

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

Wednesday 4th July 2018

6.00pm – 7.30pm

Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

Chair: Steve McCabe MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Panel: Professor Judy Sebba, the Rees Centre; Sally Kelly, Royal Borough of Greenwich Virtual School Head and Chair of NAVSH; Suzannah Torry, teacher and foster carer.

Topic: How can we make schools a good place to learn for children in care?

Welcome

The Chair welcomed speakers and attendees, and the panel introduced themselves. Suzannah Torry is a teacher and foster carer. Sally Kelly has been a teacher for several years and the Virtual Head in Greenwich. Judy Sebba of the Rees Centre specialises in fostering and education.

Suzannah Torry

Suzannah spoke about her experiences as both a teacher and a foster carer, roles that she feels complement each other.

Not all children in care require additional educational support, but the SEND bracket is used to cover needs that affect a child's ability to learn, which certainly covers children in care, who can struggle to fully engage in school life due to overlooked emotional needs. Pupil premium funding is often used up by funding extra-curricular activities, which are important, but there is also a need for 1-1 support.

Learning may not be a priority for all students, but school is a constant in their life and provides a consistent base of security. They can socialise with friends and see the same teachers every day. Schools try to meet these needs. As a carer, she has seen pupils moved between schools too often and too quickly.

Attachment must be built into the grassroots of teacher training. Schools must be able to keep a key worker in place for children in care. Secondary schools need to keep communication in between the different teachers that see a child. School changes for children in care should be a rarity and not the norm. Key points where support will be needed. By setting limits of funding we set limits on support.

As a foster carer, she has never received training on working with her foster children's schools and building relationships, although as a teacher she knows how important that is. Attending PEP meetings can be challenging, as they are rushed and jargon filled, and she has struggled to keep up with them even with her expertise as a teacher.

Communication between social work teams, foster carers and teachers is crucial in order to know what is going on in a child's life and plan accordingly. For example, if they have a contact meeting coming up, it is helpful for teachers to be aware so that a pupil can be discreetly excused from lessons or given a quiet space.

Sally Kelly

Sally about her experience of being a Virtual School Head, something that she is finding people are more aware of in recent years. She works with schools to support children in care and to try and prevent issues such as exclusion and support teachers to be better able to recognise and support their students' needs.

Schools can range greatly in their engagement with the virtual school and their understanding of current theories such as attachment theory. Some teachers are less aware of issues around adverse childhood experiences and how it can impact a student's behaviour.

The key factors that can make a difference include:

- Moral leadership. It's crucial for headteachers and governors to care about these issues and work in a child centred way.
- Inclusion. These children are part of our community, so how can we help them?
- Attachment friendly schools. This training should be statutory for school staff, like safeguarding. It should work in conjunction with mental health guidance and the SEND code of practice.
- Relationship-focused. Relationship policies are more effective than behaviour policies. Children are punished for lacking skills in some areas like behaviour, rather than being supported to learn how to do that the way that we do with school subjects.
- Evidence based. What works? Are we using pupil premiums well?

Everyone in that community must have the highest possible aspirations. If this good enough for your child? If it isn't, then it's not good enough for these children. It takes a village to raise a child, never truer than with children in care. Raise these children as you would your own.

Judy Sebba

Judy has done a great deal of research around looked after children and education. In 2013's GCSE population, 2.1% were in need but not in care, 0.2% were in short term care, and a little over 1% were looked after long term. All of these numbers are increasing. Among those groups, children in long term care did the best academically – care is a protective factor in education, and foster carers being aspirational for the children they look after is particularly important.

Research also shows that children who took their GCSEs after having moved school within the last two years dropped six GCSE grades. Moving school has a huge impact. Young people don't want to change school when they change placement, even if it means a long journey. They already have a relationship with adults and with peers there.

Schools that do well for all children do well for these children, but there are still some children in care who attend poor schools, and many children in need. Schools have a big impact on their outcomes, particularly for these children. These children do better in mainstream schools than in other settings. We don't collect national data on specific programmes, but if we collected some data on individual programmes we could find out more about what's working.

Interviews revealed three effective strategies in the eyes of young people.

- I need to know that I matter to others before I can matter to myself.

- I need a significant adult in school, doesn't have to be a teacher.
- I need a safe space in school where I can go, to calm down and step away from their peers.

Emotion coaching can be valuable, to help young people to understand their own behaviour.

With stretched resources, it can be about doing things differently rather than doing things more. Currently, 120 schools have involved in attachment awareness programmes across 22 LAs. Training on attachment is not the norm, either during teacher training or for whole school training.

The Chair commented that he was struck by how much of an impact the aspirations of the carer and social workers can have.

Discussion

UASC

- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can be a large part of the looked after children population in some parts of the country. There is currently a pilot programme taking place to look at how to specifically support this group, which NAVSH is supporting.

Behaviour Management

- Is treating children in care differently setting a bad example, making bad behaviour acceptable? Sally responds that shouting and shaming children doesn't help them to learn – their behaviour should have consequences, but that doesn't necessarily mean punishment. These consequences should help the children to learn and move on from that incident. Suzannah says that improving communication can help prevent bad behaviour, by knowing the current circumstances of a child's life and planning accordingly.
- Children don't want to be treated differently just because they are in care, but staff should be supported to understand history and meaning of behaviour in order to respond appropriately.

Mental Health Support

- The Earl of Listowel would like to see a supervision model applied more often to teachers as it is to social workers – to make sure teachers are adequately supported and can benefit from clinical professionals, particularly given CAMHS' lack of resources.

Training

- If schools are being trained on care and attachment, they could learn a great deal by hearing from young people themselves and inviting care leavers in to help deliver training. We don't hear from young people enough. PGCE training in Oxford involves a care leaver delivering training around supporting children in care, before revealing their own care experience at the end. Step Up to Social Work has successfully applied this model.
- Virtual Schools can offer this kinds of events, but often only attended by headteachers and the Designated Teacher, so need for more whole school buy in and attendance.

Young People's Experiences

- Some children in care don't want people to know that about them – important to find a balance between respecting their privacy and letting key teachers know in order to be able to provide support and to respond to central targets for different students without publicising this information, for example students being called out of class because their social worker has arrived.
- There is stigma to tackle regarding care, which is partly why some children in care don't want people to know. Can PSHE include content about care in order to break down stigma? It should always be a personal choice whether or not to disclose, but children should be supported to talk publicly about it if they would like to.
- The adults in children in care's lives aren't always ambitious for them. How can we support children to achieve and have high aspirations for themselves?

Virtual Schools

- Virtual Schools have a duty to properly allocate Pupil Premium Plus money to make sure it impacts their outcomes and improves their targets. Some money is kept centrally, some is given to schools.
- In Lewisham there's a CAMHS inreach team, with educational psychologists to support virtual school staff and support teachers. The Virtual School can pool money to provide that kind of service.

Raising Aspirations

- Parents often start talking to their children about university when they're very young – doesn't happen in the same way with children in care. Some Widening Participation programmes have been reduced, for example in Cambridge.
- Teachers need to understand that children in care's grades can suffer due to disruption rather than lack of ability. The pupil premium should be utilised to help them achieve their potential.
- Recent research by Neil Harrison shows that care leavers are likely to access university later in a way not reflected in official statistics.
- Care leavers in attendance shared individual stories of successes and failures, highlighting the key role that professionals played in their lives, either supporting them and believing in them, or lacking in support when things went wrong.
- Teachers need to tell children what they are good at.
- Funding cuts means limited courses and so limiting students pursuing what they're good at, having to change schools because of lack of course offers.

It was noted that young people should have more time to contribute at these events.

Closing remarks

The Chair thanked everyone for coming.

Next meeting: October 24th