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Fostering discrimination

Last month we looked at disabled people's varied experiences of being fostered or adopted. In her second feature, **Annie Makoff** reports on prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes which lead to disabled people being turned down as potential carers

It is no secret that fostering and adoption services in the UK are close to breaking point. In December last year, the Fostering Network revealed a current shortage of around 9,000 foster families. Considering that the number of children in care has risen from 49,700 in 2005 to 59,000 in 2011, the foster family shortfall is likely to further increase significantly over the next few years.

At the same time, adoption numbers have fallen, despite the rising numbers of children awaiting adoption.

Last month, the Government pledged to speed up the adoption process to reduce the time children spend in care, yet is this likely to make much of an impact of a system already in crisis?

With huge numbers of children desperately in need of stable home environments, it would make sense to recruit large numbers of suitable families from many diverse backgrounds. Yet it seems that even the most suitable of potential parents are overlooked as potential adopters or fosterers – because of their disability.

Midlands-based Leslie Altmann had been all but approved by the director of a fostering agency when at the last hurdle, the panel decided that the council would deem her “too disabled” to be a suitable parent.

“It felt like I’d been kicked,” Leslie recalls. “They told me that taking me on would be a considerable financial risk for them, because they’d invest time and money into training me and they thought it highly likely that the council would discriminate. They felt the council would be prejudicial because I am a disabled person.”

Leslie, who is a wheelchair-user, has a solid in-house care system in place for her own needs. Despite this, she says that the foster agency director had been able to see past her disability ➔

when they had met at a conference.

"He saw very clearly that what I could offer as a potential foster carer could be of real value to a specific sub group of children in care. I was very clear as to what I could and couldn't do – obviously, caring for a child who could run was out of the question – but my fully accessible home with 24-hour support already in place would be perfect for a child who has high-level support needs."

After a "shedload of heart-searching", Leslie decided to apply to the agency to be a foster mum. Leslie felt acutely that fostering a child in need was absolutely the right thing to do. She wanted to use all the medical knowledge she'd gathered, her "ferocious self-advocacy skills", and the extensive adaptations already in place to make a loving and stable environment for a child in need: to make a small difference to the thousands of children already in care.

Leslie received a visit from one of the agency's in-house social workers whom she described as "quietly positive but very professional" about her case, but despite this, the ultimate decision a few weeks later seemed to have no bearing on the discussions she'd had.

Not someone to give up easily, Leslie decided to approach the council directly, but she was met with further discrimination.

"I knew they were unlikely to engage with anybody that would use up more staff resources than average, but I thought I'd just try," Leslie explains. "They asked for completely ridiculous proof that I could look after kids – as it was, they didn't seem to believe that I'd already spent hundreds of hours looking after children, including children with severe and profound impairments with no support."

Leslie isn't alone in her experience.



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While there are no statistics detailing the numbers of rejected applications, nor indeed any information pertaining to numbers of disabled adoptive or foster parents at all, anecdotal evidence suggests that negative discrimination is occurring. Members of forums such as The Disabled Parents Network and other specialist websites have written of social service's general inability to see past disability.

The issue here is not about rejecting applications on reasonable grounds (such as the house not being suitable or the applicant being too ill to even

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look after themselves) but rather, rejecting applications based on preconceptions about a disabled person's ability to be a good parent.

Dawn Jones, a member of the Disabled Parents Network was also discriminated against when she tried to adopt a child with her husband.

She told *Disability Now* that the assessment and introductory chat had gone well, but like Leslie, the final decision was totally unexpected.

"They were really nice at the assessment and said we were very family oriented and it was good that both of us were here full time", Dawn says. "We mentioned that I was getting a personal assistant to help with my personal care and we were told that was fine. They left saying they were really happy with us and we had a good chance of being accepted."

But three weeks later, the Jones' received a letter declining their application on the basis of Dawn's disability and because they couldn't guarantee their PA would be the same carer for up to 18 years, which they were told was not a stable environment for a child.

But if ever the authorities needed a case study showing how a disabled person can care for a child even in the midst of an illness, Anita's story would be the perfect example.

Anita Das, who has muscular dystrophy, fostered unofficially by accident when 11-year-old Eddie happened to pass her window one day, asking for a cigarette. A shocked Anita began talking to him, and after it became apparent that Eddie's family were struggling to cope, she decided to take him under her wing, with the family's blessing.

"It was a private arrangement initially," says Anita. "He was experiencing domestic violence and his father was a coke addict – his mother just shut down emotionally and couldn't look after him anymore. So for a while it was a crisis arrangement where he'd stay with me when things got really bad."

But things rapidly deteriorated: Eddie's mum ran away and Eddie

began to get in trouble with the police. But Anita was more determined than ever to look after him. Despite experiencing very difficult health issues and being in and out of hospital – she even lost her voice for three years and had to communicate via a computer – she applied to be a kinship carer when consecutive care home placements broke down.

“People say, ‘you’re so brave!’ but I like to think that if anybody who saw a child in that situation would do the same thing,” Anita says. “During his time in a care home after his mum left, I just saw him self-destruct. My friends were telling me I shouldn’t take him on because it would be too much for me, but I knew that what he needed was a stable family life and he’d always felt safe with me.”

By this time, Anita had been in his life for four years, which meant that the authorities regarded her as one of the family. They agreed to a kinship arrangement, which later became an official foster placement. Anita, who had always wanted to foster and adopt, hoped that it would mean that ultimately, she could look after other children, too.

“I thought that once I was in the system I would be considered for other children, but they made it perfectly clear that had it not been for the kinship arrangement previously, there would have been no chance for me to be foster mum for Eddie. That was a big blow for me.”

But not every disabled person wanting to foster or adopt gets turned down, as London-based Neil McKenzie found. In fact, Neil, who has severe limb deformities, believes that it’s rare for anyone to get turned down at all. He and his wife have two adopted children, one of whom is also disabled.

“I only have myself to go on of



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course,” Neil explains, “but I don’t believe that social services are a culture which tells people they aren’t good enough, unless there are severe health issues. In my own experience, I was amazed they didn’t ask me more questions about my disability. I assumed they’d blow it out of all proportion, but they didn’t do that at all.”

Although Neil acknowledges that “health is a big thing” for social services, he sees it as a child safety issue rather than a discriminatory one.

“The priority is not the rights of the adopter, but the short and long term good of the child,” he says. “It’s not like applying for a job where there is

legislation that says everyone should be given an equal chance. This is about a child’s life. Children come from quite damaging backgrounds, so social services have to ensure the child is placed in the best possible environment.”

But for people like Dawn, Anita and Leslie, the issue of discrimination is very real. Anita and Leslie particularly demonstrated their ability to be excellent parents, yet they were seen as too much of a “risk”.

“I can see the dilemma,” Anita concedes. “If I gave birth to a child they couldn’t take it away, but as these children are in the care of the authorities, they are their responsibility.”

She added: “But I just think that as long as a prospective parent has a head on their shoulders and has the right care and support, their impairment shouldn’t come into question.” ■

• Names have been changed to protect identity.