

Minutes of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Wednesday 28th October 2015
5.00pm – 7.00pm
Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House

- Chair: Bill Esterson MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
- Panel: Baroness Tyler of Enfield, Chair of Cafcass
Linda Briheim-Crookall, Senior Policy & Service Development Manager, Coram Voice
Dr Maryia Ali, Shaftesbury Young People
Nathaniel Hill, care experienced young person
- Present: The Earl of Listowel (Co-Vice-Chair of the APPG)
Sharon Hodgson MP, Shadow Children's Minister
Tim Loughton MP, (Co-Vice-Chair of the APPG)
- Apologies: Louise Haigh MP, (Secretary of the APPG)
Meg Hillier MP, Hackney South and Shoreditch
Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England
- Topic: **'How can children in care be supported to have meaningful and safe contact with siblings, if they want to?'**

Introduction from the Chair

Bill Esterson MP welcomed the 94 children, young people and professionals attending the meeting. He said this was his first meeting as chair and briefly explained his experience in the sector. He said he was a member of the Education Select Committee which ran an inquiry on residential care; he has two adopted children and has recently become a foster carer. Bill introduced the panel and gave a brief introduction to the topic of sibling contact. He said the law has a duty to place siblings together if this was appropriate for them. He pointed to a report published by The Family Rights Group which found that separating siblings can have a negative impact on children and said the Local Government Association has pointed out that social workers are keeping siblings together most of the time but this becomes difficult when there are large sibling groups.

Panel comments

- **Baroness Tyler** said CAFCASS had found that children in care who have contact with their siblings regularly tend to do better. She said that relationships with siblings are often the most enduring relationships children have and can be as important as the relationships children have with their parents - particularly if children have supported each other at difficult times. Baroness Tyler said this is the reason local authorities do Impact Assessments, but stressed the difficulty in placing larger sibling groups. She said formal contact is incredibly important but the practicalities can be difficult. CAFCASS have guardians who represent children and young people

in court and Baroness Tyler stressed the importance for guardians to scrutinise young people's care plans. Claire pointed out the importance of contact being flexible.

- **Dr Maryia Ali** said she works at Shaftesbury Young People, which works to improve the outcomes of children in care. She said Shaftesbury Young People run a project called [Siblings United](#) which hosts residential camps for siblings four times a year. Maryia said that Christmas is often a time when siblings don't meet so Siblings United host Christmas parties to bring them together.
- **Linda Briheim-Crookall** said that [Coram Voice](#) runs advocacy services and a national helpline for children in care. Coram Voice also runs a project called 'Bright Spots' which identifies practices that improve children and young people's wellbeing; she said that sibling contact has a role to play. Linda said that every young person is different: they may want to see different siblings at different times, or in different settings and stressed the importance of recognising this. Linda said that often when a young person is taken into care their placement is prioritised above contact with siblings, but highlighted that continuity of contact is essential in some cases. She stressed the importance of children and young people talking to advocacy services.
- **Nathaniel Hill** said that he and his sister were put into care together but two weeks later someone came to take him out and when he came back his sister was gone. He was told that they were separated as they had different needs but he didn't agree. Nathaniel said if siblings don't need to be split up then they shouldn't be, it should be the last resort as it can destroy families, affect a young person's emotional state and future relationships. He said productive and regular contact that's well supported should be organised and stressed the importance of good communication between social workers and young people. Additionally he said it is important that it is productive e.g. do not let people twiddle their thumbs. Nathaniel also said it is important to involve young people in the decision making process and where possible have the same IRO for siblings and allow young people to attend their siblings review or be able to put forward their view about contact.

Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)

Key themes:

Barriers to sibling contact

Professionals, carers and the local authority: One of the main themes discussed at the meeting were the barriers young people faced in accessing sibling contact. Professionals and carers preventing young people from seeing their siblings was a common topic of discussion. One young person said he asked for contact with his siblings but social services had said 'no' because his siblings were in the care of a different local authority. He hasn't seen his siblings for ten years. Another young person said she hasn't seen her sister for eight years and blames the lack of communication between local authorities because her sister is in the care of a different borough. One young person said he is the oldest of thirteen siblings and has only been allowed to see two of his siblings. He said his adoptive parents were preventing him from seeing his brothers and sisters. Another young person said he had asked his local authority to allow him to see his sibling but they said they did not have a member of staff available to enable this.

Baroness Tyler responded saying if the problem is administrative the issues need to be looked in to and local authorities should be able to overcome this. She said the [ADCS](#) may have a role to play to ensure good contact is not stopped. She also said that there must be a way to balance the wishes of adoptive parents with the wishes of children.

Not high on the agenda: Another issue raised at the meeting was that sibling contact is not seen as a high priority when a child comes into care. One foster carer said it is often seen as a tick box activity. A young person agreed saying “as soon as you've seen your sibling, once every six weeks, you're just a tick, a massive tick in a box.” One young person said not all social workers care and see one hour of contact as a tick box exercise.

One young person said his best friend is a care leaver who has been told by his local authority that he needs to pay the costs of travel to see his brother, and claim back after, but he cannot afford to do that. Linda Briheim-Crookall said this issue has come up at Coram Voice before and said that good practice is when local authorities pay up front for travel costs so young people do not have to claim after.

Contact seen in a negative light: Mariya Ali said that sibling contact can sometimes be seen as a problem by professionals and carers as young people's emotions can run high after seeing their siblings. She said often young people, attending the sibling camps ask members of staff at camp to tell social workers they behaved well as they want to ensure they can have contact again. Mariya highlighted that emotions should be seen as normal.

Bad contact: A number of young people talked about their bad experiences of contact. One young person said her contact was really inflexible and she was forced to go to the same place every time and was always watched over. A professional said a young person she worked with had had contact in the same McDonalds for the past ten years. This was echoed by a foster carer who said one of the biggest complaints she gets from children is about how bad their contact is and said the children she supports often have contact in Pizza Hut on the motorway. Mariya said lots of children have contact in McDonalds.

A number of young people commented on the lack of communication around sibling contact. One young person said she had ten different social workers and ten different placements and the social workers would say one thing and then the carers would say another. Another young person said consistency is as important as stability and said communication problems can cause issues. Another said he was separated from his brother but wasn't allowed to know why.

Suggested ways to improve sibling contact

Change the name: One young person said: "contact should be renamed family time or family visits. None of our friends know what we mean when we talk about contact."

Indirect contact: A professional from a foster care agency said her organisation collects photos, memories and information about siblings and keep these items for a time when a child is ready to have access to this information. She also asked if there was a place for contact via Skype (see vote in appendix).

A professional working at Surrey Council said that foster carers in her local authority are flexible and imaginative with contact using Skype as a means for young people to communicate with their siblings.

Foster carers supported: A professional from the Care Leavers Association said sustaining key relationships amongst siblings was key and more should be done to ensure foster carers are able to support sibling groups, for example providing money for foster carers to extend their house so they can support larger sibling groups.

Listen to young people: There was a discussion about the importance of listening to young people's wishes when it comes to sibling contact. One young person said she asked the social worker for a 30 minute visit with her sister but she pushed for an hour and she ended up arguing with her sister. Another young person said it's about choice; he chose not to see one of his brothers because he was aggressive but decided he wanted to see his other brother. Linda said sibling contact should be

reviewed all the time as it might not be right at one point. Young people need to ask for it at their review meetings.

Letter box contact: A number of young people said they had sent or received letters from siblings via letter box contact (see appendix below).

Sibling camps: One foster carer said her foster son was separated from his sibling for years despite only living 35 miles away, she fought for two years and it was only after coming across [Siblings Together](#) that they now have contact. She said that getting local authorities signed up to the scheme had been difficult.

Create a positive atmosphere: Young person says more should be done to make sure there's a positive atmosphere during contact. Nathaniel said contact needs to be productive, well supported and organised.

Strengthen the law: Bridget from the Family Rights Group said that there is a duty for the local authority to allow children in care to have contact with their parents but this does not apply to siblings. She said the Family Rights Group has been campaigning to add siblings to this part of the law. One foster carer said “there is no teeth in the law’ for contact. If adoptive parents say no to contact then what rights do children have?”

Thinking forward:

Bill said the APPG would be writing to the Minister about the issues raised at the meeting.

Baroness Tyler said she was shocked and moved by the meeting and had a lot of issues she would be taking back to CAFCASS. She said she would go back and investigate the legislation around sibling contact and the ways the government could support councils.

Jenny Clifton said we hear that young people don't feel listened to and the Office of the Children's Commissioner can and will take up these issues raised.

Closing remarks from the Chair

Bill Esterson MP thanked everyone for coming.

Appendix: votes – there were four votes held during the meeting.

1. Who has wanted contact and had it? 50% voted yes.
2. How many young people used letterbox contact to send or receive letters from siblings? 25% voted yes.
3. Who thinks it's a good idea to collect memories and photos? 100% voted yes.
4. Who has had contact via Skype before? 60% voted yes.