

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

Wednesday 2nd March 2016
5.00pm – 7.00pm
Committee Room 10, House of Commons

- Chair: Bill Esterson MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
- Panel: Sir Martin Narey, head of the independent review into residential care homes and non-executive board member, Ministry of Justice
David Berridge, Professor of Child and Family Welfare, University of Bristol
Marie Fall, care experienced young person
- Present: Sharon Hodgson MP, Shadow Children's Minister
Tim Loughton MP, Co-Vice-Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
Lucy Allan MP, Member of the Education Select Committee
Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England
Matthew Brazier, HMI (National Lead, Looked-after Children), Ofsted
- Apologies: Lord Listowel, Vice-Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
Emma Lewell-Buck MP
Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Jonathan Farrow, Chief Executive, St Christopher's Fellowship

Topic: **'How can we ensure that children in residential care have positive experiences?'**

Introduction from the chair

Bill Esterson MP welcomed the 79 children, young people and professionals attending the meeting. He briefly introduced the panel and discussed Sir Martin Narey's [independent review](#) into children's residential care. Bill explained that discussions during the APPG may influence the review. He said 9% of all looked after children are in residential care, the average age of those in residential care is 14.7 and over three quarters are aged between 14 and 17. He said that placements last around one year on average and there are 2,057 children's homes in England.

Panel comments

- **Sir Martin** explained that his professional experience has included advising the government on adoption and preparing those working in social care. He discussed the developments of his independent review into children's residential care and said he had been in contact with young people from children in care councils and care leavers who have had experience of residential care. He said that it is not true for all children that foster care is the best option; he said that residential care may deserve more credit as it has a reputation as a 'last resort'. He explained that the review includes lots of positive aspects of

residential care but there is room for some improvements. Some homes were described to him as claustrophobic and he said larger homes may offer a better environment for children. He said that anything stated at the APPG may be included in the review which will be published by the end of May 2016.

- David** started his career as a residential care worker and said that, from his experience, a friendly and familial setting is the best for those in residential care. He said he has been a researcher since then and has visited around 100 residential care homes, mainly in the UK but some abroad. He said residential care has always been seen as a ‘Cinderella service’ and it’s often been undervalued and not given enough attention. David said that getting to know the children in residential care homes and working with them closely is best practice for staff. Over half of the residential care homes he visited were child centered - this wasn’t happening enough in the other half of the homes he visited. David said he thinks that residential care could be a base for a longer service rather than a small facility. He said the government doesn’t see why Staying Put shouldn’t be extended to residential care but the lack of government funding makes this difficult to implement.
- Marie** said she when she was 12 years old her Independent Reviewing Officer insisted that foster care was right for her after she asked to be moved into residential care. During her time in foster care, she stopped going to school, she had to attend a pupil referral unit and found it difficult to settle. Marie said there was barely a week where she didn’t run away even though she thought her foster carers were great. When she was eventually placed into residential care, she didn’t run away once and went from attending a pupil referral unit two and a half days a week to being in school every day and seeing her friends. For Marie, residential care was her home and when things were bad she could talk to staff who were there for her. Marie said she felt a sense of belonging because she was living with people that knew what it was like to be in care. In residential care, the staff were always around in the day or night which is too difficult for one foster carer to replicate.

Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)

Key themes:

Staying Put in residential care

A consultant said that whilst there are no Staying Put arrangements in place in residential care, there is a regulation that states young people shouldn’t leave until they are ready to do so. However, if 50% of the home’s residents are 18 or over, they may need to leave. A young person asked for the definition of ‘being ready to leave’. They shared their experience of being moved to a hostel at 18, followed by a move to a flat, when they thought they were ready but realising in hindsight that they were not ready to live independently and felt that 22 would be a more suitable age.

Another young person shared an experience of being asked to move out of residential care at 16 during exam time. Marie said she was given three days to leave residential care because she was doing so well there and at school but didn’t feel ready. However, the staff members keeping in touch was very helpful.

A participation worker said she knew of a young person who lived independently from 18 and ended up in thousands of pounds worth of debt, was illiterate, had a bad diet and insufficient life skills. They said it wasn’t about Staying Put but about having a supportive key worker.

Martin said that part of the problem is that a lot of people think they’re ready. He found that mainly young women in care thought they would be fine living independently but in reality found it much lonelier. Key workers should scrutinise what the young person is saying. Because of the lack of

government funding, Martin said that he thought that key workers should be able to offer more stability to young people currently in residential care.

Bill said that as a corporate parent, key workers need to make sure young people in care get the same experiences as those who are not in care and the experiences shared at the APPG show that they are a long way from this.

A care leaver asked why young people are still being forced to leave residential care if there is a policy in place to prevent this. Natasha Finlayson, Chief Executive of The Who Cares? Trust, said that it's the law, not just a policy, and the reason why this is partly down to local authorities attempting to save money by having fewer young people in care. She said councils need to ensure that residential care staff don't just permit young people to stay but actively encourage them to and should make the young person feel valued and wanted. She said it is their duty as a corporate parent - parents of those who aren't in care would be advising their children that leaving home at 16,17 or 18 might be too early. A professional said that if residential care staff don't know the rights of the young people in care, they won't be able to empower them. She said that all young people in care need to have guidance on what their rights are.

A foster carer who used to be a residential care worker suggested that it would be braver to invest in a service to give support and guidance. They said that there needs to be someone to actively check on young people who have left to live independently.

A professional spoke on behalf of a young person in residential care who said they don't feel ready to leave although they've been advised on living independently because they are concerned that they won't be supported with regards to their mental health problems. The Children's Commissioner suggested using the advice line they run as a lot of young people call about moving on and being unhappy about this.

Funding

Profit-making within the residential care sector was discussed, with one suggestion being that a percentage of the profit made should be given to young people in residential care. A young person said the behaviour of the staff is affected by how much they are being paid. Martin responded by saying that he had seen quite a few empty beds during his visits to residential care homes so the overall profit may not always be as much as expected. Martin added that many changes could be suggested, but they would cost a lot of money for the government. In response to this, a professional said that Martin should assess the need, not the resource. He said that he should not be writing the review with a sense of funding restrictions but suggest changes and look at funding afterwards and ensure he is advocating for young people in residential care.

A deputy manager of a residential care home spoke on behalf of a young person in care who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy and is a wheelchair user. They said that the young person requires more equipment that is purpose built but the lack of funding prevents them from being able to access it. They said the young person was given equipment to support them but it was taken back after the trial period was over – this meant that independence was given to them and taken away again. They asked the panel what can be put in place for children and young people in care who have limited mobility to help them become independent adults out of care.

Sharon Hodgson MP said looking at the amount of money being spent as a nation and the value for money would be necessary. She said the APPG has shown that the government could be doing better for outcomes and young people in care. She also suggested using best practice from other countries. Denmark has more residential care homes and they are smaller, meaning there is more of a familial setting. She said European countries think we rely too much on foster care in the UK and suggested undertaking research on how much we spend compared to other countries as the outcomes are much better there. Residential care staff tend to be very well trained in other European countries. David added that the constant reorganisation of local authorities means that a lot of staff members are prevented from working in a more child-centred way.

Safety & closure of residential care homes

A care leaver asked how the safety of younger people in residential care can be ensured if Staying Put comes into residential care since the average age is 14.7 and they may feel more pressure to drink and try drugs. Bill said he has heard comments like this before and this is an issue that must be taken on board.

A care leaver said that when she was 16 and pregnant, she was in residential care and she was told that the home was closing down within a week. She said that a foster placement was not available and she ended up in her sister's house. She asked what will be done to make sure residential care placements stay open and asked why some have been closed for 6+ years. Matthew Brazier from Ofsted said that the expectations of residential care homes are high, they are inspected twice a year and there is a specific set of descriptions for what makes a good children home. He said that if homes don't meet those expectations, they can be advised on how to improve them but they will need to reach them in a certain amount of time – this means they can be closed down permanently.

Positive experiences & suggestions for improvement

A social worker asked Marie how the SW can help to encourage a young person who is desperate go into foster care to stay in residential care as there are various reasons why foster care is not an appropriate option for them. Marie said a housing allowance, being able to decorate her own bedroom and staff who cared and showed an interest in her exams helped her feel more secure.

A care experienced young person said that they were unaware of any support they could be given at university as a care leaver when they were in residential care. They suggested having more notices up about their rights as well as more workshops being facilitated by independent agencies on cooking and CV writing for example.

A young person in care shared their positive experience of residential care. They said they have been in care since the age of 12 and they made the decision to move to residential care. They were listened to and preferred living with a mix of boys and girls. They said a staff member who had been through the care system was really supportive and understanding. The staff also helped with their independence, in particular their money management as they are now a secondary carer for their sister. They added that staff helped them to get jobs and with their career prospects in general.

A care leaver who has a foster care background, but has spoken to others with experience of residential care, said that they had heard about a lot of positive experiences. For example, residents feeling like they had a family unit and supportive care workers. They also said there should be more recognition of and support for residential care workers.

Two care experienced young people said their longest placements, in comparison to foster care, were/are in residential care. One said in that residential care they have time with individual staff every Saturday over a meal and they feel like they can speak to them about anything because they are non-judgemental and understanding. They also said that support and motivation was given to them regarding education and some problems they had with the law.

Closing remarks from the Chair

The Chair thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and offered to put people in contact with Martin Narey, if they wanted to feed in their views.

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

1. Should Staying Put be extended to residential care? The majority voted yes, with two votes for no.
2. How many people know how to contact the Office of the Children's Commissioner?
Approximately 80% voted no.