

Liberal Democrat and Families Need Fathers Joint Meeting: Report
Liverpool Room, Palace of Westminster
10/12/19

Attendance

Liberal Democrat Parliamentarians:

Susan Kramer MP (Chair)
Vince Cable MP
Lynne Featherstone MP
Andrew George MP
John Hemming MP
Mark Hunter MP
Norman Lamb MP
Alan Reid MP
Dan Rogerson MP
Sarah Teather MP
The Earl of Glasgow
Baroness Joan Walmsley
Baroness Garden
Baroness Linklater
Baroness Tonge

Parliamentary Researchers:
(Representing Paul Keetch)

Families Need Fathers representatives:

Jon Davies CEO
Jenny Cuttriss Trustee
Elisabeth Lakey Trustee
Becky Sibert Policy and information Officer
Wais Bashir Policy Assistant
Paul Case Policy Assistant
Simon Lucas Policy Assistant
Margaret Ashman Member
Andrew Casey Member
Calum Chace Member
Brian Ross Member
James Roberts Member
Steve Stephenson Member
Paul O'Callaghan Member
Robert Wheal Member

Apologies for absence:

Chris Huhne MP

Paul Rowen MP
Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP

3:00PM Meeting Begins

Introduction

Susan Kramer (chair)

- Welcomes and thank you for attendance and organisation
- Statement to the effect that the liberal democrats appreciate the sentiments of Families Need Fathers and accept the importance of fathers roles

Elisabeth Lakey Trustee

- Appreciation for attendance
- Background details on FNF
- Brief outline of FNF's current roles and achievements
- Hope for the future and a system which removes the need for FNF and appreciates the equal importance of both parents to a child.

3:10 Presentations begin

Presentations: (available in FNF transcripts)

1. **Calum Chace Member:** *The Family Law Industry: Problems, Causes, Solutions*

Additions to speech (not present in transcript)

- Criticism of CMEC and the negative impact it will have on willing fathers along with the possibility that it will force 'deadbeat fathers' further underground
- Sixth requirement for reform – the reinvention of CSA from scratch

2. **Jenny Cuttriss Member:** *A Grandparents Perspective*

3. **Andrew Casey Member:** *The Child Support Agency (CSA)*

4. **Steve Stephenson Member:** *Schools (and Doctors)*

Additions to speech (not present in transcript)

- Invitation for attendee's to visit an FNF members meeting - held in Leather Lane each Tuesday

3:40pm Speeches end

Discussion and subjects raised:

1. **Contact between schools and NR fathers**

Baroness Joan Walmsey: Q. Are father's details maintained within the Contact Point Database?

Jon Davies CEO: They are required; some schools believe it's at their own discretion however (incorrectly)

Lynne Featherstone MP: Expresses frustration regarding schools non-contact with her ex partner and the onus on her to forward relevant information

Q. *Why don't schools take steps to contact the father and address this issue?*

Steve Stephenson Member: It's easier for schools not to address this issue and become involved – they want to avoid possibly disruptive conflict, also when schools do make an effort they sometimes suffer from their own ignorance

Lynne Featherstone MP: Q. what is the solution to this problem?

Steve Stephenson Member: Suggests the requirement for correct and adequate guidance to the schools, notes that in medical guidance there are 'must and should' requirements.

Becky Sibert Policy Officer: Discusses the need for compulsory guidance and education regarding this issue – notes that best practise is possible and evidenced by many schools. Notes requirement to target 'bad schools'

Susan Kramer MP: Expresses the need to identify 'bad schools' and request information

2. The issues regarding contact and the inequities of the legal system

John Hemming MP:

- Notes that the system to achieve contact is very complicated, expresses personal experience of this system 18 years ago and achieving a 'joint-residency' order, notes that this implied equal responsibility but in reality the mother and child lived some distance away and contact was difficult. Expresses the need for children to maintain contact with parents/grandparents and the need to make contact a default presumption under the current system
- Proposes that the system of mediation needs improvement and case should be prevented from going through legal channels – this further delays contact and favours the mother.
- Expresses the need to maintain a stance of 'innocent until proven otherwise' regarding claims of domestic abuse and the requirement for punishment when false allegations are identified.

- Points out that the chances of full residency in the courts for fathers when a child is at an early age are current almost 'on-existent'
3. **Aid to parents who are looking to co-operate post-separation**

Baroness Linklater: Q: Is there an organisation which currently helps to facilitate contact where parents are co-operating post-separation?

Jon Davis CEO: Notes that FNF is primarily run by fathers who have experienced the difficulties in the system and achieved contact and are now looking to facilitate the needs of fathers currently struggling with the system

Steve Stephenson Member: Notes that there are no gender issues with FNF.

Dan Rogerson MP: notes the negative impact of a 'warring' situation between parents.

Q: Are there any plans for a service for parents who do want to share contact, can FNF provide this service?

Jon Davis CEO: notes that FNF is only a relatively small charity and lacks the funding or resources to provide this scale of service – points out the roles of CAFCASS and Family mediation services to facilitate this.

4. **Conciliation/mediation: Failures of an adversarial system, need to advance this service**

Calum Chace Member:

- Points out that mediation will not work when one parents knows due to the current system that they will win full residency
- The nature of mediation as a formality/prelude to legal proceedings and the adversarial nature cause it to fail and further delay contact.
- Points out the need to remove the adversarial nature of this system

4. **FNF contact with co-operative parents who require aid (revisited)**

Baroness Linklater: Q. How much contact as an organisation do FNF have with parents who have contact and require aid?

Jon Davis CEO: Notes that FNF liaises with a number of charities whom these cases will be referred onto

Jenny Cuttriss Trustee: Notes that many of the partners of FNF members come from damaged backgrounds.

Becky Sibert, Policy Officer: notes working relationship with Gingerbread.

Susan Kramer MP: (Chair) *Notes that time is running out*

5. CSA charges and the damaging effect:

Lynne Featherstone MP: notes that retrospective charges are being levied on 'good parents' who are paying fees and causing damage. **Q. What can we (MPs?) say to the CSA to prevent this?**

Susan Kramer MP: Notes that she has attempted to arrange meetings with ministers to discuss issues regarding the CSA

Jon Davis CEO: Notes that the CSA does have some flexibility regarding retrospective fee's based on an individuals circumstances

6. Case workers in court:

John Hemming: provides anecdote regarding bringing caseworkers into family court cases and notes that the courts, if pressured, will allow this. Suggests that if courts refuse, contact him, and he will contact the courts.

4:00pm Meeting Ends

Closing Statements:

Jon Davis CEO:

- Thanks those who attended the meeting and expresses hope for a continuing positive relationship between the liberal democrats and FNF to forward both their agenda's
- Invites those who wish to discuss matters further to continue discussion informally afterwards.