

Episode 35 | The kinship assessment process: listening to carers transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We asked children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello, I'm Ann Horne, CoramBAAF Kinship Consultant. This podcast is being recorded as part of Kinship Care Week in 2024. The focus of kinship care week this year is this is kinship care with an emphasis on raising awareness. We want to deepen the public's understanding of what kinship care is as well as hopefully reach some of the many new MP's. That are imposed, who will undoubtedly have kinship carers in their constituencies. For more information about kinship Care week, visit corambaaf.org.uk and look on our kinship care pages.

Our focus today in this podcast is to consider what kinship carers tell us about their experience of being assessed by social workers, and to think about what this then means for social work practice, including how we consulted with kinship carers for the design and development of Form OK, which is core, and that's new kinship assessment form due to be published. In January. I'm delighted to be joined today by my job-share partner, Clare. Do you want to introduce yourself?

Hello. Yes, I'm Clare Seth and I am also the other half of the Kinship Consultant at CoramBAAF, and I also work as a freelance social worker, primarily undertaking kinship assessments and kinship and support for kinship family.

Yes. Thanks, Clare. So Clare and I have worked together on the development project for Form K and as part of the project, we held two focus groups with kinship carers, one online and one in person. And we also had two kinship carers as part of our working party that ran as part of the project for a number of months. So, Clare, can you tell us about some of the key feedback we received from kinship carers in the focus groups and in the working party?

It was quite shocking really to hear peoples experiences, so they started off by saying that there's been a real lack of information or they felt there was a real lack of information at the start of the assessment. Process and so feeling that they weren't fully informed in helping them make decisions. So when we think about whether kinship carers might become kinship, foster carers or become special guardians, they didn't feel that they had that kind of information at the start of the process. This and then they talked about some of the sort of feelings that they experienced. So felt that they were not always treated with respect, that there was a lack of basic courtesy. So one of the special Guardians gave an example of not being asked when it was convenient to come and. Come and see her and that sort of didn't really set the relationship off on a on a good footing questions that they were asked. Were maybe more. Appropriate. They

felt for mainstream foster carers rather than kinship carers, so thinking about the needs of. Lots of children rather than the specific child that they were, they're hoping to care for them. They also said that they felt misjudged and judged that they felt misunderstood. They found that they were feeling angry. They felt that they were treated with disdain. They felt that there was. They felt really crossed towards the social workers and and I guess it's important to say that these are. These were kinship carers who'd had who thought they'd had a negative experience of the assessment process. It's obviously not the experience of all kinship carers, but it's it's it's common themes that we do here very regularly from kinship carers, that the the whole process is very intrusive and that future needs are not properly considered. So whilst there's an assessment in the here and now. It's not really. Their experience was that the future wasn't really thought about either their future or the OR the children's future. I guess another sort of striking point was that they felt the purpose of the assessment wasn't clear and the the sort of not really understanding why they were being asked specific questions. So you know what we know is that social workers need to gather information. To to form an assessment and to complete their analysis. But for kinship carers, they didn't really understand why they were being asked questions about their childhood, or about previous relationships. It just didn't make sense to them. So I think quite confusing and fairly negative.

Sure.

That's certainly the sort of the picture that's being painted, isn't it? Quite a sort of bewildering experience, quite intrusive and therefore I imagine quite difficult for those kinship carers that have kind of shared those feedback, shared that feedback and and it's quite and it is difficult to hear, isn't it as a social worker to hear that that's the experience of people that. That social workers have worked. And I'm sure other social workers listening would be quite disappointed to hear some of that. Was there any more kind of positive messages shared or anything that kinship carers did value about the assessment process?

Yes, happily there was. So it was. We did get a balanced picture, but I think what, you know what the kinship carers really wanted us to hear was that those. Negatives as well to sort of inform our assessment development work, but what they did say was that what was really important was having a relationship with a social worker and having an ongoing relationship was really important and having the time to build up as much as possible. Trusting relationship, we know that many prospective kinship carers might have had previous involvement with social services, so start from that point of not having necessarily confidence or trust in what might be the process that might be happen. And obviously that leads to a lot of anxiety. So. Having that the chance to form an ongoing relationship with the social worker is was really key and they talked about, you know, the changes that the child might have had in terms of social worker, but that if they had had a consistent social worker that made a a real difference. They talked

about the importance of cultural understanding. And cultural humility and and social workers asking questions. In a. Curious but respectful way so that they could understand the family's culture and, you know, highlighted the importance of not making assumptions about a family's history and about a family's culture. They also talked about the importance of good communication within the professional network and with the kinship. Error so that they're really included in sharing of information and communication and that. That that then felt. That the whole assessment process was smoother, really rather than being done on a sideline, actually involved in discussions and interestingly, they talked about the importance of being able to read the assessment report before it was either sent to the fostering panel or to court. It's a. It's a report that's written about them. It's really important, even if you. Can't. If they're not able to change the social worker's recommendation, it's really important that kinship carers are able to check it for factual accuracy and to check what information is being shared about them, particularly if it is in. The court arena. Because we know that that can be very difficult for people if information that they have talked about very personal and private information during the assessment processes and is then shared with parties that maybe they would. She's rather not to have that information shared with and then to have it potentially presented in a more sensitive way. But if you if you don't have the chance to read the report beforehand, then you you can't. You can't make those requests. They also talked about appreciating frankness and transparency from the social workers. So even. Even if there were difficult conversations and vulnerabilities and risks were maybe being discussed, that actually it's much better to be honest about those rather than skirting around it and and just letting people know where they stand really I think was what what came across and. And they like the opportunity to think about contingency planning. So again, quite often assessments as we know take place in a in a point of real crisis and it's very much thinking about children's immediate well-being and safety. But actually what's really important for kinship families is to think about what if in the future. And and to have those discussions as part of the assessment process, so that wider family and friends can be included in that from an early stage rather than reaching another point of crisis further down the line. And some some kinship. Karen said that actually, surprisingly, they found the assessment process. Could be quite. Cathartic and almost therapeutic with a little tea if it's. If it's done well and again, coming back to that opportunity to really build a strong relationship with the social worker and somebody that they feel that they can have. Confidence, confidence in and. Another really key one, I suppose, just to finish on is not feeling prejudged. So we we hear quite often that kinship carers feel very anxious because they might have had social services involvement with their children when they were younger and that that can maybe colour the views and the judgement of people that are then. Working with them in the future, so it's just important really just to hear people and to hear where they are in their lives and to give them the chance to talk about what's changed for them. Thank you.

I mean, like you say, that does present men more of a balanced picture, doesn't it, of some positives and and I think some key kind of sort of messages around sort of social work practise, you know around relationship based practise and kind of cultural humility which are not of course you need to. Kinship care, but thinking therefore about kind of kinship carers. Sort of based on that feedback. Therefore, how did that sort of inform, therefore, some of the key principles that sort of underpin the form care assessment form?

So when we've obviously had the chance to take that feedback from kinship carers and to talk to social work practitioners and to researchers, it's been an involved process in making sure that we take into account as many views as possible, and I think you know the things that really.

We.

Struck us where the need to have an assessment form. That is really. Focusing on strengths so a strength based assessment for form rather than a deficit model. Now that's not to say that we don't. You know, we don't shy away from talking about vulnerabilities and risk. But what we're the emphasis is really on is having that strength based with really clear robust analysis and an integral support plan. So that where we know that there might be vulnerabilities, we can be really clear about what support is going to be offered to the kinship family to mitigate agate, mitigate against those risks rather than certainly what we're we're clear about is that people shouldn't be. They shouldn't shy away from it from being clear about what the vulnerabilities are, because we know that fostering panels and courts can get a little bit more nervous when they feel that maybe there isn't full full informational available. Them. But actually if we can be clear about what the support needs are, that's reassuring. It also sets it out very clearly for kinship carers, who again did talk to us about, you know, a lack of support planning and not knowing what what was going to be available to them in the future. So if that is clearly set out in the assessment and they know. Where to go? In the future and who to come back to, that can feel much more reassuring, I think, for for families in the future. So those are the kind of the key principles are that it's relation relationship based, as you know, as we've highlighted the need for that relationship.

With the social worker that it's strength based with clear, robust analysis and a very clear integral support plan and hopefully it will have the kind of impact, the positive impact that we want it to have on kinship carers. Because obviously when we were working our way through the project. One of our sort of intended aims was that it would improve the assessment experience of kinship carers, given you know the feedback that we've received and the sort of what we know that kinship carers have been saying for many years really about the assessment. Process. And I know in your role as a freelance social worker, you've been using the form. OK, haven't you, as part of the wider pilot project? Yeah, as part of the wider pilot

project, how will CoramBAAF be seeking the views of those kinship carers who are now being assessed using form? OK.

So we have. Designed 2 feedback forms, so the form K is being piloted in in 10 local authorities across the country and we understand that there are at least 10 assessments being undertaken in each local authority. So it's it's getting quite wide reach which is. Really good. And we're getting some really, really helpful feedback that will definitely inform the final design. That's the form and so part of that is we have created 2 feedback forms. So one for professionals who are involved in either undertaking the form K assessment or reading the form, OK, but more importantly, a form for kinship carers to complete as part of. Their experience and to talk about their experience of 4K. Now it's quite challenging and it took us quite a lot of tweaking and thinking about to. Be able to ask about the experience of being able to separate at the experience of being assessed as opposed to what it's like reading form OK and and and I think that's that was quite hard and I'm not sure that we'll ever get the two elements distinct from one another because obviously what we hope is that. Form K while. Is it? It's it a a formal and a template will always just be a form and a template and it's how it's used and the skills of the social worker and the relationship that you build with the kinship carer that are going to be key. But it's hopefully gonna give us some feedback about the so far, certainly from the families that I've worked with, they've they've said that they. They they kind of understand the questions why the questions are being asked and what the purpose of it is. One has one person has commented. So the form is quite long and when it's completed in all its parts at the moment and that's something that we're going to be tweaking. But but there's feedback that I've had was well, it's good that it's long because it shows that you've taken the time. To get to know us as a family and individually. So I think that's, I mean that would be great. You know, if we can hear that feedback from people. But we also want to hear feedback where maybe it doesn't feel an an improve.

And.

And and again, that's really difficult for us because obviously we can't ask kinship carers who've been assessed using a different format. But we're hoping that we will get some useful feedback from them and and because we're not publishing till next year, we've got time to incorporate changes into the form if. If that's the feedback that we receive and and another thing that we're doing as well as asking those who've experienced the assessment with form, OK, we're also meeting with a further group focused group of kinship carers in the middle of next month to share the findings with them. They'll have a chance to look at. At the at the form and to look at it themselves, and then to give us further feedback, which will then further shape the final, the final final form.

I know from when we were thinking about the questions. What we were trying to capture was that sort of question in the feedback to the for the kinship carers who've been assessed using form K is does the form sort of capture you as a family? Does it? Does it capture what's important to you as a family in terms of how your, how your family functions, but also in terms of your sort of family identity, be that kind of your? Ethnic identity or culture, but does it essentially capture you and what's important to you? Because I think that that needs to come across, doesn't it? In a in a kinship assessment, it needs to.

Absolutely. Yeah. To feel that people people are, yeah, properly, properly represented. Yeah. And and can can see themselves in what they read. Yeah. Because that's, you know, so it it really is a a true reflection. And and I think feedback from another family that I've had. Is that they appreciate, you know, the way that. The questions were. Phrased in the form they they could, they appreciated the fact that the vulnerabilities were talked about, but that the support. The support was there too, so it wasn't seen as a well. There are vulnerabilities, therefore we're not able to make a recommendation. They they appreciated the fact that there was a balanced. That there was a balanced view and and I think that could be challenging for people because you know the assessment process is is, is anxiety provoking enough and we know it's intrusive and and to to have any vulnerabilities discussed can be quite a confronting. Confronting thing, but I think if it you know what their experience was, the fact that it was balanced with a support plan, UMM and the fact that they knew there was going to be ongoing support available for them actually. We made them, you know, be able to say, yeah, no, that's us. That is us. You've you've got it. You've got the strengths and you've got the vulnerabilities and and and that's an honest picture of who we are. And I think that was that was really important. Like you say that that kinship carers feel that they are properly. Reflected in the report.

And.

And so important that kinship carers can then feel confident about the support that's going to follow, and I, you know, and it even if you know a social worker works in a local authority where the kinship support offer is still kind of being developed and might not be kind of as to or. Wide reaching or robust, as perhaps you know social workers want it to be. We do know from the in ship strategy and from, you know, the sort of government reform. Agenda that that there, there is more support becoming available to kinship carers and so the support plan can raise specifically signpost people to where some of those other universal support offers are, as well as other universal support offers, perhaps local in your area so that you know if you are a kinship carer and it's a few years down the line and you haven't had a conversation with a social worker. For a couple of years, but at least if you go back to that original support plan, there will be places then that you know that you can turn to for support at. That point so. We're hoping it

will have, you know, a positive influence. As we said on the experience of kinship carers being assessed, but I guess as you were saying, you know, in terms of the challenges of trying to isolate. A carers assessment of being assessed from the carers assessment of reading form K we know that obviously a good form and hopefully form K will be a good form. Is only one lever to kind of influence change and to influence assessment. That is what what would you say? Perhaps as some of you know, a couple of other levers that perhaps could influence change around assessment practice.

Well, I think.

What we're hearing in terms of feedback from the pilot, which is really interesting is we're starting to get feedback from the courts and. That you know if there is a negative recommendation that the courts are still understandably requiring a support plan and we know for kinship carers, you've received a negative recommendation that that can be really confusing because it might imply. That support could be available. What we're hoping over time is that actually because form K asks for support, needs to be identified throughout what we're hoping in time is that actually the assessment in itself will be sufficient to reassure the court that. Absolutely. Everything has been considered in terms of what support could be offered, but that it's still a negative, a negative recommendation so that kinship carers maybe. Feel less confused about what the outcome is, but we know that that this this is very early stages of the form being introduced and that that will take time for that to kind of philtre through the courts throughout England. And we also hoping that because it is strength based and that really highlights the need for a relationship. The social work that that will slowly start to have an impact on court time scales because we absolutely know that social workers are under huge pressure to complete kinship assessments in really short time scales. You know, we're still hearing sometimes four to six weeks. Which a a point of crisis in a family's life and trying to build a relationship, and to to complete a robust assessment. You know, those those things just aren't compatible with with short time scale. So we're hoping again over time that that might philtre through and and I guess another lever will be from fostering panels and an understanding. And. So hopefully a reduction in terms of fostering panel members, anxiety around kinship arrangements and approving carers as kinship, foster carers and an understanding a real understanding of the uniqueness of kinship carers and the differences between that and mainstream foster carers and and again appreciating that with the integral. Support plan that the support will be there for kinship, foster carers and that it can be creative. It doesn't have to be the same as it is for mainstream foster carers, so I think all of those things and we are seeking feedback from from those from the courts and. Podcasts and from fostering panel members. So it will be really interesting to hear over the next month or So what the feedback is and again how that can shape the final the final form.

Thank you. That's been a really, you know, interesting sort of overview of how kinship carers experiences have informed. The sort of development of form, OK, and hopefully we'll continue to inform. The sort of final developments and final tweaks to the form, as you said, cause we'll have one more final meeting with a group of carers as well as obviously hopefully hearing from some kinship carers who've been assessed over the last few months through the pilot project and their experience of being assessed using form. OK, so yeah, thank you very much, Clare. And for those listening, obviously the form OK, as we've said it is in draught form at the moment and it's being piloted in 10 local authorities at the. Comments. We're hoping it will be published in January, so keep an eye on the website where there will be up-to-date information being published around sort of training being made available and a book being published alongside it, and then the form and the guidance being available through our licence scheme and do come to our kinship. Practise forum, which Clare and I run every few months. The information's available on our website and we do quite often while on a regular basis we provide updates about the development of the form. OK. And the publication and the pilot. So yeah, keep an eye on the website where there's always more information. And thanks again, Clare.

Thank you. Good to have a chat.

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