

Children and Young People Committee

AD20

Inquiry into Adoption



VOICES FROM CARE
Charity No; 1108430

Contribution by Voices From Care to the Children and Young People Committee's Inquiry into Adoption

Information About Voices From Care

Voices From Care is an organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after by local authorities in Wales. Voices From Care is unique in that it is run by people who have experienced the care system themselves.

General Mission Statement

At Voices From Care we bring children and young people together throughout Wales, who are, or have been looked after by local authorities, voluntary and private organisations, in order to: 1) provide opportunities, 2) improve conditions, 3) promote the voice of children and young people, 4) protect their interests.

The History Of Voices From Care

In the 1980's children and young people in England and Wales began to ask questions about how the care system (as it was known then) was being run. They were unhappy with: 1) some of the conditions in residential units, 2) having to buy their clothes from certain shops, 3) they were not being listened to individually or as a group about what being in care should be like.

Some children and young people spoke up about the physical and even sexual abuse they were witnessing and suffering in the care system, including in residential units in Wales. This activity resulted, in March 1993, in the development of Voices From Care – a name chosen by children and young people - and in the North Wales Tribunal Enquiry, looking at how the care system had failed to protect children and young people, and making strong recommendations for change.

The Structure of Voices From Care

Voices From Care is an all Wales organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after in local authority care. All the staff with the exception of Administrative staff have had experience of the care system.

Voices From Care is a user - led organisation. A number of young people are heavily involved in our

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work, either as volunteers or board members. Volunteers assist in the work of the organisation, particularly in the delivery of training and in consultation work.

Young people also sit as Board members on the Board of Trustees, assisting in the main management decisions of the organisation. They are supported on the Board by professional trustees.

Work Areas

- 1) Membership
Any young person, who is or has been looked after in Wales, is welcome to become a member of Voices From Care and to be kept in touch with the work of the organisation.
- 2) Advice and Support Work Service
Voices From Care provides an Advice and Support Work Service for children and young people who are or have been looked after. Examples of work in the area are: - supporting young people at meetings, assisting them to ensure that they have support from Social Services in their education / leaving care etc., helping them to seek legal advice, support to become involved in the work of Voices From Care.
- 3) The Training Service
Voices From Care operates a training service that involves young people in the training of those who work with young people who are or have been in the looked after system. Children's and young people's experiences are used to educate others.
- 4) Research
Voices From Care needs to know exactly what is happening to young people who are or have been looked after, so we know what things need to change. The organisation undertakes its own research - asking members and volunteers about their experiences and issues, and engages in research projects via universities and other institutions. This research is then used to inform the other work areas of Voices From Care.
- 5) Campaigning
Voices From Care exists to improve conditions and outcomes for young people who are or have been looked after. The organisation actively campaigns around issues which are of concern to young people, and works to ensure that those making decisions about the looked after system consider the voices of children and young people.

Evidence

Introduction

Voices From Care welcomes this opportunity to give evidence to the Children and Young People Committee's inquiry into adoption. As an organisation we are disappointed that the Committee is not seeking to use this inquiry as an opportunity to examine the experiences and voice of all those affected by the adoption process, this includes other siblings of the child being placed for adoption and also birth

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parents. Voices From Care would have liked all those affected to have been considered and not just the adoption triangle.

Voices From Care would also have been welcoming of an inquiry remit which was more objective and less presumptuous, as although we acknowledge adoption as the best route for some children to achieve permanence and stability, it is not the only route. We feel that an inquiry which does not consider all possible permanency options is at risk of not grasping the full complexity of decision-making and planning for children looked after.

Adopted Children

Voices From Care does not consider that the current arrangements for adoption adequately reflect the rights of the child. There is a focus on the immediate needs of the child, but not enough focus on long terms needs and rights.

Voices From Care would like to see all options for permanence being afforded equal value. Voices From Care feels that the inquiry should have an understanding of the whole care planning and decision making process as it is essential for the wishes and feelings of children and young people to be at the forefront of the whole process. Voices From Care feels that the role of the Family Court Advisor can also for some children not adequately express their views and wishes, and the dual role of representing interests and wishes and feelings can mean that children's voices can be lost.

Voices From Care would like to see every effort being made to place siblings together in adoptive families, although we recognise that this may mean searching for particular families and involve a significant amount of support going into those families.

We would like to see all children being given equal value. Whilst we recognise that planning for siblings groups can be very complex, we feel that situations which value the future prospects for younger children over those of older siblings is not respectful of all children's rights. or consistent with the principle of non discrimination under Article 2 and of maximum survival and development under Article 6 of the UNCRC.

Voices from Care would also like to see that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is explicitly used as a framework in the future development of legislation and policy in relation to adoption in Wales.

The UNCRC sets out a holistic set of standards for children up to the age of 18 years, including the right to have their best interests as a primary consideration (Article 3), to be protected (Article 19), to have their views and opinions taken into account in matters that affect them (Article 12) and specific rights to do with adoption under Articles 20 and 21.

The UNCRC asks that governments put in place measures to consider 'the effects of adoption on the rights of the child, particularly his or her civil rights , including the child's identity (Article 8) and the right of the child to know his or her biological parents (Article 7)' amongst others.

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The Rights of Children and Young Persons(Wales) Measure 2011 will place a duty on Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the UNCRC in making or reviewing policy and legislation and to give further effect to the UNCRC where possible by making or amending legislation that is within the powers of the National Assembly for Wales.

We would therefore expect that the Welsh Government, in the process of developing any new structures, policy or legislation in the field of adoption will undertake an impact assessment of current and future arrangements and how they will uphold children's rights under the UNCRC.

Voices From Care believes that there should be funding available for all permanency options and that this funding and support should be structured in such a way to support the circumstances and options of individual children.

Funding for adoption support services and services supporting other permanency options should be ring fenced, and structured on a regional basis. There should be more dedicated services with positions dedicated to the provision of support and not vulnerable to being taken over by other areas of the adoption process.

There should be more independent support for adopted children and young people to support them with issues they feel are important. Support should be available to children and young people when they feel it is necessary, and not just linked to adult concerns about behaviour.

There are a worrying number of adoption breakdowns, with some reports showing this number to have increased – teenage years are a particularly vulnerable time. There needs to be a focus on finding out whether these adoption breakdowns could have been prevented and on looking at the long term consequences for young people of such experiences. Accessible, independent support services are vital at this time.

Voices From Care would like the Welsh Government to monitor all permanency options as this is the only way for the Welsh Government to understand what is happening to those children who need permanency within families other than their birth families. This broad monitoring will also reflect equal value being afforded to all permanency options.

Siblings

Voices From Care would like to see a presumption that contact is maintained between siblings where adoption is being considered for one or all of the siblings. Options for on going face to face contact should be considered, but at the very least indirect contact should be maintained. Voices From Care hears frequently from older siblings of the trauma of having contact with younger adopted siblings being terminated. If contact cannot be maintained Voices From Care would like to see a requirement on social workers to explain why they are recommending that particular course of action.

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Support for maintaining contact should be written into children and young people's care plans and there should be very clear roles in terms of maintaining contact. Social workers and other professionals should be given adequate time and resources to facilitate the maintaining of contact. Contact should not be allowed to become second place to the other issues for looked after children and social workers.

Voices From Care would also like to see siblings have information about adoptive parents – this lack of any meaningful information can be distressing to siblings who are separated from each other by adoption

Birth Parents

Voices From Care has members who are care leavers but who are also birth parents whose children are now living with adoptive families.

Birth parents also need to have access to independent accessible support who are able to advise them on the processes they are involved in and who are able to offer emotional support. The role of the social worker (for the child) is a difficult one for birth parents – these professionals are often the first port of call for parents in terms of support, particularly at the stage where professionals are considering if the child is able to be rehabilitated to their parents' care, however these are the same professionals who are making decisions and recommendations to the court. There is an incompatibility in these two roles.

Social Workers have access to information about a parent's past if the parent themselves has been looked after, which they do not have about a parent who has not been looked after. Birth parents report to us that they feel that this recording from their time looked after is often used against parents, even though there may have been understandable reasons for their behaviour as a child or they may have changed considerably since that time. The birth parents who Voices From Care is in contact with felt that information about their time being looked after by local authorities was viewed out of context and open to misinterpretation. For example if birth parents had had several changes of placement in their time being looked after these were automatically seen as evidence of the person having difficulties forming relationships, being challenging etc, even though these placement moves could have occurred for a variety of reasons. Birth parents are powerless to put forward their picture of events and are in a difficult position to prove that their character and behaviour have changed. At Voices From Care we strongly feel that birth parents who have been looked after themselves are discriminated against and are at considerable disadvantage with having been looked after being seen as a considerable negative against that parent. We would expect for this situation to be addressed.

Birth parents who have been looked after and are or have been care leavers are automatically visible to Social Services as they may be receiving services in their own right. Voices From Care feels that these parents should be given a fair chance to parent their children and that information from files etc needs to be used very carefully. There needs to be consideration given to the whole issue of recording by social workers and the implications of this for service users' futures.

There is also considerable unease in regard to how being looked after can mean that people become adults with fragmented support systems through moving around the system, changes of social workers and foster carers, lack of family contact. The lack of support is often seen as concerning in regard to birth parents.

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However it may be some of the experiences of being looked after which may have contributed to this lack of support networks. Again this issue needs to be considered and services put in place for birth parents who have come from the looked after system themselves.

In short we would like to see a less punitive and a more supportive approach to assisting birth parents to care for their children and to overcoming any difficulties they may have.

Conclusion

To conclude Voices From Care values the part adoption plays as a permanency option for children and young people. However we do not want to see changes in relation to adoption legislation and practice which does not consider the role of other permanency options. As an organisation we feel that although children should not stay in placements longer than is necessary, we also feel that there should be no short cuts in recruiting, assessing, training and supporting those who want to become adoptive parents. Voices From Care would not like to see a system which gives up on families too soon. Whilst we welcome this inquiry into adoption we feel that the debate should not be dominated by politics, but by listening to the full range of experiences and voices of those affected by adoption.