

Cross-Party Group on Social Work

9 October 2024, 1815-2000

Present

MSPs

Fulton MacGregor MSP

Collette Stevenson MSP

Invited guests

Susan Dobson

Non-MSP Group members

Sarah Jackson

George Hannah

Frank Reilly

Alison Bavidge

Jon Gray

Donna Scott

Richard McCombe

Kirsteen McDonald

Rod Finan

Abbi Jackson

Chloe Kerr

Danielle Shull

Patricia Munteanu

Karin Heber

Joanne Smith

Russell Hogarth

John Watson

Calum Gallacher

Rob Byrne

Katrina Beaton

Susan Dobson

Ruairi McMurray

Judith Turbyne

Fiona Dunbar

Chloe Madden

Becky Cram

Apologies

Sue Brunton

Polly Cowan

Paul O’Kane MSP

Ruth Buchanan

Jeremy Balfour MSP

David Gibson

Kate Ramsden

Lorne Berkley

Judith Proctor

Robert White

Agenda item 1

The chair introduced himself as Fulton MacGregor MSP, current chair of the CPG on social work.

Fulton opened the meeting and apologised for the delay, explaining that he was concluding his duties in the chamber. He noted the need for other MSPs to join for the AGM and suggested moving directly into the main agenda to allow time for others to arrive.

The chair highlights that this meeting is a follow-up to the previous discussion on adoption and support for adoptive families, emphasising the need for further exploration of the topic. The chair expresses hope for concrete action points to emerge from the meeting.

Agenda item 2

Susan Dobson is introduced to provide a recap of the previous meeting's presentations. She shares her background as a registered social worker and adoptive parent, emphasising her personal connection to the topic.

Susan presents findings from the UK Adoption Barometer, which indicates that 78% of adoptive families in Scotland face challenges, with 40% describing themselves as being in crisis. She questions whether "coping" is sufficient for adoptive families, advocating for a focus on thriving.

Susan discusses the lack of clear definitions and data regarding adoption breakdown, noting the harmful impacts on children and adoptive parents. She emphasises the need for consistent data collection to understand the extent of adoption breakdown.

Susan highlights the importance of preparing prospective adopters for the realities of parenting children with trauma backgrounds. She stresses the need for improved permanence planning and timely transitions for children in care.

Susan discusses the significance of lifelong peer support for both children and adoptive parents, advocating for a balance between peer support and professional intervention. She emphasises the need for compassion in professional support for adoptive families.

Susan raises questions about the adequacy of preparation for prospective adopters, the management of transitions for care-experienced children, and the understanding of adoption complexities by social workers. She calls for early intervention and support for families before crises arise.

The chair thanks Susan for her presentation and acknowledges its value in moving the discussion forward. He opens the floor for wider discussion on adoption and potential action plans to address the issues raised.

Agenda item 3

Russell shares his personal experience of losing his parents and being placed in kinship care, highlighting the long-term emotional impact of such losses. He emphasizes the resilience he developed but also the deep sense of loss he continues to carry.

Kirsteen, an adoptive parent, expresses concerns about the lack of trauma-informed training and support for adoptive families. She shares her experiences with her children, highlighting the need for better understanding and responsiveness to trauma in parenting.

Kirsteen, mentions a positive experience attending a brain development course but stresses that more comprehensive trauma-informed support is necessary for adoptive families. She emphasises the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by children with developmental trauma.

Handling teenage behaviours is significantly influenced by trauma, which is often overlooked in discussions about trauma-informed care for children. Many children in care experience developmental trauma, and the speaker reflects on their own learning about trauma-informed approaches only after several years of adoption.

A recent positive experience was attending a course on brain development, which included families who had not yet been placed, indicating a growing awareness of these issues. However,

the speaker expresses frustration with the lack of adequate support from social work services, particularly in dealing with severe issues like suicidal ideation among their children.

The speaker highlights the inadequacy of therapeutic support for children facing extreme mental health crises, noting that many children in similar situations are likely to experience such challenges. They express hope that discussions within the group can lead to improvements for future families, emphasising the dire need for change in the current system.

Susan acknowledges the challenges in accessing appropriate therapeutic support for trauma-informed care, emphasising the need for a broader understanding of trauma and its effects on children.

She points out that the NHS often focuses on specific models of trauma that may not address the complexities faced by adopted children, who may experience multiple types of trauma. There is a call for better training and knowledge among professionals to respond effectively to these children's needs.

Richard agrees with Susan's points and emphasises the importance of adequately supported parents in helping children lead healthy lives. He raises concerns about the lack of access to mental health support for adopted children, particularly after adoption orders are finalised, which can leave families without necessary resources.

He highlights the financial implications of children returning to the care system, suggesting that investing in support for adoptive families could ultimately save money for local authorities.

Fiona Dunbar, an adoptive mother and head of services for Adoption UK Scotland, discusses the language used around adoption disruptions, arguing that it is inappropriate and stigmatising.

She stresses the need for a supportive framework for children in care that follows them throughout their lives, rather than relying on universal services that may not meet their specific needs.

Fiona mentions a therapeutic support program called Pathways, which offers clinical consultations and peer support for adoptive families but notes that access is limited and not widely communicated among local authorities.

She encourages families to share their experiences to help advocate for better support and resources.

Alison reflects on the need for equal rights and support for adoptive families, emphasising that definitions of care experience and looked-after children can impact access to resources.

She suggests that outdated definitions may prevent families from receiving the support they need, highlighting the importance of reevaluating these terms to ensure inclusivity.

Kirsteen shares her experience with the lack of support for adopted children, particularly in accessing educational psychology and therapeutic services. She notes the disparity in resources available to foster families compared to adoptive families, which can exacerbate challenges for children.

She advocates for trauma-informed training and the inclusion of experienced parents in the support system to better address the needs of adoptive families.

Russell shares his personal experiences as a care-experienced adult, emphasizing the long-term impact of trauma and the importance of early intervention. He offers to share his story to help inform better practices and support for children in care.

John highlights the need for accurate statistics and information to address the issues faced by care-experienced individuals, stressing that the financial implications of inadequate support are significant.

Calum discusses the importance of appropriate responses from social workers and the need for a national framework for training that addresses the unique needs of adoptive families. He mentions a program in Wales that provides standardized training for prospective foster and adoptive parents, which could serve as a model for improvement in Scotland.

Staff understanding and expertise are crucial for appropriate responses in adoption contexts. Kirsten mentioned DDP, which is therapeutic intervention supporting attachment in children but has limited availability in Scotland. The discussion also highlighted the importance of themed training for staff and parents, which is regularly provided based on national needs and interests.

Kirsteen was asked to share the report she referred to with the group, as it would benefit those who could not attend the meeting. The attendance was noted to be smaller than usual, possibly due to it being a follow-up meeting.

Fiona raised concerns about the experiences of adopted children and adults, particularly regarding mental health and their interactions with the criminal justice system. She expressed that many adopted children, who were once seen as wanted and loved, face significant challenges as they grow up, including mental health issues and difficulties in education and employment. The lack of support for adoptive parents from the beginning is a critical issue that needs addressing to change the trajectory for these children.

The lifelong impact of adoption on both children and their parents was stressed, highlighting the limited resources available to support families. Fiona mentioned that previously, funding was restricted to low to mid-level support, but now they have access to a range of psychological and therapeutic services, although local authorities must pay for these services.

George highlighted a comment from Danielle Schull regarding the barriers families face in accessing continuous support for children with complex disabilities, which can lead to physical health impacts and additional trauma. The importance of acknowledging these challenges was recognized.

The conversation shifted towards discussing potential actions to improve support for adoptive families. There was a consensus that the services available are insufficient, particularly after the legal adoption process, leaving families without adequate support. The fear of approaching social workers due to potential judgment was also noted, reflecting on the experiences shared by Richard and Kirsteen.

Richard emphasised the need for a community of adoptive families to share their struggles and experiences, suggesting that many families feel isolated. He mentioned the creation of a website aimed at connecting families and raising awareness of the issues they face. The importance of gathering data and presenting a united voice to the government was highlighted.

Kirsteen shared her experience of a group formed in North Lanarkshire for families with care experience, which was disbanded after funding was cut. She noted the lack of support for

adoptive families in the Promise report, which primarily focuses on care-experienced children. The need for more attention to be given to adoptive families in policy discussions was emphasised.

The discussion included the need for a letter to the government outlining the issues raised in the meetings, inviting the minister to engage with the group. The importance of documenting the discussions and creating a paper that summarizes the key points was recognised. The potential for a meeting with the minister to discuss these issues further was also suggested by Fulton.

Agenda item 4

The group agreed on the necessity of writing a letter to the minister that includes the main themes discussed, along with an invitation for her to meet with the Cross-Party group. The aim is to ensure that the minister understands the range of issues faced by adoptive families and to foster a collaborative approach to finding solutions.

The meeting concluded with gratitude expressed to all participants for their contributions, particularly those who shared personal experiences. The importance of keeping the group updated on developments and actions taken following the meeting was reiterated. The need for an AGM was mentioned, with clarification that only MSPs can vote, but the meeting could still proceed.

The meeting was concluded, and the speaker expressed hope that everyone will have a lovely night. Before everyone leaves, the speaker mentions the need to conduct the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

Agenda item 5

The speaker notes that only Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) can vote in the AGM. Alison has provided her support for the speaker to continue as convener, and it is indicated that other members are also in agreement to continue in their respective positions. The speaker confirms that Paul and Jeremy are also in favour of continuing in their roles.

The speaker hands over the chairing of the AGM to Alison. The speaker mentions the need for a nomination for the chair position, and it is confirmed that Paul and Colette have nominated Fulton, who is happy to retake the chair. The speaker clarifies that any member can nominate, but only MSPs can vote.

Danielle proposes Fulton as chair, and Christine also seconds the nomination. Fulton is congratulated on remaining the chair. The speaker then addresses the remaining positions, confirming the vice chairs as Jeremy Balfour from the Scottish Conservative Party and Paul

O'Kane from the Scottish Labour Party. The speaker is happy to nominate both vice chairs, and Russell and Christine second the nominations.

The speaker proposes that SASW, Alison and the team, be appointed as secretariat. The speaker nominates them, and Calum seconds the nomination. The speaker asks if there are any other nominations for the secretariat but finds none. The speaker congratulates Alison, George, and the SASW team for their continued appointment.

The speaker expresses gratitude to Alison, George, and the SASW team for their hard work and support for the Cross-Party group. The speaker acknowledges the significant effort that goes into organising meetings, agendas, and speakers, emphasising the importance of the secretariat's role in the success of the group. The speaker also mentions that constituents have approached them regarding various issues, and the secretary has been open to discussions and meetings on the topic.

The speaker noted that George will communicate the dates for the next meeting, which will focus on another important topic related to social work. The speaker mentioned that they will write to the minister and keep everyone updated on the progress of the adoption discussions. There will also be an agenda item for updates on the adoption meetings during the main Cross-Party group meeting to ensure the topic remains a priority

The speaker encouraged attendees to reach out via email if they have any issues or questions. The meeting concluded with well wishes for a pleasant night for all attendees.