

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

Wednesday 13th February 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: Jeanette Cossar and young researchers, University of East Anglia. Jacob Sibley and Charlotte Andrew, Three Circles Fostering.

Topic: Supporting LGBT+ children in care

Presentation: [University of East Anglia's SpeakOut project](#)

Dr Jeanette Cossar has led a team of researchers to find out what it's like to grow up as LGBTQ in care. Their research included interviews with 46 young LGBTQ children in care and care leavers and surveying local authorities about their data collection practices. More information can be found on the [SpeakOut project website](#), and young people's experiences have also been turned into [a short film, viewable here](#).

Only 5% of the local authorities surveyed had a specific policy on supporting LGBTQ children in care, although many had a more general LGBTQ young people policy. 25% of respondents were looking into developing something more tailored.

Local authorities do not record information on the sexuality and gender identity of children in care. The most common reason given was that it is not required by central government. Other reasons cited included feeling that this was too intrusive or that young people are still developing and may not be sure of their identity.

Most service managers cited the biggest barriers to better support to be a lack of staff knowledge and confidence surrounding the needs of this group of young people. This potentially leads to problems at both a structural level (lack of policy and guidance) and an individual level (staff only considering the issues reactively).

In working on the SpeakOut project, young people wanted to record their own experiences to improve things for other young people and their carers.

There are cases where coming out as LGBT+ has led to a placement breakdown, or where a young person has been afraid to come out either because of demonstrated prejudice or uncertainty about a foster family's attitudes, e.g. if they are religious. Other issues raised including having to come out many times to many different professionals.

Social workers may be less likely to be overtly prejudiced, but they may show discomfort with the topic or make unhelpful assumptions. In some cases professionals react with concern that the young person's identity is in some way a 'risk' or as a result of abuse.

For some young people, care can be a safe space to explore and express their identity, sometimes in ways that weren't possible with their birth family. This was particularly true when matched with LGBT+ foster carers.

Although being signposting towards services for LGBT+ young people can be helpful, sometimes youth groups aren't fully welcoming to young people with care experience.

LGBT Youth In Care

Jacob Sibley and Charlotte Andrew started this group in Manchester six years ago, after discovering there wasn't anything available in this area. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are still prevalent in society, and this is work that needs doing. From their own practice of running Three Circles Fostering, they wanted to embed support in their own practice and provide resources elsewhere.

Fostering is meant to be a safe environment for all young people, including LGBTQ young people. If it's not safe for them it's not safe for children in general. They are based in Manchester.

They worked with LGBT Foundation and Care Leavers Association to bring together care leavers to talk about their experiences in the care system. Some people had great foster families, others had terrible tales of rejection including very sad stories including homophobic violence in children's homes.

One of the simplest things to do is proactively make information available, which lets young people know that they're safe. Seeing e.g. a leaflet on a fridge lets young people know that they can be themselves and they will be accepted.

In 2014 they brought together care leavers and professionals for a small conference to share experiences. It wasn't on anyone's agenda then and it was hard to bring people together.

When they talk to local authorities they get told that they don't have any LGBT+ children in care. Three Circles gather their own information and run groups across the north west. They try a top down approach that gets children's services leaders on board and then trains carers and professionals. Having that high level support makes it easier to gather data.

They have produced resources which are all available at <https://www.lgbtyouthincare.com/resources>. They worked with Mermaids, The Proud Trust and a trans youth group to develop a toolkit for supporting trans children in care, having found there weren't any existing resources.

They want to share all of their work nationally and establish more regional groups, including supporting LGBT+ youth groups to offer more support for care-experienced young people.

They've made some progress. Children in care today are still scared of coming out, and it isn't nearly good enough yet. The care system needs to protect the most vulnerable children, and we are able to have a particular impact on this family environment than on others.

Audience questions and comments:

“When can we bring in more legislation to ensure more rights, protection and training? When I came out, I didn’t feel comfortable, didn’t feel valued and respected.”

“I have had to justify my own sexuality, explain identity and labels. We need more education for foster carers including respite carers. Mine didn’t have any awareness.”

“I was at training for workforce development for foster carers. Brexit has made people’s opinions more polarised and has increased homophobia. Five years ago, people just swallowed it - weren’t necessarily happy but wouldn’t complain. Now ‘why are we listening to this crap’. Foster carer workforce reflects everyday populace.”

Wendy Dawson, Rees Foundation CEO: Importance of visibility. “Let’s be visible on care day. More than policy, which is just a bit of paper. We can get stuck on labels. We need to be inclusive but not homogenous. It’s about visibility, sharing good practice to inform and influence policy and legislation. You can legislate training but can’t guarantee people aren’t prejudice. Literature being produced needs to be saturated through society. We run a community café, have as many things as possible so that everyone feels welcome.”

“I’m still in care. I have experienced a lot of homophobia in homes. Children are bullied because of their sexuality by other young people.”

“I didn’t come out, I just brought my boyfriend home. What are the local authorities policies about residential homes and dating, bringing partners home?”

“Last year I was in a polyamorous relationship and my social worker really struggled to deal with it. I was in a strict Christian household that wouldn’t have supported any kind of sexual relationships. I’m Christian as well. Not just a conflict between religion and sexuality.”

In Wandsworth, some young people are subject to transphobic harrassment in semi-independent living or residential homes. In one instance, a trans young person was moved into a foster placement with same-sex foster carers, who were much more supportive.

“I’ve come into contact with a lot of professionals. Lots of them are supportive, but there are problems with language used. They may have had training but still aren’t sure how to talk about trans issues, e.g. saying ‘lots of people experiment with their gender’. A trans friend of mine who isn’t in care is having a much easier time accessing services because she has a supportive family. I have to be the expert and do everything myself. Professionals are scared that being supportive will be seen as influencing decisions.”

Training

How do we design training to keep staff up to date and create the environment we need? Sometimes staff will use lack of confidence as an excuse, sometimes it’s a legitimate problem. Training and other work in this area needs to be able to take people with you.

We have lots of talk about training, good work from external organisations, but no expectation for LAs is they will only do what they are legally obliged to do. Challenge for the politicians in the room.

UEA are piloting training materials in local authorities. The LAs are keen but it can be hard to get people to attend training. They think ‘I don’t have anybody on my caseload, this isn’t relevant to me’. Specific training has a lower uptake unless you have an organisation that is very passionate. It’s important to make sure that general mandatory training includes

diversity content including supporting LGBT+ young people. Training is important for both social workers and foster carers.

Training isn't enough by itself without organisational change. Local authorities, and other organisations that commission services should include questions about how a service will meet the needs of LGBT+ people, and create structural change.

We need to focus on listening to young people. What language works for you? What upsets you? There will be different opinions and comfort levels, and we can respect their opinions and views.

Trans young people in care are under particular pressure to become the experts. They are more likely to want to access services than their cisgender (non-trans) LGB peers, and that can involve having to explain what those services are to a foster carer or social worker. Social workers need to be able to advocate for young people's access to education and health. Training would reduce pressure on the young person to have all the answers right from the start.

Assessment and Inspection

Assessment and inspection materials need to be inclusive and to help support carers and social workers to recognise and put aside prejudices. You can't always legislate social change, but if children in care are at the heart of decision making, things will be better for everyone. Inclusiveness is part of the schools inspection framework but not social services – something Ofsted could change.

LGBT+ children in care just want the same treatment as their straight and cisgender peers. In the last few years in the UK we have seen a rise in hate crimes, it can be a frightening time to be LGBT+. As corporate parents we should be modelling the best possible parenting for all children and young people, and take a lead on these issues.

Charlotte received a referral for a young person recently that included the phrase 'problematic behaviour to be aware of: sexual orientation.' This is unacceptable, and young people should be involved in how data about them is recorded.

Data Collection

We don't know a lot about how many children in care and care leavers are LGBT+. Different local authorities give different reasons for not collecting the data, but the biggest one is that DfE doesn't ask for them. It can also be a challenge to update LA systems to e.g. change gender or have more gender options.

Jacob and Charlotte are working with care leavers to update forms with this info – trying to find ways to record information without being overly intrusive. People shouldn't be pressured to come out, but if they are happy to share then we should be able to record it.

Jeanette knows it will be a long process to get reliable national data, but we should make a start. It's a sensitive subject and young people will have very different views. There is divided opinion in the room about whether this information should be recorded by the local authority.

We are making progress on this area in schools, and this should be extended to the care system. Professionals should be trained and should proactively make it clear that a foster home or children's home is welcoming and inclusive, important message for all children and young people.

Faye spoke about her experience living in a children's home. They had weekly meetings to discuss issues, and tackled homophobic bullying through talking at these meetings and through roleplay to help people see things from the perspective of others.

Commissioning and Recruitment

Sensitivity to and understanding of LGBT+ identities could be part of the recruitment process for foster carers and residential workers, and part of fostering panels. Ask potential foster carers how they would react if their child came out as LGB or T?

It could also be part of the commissioning process. Local authorities could ask in their commissioning forms about service providers' policies on diversity and inclusion, bullying, training for staff and so on.

Making Change

We should find more ways to disseminate research and good practice guides. Suggestions include getting children in care councils involved, speaking to local councillors, sharing with MPs, working with social work training programmes like Frontline.

One concern with shorter social work training programmes like Frontline, is that issues like these might be dropped.

It would be good to see specific LGBT+ positive content as part of the care leaver local offers being developed.

Closing remarks

The Chair thanked everyone for coming.

Next meeting: May 1st