

Grandparents First

In this issue

- 2 **An MP's view**
Terry Rooney MP shares his thoughts
- 3 **Telling it like it is**
The results of our survey
- 6 **A grandparent's story**
We've tried to give the boys a good, rounded life
- 8 **Inspiring artists**
The wonderful winners in our *This is my family* competition



A show of strength

Westminster was swamped by a sea of red campaign t-shirts on Wednesday 28 October 2009 when over 250 grandparents, family carers and children arrived to make their voices heard. Travelling from across the country - from as far afield as Liverpool and Newcastle in the north, Plymouth in the south and Cardiff in the west - families gathered together to meet MPs and highlight the issues they face as kinship carers.

Continued overleaf...



Thanks to *Yours* magazine, who sponsored the day by providing funding for event t-shirts and for families to enjoy a trip on the London Eye. Thanks also to the Lloyds Banking Group for their sponsorship of the event which included funding for our survey report, *Recognition, Respect, Reward*.

An MP's view...

Terry Rooney MP, who hosted the event, shares his thoughts on the day and his hopes for the future.

"I first became involved with a grandparents group in Bradford some five years ago and was shocked to hear their stories of how they had been abused by the system but at the same time I was full of admiration for their dedication, commitment and resolve to do the best they could for the children in their care. I have had many conversations with ministers since about the position of grandparents and whilst there have been some positive changes progress has been painfully slow. Over recent years it has been a privilege to work with the Kinship Care Alliance and I was delighted when they asked me to host their lobby of Parliament in October. I was able to raise the issue with Gordon Brown at Prime Minister's Question Time immediately prior to the lobby.

"This lobby of Parliament has to be the start of a better deal"

"On the day there were very powerful and moving testimonies of people's personal experiences which graphically exposed the hardship and difficulties so many grandparents face. I myself have nine grandchildren and they are the joy of my life. Fortunately I am able financially to help out when needed but in far too many cases we expect grandparents to carry a disproportionate burden. This lobby of Parliament has to be the start of a better deal and I was hugely impressed by the optimism and courage of all involved. I look forward to working with Grandparents Plus and others for a better deal and brighter future. After all it is innocent children's lives we are talking about – they deserve no less."



Continued from cover...

Terry Rooney MP hosted the day, and was joined by fellow MPs Angela Eagle, Minister of State for Pensions and the Ageing Society, Annette Brooke, who responded on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, and Tim Loughton on behalf of the Conservatives. Grandparents Pam Carnegie and Jeff Bowler shared their stories before handing over to Cathy Ashley, speaking on behalf of the Kinship Care Alliance, who outlined what the campaign is calling for.

"We want a national financial allowance for relatives raising children who would otherwise be in the care system," said Cathy. "It costs £40,000 a year to look after a foster care child. People need money to do the job properly and it's time the state recognised that."

Cathy also called for a better support structure, public funding for relatives applying for legal orders and a system for collecting data. "At the moment you are invisible and that needs to change."

Annette Brooke MP responded, saying: "Support and help could be put in instantly. The reward long term is in our children's futures but you must be given support along the way."

"You are a forgotten army, ignored for too long," said Tim Loughton MP. "You are the fourth emergency service to kids in difficult situations and it is a false economy not to take that on board and do more."

Angela Eagle MP highlighted the need to look at how services should be re-designed to meet needs rather than have systems that people have to fit into, which will be discussed at the Government's Grandparents Summit in November. "This is the beginning of a journey that will inevitably go on," she said.

Finally, Terry Rooney asked everyone to contact their MP to ask them to sign his Early Day Motion 2170 for family and friends carers. Terry said: "Let's keep the momentum going and get some justice at last."

You may not have been with us on the day, but please email your MP and candidates and ask them to support our campaign for a national allowance for kinship carers. Visit www.frg.org.uk/news and follow the link.

“We felt so proud to be invited”

“In 100 years no-one will know what my bank account was or how big it was. The world won't care what car I had or how big my house was. No-one will care what my ambitions were or whether I achieved them. But in 100 years the world will be a better place because I loved and nurtured a child.”

Grandparent Jeff Bowler speaking to MPs at the lobby day

The highlight of the lobby day was bringing together over 250 grandparents and children, with a wave of red t-shirts making their way into Parliament's Portcullis House. Here are some memories from those who joined us.

“When we arrived at Kings Cross and headed for the underground to Westminster, we spotted other ‘red t-shirts’ and became quite emotional as we saw other grandparents and grandchildren excitedly making their way. We all called out to each other, as though we had known each other all our lives. There was a real connection,” said the Second Generation group, who travelled from Peterborough.

“The atmosphere was charged and so positive with all those present having a common goal and not being afraid to say how they felt and what they wanted for the future,” said the Harbour Project from Bolton. “There was a definite ‘we are all in this together’ feel.”

And final words from Hetty's, Mansfield: “The day promoted a united feeling and a strength that has perhaps not been felt before. What is needed now is for that momentum to continue and the policy makers and law makers to pin their ears back, digest the information and use the power they have to change both law and policy. Recognition, respect and reward just like it said on the t-shirt. It's not rocket science is it?”

Telling it like it is

In summer 2009 we surveyed 100 Network members to find out more about your circumstances and about the children you care for. We want to say a big thank you to all those who gave so generously with their time and personal experiences.

The results of the survey were launched to coincide with the lobby day in October and were highlighted in local and national press including the Sunday Times, Daily Express and BBC Radio's *Woman's Hour*.

The survey found that 38% of families live on less than £200 a week. One in three who took part in the survey had fought legal battles to care for the children and over half had incurred legal costs. “I had to sell my house in order to pay for legal costs,” said one respondent.

Four out of five are under 65, with one in three under 55. Over one third (35%) are living without a partner, and three out of five either gave up work or reduced their paid working hours when they took on the care of their grandchild.

Of the children being cared for, 46% were reported to have serious emotional or behavioural problems with only 39% receiving any counselling or other support. Four out of 10 have Special Educational Needs and one in seven has a physical disability, causing fears for the future. “I worry about what will happen when I'm no longer here,” said one grandparent.

But we also found that 98% of you enjoy receiving our newsletter and six out of 10 say you feel less isolated because you are part of the Network.

For a copy of *Recognition, Respect, Reward* Survey Findings visit www.grandparentsplus.org.uk or call 020 8981 8001.



News & resources...

Following the lobby day ...



“Since the events of October last year there has been some progress on family and friends care. But the campaign still has a long way to go before we can really say we’ve secured a fairer deal for you and the children you care for.”

The Government held a Grandparents Summit in November to hear directly from grandparents including those raising their grandchildren. This fed into the Families and Relationships Green Paper which was published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families on 20th January. The Green Paper includes proposals to change the guidance that sets out how local authorities should approach their responsibilities to children and young people living with family and friends carers. The Government is also talking to the Family Rights Group, the Grandparents Association and Grandparents Plus amongst others to identify the additional support that family and friends carers need and the barriers they face. “We will continue to press hard for additional financial and practical support and we need you to keep up the pressure on politicians in the run-up to the general election,” said Sam Smethers, Chief Executive of Grandparents Plus.

Email your MP and candidates in your area directly from the news page on the Family Rights Group website - visit www.frg.org.uk

Rights for Grandparents Day

We went to Portcullis House

Did not see a mouse

Went a walking

Listened to people talking

After lunch we went on the eye

300 children and more

Up to the sky we soar

Each pod was filled with red

What a sight everyone said

By James, age 7

The forgotten families of Europe

Mentor UK has released a report looking at the needs of kinship carers in seven European countries.

Over 180 carers who were looking after children and young people because of their parents’ drug or alcohol problems were interviewed about their lives and the lives of the children they are caring for.

“Children who can’t live with their parents are increasingly being placed with family members, said Andrew Brown from Mentor UK. “What we have been told is that while the families love and want to support these children it often isn’t easy.” As one Swedish carer said: “People look at you differently, as if there is something wrong with you or your family. People get very curious.”

The next steps in the project will see the development of guides for kinship carers who want to protect the next generation from drug and alcohol misuse, a parenting programme, and key advice to new kinship carers about their legal and financial entitlements.

Forgotten Families - The Needs of Kinship Carers in Europe can be downloaded from www.eukinshipcarers.eu



New Grandparents Project Co-ordinator joins Adfam

Vicky Brooks has joined Adfam, the national umbrella organisation working with and for families of drug and alcohol users, as the new co-ordinator to take forward its Grandparent Carers Project.

The project, which is funded by the City Bridge Trust, is designed to help and support grandparent carers living in London through providing good practice guidance and support for professionals working with them.

Vicky, who joined Adfam in October, has a background in third sector communications and research psychology. "I'll be leading the project through to its conclusion, and look forward to working with as many of you as possible, said Vicky.

Contact: v.brooks@adfam.org.uk for more information.



Finding out about families

National charity 4Children has recently launched a major inquiry into family life in 21st Century Britain. The Family Commission, chaired by Esther Rantzen CBE, is seeking to consult with 10,000 families to explore the real challenges and support needs of families in Britain today.

"We will launch our recommendations next year and will be urging Government to take action," said Esther. "Please tell us about your family and help put families in the spotlight everywhere."

To complete the survey online visit www.thefamilycommission.org.uk or contact Julie Evans on 020 7522 6928 for a copy by post. Surveys should be completed by the end of August 2010.

Getting together

The first conference for leaders of support groups for family and friends carers took place in London recently.



Organised by the Family Rights Group, leaders shared their experiences of setting up groups and how best to develop and sustain them. Bridget Lindley from FRG outlined legal rights and options before special guest, actor, author and grandmother Phyllida Law, lightened the mood with memories from her book, *Notes to my mother-in-law*. Phyllida has been a supporter of FRG for many years and ended by telling family and friends carers "I think you're all wonderful!"

A special publication, *Getting Together – A Guide to Setting Up and Running a Support Group*, is available from FRG. Contact 020 7923 2628 or email sheila@frg.org.uk for details.

Helplines & groups

National

The Grandparents' Association

Tel: 0845 434 9585

www.grandparents-association.org.uk

Family Rights Group

Tel: 0808 801 0366

(10am—3.30pm)

www.frg.org.uk

North East

Newcastle Props

Runs a group for grandparents. Provides support to partners, carers and families affected by someone else's drug use.

Visit www.newcastleprops.org.uk or call 0191 226 3440.

South East

Parenting Support for Grandparents

Battle, East Sussex. Meet on the second Wednesday of each month at Battle Baptist Church.

Contact Mel at the Family Plus Team on 01323 463010.

East

Second Generation

Support for all family and friends carers in Peterborough. Contact Chris Leaves for more information on 01733 751 531.

A full listing of support groups can be found on our website – www.grandparentsplus.org.uk

Include your details...

If you run a group and would like to include your details please email info@grandparentsplus.org.uk

A grandparent's story:

“We've tried to give the boys a good, rounded life”

“We found out later that the police had been called to the flat many times following arguments and shouting”



Alice and Les stepped in to raise their grandsons when domestic violence threatened their well-being.

“My adopted son’s behaviour was always volatile,” says Alice. “He left home at 17 because he wouldn’t accept that we couldn’t put up with his bad behaviour. He moved into a YMCA, then got a bedsit. We supported him, buying things like new curtains, making it a nice home.”

His girlfriend moved in with him, and after they had their first baby they were moved to a council flat. “All the family helped them decorate it, doing a lot of work to make it nice,” remembers Alice. “But soon there were doors off hinges, holes, broken cupboards. They gave us silly reasons for the damage. They lived on the fifth floor and the kitchen window got broken.” Alice was worried, knowing her son’s previous behaviour. “I told his girlfriend that if he ever touched her, she should tell me. That I would support her. But she said everything was fine.”

With their baby getting older, Alice and her husband Les encouraged his mum to go to college and work towards getting a job. “We spent the whole weekend with her, chatting about what she could do. Then, when she was leaving, she said she had something to show us. It was a scan photo; she was pregnant again.”

Then one weekend, when Alice and Les were looking after both boys, they became poorly. Their parents came home after 10pm but Alice refused to let them go home so late as they weren’t well, asking their mum to make an appointment with the doctor the following day.

“When I took them home there was no appointment. I ended up taking them myself with the mum’s grandmother – a really lovely lady. The doctor asked where mum was and we just said she was at home. He wasn’t impressed.”

This incident led to Alice and Les finding out that the family were known to social services. “We found out later that the police had been called to the flat many times following arguments and shouting,” says Alice. “Social services were not happy with the situation and asked if we wanted to attend meetings. We didn’t want the boys to go into care, but nobody in her family was coming forward.”

The meetings went on for a year, with the boys’ mother supported by her grandmother as social services tried to establish whether she could improve and protect her children. “One time we had been looking after one of the boys, and when we dropped him home his brother was locked in his bedroom.” Horrified, Alice discovered her grandson had been given a caffeine drink, and when it made him too hyperactive he was locked up. He was just 18 months old at the time.

Over the year, it became apparent that she couldn’t prove she would take care of the boys, so social services planned to take the matter to court. “I just knew she was pregnant again,” remembers Alice. “She wasn’t supposed to be seeing their father, my son, for the boys’ safety, so I challenged her at the meeting. The boys had been staying with us, so I asked how she would cope with them and her new baby. The social workers mouths dropped open when she said she was pregnant again, and my son was the father.”

Court proceedings followed, with Alice and Les granted a Residence Order for the boys. Her new baby, a little girl, stayed with mum although she was on the At Risk Register for the first year of her life.

“We were told that the boys would be with us until they were 18,” says Alice. However, the family were not told that their mum would have the right to challenge the decision at any time – which she has done every year since. “We feel let down,” says Alice. “There’s nothing we can do to stop her continually applying.”

Alice has always wanted the boys to have contact with their mum, although there’s no legal requirement. “Every other weekend she would come for the day with her daughter. Then she wanted more access – I can understand if she wants to see them more, but she wanted us to pay her travel costs. She’s now on her third solicitor and is asking for the boys to stay overnight at her flat. But that can’t happen – I don’t want the memories of what happened there to come back for them.” And although their mum receives Legal Aid, Alice and Les have to pay for every letter their solicitor sends. “I’ve no doubt it will end up in court eventually,” says Alice.

“Sometimes I feel as though I wish we hadn’t taken all this on,” says Alice. “But if we hadn’t taken the boys we were told they would be fostered then adopted – they had someone in mind for the youngest. They might be split up. But after we got the Residence Order we were dropped like a hot potato.”

The boys see their mum and sister regularly, and Alice is keen that as they get older, they will be involved in any decisions. The family have no contact with their father, who has not applied to see the boys.

“We’ve tried to provide a good, rounded life for them,” says Alice. “They’re doing well at school, enjoying hobbies and are going from strength to strength. The people around them are very positive and everyone loves them.”

“One time we had been looking after one of the boys, and when we dropped him home his brother was locked in his bedroom.”

“I don’t want the memories of what happened there to come back for them.”

Would you like to share your story with other grandparents?

If you are interested in sharing your experiences please call Alison for a chat on 020 8981 8001.

Inspiring artists

To celebrate the diversity of the families we support, Grandparents Plus ran an art competition for children and young people to show what 'my family' means to them.



The overall winner in the competition was seven-year-old Caitlin, who designed a beautiful collage with some help from two-year-old sister Gracie (above).

Other prize winners were Laura, aged six, for her family picture (above right) and the children supported by Hetty's in Mansfield for their lovely handprint fish picture.

Finally, three-year-old Hayden sent us a special photo taken of him and his nan and grandad on a summer day out to Marwell Zoo.

All winners have been sent their prizes by post. Well done to everyone for taking part!



Hetty's fish, which travelled all the way to Westminster to show MPs the handprints of just some of the children being raised by family and friends carers.

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Grandparents plus

We champion the wider family who care for children

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