



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

Wednesday 5th February 2014
5pm - 7pm
Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

- Chair: Craig Whittaker MP, Chair
- Panel: Trevor Akerman, Head of Leaving Care Services, London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames
Sheila Simpson, Visiting lecturer, Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and Manager of the Leaving Care Service, Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea
Kevani Kanda, care-experienced young person
Martin Hazlehurst, National Manager, Catch 22 NCAS
- Present: Dr Maggie Atkinson, Children's Commissioner for England
Steve McCabe MP, Shadow Minister for Education
- Apologies: Lord Listowel, Vice Chair
- Topic: The role of the personal advisor – how can we ensure that young people leaving care are well supported?

1. Introduction from the Chair

Eighty nine 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 commended Roger's invaluable work to uphold the rights of children in care over the past 12 years and highlighted the positive change that had come about as a result of his work during that time. He requested that Chloe Cockett, on behalf of the APPG, send Roger a letter recognising his work.

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. Status and retention

One issue raised at the meeting was that personal advisors' salaries are often too low and some professionals are not recognised for the important work they do. These factors, amongst others, can result in low levels of retention in the profession.

Martin Hazlehurst commented on the status of personal advisors, noting that personal advisors are paid less than social workers despite the importance of the role. He said that the low salary means that there is less incentive for workers to go into this profession as a career. He said if you want an increase in salary you have to move away from the sector as management jobs do not come around very often.

A personal advisor in the audience said that her pay had recently increased from £18k to £22k. Kyle, a care leaver, said that often personal advisors were not being recognised for the good work they did and sometimes underperforming personal advisors were not facing any consequences. Trevor Akerman noted the importance of regular supervision and appraisals for personal advisors to ensure good work is recognised. Sheila Simpson added there should be rewards for good work and fair pay.

Trevor Akerman said there are issues around low retention rates and this has a negative impact on young people. He said it is important that personal advisors are clear about what the job entails before accepting the role. He personally meets prospective employees after their interview to ensure they understand what is expected of the role and to ensure they are right for the job.

One care-experienced professional said it was best practice for young people to have one social worker/personal advisor over a long period of time but he said in social work it is essential to get experience in other teams if you want to progress professionally. He said this is a culture which exists in local authorities which needs to change and is contributing to low retention in the sector.

ii. Relationship building, communication and involving young people in decision making

There was a discussion about the importance of personal advisors having and sustaining good relationships with the young people they work with.

One young person said that 'stability is key' and that more work needs to be done to ensure personal advisors stay in the job. Care leaver Kevani said she had over ten social workers but was lucky to have only one personal advisor. She said some of her social workers only lasted a week. She suggested social workers and personal advisors have a minimum of a six months or a year notice period so workers can gradually be introduced to young people as 'young people need stability that is constant'.

Sheila Simpson said that the personal advisor's role is to help young people develop the skills they need for building relationships and young people will never stop needing support. One young person asked 'how can social workers



and personal advisors have a chance to help young people who have given up with services?’ Sheila Simpson said reliability was important and a professional should not reject a young person even if that young person rejects them.

Martin Hazlehurst and Trevor Akerman agreed that children and young people had a role to play in restructuring services so relationships can be sustained and pointed to the importance of children in care councils linking up with their local authorities.

There was a discussion about the age at which a young person should get a personal advisor. One personal advisor said the relationship between a young person and a personal advisor needed to start earlier. Kayley, a young person, said personal advisors should be offered to young people at any age. Rachel Knowles (Just for Kids Law) highlighted that the law stipulates that young people should have a personal advisor from the age of 16.

Kevani stressed the importance of building a relationship with a personal advisor as she said it helps young people build relationships with their peers. Additionally Chris Hoyle (A National Voice) said that the earlier personal advisors engage with young people the better. It was noted that personal advisors at Richmond-upon-Thames and Kensington and Chelsea are introduced to young people at the age of 16 and the final change occurs between the ages of 16 and 18, at a time that suits the individual.

Craig Whittaker MP asked attendees to respond to two questions using their ticks and crosses:

1. Who thinks they should have one personal advisor the whole way through?
2. Should you get a personal advisor at the age of 16 instead of 18?

The room overwhelmingly supported the idea of having only one personal advisor and for young people to get a personal advisor at the age of 16.

Only two attendees responded ‘no’ to question one and only two attendees responded ‘no’ to question two.

iii. High caseloads

One care-experienced professional said social workers and personal advisors do not have enough time to devote to young people they work with because of high caseloads. Trevor Akerman said the issue of high caseloads was frequently discussed at the Leaving Care Manager’s Group and local authorities were reporting caseloads ranging from 15 up to 35.

He said it was important for the issue of caseloads to be taken up by the government and the Department for Education. Sheila Simpson said Kensington and Chelsea had managed to get their caseloads down to 15. Martin Hazlehurst pointed to an NCAS survey which showed that the lowest caseloads were 20 and the highest up to 30. He said caseloads are a big issue that needs to be addressed.



iv. Training

There was a discussion on the importance of accreditation and qualifications for personal advisors. One personal advisor said she thought more training was required and that a formal qualification should be in place. Another professional said it is important to support workers so they have the skills knowledge and structures in place to stay in the profession. Trevor Akerman said there need to be clear policies in place so personal advisors are aware what young people are entitled to. Martin Hazlehurst agreed and said access to information was important. Kevani added that all personal advisors need to have skills and training but emphasised the need for training on empathy and communication, not just a formal qualification in the form of a degree.

Actions

One young person asked 'what is the Chair taking away from this APPG, and what is he going to do to show he has listened?'

Craig Whittaker said he got a lot out of the APPG. He was currently fighting for those in residential care to be able to stay put until the age of 21 and had led a debate in parliament. He also mentioned an innovation fund which had become available where charities can apply for funding to run pilot schemes. He said Edward Timpson MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (children and families), would see a copy of the minutes. He would also be following up with the Minister about the recommendations which came out of the Entitlements Inquiry.

4. Closing remarks from the Chair

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