

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

Wednesday 7th February 2018

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Committee Room 9, House of Commons, Palace of Westminster

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

Panel: Nadhim Zahawi MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

Professor Peter Fonagy, Chief Executive of the Anna Freud Centre

Andrew Baxter, Department for Education's Health and Wellbeing of Looked After Children Team

Derreem Huggins, expert by experience

Topic: How can we improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children in care?

Introduction

The Chair welcomed attendees to the event and introduced the panel of speakers, with a special thank you to the new Children's Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, who was able to attend on short notice.

Minister's Remarks

Minister Zahawi spoke about the fact that his family arrived in the UK as Kurdish refugees in 1978. He was able to catch up in school thanks to the support of others. He now has the best job in government. He recognises that there are challenges and a lot of work to do, but that we have the opportunity to make a big difference to children in care. Crucial that we create a system that effectively supports children and young people in their mental health and wellbeing. For too long they haven't been able to access the help that they need. He wants to hear as much from this group as he can.

The government set up the Expert Working Group in 2016 and has now launched the Children & Young People's Mental Health green paper. He encourages everyone to participate in consultation and make sure that the voice of our most vulnerable children is heard.

Questions for Minister:

- English system should look at the care review happening in Scotland to share learning.
- Problem of mental health transitions at 18 which can cause problems during a Staying Put arrangements.
- Caroline Spelman MP raises issue of making sure that councils looking after unaccompanied asylum seeking children have sufficient funding to provide mental health support, including after they leave statutory services at 18.
- Getting more local authorities to agree to the council tax exemption for care leavers – 50 have so far.

Peter Fonagy

Professor Fonagy co-chaired the Expert Working Group Improving mental health support for our children and young people, which he feels is one of the most important things he's ever done in his life. This felt like an opportunity to do something that would be change things. They wanted to start from the voices of the young people that they heard. How much more we could do, not just via government but as fellow citizens, that would improve the lives of the young people that are collectively in our care.

In 2015, looked after children made up 4% of referrals to CAMHS, but are only 0.1% of children. We are not yet doing enough.

The recommendations from the Expert Working Group report included:

- interventions should be tailored towards love and kindness.
- Not everything needs to be labelled as an 'issue' or a problem.
- A non-judgemental attitude is essential.

- Young people need to be kept involved and informed about their care.
- Give young people time to process information about their mental health.
- Remember that looked after children are still young people. The word 'young' is important, the word is 'people' is even more important.
- Don't treat them differently just because they are in care.
- Remove barriers to accessing care
- Involve young people in decisions that affect them. What came across again and again is that young people weren't made to feel that they were agents in what was happening to them. We know that what makes things difficult for all of us is if we are not giving agency over our lives. Why do we have a system that deprives them of agency rather than giving to them.
- Social workers need to be trained in life story work, talking therapy, anger management.
- More advanced therapy should be made available when needed.

Andrew Baxter

Andrew is part of the Health and Wellbeing of Looked After Children team at the Department for Education. He agrees with Peter's point that all of the state has a parental responsibility, which is the intention behind the new Corporate Parenting Principles for local authorities. He is interested to hear perspectives on both the green paper and the mental health assessment pilots.

The Green Paper aims to do the following:

- Bridge the gap between schools and children's services by putting a designated mental health lead in every school. Staff will start being trained for this role in September.
- Trail blazer areas will start in 2019.
- 4 week waiting times for access to CAMHS, based on work done with psychosis and eating disorders.

Regarding the mental health assessment pilots:

- The Expert Working Group and the Select Committee report are influencing how this work is being done.
- They need to empower and involve children and young people, and be dictated by needs and/or outcomes, building on young people's strengths.
- Mental health assessments should embed three core principles: good quality, leading to the right support at the right time, and being personal and child-centred.

Derreem Huggins

Derreem is a young person who spoke about his experience of dealing with mental health while being in the care system. He experienced several years of depression, and despite asking for help from his social worker, he was never referred to CAMHS and was consistently let down.

The things that helped him were the Staying Put scheme, support from his college, being able to take part in creative arts, and support from his partner.

His recommendations:

- More needs to be done to make children in care and care leavers aware of the support available for them, by putting information in places where they might see, not just local council websites.
- Young people should be able to self-refer to services.
- Social workers need more training and support in dealing with mental health issues so that they can support young people more effectively as well as signpost and refer.

Audience Discussion

Issues raised during audience discussion included:

Mental health support in schools

- How will this work with residential schools?
- Will one lead be enough – surely all professionals working with children and young people should have training in mental health?
 - DfE response – the idea is that the lead in each school will be able to disseminate training and information and other staff.
- What happens when students are referred to services they can't access, while waiting for e.g. CAMHS waiting times to be reduced?
- Will this be tokenistic – teaching staff are incredibly stretched, how will they be sufficiently trained and have the time to take on this additional role?
- Care leavers often have complex needs and aren't in education, have difficulty accessing adult services.
- Whole school needs to have a culture that is supportive of children in care and their mental health needs, through policies and approaches to behaviour, admissions and so on.
- There needs to be a mental health lead in a school who had the equivalent of a MA in mental health (i.e. two years), if that person is going to be genuinely able to coordinate services. There's a lot of resource already being directed towards mental health in schools, but unfortunately within even excellent schools it's not as well coordinated as it could be.
- There should be a standard national curriculum for mental health leads which includes how you deal with mental health problems that arise within looked after children, e.g. training about attachment and insecurity and interpret it as bad behaviour. Appropriate training could help avoid this.

CAMHS

- Transitioning from CAMHS to adult services at 18 is very difficult, and sometimes the thresholds are higher so people can stop receiving care, e.g. BMI for eating disorders.
- Aged 18, care leavers are dealing with a lot of changes all at once, having a mental health services move at the same time isn't helpful – should be able to continue accessing CAMHS until later, age 25.
- There are 1 million children with mental health needs and only 6,000 staff working in the CAMHS system – without addressing capacity issues these problems can't be resolved.
- Mental health support isn't just talking therapy and medication – need to look at broad range of services including community activities and supportive relationships.

Other points raised:

- What is being done for Staying Close in residential homes?
 - Work is being piloted by DfE.
- How do we better reach young people who are struggling with mental health issues? Suggestions of advertising services via social media, television, libraries, following example of other organisations e.g. the NHS.
- This has been a known issue for a long time – why has this taken so long?
- Disappointing not to see more of the Expert Working Group's recommendations reflected in the green paper.
 - Government hasn't yet accepted EWG recommendations but these are being worked on.
- Social worker case load means they can't see most of their clients very often. They don't need more training, they need more time.
 - Case loads are being reviewed elsewhere in DfE as part of social work reform.

Closing remarks

The Chair thanked everyone for coming.

Next meeting: April 18th