



# Viral “Breadwinner” hoax email alleging abuse of fostering allowances

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Author: Tim Jarrett  
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A number of MPs have contacted the Library concerning an e-mail that constituents have forwarded alleging abuse of the fostering system in order to benefit from the allowances available. The e-mail in question is not based in fact, and is a hoax.

This short note explains the many errors in the “Breadwinner” email, and notes that an almost identical US version is also in circulation, which seems to be the source of the version discussed in this note.

This note applies to England only.

Further information on issues relating to fostering can be found in the Library Standard Notes:

- [Fostering – long-term, emergency, temporary and private placements; and care orders](#) (SN 6316); and
- [Support for family and friends carers looking after children](#) (SN 2967)

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## 1 The “breadwinner” hoax email

An example of the e-mail is provided below:

Only in the UK :-

The new breadwinner in the family...

This is preposterous! A doctor told me that a woman in her late 20's came to the hospital today with her 8th pregnancy

She told the first doctor she saw: "My mum told me that I am the breadwinner for the family." He asked her to explain. She said that she can make babies and babies get money from the State for the family. It goes like this:

The Grandma calls the Department for work and pensions, and states that the unemployed daughter is not capable of caring for all of her kids. DWP agrees, and tells her the children will need to go into foster care.

The Grandma then volunteers to be the foster parent, and receives a cheque for £700 per child each month.

Total yearly income:

£58,800 soon to become £67,200 when the 8th one is born, tax-free and nobody has to go to work!

In fact, they get more if there is no husband/father/man in the home! The brother does not count.

Not to mention free dental treatment, free housing, free council tax free school dinners, free tuition fees at college or Uni, free eyecare and glasses, free prescriptions and various other benefits...

The total value of all benefits combined is approaching £100,000 per annum which would require an income of around £148,000 to create. About my salary as a senior consultant with years of experience and surgical skills in a central London teaching hospital

Indeed, Grandma was correct that her fertile daughter is the "breadwinner" for the family.

Sincerely,

Sebastian J. Ciancino - Urologist,

Guys Hospital trust - London

## 2 Analysis of the email

### 2.1 The scenario in the email compared to the laws on taking a child into care and fostering

The email sets out a scenario where the children are taken into long-term care, and the grandmother becomes their foster carer.

Taking a child from its family and placing it into long-term local authority care is a complicated matter that is determined by a court following procedures set out in statute, and

at the heart of which the welfare of the child is the “paramount consideration”; it is not a matter that is settled on the basis of one telephone call, as the e-mail alleges.

In order to be taken into local authority care, a care order or interim care order would need to be made by a court. The child would have to be judged by a court to be either “suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm” – the reason cited for taking the children into care in the email, namely that the mother was “not capable” of caring for her children, seemingly because she is unemployed, would be judged against the “significant harm” test by the court.

If the child was taken into the care of the local authority, it is possible that a grandmother could care for the child under a temporary, short-term, placement without needing to be a local authority foster carer. However, the scenario set out the email describes a long-term placement. In order to foster children in local authority care in the long-term, the grandmother must have been approved by the local authority to be a foster carer – under the *Children Act 1989*, only local authority foster carers may foster children in care.

To become a local authority foster carer, the grandmother would have to submit an application which would be subject to detailed suitability and background checks, and the matter would be considered by an independent fostering panel which would make recommendations to a decision-maker.

In respect of the claim that a local authority foster carer could care for eight foster children, Schedule 7 of the *Children Act 1989* states that the “usual fostering limit” is for a local authority foster carer to care for up to three children. A specific exception could be granted by a local authority, although that exemption can be withdrawn at any time. The local authority’s decision to grant an exemption would be influenced by the fostering panel’s recommendations regarding an application to become a foster carer, as the panel’s duties include “making recommendations about the number, age range and backgrounds of the children or young people” that should be placed with an applicant foster carer.<sup>1</sup> So, while in theory it is possible that a foster carer could care for eight children, it could not be presumed and would be subject to approval.

## **2.2 Financial support for foster carers and the claims made in the email**

Local authority foster carers can claim fostering allowances, but the email’s assertion that they can also claim “free housing, free council tax” is not correct. For Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, when a foster carer is in receipt of fostering allowance for a child, that child is not deemed, for means-tested purposes, to be part of the claimant’s household.

Like anyone else, a local authority foster carer could apply for means-tested benefits, such as Jobseekers Allowance (JSA); a successful application for income-based JSA, for example, would also give them eligibility for “passport benefits”, including free NHS prescriptions, free NHS dental treatment, free NHS eye-tests, NHS optical vouchers (to help fund the purchase of glasses), and free schools meals for their children. However, simply being a local authority foster carer would not give a person the right to these benefits; they would have to be in receipt of a listed social security benefit or be in one of the other exempt groups.<sup>2</sup> Further, children in care who are being fostered are not eligible for free school meals in any case – the fostering allowance is intended to cover the cost of school meals.

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<sup>1</sup> Foster Care Associates, [Fostering Panel](#), website [taken on 2 May 2012]

<sup>2</sup> NHS, [Help with health costs](#), HC11 factsheet, April 2009, p8

All children under 16 (and those under 18 but in full-time education) are eligible for free NHS prescriptions, free NHS dental treatment, free NHS sight tests and can receive NHS optical vouchers.<sup>3</sup>

Higher education students with children, including those who are foster carers, are entitled to additional support to help them study at university, such as the Childcare Grant and the Parents' Learning Allowance,<sup>4</sup> although this funding is not intended to cover the cost of tuition fees – these are covered by tuition fee loans. No students, including those who have been fostered, gain any exemption from tuition fees.

### **2.3 Other factual errors**

Having checked with Guys and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, the purported author of the UK version of the email, Sebastian J. Ciancino, does not work there.

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) would not be involved in the process of taking a child into care. Rather, it would be a local authority's role to make an application to the courts, and under the *Children Act 1989* it would be the court (not the local authority or the DWP) that would determine whether a child should be taken into care.

While the email is headed "Only in the UK", most of the issues in the email, including arrangements for taking a child into care, arrangements for a fostering placement and fostering allowances (see below), are devolved matters. It is therefore incorrect to state that the arrangements set out in the e-mail, were they to be true, applied to the entire UK.

## **3 Near-identical US email**

It should be noted that almost identical "breadwinner" articles can be found on US websites. It is often titled "Only in America", rather than as in this case, and therefore paradoxically, "Only in the UK".

The US version, signed by Sebastian J. Ciancio (note the slightly different spelling to the purported author of the "Only in the UK" version) of Danville Polyclinic, Illinois, referred to an alleged case in Illinois State, where the grandmother fostered her seven (soon to be eight) grandchildren because "her unemployed daughter is not capable of caring for these children". In response, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services reportedly said: "We don't have a family like that. We don't have anything that looks remotely like what he described".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> NHS, [Help with health costs](#), HC11 factsheet, April 2009, p8

<sup>4</sup> Directgov, [Help for students with children](#), website [taken on 2 May 2012]

<sup>5</sup> Factcheck.org, [Fostering a Fortune?](#), 10 December 2010