Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

12:00-16:00, 23 January 2020, the Abbey Centre, Great Smith Street, SW1P 3BT

Attendees

Andrew Christie Chair

Lucy Peake Grandparents Plus

Julie Selwyn Expert Advisor

Cathy Ashley Family Rights Group

Charlotte Ramsden ADCS

Sarah Caton ADCS

Susie Charles LGA

John Simmonds CoramBAAF

Joanne Alper CVAA

Sue Armstrong-Brown Adoption UK

Justice Frances Judd Judicial Observer

Shelagh Mitchell RAA Leaders representative

Others

Louise Smith LGA

Fran Oram DfE

Katy Weeks DfE

Kevin Woods DfE

Nicola Doyle DfE

Kathryn Lewis DfE

Cheryl Duke DfE

Sara Calladine DfE

Kevin Yong CSC Secretariat

Louise Jelks CSC Secretariat

Rae Buttenwieser CSC Secretariat

Kelly Kaye CSC Secretariat

Reema Sodha CSC Secretariat

Apologies

Rachel Dickinson ADCS

Maggie Jones CVAA

Teresa Williams CAFCASS

Anita Hart Adoption UK

Jan Fishwick CVAA

1. Visit from Minister

Andrew Christie welcomed Children’s Minister Michelle Donelan MP to the meeting. The Minister spoke about the new government’s priorities. Some key points she emphasised were:

* Adoption and all forms of permanence are a priority for her and the government. She sent a letter out last week on adoption and will be communicating with the sector on other forms of permanency shortly.
* The government understands how important all forms of permanency are and are not focusing on one single route. They are concerned about the perceived barriers to adoption, special guardianship etc. such as race, religion and financial backgrounds.
* The Minister has been talking to prospective adopters and adoptees and listening to the challenges they see and the extra support that people are asking for.
* Another concern for the Minister is BAME children and targeting suitable families for recruitment.
* Care review – This needs to be a wholesale review.

Members welcomed the Minister’s interest, passion for permanence for children, and recognition of various routes to that. Points raised to the minister were:

* That as things change the difference between special guardianship and adoption are becoming increasingly blurred. It is important to think through how we support adoptive families in what used to be a clear set of boundaries. Social media has been a large complicating factor.
* The announcement that the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) would continue was very welcome, but many members felt that a longer extension would allow for more certainty and stability in the sector.
* The two issues raised the most by adopters are access to community and therapeutic support and the right school for children. In terms of concerns about recruitment of prospective adopters, where there is more post adoption support for families, prospective adopters have the confidence to step forward and authorities have an easier time finding homes for harder to place children.

The minister queried members on whether the ASF was adequate for the support required. Member’s responses were:

* The ASF had been a lifeline for many families, however, demand outstrips supply even with the increases from the government. The parliamentary group recommended that the ASF be stabilised and secured until 2030, to give authorities and social workers the ability for long term planning.
* The ASF is set up for adoption but kinship carers need the support just as much. Where the ASF has existed it has changed behaviour in the market, but it has also resulted in a reduction in support not covered by the ASF provided by agencies. It would be helpful to look at what basic provision levels need to be.
* The ASF should be attached to a support plan with guaranteed funding. A proactive and strategic approach to care would be less costly and have better outcomes.
* Research shows that uncertainty around the ASF’s longevity impacts on referrals and placements.

Other comments from the discussion were:

* A key issue is the stability, experience and expertise of the workforce. An Education Select Committee report on workforce[[1]](#footnote-1) showed a lot of delivery issues and raised questions about levels of competence for social workers 2-3 years after qualification. The DfE training materials had been helpful, and a possible priority for the government could be to reinvigorate that material.
* Where access to therapeutic support until children are 18 is provided this reassurance has made a big difference in terms of recruitment. A focus on adoption support rather than numbers is key. Furthermore, when the service is paid for up front there is no bureaucracy, which can be a barrier for families seeking help. It is also important that authorities are recruiting emotionally healthy adopters as there has been a recent increase in families with unresolved trauma that can be triggered by caring for the child.
* RAAs are developing direct support to have an open door concept ensuring that families can return when they need. However, there still needs to be improvement in schools understanding the needs of the individual child. There needs to be a level of universal service that is accessible.
* There is a variance in how Virtual School Heads’ (VSH) time is spent. There are situations where VSH has a more obvious role in the school and balance needs to be struck between that and good practice.
* There were struggles when it came to engaging with health, NHS England and Public Health England.
* The courts see a high turnover of social workers. The recent decisions in the Court of Appeal have been perceived as making adoption harder but the reality is they strengthened regulations rather than changing the law, and that has made it more difficult for social workers.
* The review demonstrated that the right of the family is an untapped resource, but there are many barriers to this. It is important for families to know that they may be entitled to access options of therapeutic support for their children and that they know who in the Local Authority (LA) will make that assessment and take them through the process. Huge turnover in LAs is proving to be restrictive for families as well. This is a communications issue but also a problem with a lack of understanding in LAs around kinship care.
* There needs to be more urgency in supporting kinship carers, which is a growing group. Many kinship carers have stepped in to take children out of the care system and receive little preparation. There are some quick wins for this group including:
  + Access to long-term support: This could be achieved by working with Local Authorities to develop new support programs so that families can feel they have access to long term support.
  + Holistic and intensive one to one support for kinship carers who receive no training and often distrust Local Authorities, which could help to avoid families reaching crisis point.
  + Peer support networks have been proven to be very beneficial for kinship carers, many are already in existence so their needs to be signposting to these resources across the sector.
* If the sector is able to normalise early support through the ASF, it will prevent many families from reaching crisis point. There also needs to be a stronger examination of how to use knowledge to dip into children’s lives. A big block for early intervention is that not all families choose to make open that their child is adopted, making it harder for schools and Local Authorities to step in early.

The Minister thanked the group for the feedback, and emphasised the need to nail down this support. The government is prioritising permanence, and looking at how to ensure that adopters and prospective adopters feel supported. After the Minister left, the reflections of the group were:

* Permanence is why social workers come into the profession, if this can be effectively managed then the sector will be able to address retention problems.
* However retention issues were more in front door services who are doing the more challenging work. Keeping the system experienced is a particular challenge as there is a certain speed at which people can develop. Now that the government has a bigger majority there is more opportunity to act on this.
* Data on retention is not being collected by child and more information is needed on turnover by child in terms of the relationship they have with their social worker. There is variation by authority, the turnover rate for advisors for care leavers aged 18-25 is relatively small, but this could also be related to the pressures of the job in comparison to social workers.
* There were concerns that recent press releases from the Government and the department did not mention special guardianship, giving the appearance that the Government was more focused on adoption. It could be helpful if special guardianship could be mentioned on future releases.

Fran Oram gave an update on the Government’s priorities going forward. This is a big opportunity for social care and the scope of the care review needs to be right - it will likely be broad and capture many of the issues discussed at the meeting. There is an awareness within government that quick fixes are not always the right approach. The Minister is very interested in issues relating to retention and the programmes mentioned by the Minister are worthwhile but need to be situated in a broader context. There is a definite level of burnout being observed across the sector. In terms of the ASF, asks for more certainty have been heard and will be factored into conversations with the treasury.

1. Permanency Orders and Adopter Sufficiency

The Board went through each page of the data pack to discuss the implications. The discussion focused on:

Children Under 5: The data showed that number of looked after children under the age of 5 are increasing.

* If children are not placed before the age of 5 they are likely to spend their whole life in the care system. A rising trend observed is permanency plans being written when children are very young and then not being reviewed. In better RAAs, homes are found for these children but there is regional variation.
* Questions need to be asked about what is happening with this age cohort and what checks and balances there are other than the role of the panel.
* This issue is related to the confidence and experience of the workforce, if the social work team is unstable, care planning reviews and permanence reviews may be lost sight of.

**Action 1: Secretariat to put item on next RASGLB agenda about children under 5 and review of permanency plans**

**Action 2: Secretariat to circulate DfE data on SG ages to main board and regional boards**

Children looked after in England including adoption: The numbers of children leaving care through SGO are constant, the numbers of ADM decisions are declining, while the number of children who have an order but are waiting to be placed is also increasing. Kevin Yong explained that in the data, there isn’t a massive shift in the numbers of children who get a best interest decision and go on to get a placement order, so it doesn’t seem that the numbers are due to courts not approving them.

* It is not surprising that is a difference between agency decisions and court orders because it is a slightly different process. A key issue is that adopters aren’t meeting the standards for children with complex needs.
* The RASGLB felt that there were two reasons for this: (1) increase in SGOs (2) Courts pushing back on previous adoption orders

Adopter Recruitment: While it appears that recruitment has stabilised, Andrew Christie raised concerns about the growing cohort of children waiting to be matched. This issue of recruitment now lies in the main with RAAs and voluntary adoption agencies, and highlights the need to recruit adopters that can take on sibling groups.

* The National Recruitment Campaign have hired a PR company to work with them. Their approach is to centre on public figures who have adopted in the hopes it will gain national attention. The DfE is also doing behavioural insight work to see what motivates people to adopt.

**Action 3: Shelagh Mitchell to ask RAA leaders group about the issue of more children waiting**

**Action 4: Secretariat to follow up with regions about the lack of data on whether a child has previously been in care**

* Approvals have increased, but didn’t increase as much as was anticipated. This is needs to be looked at.

1. Update on RAA Recruitment and Sufficiency

Shelagh Mitchell spoke about the RAA leader’s group working party on adoption. There will be a campaign at the end of February for a few months. Part of this will look at BAME adopters and the issues with starting the journey.

1. Grandparents Plus- State of the Nation report

Lucy Peake summarised the report. She highlighted that many kinship carers are given no option when being asked to take a child, or they don’t understand what options they have. There is a need for more independent advice, preparation and training. There are also some possible quick wins for the sector including: information advice, peer support groups, financial clarity, preparation training, and learning from the digital information hub on how they can access support.

**Action 5: Lucy Peake to share statistics from the GP+ helpline**

**Action 6: Lucy Peake to share videos of SGs talking about their experiences of working with social workers and courts**

Members welcomed the report. Comments from members were:

* there were similar findings in the Family Rights Group surveys. Many kinship carers have to give up work and are forced into the benefits system as a result of a lack of support.
* There needs to be greater understanding of the differences between age profiles. Many kinship carers are often still working, and are predominantly women.
* The Public Law Working Group is examining the issues of information, preparation and assessments for SG. The President of the Family Justice Court issued a statement on flexibility regarding the 26-week care proceedings limit as well, so there is an expectation of more SGs being better prepared.

1. Lifelong Identity

Kevin Yong gave a summary of the October lifelong identity roundtable. The roundtable had stakeholders from across the sector and discussed what the focus of the work should be going forward. Some highlights from the discussion at the round table were:

* A quick win for this work would be to identify and signpost advice, research, and practice guidance that is already out there.
* Life story work should start from the outset, and focus on helping children understand why they are in care. Contact between the child and key people is necessary, and all parties need to be supported to ensure contact is beneficial.

The feedback from the board was:

* There needs to be work with parents that enables them to understand what contact will look like, as well as greater understanding within the sector around the differences between contact in SGOs and adoptions.
* When it comes to contact with older young people, an amount of this is unsolicited and families are only getting support from agencies after the contact, which is a problem and can be hugely destabilising.
* There has been good work in Wales around life story materials, which is accessible to anyone and started as soon as the child enters care.

The board agreed that as a next step there needs to be more input from SGs and care leavers, and a focus on workforce development.

1. Data Work stream

Kevin Yong gave an update on the data work stream. The first of the data workshops was held in December, and had a focus on permanency planning, with the next one being held at the end of January focusing on securing permanency data. The third data workshop in February will focus on maintaining permanency. A fourth workshop may be held depending if there is gap, e.g. in relation to special guardianship.

1. AOB

AUK is opening the survey for the next adoption barometer, and Sue Armstrong-Brown encouraged members to circulate throughout their networks.

**Action 7: Sue Armstrong-Brown to circulate AUK link to members**

The ARG is adding some additional members to increase BAME representation.

Cafcass holds senior staff meetings on Tuesdays, making it hard for a representative from Cafcass to attend ASGLB meetings. Secretariat is going to look at holding ASGLB meetings on a different day of the week.

**Action 8: ASGLB to conduct poll among members to see if other days of the week would be more opportune to hold meetings.**

Andrew Christie announced that after 4 years he is stepping down as Chair of the board. The April meeting will be his last as Chair, and the replacement will hopefully be in place for the July meeting.

1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/826965/LongCAF\_Wave1\_report\_IFF\_DfE\_August19.pdf?\_ga=2.229896472.503541948.1566546550-1578664186.1566546550 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)