

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

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2015  
5.00pm – 7.00pm  
Committee Room 10, Palace of Westminster

Chair: Craig Whittaker MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Panel: Edward Timpson, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families  
Janet Boddy, Professor of Child, Youth and Family Studies, University of Sussex  
Anna Edmundson, Policy and Programmes Manager, Children's Rights Alliance for England  
Harvey Gallagher, Chief Executive, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers  
Melissa Goodman, Independent Reviewing Officer Team Manager, London Borough of Hounslow  
Joanne Lee, care-experienced young person, Sefton Council

Present: The Earl of Listowel (Vice-Chair)  
Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England

Topic: 'Involving children and young people in care planning: what do they need to know to feel empowered to be involved in decision-making?'

### Introduction from the Chair

Craig Whittaker MP welcomed the 95 children, young people and professionals attending the meeting. He announced that this was the last APPG meeting of the parliamentary session.

### Panel comments on the ways children and young people can be empowered to be involved in care planning:

- Melissa Goodman said a care plan is a life plan and it can be overwhelming and intrusive for young people to sit through meetings about every part of their life. She said young people should take the power back and should be at the centre of planning. There are six things young people need to be to enable them to take the power back: be curious; be strong; be brave; know your choices and negotiate; know your rights and entitlements; be present and don't let others make decisions for you.
- Janet Boddy commented on three areas: rights; choice; and time. She said that there is strong evidence in Denmark that strengthening legislative rights can strengthen the system. New legislation was introduced stating that from the age of 12, children had to agree to their care plans. In Denmark in 2001 29% young people said they felt their views were heard, by 2011 this was 80%. Janet said young people need to have a choice, for example when choosing placements and said there needs to be sufficient room in the system to allow time for planning.

- Anna Edmundson said it is essential for children and young people to know about their rights and emphasised a child's right to participation and right to express their views about their lives.
- Joanne said the care system was not as child centred as it should be and young people are not always involved in decisions. She said young people should be asked if they want to chair their own meetings. Joanne emphasised the importance of strong relationships. She said there are often too many tick boxes and the need for local authorities to achieve outcomes but ultimately it's a child's life in their hands. Joanne said it was important to ask young people how they'd like to be communicated with.
- Harvey Gallagher emphasised the importance of young people knowing about their rights and entitlements. He said "you don't know what you don't know". He stressed the importance of young people being able to express their views at an early stage.

### **Summary words from Edward Timpson MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families**

The Minister thanked everyone who had contributed to the All-Party Parliamentary Group over the years. He said the meetings had helped him to understand a lot more about the care system than he could ever have imagined. He stressed the importance of listening to the views of young people early on and said care planning is about young people's lives. The Minister highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people are at the heart of decisions made about them. He said there are lots of laws that make it clear young people know what their entitlements are but children and young people also need someone involved in their care plan who understands who they are, and what they have been through. Local authorities should continue to be inspected to ensure they are doing what they should but ultimately it is about a change in culture. Young people should be included as part of the solution and only by giving them a chance to speak can we learn from our mistakes.

### **Discussion (the floor was opened to questions)**

#### **Key themes:**

##### **A holistic child centred approach**

One of the main themes discussed at the meeting was the importance of taking a holistic child centred approach to care planning. Young people should be involved in all aspects of the care system. A young person from Lancashire said their local authority was currently trialling a young inspectors programme and said this was the best way to get young people's views. He said young people should go to every corporate parenting board. Joanne said Sefton council provided 'mystery shop services' that enabled young people to pinpoint training needs for staff around engaging with young people. One young person said every young person should be able to express what they want at their placement plan meeting.<sup>1</sup> He said he'd participated in the 'Total Respect' project at Haringey which employs young people to interview social workers. One professional said Suffolk Council have care experienced peer reviewers who inspect external social care providers.

One young person asked why young people were not able to attend their own placement plan meetings. Anna pointed to article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stating that participation has no minimum age limit and stressed the

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<sup>1</sup> A placement plan meeting can also be referred to as a panel meeting.

importance of young people being involved in decisions about themselves. Anna said even if you cannot attend a placement plan meeting it is about finding other ways to voice your views such as attending part of the meeting or ensuring there is someone who can represent your views. One young person asked "If a young person does not want an advocate, can they go to a panel meeting?" Melissa said this was a tricky issue and that there is often lots of red tape. She said individuals are treated on a case by case basis.

Janet said there has been a lot of research on social pedagogy and emphasised the importance of looking at the past, present and future of a child's life to understand their needs from their point of view. Melissa agreed and said you also have to think of young people's lives as a whole and ensure they are ready for independence looking at a range of issues, including whether they can change a light bulb and have the support networks they need. Edward Timpson agreed and said this approach should be used at the very start of care planning. He said a lot of children do not come into care until they are older and often professionals miss these important conversations when children first come into care.

### Building trust, relationships and communicating with young people

Joanne highlighted the importance of building strong relationships with professionals. She said she had multiple social workers and when it came to care planning she didn't feel comfortable talking to them about personal issues as she'd never built a strong bond with any of them. Similarly another young person said she didn't feel comfortable talking to someone who was reading her life off a piece of paper. Harvey said gaining trust is essential. Professionals need to show young people that they have the time for them and need to prove they are able to represent their views. Janet said in Denmark young people are entitled to a 'steady contact person' and this person is chosen by the young person themselves from their own network.

One young person said foster carers should be more involved in helping young people into independence. Harvey said some foster carers have good relationships with young people and we should be enabling them to support young people. He said delegated authority had a really important role to play. Rachel Cook said the Office of the Children's Commissioner constantly hears from young people about the importance of relationships and a good advocate. Joanne said Sefton is currently working on a campaign involving foster carers in supporting young people. She said they are in a unique position to know lots about young people.

Joanne said communication between professionals isn't always as it should be. She said it is really important to ask young people how they would like to be communicated with. A foster care support worker asked if local authorities had considered using a different format for the care plan. Janet said we should experiment with different methods of capturing information for example the use of technology such as videos or music. Harvey agreed and said the use of technology would also enable all information to be kept in one place. Anna said young people need to have access to information in a variety of forms and suggested the use of apps, for example 'Mind Of My Own.'

### Knowledge and access to rights and entitlements

Anna said children and young people need to know about their rights. Similarly Harvey said "you don't know what you don't know". One professional said lots of young people do not know what an advocate is and questioned the independence of advocates. There was a discussion about the independence of advocates. Joanne said that she thought that it wasn't the independence that mattered, but whether the young person trusted the advocate to fight for them.

One young person said the complaints process is very complicated and there is not a separate system for children in care as you have to go through social services' general process. He said it need to be made a lot clearer and simpler. Melissa agreed and said that the role of the IRO is to have the discussions about issues and complaints. Young people should be able to turn to them.

#### Thinking forward:

Marion Russell, chair of the Principal Social Worker Network, said Craig Whittaker had written to her about the Entitlements Inquiry and they will be looking at the recommendations. She said she would work with Chloë Cockett, Policy and Research Advisor, The Who Cares? Trust to look into the following issues raised at the meeting:

1. Complaints processes
2. Young people attending their panel meetings
3. Find out more about peer reviewing

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England agreed to work with Marion on the three issues raised.

#### **Closing remarks from the Chair**

Craig Whittaker MP thanked everyone for coming and awarded prizes to the youngest two people in the room.

#### **Appendix: votes – there were four votes held during the meeting.**

1. Has anyone in the room used an advocacy service recently? 6 out of 35 young people said they had (20%).
2. How many young people do not know about staying put? 3 out of 35 young people said they did not know (10%).
3. Who is in favour of alternative methods of recording care plans? 100% said they were in favour.
4. Are there any peer reviewers in the room? No young people raised their hands.