

## In Response to the Narey Report:

### The Paula Report - Written by a Kinship Carer

Paula Pawley-Smith is a forty two year old woman who lives in a village in Kent. She is married to an understanding man who works hard to keep her in chocolate, Brazilian blow dries and good mental health.

She has lots of children (too many to count) but they are all doing well after enduring the parenting of a woman who constantly worries about grey hair and lost socks. Her last child arrived on the doorstep in the arms of a Social Worker who quite frankly looked like a teenager, weighed down with the problems of the world on her shoulders as well as the toddler in her arms. Henceforth Paula became a Kinship Carer.

Strangely enough people have trusted her enough to work as a Samaritan and to work on the advisory group at Grandparents Plus.

Even stranger are the weird people that she has become involved with intimately – the Kinship Foster Carers Group. A nuttier group of people you would be hard pressed to find, they range from a Probation Officer to a Magician but they all suffer from the same condition “Kinship Caring” The administrators are known as The Spray Glitter Girls (plus one poor bloke called Charlie)

One thing she has learned throughout her dealings with this lot is.....;

**IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!**

## **Kinship Care – The First Choice**

As a Kinship Carer myself I have some insight into areas of Family Services. The service provided by the Local Authority, Cafcass and the Court System.

I have read your report and in essence I agree with most of your findings; I myself have come across the issues and difficulties you have expressed within it.

The points I would like to draw your attention to are these:

### **^ The concern shown for Birth Parents during Child Protection Matters**

*We find this too. As close family members we may have faced weeks (if not months) of concern that children are being neglected or abused by their parents. We face daily battles trying to get the Social Workers to listen and log the facts. We are often seen as interfering and trouble making. The Parents themselves seem to be able to convince Social Workers that we are only causing problems within the family for no reason.*

*Now I am not saying for a second that there are not grand-parents or other relatives out there who will make trouble - but this has got to be seen as unusual and not the norm. It takes such a lot for a Parent to go against their own offspring and to report them for something so horrific as neglect and abuse. I feel it must be viewed with more urgency and concern from the first point of contact.*

*It is often the case that in the end, the school or Health Visitor service back up the reports and finally we are listened too. By that time the child/children have been left in unsafe homes for a considerable amount of time before some action is taken to help them.*

*This is then followed on if a child is placed in a Kinship Placement by the Local Authority. Contact can be traumatic and frequent. The Carers can be expected to supervise contact where the Parent is aggressive, drunk or under the influence of drugs. They may have to take a lot of abuse from the Parent, who may often take their anger out on the Carer as they see them as keeping their child from them.*

*Whilst Foster Carers would not be expected to put up with this type of behaviour a Kinship Carer often faces difficulties finding help within the Social Services department in regard to contact.*

*It seems that a lot of the time care is taken to placate the Parent and they are given too much contact to keep them happy. Contact should be for the benefit of the CHILD not the adult and we feel this is not adhered to, especially in the case of Kinship Care, where Carers are not viewed in the same professional manner as Foster Carers and therefore available at any time to supervise contact within their own home.*

### **^ You talk about the lack of urgency once a child is placed into the Care**

## **System and are therefore “Safe”**

*Again we see evidence of this too. My own case is a prime example. Jake was taken into care at birth. No effort was put into contacting family members so he had to be placed with a Foster Carer. When I found out he was in care I immediately put myself forward to take him. I was given an initial assessment within 10 days and this was very positive. The Court appointed Guardian for the child called me and told me he would be happy for Jake to be placed with us and said that he had told the Local Authority this too. One Social Worker from the Permanence Team asked her Manager if Jake could be placed on what was then called an Regulation 38 placement, this was denied as they said it could not be given on a child who was already in Foster Care. The Local Authority came up with many excuses as to why Jake should not come to us before the Special Guardianship was granted. They told us that if the placement were to break then moving him to another placement before adoption would be damaging to him.*

*As time went on and the assessment process evolved it was becoming clearer and clearer that everything was positive and safe for Jake. The Guardian again pushed for placement. All the time Jake was living with a Foster Carer who was being paid a wage to care for Jake, growing more and more attached to her as his Carer etc. We did not even get to meet Jake at all during this time.*

*Finally after four months things came to a head when we discovered that the Foster Carer was going to go on holiday for 3 weeks and leaving Jake with a new Respite Carer. After all the talk about not wanting him to change his placements he was being passed to completely new Carers for a three week placement, just two weeks before Court was due to grant an SGO to us. So angered was I, that I called the Guardian and he agreed. He demanded that Jake be placed with us immediately. Three days later Jake came home under a Regulation 38 the same order they told us could not be done four months previously.*

*Now again I understand there will be Grand-Parents, Aunts, Uncles - in fact whole families who will not be suitable as Kinship Carers. I agree that there needs to be a cut off point after assessments are completed and they are deemed unsafe. I have witnessed first-hand the Court ordering assessment after assessment on unsuitable Parents and Carers long into the proceedings. BUT there needs to be a more common sense approach. The first thing that needs to happen is a thorough investigate into possible Kinship Placement. Quick and detailed initial assessments need to be taken by specially trained Kinship Placement Social Workers who understand the differences between a Kinship Placement and a Foster Care placement.*

*Whilst at a Family Rights Group conference for Social Workers a few weeks ago Social Workers made it clear to me they found it difficult to get some Kinship Carer through Panel because the Panel wanted to abide by the normal rules for Foster Carers. This is just not possible, things are different for Kinship Placement – not UNSAFE but different. In my opinion for Carers*

*who need to be approved by Panel the Panel should be made up to include some experienced, trusted Kinship Carers who already understand the complexities of Kinship Care.*

*The Court needs to have more power in making the Local Authorities adhere to the time scales set to them. So many times I see people arriving to proceedings knowing their assessments have not even been started or are unfinished, Social Workers admitting to not having had the time to complete the work set to them. This in itself is so costly. Members of Cafcass, Legal teams and Carers all coming to court for yet another continuance. It seems a blatant waste of money.*

#### **^ The Coram Approach**

*My only worry with this excellent approach is only that Social Workers would fail to look for and assess Kinship Carers if they see the Child already being settled with the would-be adopter. I would like to see assurances that this would not be the case. That Kinship Care would remain the first option for the Child if safe and secure.*

#### **^ Social Worker Training and Non-Qualified Staff**

*Too many times Carers come to me complaining that their allocated Social Worker has no clue as to what they are doing. I am sure this is not always the case but I do feel that Social Workers are given very little training in Kinship Care.*

*In cases where a young, inexperienced Social Worker is asked to assess Grand-Parent Carers it can cause a rift almost immediately. The Social Worker may have great knowledge of procedures and protocol but little in the way of empathy and understanding of the Carers needs and worries. I have been asked to attend meetings both by Carers and Social Workers to advocate and advise and often I have been told my presence calms the situation. I believe this is due to the fact I do not sugar coat or talk around something. If I know a Social Worker is trying to tell a Carer to change the way they do something in Social Work language I will tell the carer in plain English what needs to be done and the consequences if it fails to happen.*

*More staff are needed, not necessarily degree level staff but staff that are able to be forthright and understandable. There needs to be less legal and professional jargon and more emphasis on getting the Carer to work with the professionals using clear language and setting goals. I am always clear with my explanations to Carers that if they cannot work with the professionals then the Child placement with them will be put in jeopardy and to be honest, quite rightly so. These children can be highly complex and challenging, if the Carer and Social Worker are unable to work together then nothing good will come out of the relationship.*

*At the same time though I have witnessed Social Workers who constantly deny knowledge of their own procedures, especially where financial aid is concerned. I am aware that we are in a difficult financial age but so are the Carers and having to constantly feel like they have the begging bowl out is very degrading for many.*

*Some Carers are being forced to live in cramped conditions, asked to leave their well-paid jobs to bring up these children or use all their saving for court costs etc. They need to be made aware that they can ask for help. Some of money saved by using Kinship Care has got to be utilised in helping the Carers without making them feel as if they are a burden to society.*

*At other times Social Workers have been ill-equipped to explain an Special Guardianship Order – one Worker telling me that a SGO will not give Parental Responsibility to a Carer. When I told him he was wrong he informed me that I was in fact the incorrectly informed person and that he would double check his information and then call me to confirm he was right – needless to say I am still awaiting his call.*

*All in I agree again with the report and would ask that staff dealing with Kinship Care are fully trained in all aspects of its area.*

The days of the unlucky single mother being “caught” are virtually over as you intimated in your report, the perfect white baby age is all but gone. Even the babies more often or not come with a legacy of drug and alcohol usage leading to brain damage, Cerebral Palsy and Foetal Alcohol Syndrome etc. The Social Workers are always keen to use Attachment Issues as the cause for problem placement; this can leave an Adoptive Parent thinking they may be in some way failing the child. I often think this is an overused diagnosis and these children are actually suffering from the effects of their conception and birth.

I am a great advocate for adoption. I believe that in the worst of circumstances for some children it can offer hope, comfort and a better future. But I am also a realist and whilst I do not want to get caught up with – or even admit to understand - the figures on failed adoption etc. I do understand that a lot of the children entering the care system are damaged, unsettled and quite frankly difficult to love. With Kinship Care comes a greater degree of resilience to deal with these issues, family is key; it has unseen bonds and when it is safe and sound it should always be the first choice for children.

Used and supported correctly Kinship Care will save the Country money in all areas. Support is not just needed financially either but with emotional support and access to other professional services, the same services that would be offered to a Looked After Child being raised by the state. Just because a permanent order is made, albeit an SGO or an Adoption Order the child does not magically become emotionally or physically fit. This takes years of work and effort by the Carer and the right professional input.

All we ask is for recognition, respect and equality in our effort to give these children

the greatest of futures.

