

Introduction

Good morning. I am Angela Frazer-Wicks. I am a birth mum I lost my eldest two children to adoption in 2004. I am also mum to a 7 year old daughter who has had no Local Authority involvement whatsoever. I have worked with FRG for 12 years. I am a Trustee and a member of their Parents Panel – one of their expert panels made up of family members with lived experience of the system. I am also Co Chair of the YFYV Alliance, an alliance of families and practitioners working together to transform the system.

Firstly I would like to thank Kate and the FJC for inviting me to speak today. It is a real honour to be back where my journey with Bridget Lindley first began on the FJCs Family and Relatives sub committee.

When I first met Bridget all those years ago its safe to say I wasn't in a great place, physically or emotionally. Having only recently lost my children I was homeless and struggling with mental health and addiction problems and was facing a very uncertain future. I genuinely felt I had nothing left to offer society and I had no real desire to keep going. I had a worker from After Adoption who was trying to help me turn things around but the truth is I was pretty lost. Then a chance meeting with Bridget changed all that. One brief encounter put me on the path to a life I never could have dreamed possible. I was no longer lost.

Im often asked what she did that had such a profound impact. What could she have done for it to change my life so drastically? The answer is very simple. She listened to me. She heard me. She believed me. She felt my pain and she let me grieve. She helped me to see that my experience of the child protection system made me an expert. An expert by experience. She asked for my insight, she asked for my help. She gave me back so much that had been stripped from me, she gave me back my confidence, she gave me back my passion for life.

You see the thing is when you've been through the system, when you've had every aspect of your life scrutinised and pulled apart, when you've lost everyone and everything you've ever cared about. Well at the end there's not a great deal of 'you' left. And what there is left is broken, broken in a way that cant ever really be fixed. There isn't bereavement counselling for parents who's children have been adopted, there is no place to go to grieve, there is no one to talk to. There is just emptiness and despair.

And Bridget just got that. Her empathy for the struggles and suffering of families was one of her greatest qualities. A beautiful gifted woman who had the power to make you feel her equal at a time you felt completely worthless. She understood the power of our stories. Her quest for a fair and just Family Justice System centred completely around them. She believed the voices of families were fundamental in achieving positive change. She saw us as the experts. We had seen the system from the inside. We had a unique insight. An

unwanted perspective but valuable nonetheless. By giving me permission to talk, to grieve she helped fix a little bit of what was broken in me.

Her belief in our ability to change the system was unwavering, unlike mine. Whenever we would begin to make progress and start to feel optimistic we would hit a brick wall, usually made of money. I would see this as a failure, Bridget however always saw a challenge. She would already be thinking of a solution, a new direction to take. My journey with her took me from the Family Justice Council to advising the GMC, taking part in the Care Enquiry even speaking in Westminster. Where the system saw a problem Bridget saw the person. And she saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself, she opened doors i wouldn't have even had the confidence to knock on. She never for a minute lost faith in me.

I think one of the saddest things for me is that I don't think I ever really believed her when she told me that I could bring about change. She had complete faith in my ability when I had almost none. It wasn't until she died that everything all finally started to fall into place and I realised Bridget was right. We are the way forward. We are experts. Our voices do have the power to change.

And now there isn't just me. FRG now has panels of family members that influence all of the work they do. Parents, birth parents, adopters and kinship carers working together with practitioners to ensure all the work we do is completely balanced and inclusive. Several of us sit on the Board of

Trustees. All of the training that FRG currently delivers includes panel members. We do DV training for SWs and CP training for DV workers and the feedback is always amazing. By sharing our stories we give delegates a real insight into the challenges facing the families they are working with. Unlike a case study our sessions are interactive allowing delegates to ask questions and advice. All of our research involves family members. We have produced blogs for the website and helped design advice sheets and videos.

As well as helping to change the system being a member of the panels has helped change us too. Simply being able to talk to someone who has been through a similar struggle is enormously therapeutic. It helps to alleviate some of the guilt, shame and anger. We support one another. In fact one panel member once told me that I was her 'Bridget' I don't think there's a bigger compliment than that!

As well as the panels at FRG there are now panels, councils and forums forming all across the country. Professionals are now starting to acknowledge that the only way families can currently provide any feedback into the system is negatively via complaint. What about all the examples of good practice? Families do not want to join panels to bash social workers or be negative. We simply want to help. Even those of us with the most negative and traumatic experiences can find ways to positively influence practice. We are working with several LAs who are setting up Councils to feed directly into their policy and practice. Local families with local knowledge of their communities who have a wealth of information are now

being seen as a resource and finally being given a say in how their local services are designed and implemented. At a time when support services are so scarce and the threshold for accessing them so high it is vital that the limited resources are invested in the right support services for the families in that LA.

We are currently assisting Cafcass to set up a national family forum in both private and public law. A forum that will be truly representative of all the families involved in the Family Justice System. Two of our members are Stakeholders in the ongoing Care Crisis Review and several more contributed. Along with Practitioners our members worked to produce the Mutual Expectations Charter, a document designed to ensure a positive working relationship from the first point of contact. One of the recommendations of the Care Crisis Review was national roll out of the Charter. If, as Isabelle mentioned earlier, we want to keep those families who can safely care for their children out of court then relationships are key.

We are working with BASW on their 80/20 campaign ensuring the voices of families are heard throughout. Social Workers need to be given the opportunity to spend quality time with the families they are working with. Currently the system does to families rather than works with. The Charter aims to break down the barriers that currently exist allowing good relationships to be formed. Working together is possible. Even families who have not agreed with the outcome of their case are able to at least accept it if they

have felt heard respected and included throughout the process.

We are currently working with SCIE and the What Works Centre as well as the Family Justice Observatory. We have worked with KPMG and Mott MacDonald. We have worked with Camden on their Family Advisory Board. Our members have spoken all over the country, lectured at universities and set up charities. Our kinship care panel members are currently part of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care.

And now to thresholds. All too often we hear from families that they have approached their LA and asked for help only to be turned away as they don't meet the threshold for support. They are then left trying to manage problems that are beyond them. The problems continue to mount and inevitably they reach crisis point and suddenly meet threshold. All too often these families end up in proceedings and are left, understandably, feeling let down and angry and are much less likely to engage. Support services cannot simply be crisis management. We need to understand and properly appreciate the level of strength and bravery it takes to admit you can't cope and ask for help. To then be told you are not struggling enough can leave families feeling like they should be coping with situations that are outside their control. A mental health patient cannot treat themselves anymore than an addict can. Thresholds do not currently accurately represent need. Thresholds change but the needs of families do not. We all know that community support is disappearing

at an alarming rate. Surestart centres are closing, Drug and Alcohol and mental health services are non-existent in some areas. My LA has gone from 8 Health Visitors to one and that one has been told to focus only on CP cases. What is happening to all those other families? Where do they go for help and advice? How many will end up in CP when they could have been supported at an earlier stage? Again this is where family forums come into their own. Having a group of family members with good knowledge of their local area can help SWs point families in the direction of non-statutory support services and hopefully keep them out of court.

The Charter, Family Forums, Family Group Conferencing, they all provide ways of addressing the imbalance that currently exists in the system. A more level playing field, a move away from the 'them v us' culture. Collaboration and inclusion. Because Bridget was right. We are the future. Our stories do have the power to achieve positive change. Because you can't have Family Justice without hearing the voices of families.

And while she may not be here to see the change happening or continue the journey we started together all those years ago I can feel her beside me every step of the way.