



Minutes of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Wednesday 10th December 2014
5.00pm – 7.00pm
Committee Room 9, Palace of Westminster

Chair: Craig Whittaker MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Panel: Dr Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England
Neelam Bhardwaja, Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, Haringey Council
Matthew Brazier, HMI, National Lead Looked After Children, Ofsted
Chloe Cunningham, Leicestershire County Council
Michael Simpson, Strategy and Policy Adviser, The College of Social Work

Present: The Earl of Listowel
Martin Howarth, Department for Education

Topic: 'Following the publication of the Entitlements Inquiry report in 2013, what improvements have been made for children in care and care leavers?'

1. Introduction from the Chair

Craig Whittaker MP welcomed the 70 children, young people and professionals attending the meeting and summarised the findings of [The Entitlements Inquiry – 'one year on' report](#).

2. Panel comments on what has changed since the launch of The Entitlements Inquiry Report

- The Office of the Children's Commissioner is running a series of regional visits to listen to the views of young people in care from across the country, and the Care Monitor will also hear from young people.
- Ofsted now report on young people's knowledge of and access to entitlements following the report's recommendations. Matthew said that out of 40 local authorities inspected so far 60% need to improve and Ofsted have made specific recommendations to 40%. He said that the Entitlements Inquiry report has made a big difference but there is still lots of room for improvement.
- Neelam Bhardwaja said that it is essential that senior managers are personally committed to ensuring that young people know about and are getting their rights and entitlements. At Haringey Council, senior managers meet with Aspire, a youth-led club for children in care, every three months to hear the views of young people. Neelam often responds directly to email enquiries from young people.



- Michael Simpson said that supporting and empowering young people is the main role of a social worker. Young people are the experts of the care system and training should reflect this.
- Chloe Cunningham said that Leicester Children in Care Council developed a survey for children in care and fed back responses to social work and management teams. They are also currently looking at changes into care plans and care planning and will do another survey next year. Young people also chair corporate parent meetings.

Lord Listowel said Maggie Atkinson would be stepping down from her post in February next year and said he was grateful for all the hard work Maggie has done over the last four years for children.

3. Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)

Key themes:

i. Asylum rights and receipt of support

One young person said his local authority had agreed to pay half of his university tuition fees but this was retracted after the manager left. Neelam Bhardwaja agreed to speak with the young person after the meeting. Another young person asked; 'What happens to asylum seekers who leave care?' Maggie Atkinson said young people receive support until they are 18. Often young people given discretionary leave to remain can be left in limbo as they cannot work, study or claim benefits. She said the Office of the Children's Commissioner had been trying to get this changed. Craig Whittaker agreed to raise this issue in parliament.

One young person said he was promised letter box contact with his siblings however this had not happened in practice. Craig said he would speak with the young person after the meeting.

ii. Pathway plans

Matthew Brazier said that lots of local authorities have care leavers who have pathway plans but the issue is the quality. He said there is a need for young people to have a sense of ownership over their plans. He said the focus on quality is important and we need to find out what works and share best practice. One care leaver said he knew of a young person who was given her pathway plan by a social worker and asked to complete it on her own. Michael said this was bad practice and it was important for social workers to support and empower young people by providing help and guidance. One foster care provider said that out of 308 children in their care he only knew of 123 with pathway plans. One care leaver asked if there was scope for revising pathway plans to make them more user friendly as he said they were 'boring and repetitive'. He said it took him over a year to see his plan and when he eventually saw it changes had been made without his consent. Craig said he would write to the Minister about this issue. A care leaver said a young person's history makes up two thirds of a pathway plan and this needs to change as it's easy for a professional to read a young person's history and pre-judge them. He said the plan 'needs to be more relatable and more relevant'. Matthew said it would be helpful to create a young person friendly template. Chloe said that Leicester County Council are currently looking into making pathway plans more young person friendly and are using Derbyshire's template. One professional



suggested fining local authorities for every day a child does not have a plan or an adequate plan. Maggie said you should shame local authorities but not fine them.

iii. Social workers: retention, relationships and support

Neelam highlighted the importance of young people having a consistent and strong relationship with a social worker, but said staff retention was a barrier. Michael agreed, saying this comes up regularly. Additionally he said social workers want to have time with young people to deliver on their promises but often have administrative duties and high caseloads which can make this difficult. Matthew said Ofsted is increasingly seeing good practice. He said generally social workers are visiting young people on their own and visits are less likely to be seen as tick box exercises. He said he'd like to see this everywhere. Chloe said that Leicester has a set of promises and one of those is that social workers must meet with a young person every six weeks unless a young person says otherwise. This is monitored in social worker supervision.

iv. Lack of support leaving care

One young person said care leavers often face financial difficulties and asked 'how do you help care leavers struggling with money problems?' Maggie said good practice involves local authorities working with external organisations such as credit unions and financial support services. She said there ought to be a central place to share best practice. Neelam said Haringey provides personal advice, have benefits advice services and also work with voluntary organisations. Chloe said young people leaving care in Leicester have support workers and the council has recently set up a website where young people can find out about what they are entitled to. Neelam pointed to the £2,000 setting up home allowance and said Haringey often supports young people who are in arrears.

One care leaver said that there is a gap in support for care leavers who turn 18 and intend to go into higher education. She said once you turn 18, support ends until you are back in education. Craig said that the Education Select Committee has reviewed this and the government is going to revise the guidance so support goes beyond your 18th birthday.

A professional said that his fostering agency saves £10 a week per child; however he said if a child leaves care with over £6,000 in savings then they are not entitled to benefits. He said this is an issue which needs to be addressed.

v. Lack of knowledge

One young person said she found out about the 16-19 bursary through her friend not her local authority. She asked what could be done to ensure young people know about their entitlements. Matthew said local authorities should have well-informed staff and highlighted the importance of staff having and sustaining good relationships with the young people they work with. Maggie said regulation was essential. Local authority promises should be clear and accessible online, if funding needs to be ring-fenced then it should be. Michael said it was down to a change in culture around best practice. Social workers need to be aware of entitlements and The College of Social Work (TCSW) has a role. He said in the last 12 months TCSW has used Twitter and e-bulletins to highlight to social workers the importance of rights and entitlements and has more to do.

vi. Positive changes



Craig asked the floor if there had been any positive changes made since last year's meeting. A young person from Kirklees council said they had set up an online site called 'Me and my Social Worker' which allows young people and social workers to upload personal profiles so social workers and young people can get to know each other before they meet in person. Additionally Derby said they had a pledge on their website. One professional said his council now gives social workers two weeks to ensure young people have a care plan and said accountability is important.

4. Closing remarks from the Chair

Craig Whittaker MP thanked everyone for coming and awarded prizes to the youngest person in the room and the group that had travelled the furthest.

Appendix: votes – there were two votes held during the meeting.

1. How many young people do not have a pathway plan and should have one? 7 said they did not have one, 10 said they did.
2. Is your care plan or pathway plan good? 9 said yes, 13 said no, 2 were in between.