

# Cross-Party Group on Social Work

4 June 1830-2000

## **Present**

### **MSPs**

Fulton MacGregor MSP

Paul O’Kane MSP

Jeremy Balfour MSP

### **Invited guests**

Linda Davidson

Susan Dobson

Richard McCombe

Polly Cowan

Sue Brunton

### **Non-MSP Group Members**

George Hannah

Cram, Becky

Alison Bavidge

Linda Davidson

Heather Ottaway

Kerr, Chloe

Fiona Barrie-Higgins

Abbi Jackson

Jackie Irvine

Donna Scott

Paul Jewitt

Frank Reilly

Emma Watt

Iain Wilson

Sam Brogan

Munteanu, Patricia  
Zoe Sharpe  
John Watson  
Ruairi McMurray  
Hannah Graham  
Maree Allison  
Rona Gray  
Suzanne McGuinness  
Cameron Smith  
Pamela Bell  
Joanna Macdonald  
Danielle Shull  
Fiona Dunbar  
Billi Allen-Mandeville  
Caroline McDonald  
Jon Gray  
Judith Turbyne  
Galloway, Susan  
Nadine Fowler  
Smith, Joanne  
Karin Heber  
Toyin Okpaje  
Wales, Alison  
Ruairi McMurray  
Calum Gallacher  
Ben Farrugia

## **Apologies**

Charlie McMillan – SCLD

David Gibson – Argyll and Bute HSCP

Megan Farr – Children's and Young People's Commissioner

## **Agenda item 1**

Fulton welcomed the meeting and apologised for the change in time due to parliamentary business running over and decision time being made later.

Minutes were proposed by Danielle Shull and seconded by Frank Reilly. The minutes provided were therefore approved.

Apologies were noted from Charlie McMillan, SCLD and David Gibson, A&B HSCP.

The group agreed with the convenor to go ahead with the original agenda and to hear all presentations but just for them to be slightly shortened as was already agreed with presenters.

The Convenor welcomed the speakers and introduced the first speaker.

## **Agenda item 2**

**Susan Dobson**, discusses the complexities of the adoption landscape in Scotland.

Adoption involves a child removed from their birth family, placed in foster care, and ultimately adopted. This process involves legal procedures, assessment of the child's and family's needs, and managing the relationships between the child, birth family, and foster carers.

The assessment process for prospective adopters can take up to a year, as social workers evaluate their parenting capacity and ability to support the child's needs. The birth family, who often have their own difficult stories, are never fully left out of the process.

Foster carers who have cared for the child for years before adoption also have a bond with the child, and the social work task involves coordinating these different relationships. Adoption orders are often not granted until well after the child is placed with the adoptive family.

There is no clear definition of adoption disruption in Scotland, making it difficult to track the extent of the issue. Post-adoption support is variable, depending on the local authority and available resources, and the quality of this support is considered quite variable.

### Agenda item 3

**Richard McComb**, shares his findings from speaking with around 700 families across the UK who have experienced adoption breakdown or disruption. He states that Scotland has the worst rate of adoption challenges in the UK, with 78% of families facing difficulties.

Adoption rates are falling, while adoption breakdowns are increasing. Richard shares that some adoptive parents have faced severe consequences, such as legal issues, financial ruin, and even suicide, due to the lack of post-adoption support.

Adoptees often have complex needs, such as trauma, ADHD, and fetal alcohol syndrome, which require more than just love to address. Ongoing support is crucial to improve the level of adoption breakdowns, which Richard believes are underreported.

Richard shares his personal experience as an adoptive parent, where his child's behaviour became increasingly challenging, leading to violent outbursts and a runaway incident. Despite reaching out to the local authority for help, he was met with a lack of support and the threat of the adoption being disrupted.

Richard emphasizes the need for policy changes at the government level, such as a national adoption practice model and better data collection on adoption breakdowns, as well as improvements in local-level practices to better support adoptive families in crisis.

The speaker describes a very difficult situation with their adopted son, who exhibited severe behavioural issues and became a danger to the family and the community. The son would frequently damage property, assault others, and engage in criminal behaviour. Despite efforts to get help and support, the family faced significant challenges in accessing appropriate services and interventions.

The speaker had to take extreme measures to keep the family safe, including installing gates and locks in their home. The son eventually refused to come home and instead slept in a tent, which the social worker allowed. The police were frequently involved, but were unable to provide adequate support or intervention.

The family was encouraged to sign paperwork to abandon the child, but they refused and instead sought a Section 25 order, which was denied by the local authority. The speaker then had to pursue a self-referral to children's services, which led to the son being placed with his biological mother, despite concerns about her ability to care for him.

The child was eventually placed in secure accommodation, where he remained for seven months, due to the risk he posed to himself and others. The speaker expresses frustration that the social workers repeatedly promised the son would be moved to a more suitable placement, but this never materialized.

The speaker's child was eventually diagnosed with a developmental disorder, which the speaker believes contributed to his challenging behaviours. However, the

speaker feels that the system has failed to provide adequate support and intervention, and his child is now exploiting and being exploited as a drug runner, with no one able or willing to intervene.

The speaker emphasizes that their story is not unique, and that there are many other families facing similar challenges with adopted children. The speaker is not anti-adoption, but simply feels that the system has failed to provide the necessary support and resources to help their family.

#### **Agenda item 4**

**Fiona Dunbar, from Adoption UK** provides an overview of the annual Adoption UK Barometer survey, which has found that 40% of adoptive families in Scotland are facing severe challenges. The survey also highlights the lack of support available for adopted teenagers and young adults, a critical transition period.

Fiona also discusses the Adoption UK's PATH program, which provides free access to clinical psychologists, peer support, and other resources for adoptive families in Scotland. However, she notes that many families are unaware of this support, and that it is not always easily accessible.

**Polly Cowan, a social worker and researcher**, presents findings from her PhD research on adoption breakdowns in Scotland. She highlights the lack of data and tracking of adoption outcomes, making it difficult to estimate the rate of adoption breakdowns in the country.

Polly's research found that the majority of children placed for adoption had experienced significant early adversity, including exposure to multiple types of maltreatment. She also found that many adoptive parents had professional experience working with children but struggled to translate that knowledge into effective parenting strategies for their adopted children.

Polly discusses the challenges faced by adoptive families, particularly around the lack of support and understanding from social services. Key topics include the importance of transitions, the impact of unexpected loss and grief, the need for better preparation and support during crisis points, and the importance of compassion from social workers.

The presentation highlights the unpredictable nature of transition processes across different local authorities, and the lack of planning for endings when children move on from adoptive homes. This can have a significant impact on children's wellbeing.

Unexpected loss and grief are also major issues, with adoptive families not being given the space to process their own feelings and the complex interactions of loss between the family and the child. This can lead to a sense of failure and overwhelming emotions.

Preparation for adoptive families is often inadequate, leaving them unprepared for the challenges they may face. The presentation also discusses the "crisis point"

where families reach a tipping point and do not receive the appropriate support, with services often being inappropriate or unavailable.

The importance of compassion from social workers is highlighted, as there is a sense that the difficulty of living together is sometimes brushed aside, with adoptive parents being expected to "do better" due to their training. This can lead to a breakdown in the relationship between families and social services.

The presentation also emphasizes the need for better management of endings, with a lack of understanding around the impact of early experiences on adopted children as they grow older. Peer support is identified as essential, with many families accessing private counselling and therapeutic interventions.

The presentation suggests that data should be collected nationally to better understand the experiences of adoptive families, and that a more consistent, agreed-upon framework for adoption practices, particularly around transitions, is needed across Scotland.

## **Agenda item 5**

**Sue Brunton, from Scottish Adoption and Fostering** reinforces many of the points raised, highlighting the importance of early intervention, peer support, and a children's rights-based approach. The organization also emphasizes the challenges faced by social services, such as recruitment and retention issues, and the inconsistency of support across local authorities.

The presentation suggests that a national framework for adoption practices, including what good transition and family time practices look like, could help to improve consistency and support for adoptive families. The need for funding for adoption support, as seen in England, is also highlighted.

## **Agenda item 6**

**In conclusion**, the presentations have highlighted the significant challenges faced by adoptive families and the need for a more comprehensive, compassionate, and consistent approach to adoption support across Scotland.

The cross-party group agrees to reconvene after the summer recess to further discuss these issues and develop a plan of action.