



## **Summary of the key themes discussed at the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers**

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014

5.30pm – 7.30pm

Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

- Chair: Craig Whittaker MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
- Panel: Peter McNamara, Virtual School Headteacher, Salford City Council  
Joanne Lee, Care-experienced young person  
Carolle Allman, Student Welfare Officer and designated member of staff for care leavers, MidKent College  
Arron Pile, Student & Graduate Diversity Officer, University of Salford
- Present: The Earl of Listowel, Vice Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers  
Dr Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England  
Steve McCabe MP, Shadow Minister for Education  
Fiona Bruce MP, Congleton  
Bill Esterson MP, Sefton Central & Vice Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers  
Mike Thornton MP, Eastleigh
- Apologies: Mark Belsham
- Topic: 'Aspiration in education: how can we ensure children in care and care leavers are ambitious and are supported to go on to further and higher education?'

### **1. Introduction from the Chair**

120 children, young people, professionals and carers attended the meeting.

Craig Whittaker MP started the meeting by welcoming those present. Before introducing the panel, he highlighted the retirement at the end of March 2014 of Dr Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England. Craig said Chloe Cockett had sent Roger a letter on behalf of the APPG recognising his work.

Additionally Chloe and he had met the Minister to discuss the progress of the Entitlements Inquiry. He highlighted that the new DfE website was about to go live and all the entitlements would now be in one place. For a fuller update see The Who Cares? Trust's [website](#).

### **2. Panel comments**

Craig Whittaker MP asked the panel members to give a brief comment on the topic for discussion.



### **3. Discussion**

The floor was then opened to questions.

#### **Key themes:**

##### **i. Attitudes, stigma and low expectations**

The main issue raised at the meeting was that professionals often have low expectations of children in care and care leavers and as a result do not actively encourage young people to aim high. This in turn can have a negative impact on the confidence of young people and can reinforce the stigma attached to the care system. Joanne Lee said it is important to encourage young people to aim high and to reduce the stigma around care. Arron Pile said young people need an environment that values education and positive role models.

One care leaver said he started university late as he was not encouraged to apply at school. A child in care said it had taken three years for teachers to believe in him. He said his history teacher said he would get an F grade - he managed 7 A\*s. He asked why these attitudes existed. Peter McNamara said these attitudes were distressing. He said attainment and ability can often get confused in schools with more emphasis on the former. This rigid structure means teachers can often have low expectations of their pupils. Additionally he said many teachers have never heard the term 'looked after child' and many do not know about attachment and trauma issues. He said these topics should be covered in initial teacher training, noting the importance of driving a professional development programme which educates the professional work force about the care system. Joanne Lee said school is a tool for stability and agreed that educating the workforce was vital. She said it was important to celebrate success and to share evidence of best practice to help break down stigma.

One young person said they felt judged for being in care and wanted to know how to get rid of this stigma. Joanne agreed and said there was a perception of failure especially towards young people who come into care later. Dr Maggie Atkinson said it was outrageous that some professionals believe that life experiences make people who they are. She said they shape who you are but your dreams are your dreams and we should support young people to follow those dreams. Maggie said it was important to challenge those who have low expectations of children in care and that it was important for children to be supported by teachers from a very young age.

It was noted that teachers are not the only professionals who often have low expectations of children in care. Mark Winterburn, Centre for Social Justice, said he was concerned leaving care teams do not encourage care leavers to apply to Russell Group universities after one professional told him 'That's not the type of university our kids go to'. An advocate at Waltham Forest Council said lower aspirations are an issue and these attitudes come about largely because children in care lack stability go through negative experiences and often have



financial problems. One professional said foster carers often do not have high expectations and he felt that more intensive training was needed.

A young person asked what could be done to prevent bullying in schools? Joanne Lee said this should be built into the PSHE curriculum.

There was a discussion on careers advice and the need to improve the services available. Arron Pile said he knew of a care leaver who was told by a career's advisor: 'People like you don't go to uni'. Carolle Allman said financial pressures on school budgets were phenomenal and this has a knock on effect on the careers advice offered.

## **ii. Financial concerns**

There was a discussion on the financial implications of going to university. A care leaver said she had to make a choice between going to university and having accommodation as she could not afford to have both. A professional from Buckinghamshire University said care leavers can wait months to get to the top of the housing list and are terrified that if they go to university they will lose their place. He said care leavers should be placed at the top of the queue as a reward for going to university. Another care leaver said he did not have enough financial support. He said 'there is no support after 21 unless you go into higher education and if you go to university, where do you stay in the summer?'

A care leaver said he had come to the UK in 2004 and had been in care since he was 11 years old. When he tried to apply for university he was told he was an international student and was not entitled to a student loan. He is unable to get support from his local authority. Arron Pile said the University of Salford offers fee waivers for young people in this position. Peter McNamara said all universities should offer these waivers.

Arron Pile said there are often misconceptions about the financial support available for higher education, noting that students do not pay back their loan until they are earning at least £21,000. He said another issue is the level of support young people receive from their local authority varies from council to council and it can be a postcode lottery. Additionally young people are often unaware of what they are entitled to and this can have an impact on their desire to go into higher education.

## **iii. What support is available?**

A number of questions were raised about the type of support care leavers would be entitled to if they decided to go into higher or further education. Confusion and a lack of knowledge about the availability of support was evident.

A young person asked what sort of support he could get as someone with additional learning needs. Carolle Allman said that colleges have specific departments and often offer tailored support. Arron Pile said universities offer student support plans and students are able to have an educational psychologist report if they wish. He noted that 50% of students with learning difficulties do not know they do so when they first enter university. He also pointed to care leaver coordinators, who can help signpost young people to the right support



and said that The Who Cares? Trust's [H.E. Handbook for Care Leavers](#) is a useful tool for care leavers who are thinking about applying to university and want to know more about the support university's offer. Natasha Finlayson, Chief Executive of The Who Cares? Trust, said every university has something to offer care leavers. She said a condition of increasing tuition fees was that universities have to actively encourage and support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. She highlighted the importance of ticking the 'in care' box on the UCAS form when applying to university.

One young person asked if they were able to re-do GCSEs. Carolle Allman said that many colleges allow GCSE re-takes.

An advocate asked if pupil premium plus was allocated on a yearly basis per pupil or a one off per school. Peter McNamara said the money was allocated on a yearly basis and was needs driven.

#### **iv. Alternative routes**

A professional said young people are under pressure to go to university when they may not feel ready to go. Another said there is a danger of leaving care services seeing Higher Education as an end in itself and pushing young people to university when they are not necessarily ready. Joanne Lee agreed and said that it is important that young people are supported to choose alternative routes. Peter McNamara said the local authorities had more work to do in providing apprenticeships and suggested introducing a system of positive discrimination. Carolle Allman said that traineeships would offer young people a route into apprenticeships. One professional noted that Ealing were already following a policy of positive discrimination for apprenticeships. One young person said that care leavers needed to be supported up to the age of 25 even if they do not go into higher education.

#### **4. Closing remarks from the Chair**

Craig Whittaker MP thanked everyone for coming and gave out prizes to the youngest person in the room and the person who had travelled the farthest.