

All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care
Minutes of private meeting
Educational support for children in kinship care
Monday 24th May, 4pm, Zoom

Attended: Andrew Gwynne MP (Chair), Baroness Drake, Baroness Masham

Griffin Mosson (Office of Andrew Gwynne MP), Fliss Radomska (Office of Kerry McCarthy MP), Hannah Bowes-Smith (Office of Baroness Finlay), Judith Turner (Office of Liz Twist MP), Liam Lavery (Office of Kate Osborne MP)

External guests: Cathy Ashley (Chief Executive, Family Rights Group), Jordan Hall (Public Affairs Officer, Family Rights Group), Jonathan Hannay (CARF-UK)

Speakers: Enza Smith MBE (Kinship Carers UK), Sir Alan Wood (Advisor to Sir Kevan Collins, Educational Recovery Commissioner), Julie Bunn (Vice Chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads & Virtual School Head for North Yorkshire County Council)

Apologies: Tim Loughton MP (Vice Chair), Catherine McKinnell MP (Vice Chair), Miriam Cates MP (Vice Chair), Helen Hayes MP (Vice Chair), Baroness Armstrong MP (Vice Chair), Ian Byrne MP (Vice Chair), Kerry McCarthy, Archbishop of York, Andy McDonald MP, Alex Cunningham MP.

1) Chair's Welcome – Andrew Gwynne MP

Andrew opened the meeting with an introduction to the APPG and provided some background to the group's interest in educational support for children in kinship care.

Key points:

- The APPG shares a common interest in championing kinship care as a way for children to live safely and thrive within their family network when they cannot remain with their parents.
- The group wants to ensure children in kinship care, and their carers, get the recognition and support they need to thrive.
- Evidence on educational outcomes for children in kinship care shows that some are doing very well and as a group they perform at least as well as children living with unrelated carers.
- Overall children in kinship care are behind children in the wider population when it comes to how they do in school. Many have suffered tragedy and trauma and over half have additional educational needs or disabilities.
- During the pandemic there have been many additional challenges for these children, including not being able to access school places for vulnerable pupils during lockdown and difficulties with home learning particularly digital poverty and not having the necessary technology at home.
- Depending on the child's legal status, they typically have no clear route to greater educational support.

- The APPG builds on the work of the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care, which made a number of recommendations to ensure children in kinship care receive the educational support they need to fulfil their potential. It is especially keen to see that the legal status of a child isn't a barrier to accessing the educational support they may need.

Andrew welcomed the guest speakers to the meeting:

- Enza Smith MBE, a kinship carer and founder and chief executive of Kinship Carers UK.
- Sir Alan Wood, adviser to Sir Kevan Collins, Education Recovery Commissioner.
- Julie Bunn, Vice Chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads and Virtual School Head for North Yorkshire County Council.

2) Enza Smith MBE, Kinship Carers UK

Enza spoke about some of the challenges she had faced and that fellow kinship carers are facing in accessing educational support for their children.

Key points:

- Ineffectiveness of universal services for kinship families and their children, particularly relevant to this session in relation to barriers in health and education for kinship children.
- Government and schools need to understand the needs and issues of kinship children, and that adverse childhood experiences and trauma can lead to poor issues of mental health and unregulated behaviours as experienced by some foster children.
- Kinship children should have an education passport, from nursery through to university, to ensure they are not excluded from universal support.
- Outcomes for kinship children would be better if they were recognised and supported.

Enza shared some case studies from families she has been working with during the Coronavirus pandemic:

- Cath and her husband are raising two boys with high level Special Educational Needs (SEN). One is in a specialist school and another is in mainstream education. One child is on the edge of care due to aggressive and violent tendencies. During lockdown neither children were eligible to have a school place. There is no support and both carers are now struggling with their mental health.
- Sue is also a kinship carer. She is 65 with high end health issues and is on the vulnerable list. She's very anxious about sending the boys to school because she is the only option. However, Sue was ordered to send the boys to school and she had no option but to give in. Sue is a carer without a voice.
- Child A is a looked after child of six years. She has been supported by universal services within school. Last year she became labelled as an SGO child and services were immediately withdrawn. The kinship carer was told by the manager of the services that they do not support SGO children. The child's attachment and behaviour issues become an excuse to exclude her from school. The child is now only allowed into school two and a half hours per week. The carer has no voice.
- Enza's granddaughter has special educational needs. They first asked for help when she came to live with them aged 6. They were told by the social worker that their

granddaughter would only get the support she needs if she was placed into care. They decided to place her in care but the support arrived too late down the line. She didn't make it through secondary school because of her mental health issues and was excluded. She is now categorised as NEET (Not in education, employment or training).

3) Sir Alan Wood

Sir Alan presented to the meeting before taking questions. Key points from his introduction were:

- Outlining Kevan's role as National Education Recovery Commissioner: He was appointed by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. He reports to them but doesn't have executive powers to tell the Department for Education what to do. The Commissioner's role is to advise or to challenge the Department in terms of the recovery programme.
- The Commissioner has consulted widely across the sector, including with parents, carers, teachers, school leaders, local authorities, multi academy trusts etc.
- They have good information about the impact of the pandemic on children's education and the issues that need to be addressed by schools and others to ensure children can recover to where they would be expected to be for their age, in short order.
- They have put forward a proposal for funding which, very briefly, has three factors.
 - o 1 – Any recovery programme needs to be properly funded
 - o 2 – It should be led locally, principally by schools in partnership with the local authority, their MAT and whoever else they are engaging with.
 - o 3 – It needs to be long term. This isn't a quick fix. It should be at least the life of this Parliament and probably into the next.
- They have framed their recommendations within three objectives:
 - o 1 - The need to get pupil attainment back on track, following the loss for the average child of 115 out of 197 days.
 - o 2 – A need to be conscious that the attainment gap has significantly increased. It was closing two years before the pandemic, it then flatlined and has now got worse according to their research.
 - o 3 – It can't just focus on academic recovery. The response of government should also focus on a broader child wellbeing, their emotional health, their access to sport, culture, drama etc
- They believe there are three critically important parts within the plan they are putting forward – what they are calling the 3 Ts – increase in teacher time for children, significant increase in teacher training (particularly covering specialist areas for children with special educational needs and disabilities), and the third is targeting of tutoring.
- They aim to reach 5 million children by the end of the recovery programme, covering all age groups 2-18, all children including those with special needs.
- If support is provided locally by schools, there is no reason that it could not be provided based on an assessment of each individual child's needs.

Group members had a number of questions for Alan on the following issues:

Q: We've heard evidence from kinship carers of positive and negative experiences of schooling for their kinship children. Some have had really good experiences with staff and

teachers who understand kinship care and the challenges for children who have faced a lot of trauma. However, many have come up against a real lack of understanding. One area that often comes up is the impact of exclusions. Survey data on rates of temporary exclusion for children in kinship care to be higher than for the general population. Do you think there needs to be greater attention given to training teachers about kinship care, and to ensure they are trauma-informed? And what role do you think the Commissioner has in supporting that?

Answer summary:

- There should be more training and professional development for teachers to understand the needs of children who are in kinship care.
- The Commissioner has a role to play in influencing the decision making policies of the DfE in relation to professional development programmes for teachers.
- The programme being proposed is focused on extending the early careers framework and national professional qualification. They are saying that there should be a particular additional focus on SEN and disability. It shouldn't just be core curriculum training but a broader focus on emotional wellbeing and additional challenges faced by children.
- The major expansion of the national tutoring programme allows schools to call in support and they are proposing that it should be much more flexible than it is now so schools can call in the most appropriate support, e.g. counsellors working with children in school.

Q: Before the pandemic, while educational outcomes for children in kinship care were on the whole better than children living with unrelated foster carers, many were still not doing as well compared to the general population. Levels of additional needs among the kinship child population are significant, and many have often suffered trauma. What change do you think needs to happen longer term to help children in kinship care get the support they need?

Answer summary:

- This is probably not an area the educational recovery commissioner will look at.
- The way the system currently support children in schools who have particular vulnerabilities (in care, in kinship care, have disabilities etc) needs to change. The first step when a child needs additional support is usually to refer out. Instead, we need to look more clearly at locating specialist support where children are.
- The What Works Centre has undertaken a trial of placing decision making social workers in school. They can make decisions about the child, the family and any additional support needed, within the school. This is going to be scaled up to another 25 local authorities from the current 6, and there is a medium term plan to extend it to all.
- Having in-school understanding of kinship care would increase knowledge of children in kinship care and what their needs are.

Q: One of the proposals made by the Parliamentary Taskforce was for educational support for children in kinship care to be available regardless of legal order. That would include Pupil Premium Plus, priority school admissions, having a designated member of staff, and extending the remit of Virtual School Heads to cover all children in kinship care where there is professional evidence of need. Would you support those proposals? How is the

Commissioner ensuring that catch-up provision is reaching the most disadvantaged children based on their level of need and not their legal status?

Answer summary:

- Important recommendations from the Taskforce.
- The success of the Taskforce/APPG in securing amendments to the School Admissions Code to specifically include kinship carers is a great step forward.
- The role of Virtual School Heads is key and their remit has been significantly extended since they were first conceptualised.
- The expertise they provide, supporting teachers and schools, modelling effective interventions, modelling effective support for children and their families, is going to be a really important part of the next period.
- The issue being faced is not that children in kinship care are seen as not being in need of support but that there is a lack of knowledge about kinship care and the issues faced by children in kinship care.

Q: When you talk about vulnerable children, how are you defining it? There are children on the edge of care who have suffered trauma yet are not classed as vulnerable. How do you draw the line?

Answer summary:

- We shouldn't be in the business of drawing tight lines around groups of children. We should be upping our skills at assessing what a child's needs are.
- When you start to categorise children you start losing flexibility and start to ration support.
- The more information we can provide to school leaders about vulnerability in the broadest sense, the more they will be able to understand and respond flexibly to the needs of children.
- The evidence shows children respond best when they're with a very skilled teacher and a very emotionally supportive school.

Q: When government change policy and it is operationalised, what happens at a local practice level doesn't always line up with the original intent of the policy. Varying local policies, differing interpretations, funding constraints – these barriers keep returning. What is there within your recommendations and in the government's response that would strengthen the imperative behind schools and local government to support kinship children?

Answer summary:

- There is a yawning gap sometimes between policy and the implementation of the policy
- We have a very fragmented school system and the independence of schools allows that choice of whether they respond or not.
- We have to be conscious of the local management of schools. But in most circumstances schools respond to policy if it is well thought out, support for implementation is clear, and the objectives are clear. There are examples of schools which don't do that but they are few and far between.
- There is an important route of accountability – it starts with the governing body and parents, then local authorities or MATs etc. We need to remember the maintaining authority's role in schools.

Q: Some kinship carers have expressed concerns about being potentially fined for not sending their children back to school, either due to the child having extreme anxiety exacerbated by the return to school or because of the health vulnerability of members of the household. Has this been part of the Commissioners discussions?

Answer summary:

- They haven't specifically looked at the issue of whether a fine is or isn't appropriate.
- It seems to be highly insensitive to start fining vulnerable children's families.
- They are speaking to teachers and quite a number have spoken about attendance issues that have emerged since the pandemic with children for whom there were not previously attendance problems – they are not coming back for all sorts of reasons, including fears about virus transmission.
- There is some very careful thinking and talking with parents for children to come back in a very planned way, to ensure a child feels comfortable and supported
- Sir Alan will raise it with the Commissioner

4) Julie Bunn, Vice Chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads & Virtual School Head for North Yorkshire County Council

Julie presented to the meeting before taking questions. Key points from her introduction were:

- Julie was a teacher in Middlesbrough before becoming a Virtual School Head. She taught reading recovery and knows first-hand the value of regular, focused support with a qualified teacher,
- Similar to the Commissioner, VSHs can't tell the DfE what to do but in her experience they are very open to listening to messages from the frontline.
- The main role of virtual school heads at the moment in relation to the recovery curriculum is to support colleagues in the attachment research community in their call to action for all schools to be attachment and trauma aware by 2025. Making sure that all schools have a whole school approach to understanding attachment and trauma, and therefore being trauma informed in their practices.
- Messages about a child's lived experience can get missed – e.g. because teachers are scared to ask or social workers think they know.
- Virtual Schools are trying to emphasise with teachers the importance of understanding the lived history of a child, understanding triggers, and what is and isn't working well.
- Relational trauma needs relational repair – there needs to be someone in school who can welcome and support the child and if things escalate be able to take them through stages until they can access learning again.
- Part of Julie's role at the moment with a lot of schools is encouraging emotion coaching and training teachers to be curious about children and the background behind a situation.
- The evidence shows the impact on children who are separated from their family.
- Even though VSHs don't formally cover all kinship children, they are going into schools and teaching schools how to understand trauma.
- Many schools are doing good work managing the return to school, adopting part time timetables and establishing safe spaces. There are instances where it could be done better but on the whole teachers are trying really hard.

Q: Only some children are in the remit of Virtual School Heads - those in kinship foster care or those who left care to live with relatives under a legal order. How do you see the role of Virtual School Heads changing to support the educational achievement of all children in kinship care?

Answer summary:

- They are all the same children who have suffered trauma. VSHs exist to bridge the gap between education and social care, bringing the learning from both together in a holistic plan for the child.
- As long as they have the resources to do the role, they will help every child. At the moment its only providing advice and information.
- The role of VSH is there to make sure that educators are aware of the reasonable adjustments that need to be made and of the difference between equality and equity.

Q: Analysis by the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care showed that there is a significant amount of Pupil Premium Plus which goes unclaimed for children in kinship carers who are eligible. Why do you think that is and what role do Virtual School Heads have in ensuring that all children eligible for that support are able to receive that support?

Answer summary:

- It is part of the role of a VSH and the message has got through that this wasn't always happening. Efforts are being made, in Julie's case particularly, to ensure that families are getting the advice they need about informing the school to claim Pupil Premium. VSHs highlight this in their designed teacher training.
- In many cases schools are spending more than their Pupil Premium allocation but are not always good at communicating that to families.
- It's important that schools communicate what their aims are for closing the gap for these children – or extending it where they are gifted and talented
- Designated School Heads are encouraged to draw on advice and learning about what works – What Works Centre, evidence from what has worked with EHSC plans etc

Q: Does that mean all special guardians will have access to a virtual school head?

Answer summary:

- They have already - under the extended duties, advice and information can be provided. However, VSH can't be a case holder or a corporate parent as they are for looked after children.
- VSH want to be there for everyone but it's a challenge because they can't give that same support to all. But they can listen and advise and undertake exercises like 'circle of adults' to resolve difficulties.

Q: What role does the Association of Virtual School Heads have in collaborating to improve support for children in kinship care. Is this an area the Association is looking at?

Answer summary:

- Julie will raise the Taskforce/APPG's work at the Virtual School Head trustee day tomorrow

- If instruction comes from the DfE then VSH will work with it.
- Children are the same regardless of legal order and VSHs want to help them all.
- Julie is well placed by sitting in the social work team so has that connection and the training to support her work but it won't be the same for all VSH.
- Julie has been trained in 'Family Finding' and understands the importance of family group conferencing and engaging the whole family network to support a child.
- The Association of VSH are keen to provide further training in this area, so they can support children remaining with their family.

AOB

Next meeting – Tuesday 22nd June at 1045am with the Chair of the independent Care Review, Josh MacAlister