



# Children in Wales Plant yng Nghymru

## Assembly Cross-Party Group for Children and Young People

### Grwp Cynulliad Trawsbleidiol ar Blant a Phobl Ifanc

#### Kinship Carers in Wales

Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016

#### Present:

Julie Morgan AM, Chair  
Helen West, Administrator to Julie Morgan AM  
Nancy Cavill, Senior Research Officer to Julie Morgan AM  
Paula Foley, Caseworker Jenny Rathbone AM  
Kathy S'Jacob, Association for Fostering and Adoption Cymru  
Trevor Evans, member of Children in Wales  
Ruth Lee, Caerphilly FIS  
Andrea Storer, Children in Wales  
Arfon Jones, Gobaith Cymru  
Leigh Dirkzwagger, Kinship Carer  
Mandy Steer, Kinship Carer  
Julia McIntyre, Kinship Carer  
Paula Stonelake, RCT, Kinship Care Team  
Paula Daniel, Y Bont  
Emily Philips, Y Bont

Apologies: Jenny Rathbone AM, Dave Jewel, Kinship Carer

#### Welcome

Julie Morgan AM welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologised in advance that she would need to leave the meeting early because of a vote in the Chamber. She then handed over to Andrea Storer from Children in Wales to start the discussion.

#### Introduction from Children in Wales

Andrea gave a brief overview of the current situation regarding kinship care in Wales highlighting that the majority of kinship carers are grand-parents and the largest numbers of children and young people living with kin are in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent, the two Local Authorities with the highest concentration of deprivation. Andrea referred to the Kinship Care Guide for Wales, funded by Welsh Government and produced by Children in Wales with the support of the Cardiff and Newport Grandparents support groups, but stressed the need for a more strategic approach to assessment and support services for kinship carers. The health and

well-being of children is paramount and kinship carers sometimes need support in dealing with challenging behaviour to ensure the best outcomes for all.

The Voices of Kinship Carers: Leigh Dirkzwagger, Kinship Carer and Chair of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, Cardiff.

Leigh started her presentation by asking everyone to close their eyes and imagine themselves in a situation where there's a knock on the door or they receive a phone call in work and they are being asked to take in their nieces, nephews, or grand-children. What would you do? How would this impact on your life? This is the reality for thousands of kinship carers.

Leigh continued by highlighting some of the issues she and other kinship carers face. Everyone's situation is different and people are often afraid of social services, they don't understand the system or their rights. She stated that grand-parents are putting all they can, doing their utmost to provide loving, caring homes for their grand-children but they need help, they need someone to be there for them, for example, a link worker between social workers and carers / support groups. She stressed that if there was a good, robust support network for kinship carers then more would come forward to take on the care of children and young people – saving social services a lot of money. She concluded by saying that she believed everything should be done to keep children close to their families but that they needed support, they need people to help them.

Kinship Care in Wales – Current issues and a way forward, Kathy S'Jacob, Adoption & Fostering Association (AFA) Cymru.

Kathy gave a brief introduction to AFA Cymru, which was formed with the support of Welsh Government and St David's Children's Society, after BAAF closed last summer. The work of AFA Cymru includes an advice telephone line for members of the public and professionals, developing and delivers training, and the provision of a consultancy service.

Some areas of concern with regards kinship care support in Wales were highlighted, in particular around the legislative framework for fostering which often doesn't work for kinship carers. In addition, case law and social work practice is changing and Local Authority structures need to be able to adapt to these changes. Kathy stated that although the Social Services & Well-being Act could have a positive impact on the role of kinship carers, there are concerns that austerity will result in less support for kinship carers and special guardians. She stressed that the children and young people being cared for by kinship carers have often had very poor early years experiences, those carers will need to be able to deal with that challenging behaviour and there is therefore a real need for better support.

With regards a way forward, Kathy highlighted four basic changes that are taking place in England and that AFA Cymru would welcome here in Wales:

- 1) The addition of a consideration of 'any harm which the child has suffered and any risk of future harm to the child posed by the child's parents, relatives, or any other person the local authority consider relevant'.
- 2) A specific reference to the child's 'current needs or likely future needs'.
- 3) An assessment of the prospective special guardian's current and past relationship with the child.
- 4) An assessment of the prospective special guardian's parenting capacity, including
  - Their understanding of, and ability to meet the child's current and likely future needs, particularly, any needs the child may have arising from the harm that the child has suffered;
  - Their understanding of, and ability to protect the child from any future risk of harm posed by the child's parents, relatives or any other person the local authority consider relevant, particularly in relation to contact between any such person and the child;
  - Their ability and suitability to bring up the child until the child reaches the age of eighteen.

In addition in Wales work is underway to look at the development of a National Fostering Framework. This has involved consultation about the way ahead for mainstream and kinship foster care. At present it is recognised that there is an issue within the assessment process. These placements are often more positive than a traditional approach to assessing foster carers would suggest. Possible this reflects the difficulty of assessing and accounting for the positive impact of belonging that family members already have e.g. love for grandchildren.

This is still work that's in progress directed by Welsh Government.

#### Discussion:

Julie Morgan AM thanked everyone for their contributions and stated that she would make this issue a priority in the next Assembly term.

Andrea took over the Chairing of the meeting and invited comments and questions from the floor.

The Grand-parents were asked to say more about their group, they informed everyone they were based in Cardiff but welcome carers from any part of Wales, and they meet on a monthly basis in the Unite building in Cardiff. One of the grand-

parents stated that she found out about the group through an advert in the South Wales Echo. They stated that health visitors need to know about the Group so they can tell new kinship care families about them. Andrea to look into this.

Ruth Lee from Caerphilly Family Information Service stated that they could help promote kinship care support groups. She also invited the Grandparent support group to speak at an FIS managers meeting. Andrea to arrange.

Arfon from Gobaith Cymru stated that he supported Kathy's point regarding the issue of the assessment process. He stated that it was incredibly important for this assessment process to be as robust as possible for social workers. He is fully behind children being placed with family members but there has to be a clear assessment process as this may not always be the best option for the child. In addition, he made the point that some of the barriers between social workers and kinship carers need to be broken down, that everyone should be treated with respect and dignity. Leigh agreed with this and highlighted the need for someone to be there to support you because you are afraid.

Trevor Evans stated that social services are generally not good at recognising children as experts in their own lives, or hearing and evaluating what those closest to those children are saying – meeting that child's needs is the most important.

Paula Stonelake from the kinship care support team in RCT, stressed that the will is there amongst social workers to provide the best support they can, however the reality of their workloads means that time to do the support work gets squashed. Paula Daniel from Y Bont, raised the issue of the need for interim payments for kinship carers at the time a child is placed in their care. She stated that the number of families using foodbanks had risen significantly, that grand-parents were having to give up work to care for their grand-children and go weeks without any benefits.

Trevor Evans, made the point that St David's Children's Society provides post-adoption support to families, he suggested that this could be fed into kinship care support groups ie: they know what works well so why not look at doing the same for kinship carers.

Andrea thanked everyone for coming, for their presentations and for contributions to the discussion.