who come into care. That is due to a range of factors including social issues; trauma; adverse childhood experiences; lack of attachment or parental mental health issues. Children who are accommodated are children with fundamentally complex needs. To take only your own experience of parenting your own children and transfer that over would not be successful.

140. The training and support given to foster carers is basic. I think the training and support should have an individual element as people have different temperaments and expectations. There should be a basic level of training and then a focus on different challenges.
141. I can't say whether the child protection protocols for children in foster care are suitable or whether they have been updated sufficiently since I was in care. I don't know the protocols that are in place. There are checks and references taken but they only matter if someone has a criminal conviction. There will always be ways for people to harm children.
142. It is for the local authority to show that the protection which they have in place for children is reasonable. My experience is that the systems are more robust now and there is more professional curiosity than when I was a child in care. Any allegation is reported and discussed on a multi-agency basis. Decisions are accountable. You must provide a justification for decisions which is shared. A child looking back on their records will have a justification for why things did or didn't happen.
143. There are two aspects to protecting children in foster care. You must make sure the framework is safe and that is already in place. You must also understand that there will be gaps in the framework and people who want to harm children will get through. In that situation you must have someone for the child who is a position of trust and who has the child's ear. That person must enquire about the child's life and explore whether everything is really okay, and in depth.
144. Foster children need key relationships. They need a relationship with someone whose role it is to build a relationship with the child. In one of the local authorities I worked in, the chairperson of the LAC review was the person who took the time to speak to the child before the review. The chairperson told the child they could speak to the chairperson at any time and their voice would be heard at the review. Children appreciated being treated in that grown up way, but the chairperson was not necessarily the adult they would confide in. The relationship was too formal.

145. There are many barriers to hearing the voices of children in foster care. One of the biggest is that children are children. Depending on their age and stage, they don't often know what is or isn't acceptable and they wouldn't know whether or how to report harm. Relationships between children and adults can be confusing and complex, and it is quite possible for a child to feel loyalty and security within a harmful or abusive environment. It is down to the social worker and foster carers to make sure that children are aware of those things. Often children don't have the perspective, comprehension or vocabulary to report.
146. When children do report there may well be a disclosure but not the evidence to pursue it criminally. Where the allegation concerns a foster carer then the evidence would go to a Fostering and Adoption Panel to make a decision about whether they should continue as foster carers. That is an important decision to make on minimal information.
147. Many children in foster care are there on a compulsory order and they are reviewed by the children's hearing. The hearing is independent from social work, police and health. Through the hearing children are offered advocacy. It's the responsibility of the adults who are around the child to inform the child that advocacy is available to them. There should be more training in the area of informing children of their right to advocacy.
148. People who want to harm children behave in a covert way. There should be better understanding of indicators of abuse. Indicators are obvious once you suspect what is happening. I'm not sure foster carers are aware of all of that or their responsibility to flag up indicators. Foster care training is not adequate in that respect.
149. Training for social workers in understanding indicators of abuse is adequate. The training is mostly in-practice training and is something I focus on with new social workers. Understanding and awareness generally increases with experience. Indicators of abuse have been brought together in easily accessible formats by organisations such as Barnardo's.

150. What has surprised me is that each time a child has been referred to the team exhibiting an indicator of sexual abuse or exploitation, it later transpires that they have been sexually abused. That gives me confidence in the research and suggests that child sexual abuse can be detected by an attuned and informed practitioner. Sometimes it takes years for a disclosure to be made. Meantime, support can be provided to children in this position to identify acceptable/harmful behaviour, for them to identify a safe person to tell their worries to, and for them to be given a hypothetical understanding of what would happen if they told. There are always indicators of physical harm, such as a change in behaviour, unexplained injuries, or fear. Emotional harm in foster care can be more difficult to detect when children have difficult past experiences. For example, how would the child recognise that a foster carer was bullying them or subjecting them to unattainable expectations for their age and stage?
151. Children who have come from traumatic backgrounds should be given therapeutic support to process that. As there is a LAC medical when the child is taken into care, that would be the ideal time to signpost children for additional support. There are foster care placements that are at the end of the line because the carers don't know how to deal with particular behaviours. The child is referred to other agencies and once they are there, they are often forgotten by social work.
152. Foster carers and social workers can forget about the child's family of origin. Often the family are marked as being the problem. Sometimes foster carers are not prepared to facilitate family contact for the child. The child's attachment to the family is massive even if it's problematic. It would be great to see more integration of the child's lived experience at home and more done to help the child remember good times at home. That would help future contact and future plans. Families are not all bad. Sometimes foster carers are looking for a slate that's been wiped clean.
153. I've heard anecdotally that sometimes foster carers are disappointed when they can't fix children. There is an assumption that by giving a child a different, middle class home that all their issues will be resolved. I would like to see more matching of children with foster carers. Matching is often spoken about but not often seen in practice. That's

probably due to availability of resources. I would like to see more ordinary households being encouraged to foster children.

154. Often it is parents are considered for contact because they have parental rights and responsibilities legally. A child may have a loving relationship with other members of their family who are not necessarily considered for contact. Having the child at the centre and thinking holistically about their life is enshrined in our practice but that can be forgotten by social workers.
155. I am aware of a project which is about looking for lifelong links. Rather than looking for related kinship carers they are looking for people who are genuinely invested in the young person. The person could be someone unrelated, like a friend's dad. There is a natural link between the child and a particular adult who is willing to take on responsibility for the child. The child and the carer are matched. It's less the status of fostering/kinship that is important and more about the passion and connection between the adult and a child and how well the adult can champion the child. That type of project is particularly good for teenagers who can be hard to hook in.

Other information

156. Foster carers are not valued. They are not valued financially. Their skill development is not at the professional level that it requires to be. I don't think foster carers should be seen as professionals by children. It's a different thing being told you are going to a family and realising foster carers are paid to help you. There's a mismatch there.
157. With a local authority providing care for children, the standards of foster care should be better. The basic qualifications you need to work in the care profession are not always evident in foster carers. However, there are some magical foster carers who have lots of experience raising their own children. They will raise mini-buses full of foster children in a nurturing and homely manner. There are many styles of foster care and each child needs their own style of foster care. Resources are tight and there are

not enough foster carers. Social work should have links nationally and there should be more access to appropriate care.

158. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed.....EZF.....

Dated.....01 June 2022.....