

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

Wednesday 1st May 2019
6.00pm – 7.30pm
Committee Room 9, House of Commons, Westminster

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

Speakers: Alan Culley, Senior Advocate at NYAS; Trey, a care leaver and member of Become's advisory group; Simone and Russell, both care leavers from Islington.

Topic: What makes a great Personal Adviser?

The meeting opened with a brief announcement from a colleague at the office of the Children's Commissioner who noted an ongoing project to explore access to advocacy services for children in care. The office of the Children's Commissioner have: issued a statutory data request to all local authorities to gather information on the advocacy services they provide and how much money is spent on these services; undertaken a consultation with children and young people to understand their experiences; and will release a report (expected at the end of May) which makes recommendations to the government on how to improve access to and quality of advocacy. In addition, the office intends on publishing an additional report as part of the Stability Index project in mid-late July which looks at the number of children experiencing changes of placement, school and social worker over the previous 12 months as well as longer time periods.

Speakers: The Chair introduced each panel member and asked them to speak for five minutes on the question 'What makes a great Personal Adviser?'.

Alan Culley

Alan noted the vast changes which have occurred since the introduction of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 – there used to be no leaving care teams and very limited support available for young people leaving the care system.

Alan reflected on some of the issues facing care leavers which are commonly heard through NYAS' advocacy services:

- Young people may not know who their Personal Adviser (PA) is or what they should be doing.
- There is limited understanding about what a Pathway Plan is, and young people aren't often given a copy nor is it regularly updated.
- Housing issues and evictions are common – PAs need better support around understanding and navigating housing law.
- Procurement systems within local authorities mean young care leavers are often forced to spend more money than necessary on washing machines and other household items with their setting up home allowance.
- Appropriate guidance isn't always provided on going to university or accessing other educational courses.
- The transition to adult services is often a turbulent and disjointed experience.
- Forward planning doesn't always take place – in one circumstance a PA was only appointed for a young person three weeks before their 18th birthday.

In addition, Alan offered some thoughts on what qualities makes a good PA:

- Consistency and reliability – someone who will turn up when they say they will and returns calls.
- Stability – someone who remains in the role for an extended period of time.

- Rounded knowledge – a “jack of all trades” with a holistic approach to support.
- Understanding and treating care leavers as (young) adults, not children.
- Supported by the local authority and given power to make delegated decisions (e.g. spending money).

Trey

Trey spoke from his own experiences and suggested that lots of PAs don't have a good understanding of the issues which young people leaving care are facing. He was given no advice or support when it came to paying bills, including council tax, and wasn't provided with information about things which later emerged to be important, such as building a positive credit score.

However, he also highlighted that you can't always blame individuals – the local authority has a responsibility to train, support and help them to do their jobs properly.

It was suggested that everyone has a different definition of what a PA should do, which is where some problems can emerge.

Ultimately, Trey argued that the focus should be on developing relationships above all. “All young people want is someone who will support them and love them, someone who will help them”. Too often the focus is on an individual's finances and following a ‘checklist’ of questions – instead PAs should take time to build and strengthen the relationship they have with each young person they support. “It shouldn't be just a job – it needs someone who really wants to make a change to someone's life”.

Simone

Simone spoke about her positive experiences with her PA who helped her through a number of different situations, including managing her finances and going to university. Simone and her PA developed a strong bond, a connection right at the beginning of their relationship. “She was a shoulder to cry on, she was like an older auntie”. Her PA knew her well enough to know when she was happy or upset depending on the tone of her voice.

Through the support of her PA, Simone has been able to develop her confidence and now feels able to contribute to events such as the APPG, and recently spoke at a corporate parenting board meeting.

Russell

Russell offered three messages to all PAs:

- Listen: PAs need to listen closely to what a young person has to say, and then act as a result.
- Be present: Despite a number of different moves, Russell knew that there was always someone he could call if he needed.
- Believe in me: Russell urged PAs to believe in what young people can actually achieve and in their accomplishments. “I don't want to hear ‘are you sure that's not too much for you?’ – I want to hear ‘okay, cool, here's what you need to do.’”

Russell spoke about his own positive relationship with his PA, who doesn't try to “interpret his feelings like a therapist”, but actually listens to what he has to say. His PA demonstrates an understanding of how difficult some situations can be, and puts all of their energy and emotion into the job.

Comments and questions

The Chair then welcomed comments and questions from attendees and via text or Twitter.

One young person spoke of gratitude for their PA who had helped them secure an apprenticeship role within a children's services team.

A Participation Officer spoke about the importance of being a good role model. Getting a good PA is seen to be a bit of a lottery – some have a positive outlook and a can-do attitude, whereas others are bogged down by paperwork. It's important to do things *with* young people, not just *for* them and empower them into adult.

A representative from a fostering provider raised the issue of missing savings for young people who have changed placement a number of times. Often, they aren't being supported by their PA or others to find and claim this money.

Trey noted that “when you’re young, you can see through people” – whether people like their job really impacts on their performance as a PA. Particularly, energy and enthusiasm during the first meeting can make a big impact.

The Chair asked the speakers and the audience how we get PAs to best listen to the young people they support. Russell spoke about how his first PA didn’t really listen to him, and so he instead used other local authority services and spoke with Participation staff. Simone noted the power of the email and knowing how and who to complain to within the local authority.

The Earl of Listowel noted the importance of considering not just the worker, but what’s behind the worker. The emotional demands on being a PA can be quite challenging, and they need excellent support and training to ensure their contribution is positive. On the topic of missing savings, it was suggested that PAs need additional guidance to help sort out this issue. A quick poll within the room suggested many care leavers had not gained access to their savings as they should have done when they turned 18.

A young person highlighted Total Respect training delivered by care leavers themselves, which had received really good feedback from social workers and PAs in their local authority.

Another member of Participation staff raised the issue of rising caseloads. “The only way you know someone cares for you is time, and PAs are struggling to give up the time they need”. Instead, they are constantly ‘fire-fighting’ and unable to deliver the quality work they would like to. Putting in time allows the young person to know you as a person and not just a worker, which makes tasks including pathway planning much more effective.

Matching was also highlighted as a key issue – sometimes young people can be paired with someone they won’t work well with. It’s important to consider who might work best with each young person. Trey said it’s important to have someone who “reflects” the young person and motivate them.

However, Russell noted that some relationships between PAs and young people can work very well despite obvious differences between them. He spoke of a mentor he had who was much older and came from a very different background, but despite Russell’s initial judgement, they developed a very strong relationship and shared different cultural experiences which each other.

3 questions submitted via text were then read out to attendees:

- One PA said their current caseload was 27. Should there be a capped caseload?
- Should there be specific training for PAs? What should it look like?

- At what age should someone first meet and begin the relationship with their PA? 18 is often too late.

Simone noted she'd heard 18-20 mentioned as a maximum caseload elsewhere and emphasised the importance of good matching. It is important that every PA receives training which includes knowledge about different education and training options including higher education, college and apprenticeships.

Alan said 27 is too high a caseload as this prevents a PA fulfilling the regulations which suggest regular visits every two months, and suggested 15 as a maximum.

Trey emphasised that the role of the PA includes educating a young person about what's going to happen in their future – too much is simply about money and not enough is about how to write a CV, how to search and apply for jobs etc. PAs can take some of the mental load about navigating finances away from them. Young people living with their birth parents aren't going to be paying council tax at age 16 or 17.

An attending young person noted that Participation staff had offered support which acted to reduce the workload of PAs, such as lessons in financial management.

Another young person noted that the last time they had seen their PA was in November, and that the experience of pathway planning felt like talking to a robot. They only recently realised just how much help and support they were missing out on.

Another attending young person highlighted the additional difficulties experienced by those seeking asylum and who often might struggle with English. Having a great PA is particularly important for those who alone. The Earl of Listowel agreed and argued that asylum seekers need strong legal advice as soon as they come into the country to best support them.

A young person asked – what can I do when my PA simply doesn't listen and I don't feel like I'm being heard? It was suggested that you often have to be in crisis in order to get support, and even when you've reached that point, support isn't delivered properly. Another young person agreed and spoke of difficulty getting their PA to speak with their foster carers. Alan suggested making use of advocacy services and highlighted the significance of the Pathway Plan as a legally binding document. Russell spoke about making as much noise as possible and appealing to others within the local authority.

A Personal Adviser in the audience noted that they struggle to provide what young people want, particularly around housing, and finds it difficult to show that they're listening when they're not able to action everything. They do care and do listen, but often simply don't have the resources to deliver what they want. How can PAs make young people feel they are being listened to in these cases?

Alan suggested that it's a case of being honest and not promising anything which is unlikely to happen. Russell highlighted other ways that young people can have their voices heard, such as through care leaver councils or similar. PAs can support young people to bring their concerns collectively to the local authority.

A young person in the audience spoke of how they live quite far away from their PA – the localised nature of the system is tough if you move further away, and the quality of care is so dependent on each local authority. They suggested that there needs to be more centralised efforts to deliver a better and more equal leaving care service across the country. Many in the room agreed.

A member of local authority staff noted that one visit every two months simply isn't enough, and that young people need more support at a crucial time in their lives. It doesn't give room for people to change their minds.

A colleague from NYAS noted that what costs money is time, and we need to demonstrate the case for why better PA support is worth the money – for example in terms of improved employment outcomes. We need to explain it in these terms in order to create change.

A young person added that a good PA is someone who is proud of their young people, and someone who knows what's also available outside of their borough.

The Chair asked the panel members for their final closing thoughts:

- Trey noted that it's important to take findings and thoughts from discussions such as these to the senior leaders in local authorities and elsewhere. He said that young people should also be proud of their PAs – both enjoy seeing each other succeed.
- Alan echoed that some PAs do remarkable work, and that generally his experience suggests young people are more positive with PAs than social workers. However, PAs would benefit from additional decision-making autonomy, and local authorities should support them with this.
- Simone reminded every young person that they have a voice, and encouraged them to use it.
- Russell highlighted just how different people's experiences could be, and argued that we must do better to ensure a more equal service. He asked the PAs in the room – how do you feel inside when you hear your young person is doing well? They responded with 'proud'. "It makes you feel like a parent."

Closing remarks

The Chair thanked everyone for coming and offered a special thanks to Natasha Finlayson, the outgoing Chief Executive of Become who has led the charity (which acts as secretariat for the APPG) for 11 years.

Next meeting: Wednesday 26th June 2019