

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

Wednesday 9th December 2015
5.00pm – 7.00pm
Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House

Chair: Bill Esterson MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Panel: Ann Gross, Director, Special Needs, Children in Care and Adoption, DfE
Ged Crowther, Head of Service (Children in Care), Trafford Council
Martin Kelly, Head of Children and Young People's Resources, North Yorkshire County Council
Rimha Mihra, care experienced young person

Present: Sharon Hodgson MP, Shadow Children's Minister
Baroness Young of Hornsey OBE
David Lammy MP

Apologies: Lord Listowel, Vice-Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
Edward Timpson MP, Minister for Children and Families
Emma Lewell-Buck MP
Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top

Topic: **'What are the benefits of Staying Put? How can we ensure all young people benefit, even if they cannot or do not want to stay put?'**

Introduction from the Chair

Bill Esterson MP welcomed the 78 children, young people and professionals attending the meeting. He briefly explained the context of Staying Put. Bill said Staying Put began as a pilot in 11 local authorities in July 2008. It was targeted at young people who had established relationships with their foster carers, and gave them the chance to stay living with their carers until they turned 21. He said on 13th May 2014, a new duty came into force, requiring local authorities in England to facilitate, monitor and support staying put arrangements for young people in foster care, until they reach the age of 21.

Panel comments

- **Ann Gross** said she was attending the meeting on behalf of Edward Timpson who sent his apologies. Ann said, Edward had shown strong commitment to children in care, leading the first cross-departmental care leavers strategy in 2013, introducing a new Ofsted inspection framework, as well as implementing Staying Put. Ann said the Staying Put arrangements are a very positive option for young people in terms of stability and continuity. She said that just under 50% of young people had taken up the offer to Stay Put at the age of 18, but that there was variability in terms of uptake across the country. She said ministers were committed to a new strategy for care leavers next year and would consult further in the New Year involving young people in the conversations. She said she was here to learn.

- **Ged Crowther** said Trafford had introduced a Staying Put type of initiative a number of years ago and the national implementation of Staying Put had been welcomed. Ged said at Trafford, they wanted to drive forward more and consider an extension into residential care and a need to explore whether or not there was an age limit for young people staying put. He said one of the difficulties Trafford experienced was engaging with independent fostering providers.
- **Rimha Mihra** said she'd been in care since she was four years old and had moved 20 times. She said Staying Put had helped her greatly. Rimha said she wasn't originally able to stay put with her foster carer so was moved to another placement. As a result she failed her A levels and had no support. This year, she said, because of Staying Put she was able to get As and is at uni studying international politics. By contrast she said her sister was not able to access Staying Put arrangements and became homeless. Rimha said Staying Put helped her emotionally and academically.
- **Martin Kelly** said North Yorkshire County Council started Staying Put arrangements in 2008 and since then 99 children have 'stayed put'. Ten young people stayed in foster care beyond 21. He said there is the need to think about it beyond 21 years of age. Martin highlighted his background working in residential care and said there were many arguments in favour and against extending staying put to residential care. He spoke about '[No Wrong Door](#)' which is a project which provides young people with the stability, skills and support they need to successfully manage their transition to adulthood through innovative ways. He explained that part of the project involves key workers supporting young people throughout their placement journey up to the age of 25.

Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)

Key themes:

Places for foster children and the recruitment of foster carers

One of the issues raised at the meeting was whether or not the implementation of Staying Put reduces the number of foster care places for other children. Ged said this was a challenge, however often foster carers are able to accommodate another child. He said the feedback from foster carers was that they supported Staying Put. He said Staying Put could be used as leverage for better recruitment as often foster carers did not want children to leave at 18. He said the solution to getting more foster carers was better recruitment. Ged said there were lots of different strategies including ensuring foster carers are treated as professionals, are treated fairly, respected and supported as well as being paid well. Martin said part of North Yorkshire's recruitment strategy was ongoing support for foster carers.

A lack of financial support for former foster carers and local authority disparities

Natasha Finlayson, Chief Executive at The Who Cares? Trust said former foster carers do not get paid the same as foster carers and there are local variations. Natasha asked if there should be a national minimum allowance. Additionally, she said the Trust had heard that some local authorities have been putting conditions on Staying Put arrangements despite the law saying the only condition should be that both the foster carer and the young person agree to the arrangement. Martin agreed, saying that there should be a minimum rate. He said the challenge was that independent fostering agencies were taking part of the payment. Ged agreed. Ann said the foster care labour market is variable and said the Department for Education (DfE) expects local authorities to comply with statutory guidance. She said the DfE would look into this issue.

A professional said the organisation she works for has supported Staying Put for years and only charges £100 to monitor each placement. She said this was not excessive money. Another professional from an independent fostering agency provider agreed but said housing benefit varies greatly across the country so foster carers pay varies.

A young person said he was asked to give money to his former foster carer from benefits. He said there needs to be a minimum wage for foster carers otherwise money becomes an issue and the relationship between young person and foster carer can change. A care leaver said her foster carer couldn't afford to keep her even though she wanted to stay. Another young person said he left care this year after being with his foster carer for 12 years. He said, when he turned 18 his foster carer realised that her pay changed and this caused the relationship to change. He said he wasn't allowed to touch anything in the house as she said she couldn't afford it. When he left, his education suffered and he got kicked out of college. Ged said this was not just about money but agreed that foster carers need suitable remuneration. He said when you come into care you should be able to stay if you want to. A professional said the main issue is the financial restraints that local authorities are facing. One young person suggested talking to big corporations to ask them to pay their taxes. Ann said an additional £44million has been put into the Staying Put policy.

Housing benefit

One of the topics discussed at the meeting was that young people are claiming housing benefit to subsidise pay for former foster carers. One professional said former foster carers are relying on housing benefit for Staying Put to work. She said rather than transferring the money from one pot to another it would make more sense for the money for housing benefit to go directly to pay former foster carers.

One young person spoke of the issues she'd had at the job centre when claiming housing benefit. She said the job centre employee asked why she was unable to live with her parents and wouldn't accept that she was on a full care order. She said it was an open office so everyone was able to hear the conversation. She stressed the importance of staff at the job centre having more training. Anne Longfield said she has heard lots of similar comments from young people. Bill Esterson asked Ann to talk to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) about issues like these. Ann said this was a good point and would take it away. She said she would be talking to the DWP next week and would write to the Chair of the APPG after the meeting.

Residential care

There was a discussion on extending Staying Put to include children in residential care. One young person said he was in residential care and was not allowed to stay after the age of 18 because of the costs. He said he had to leave his course and said 'my education was messed up.' Bill pointed out that there is a strong argument to extend Staying Put to residential care. Another young person said it was wrong to discriminate between foster care and residential care. One professional asked how committed Edward Timpson was to children in residential care. Ann said that the DfE recognises that often young people in residential care benefit from continuity and support. She said Mike Stein's research reflects this view. Ann said she was interested in projects like 'No Wrong Door' and highlighted the importance of a flexible approach. She said there had been a lot of feedback that simply enabling young people to stay in residential care might not be the right option. She pointed to the research which looks at different models of extending Staying Put. She said as part of the DfE's new strategy this was being discussed.

Martin said it is important to find positive alternatives and options for young people so they have a choice. He said, having spent 25 years working for the residential care sector very few young people he worked with wanted to stay in the same home post 18 and wanted other options. He said the DfE were right to look at different options. Bill asked why it had been a slow process. Ann said it was important to gather the evidence on what are the most effective options.

A young person asked why so many young people have to leave care at 18. Anne said lots of children contact the Office of the Children's Commissioner's (OCC) helpline saying leaving care is like being on a cliff edge and stress the difficulties of maintaining relationships. She said this was being looked at as

part of [Martin Narey's Residential Care Review](#). She said she was gathering young people's voices and asked young people to get in touch with the OCC.

Accessing Staying Put, Personal Advisors and support ending too early

One professional said lots of young people have been refused Staying Put arrangements because of their NEET status. A young person said she is 21 years old and not in education or training and has no support at all. Martin said if she was looked after by North Yorkshire County Council she'd get support. He said through the 'No Wrong Door' project young people have support until they are 25. He said his local authority takes an individualised approach, for example housing is being provided for a young person who has a good relationship with his key worker so they can live together. He said young people are given an individual care plan. Ann said this was a good approach. She said that after the age of 21, young people should have support and highlighted that currently young people only keep their personal advisor (PA) if they are in education and training up to 25. She said there was a need to look at the PA role and establish what should change. She said she wants young people to be supported and be able to develop long and stable relationships. One young person said he didn't get a PA until after his 18th birthday and had moved out at that point which was too late. He said his PA hasn't contacted me for two months and hasn't been much use.

A professional said the PA role was not fit for purpose. He suggested looking at the Scandinavian model which he said is much better and relationship based. Ann said the Residential Care Review was looking at other approaches in the international context. A professional said the Fostering Network are running a social pedagogical project with seven local authorities and will share the findings with the APPG.

One young person said it was a good idea that young people only get support when they are in education training or employment as she said it keeps young people focused. Rimha disagreed saying all young people leaving care need support. Ged said he has never met anyone who doesn't aspire to get into education, training or employment and all should get support. There was a vote on the issue (see appendix).

Awareness of Staying Put

A young person said she left care two years ago and didn't know about Staying Put. She said she works part time at the same time as studying and wishes she'd known about this opportunity. She said it is important for social workers to emphasise the benefit of Staying Put. Martin agreed saying it is important for social workers to inform young people about Staying Put. He said now all local authorities have to publish entitlements for care leavers and that Staying Put should be included in this.

Alternatives

There were a discussion on alternative approaches to Staying Put. One young person said Staying Put is based on strong relationships between a foster carer and a young person. He asked what was in place for young people who do not have this. Martin said some young people do not want to stay and it's important to provide alternatives. He said unfortunately independent housing is not always right and young people can often be faced with eviction for failing to pay rent. Ann said local authorities must have individualised responsive approaches which address individual needs to provide support.

Closing remarks from the Chair

The Chair thanked everyone for coming to the meeting.

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

1. Should Staying Put be extended beyond the age of 21? 100% voted yes
2. Who thinks the arrangements for Personal Advisors work well? 10% voted yes
3. Should you get a Personal Advisor if you're not in education or training? 100% yes