

**‘No Good Options: one year on’**

**Minutes of Evidence session 1: Children and young people, and practitioners**

**Wednesday 24th January, 4:30-6:00pm**

**The Grimond Room, Portcullis House, Houses of Parliament**

**Chair**: Tim Loughton MP

**Co-Chair:** Baroness Howarth of Breckland

**Secretary**: Baroness Massey of Darwen

**Treasurer**: Earl of Listowel

**Vice-Chairs**: Baroness Walmsley, Alex Burghart MP, Sarah Champion MP

**Clerk**: Robyn Ellison

 Welcome and introductions

As Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Children (APPGC), **Tim Loughton MP** welcomes everyone to this first evidence session, particularly the young people who will be speaking. He provided some background to today’s session: last year the APPGC published [*No Good Options*](https://www.ncb.org.uk/resources-publications/resources/no-good-options-report-inquiry-childrens-social-care-england), a comprehensive review of children’s social care. *No Good Options* found significant variation in the application of law and policy across local authorities and presented evidence which suggests that local policy decisions are leading directly to stark contrasts in children’s outcomes, including the likelihood that they are taken into care.

Our new Inquiry aims to dig further into some of the findings from *No Good Options* and identify the causes of variation in access to children’s services including the role that thresholds play in this. Today’s meeting is the first evidence session as part of the new Inquiry and the format today will include two sessions. During the first session we will hear from three young people from Catch22’s Young People’s Benchmarking Forum (YPBMF) who will be asked questions by Tutu, one of the National Children’s Bureau’s Young Research Advisors. During the second half we will be hearing from practitioners – social workers and school designated safeguarding leads.

**Panel 1:** Young People from the Young People’s Benchmarking Forum, Catch 22

**Tutu** gave some background on the National Children’s Bureau (NCB)’s Young Research Advisors (YRAs). The YRAs are children and young people (CYP) from across England, including those with a range of physical and mental health needs, who have been trained in research and policy skills. The decision for a young person to be invited to ask questions at today’s meeting is the result of a suggestion from the YRAs about how to make young people feel at ease when giving evidence in a format like this.

The three young people from the YPBMF – **Billie-Jo, Duncan and Faye** - introduced themselves. **Nat O’Brien, Project Coordinator for the YPBMF** was in attendance in a supportive capacity to the young people. Billie-Jo, Duncan and Faye are also support workers to young people in their communities.

They outlined the role of the YPBMF, which was formed in 2008 and involves young people aged 16 and above from local authorities that are members of the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLFBMF). Members include young people who are employed by their local authority, undertaking a traineeship or actively involved with participation work and service delivery within their local authority. The YPBMF works alongside the NLCBF to complete an annual work plan with the aims of improving understanding of children in care, improving services and producing advice, information resources and participation opportunities for other young people. The group prioritises issues they feel are important and campaigns to raise awareness of them and to try and achieve better outcomes for young people making the transition from care to adulthood. The YPBMF reports regularly to the NLCBF steering group. In preparation for this APPGC session, the YPBMF held two consultation meetings with young people (YP) and practitioners where they sought inputs on the topics under discussion today.

**Tutu** began by asking about the type and level of support provided to young people by social services. Whilst one young person praised the level of support and the fact that it is provided on an individual basis, another felt that social services are better at supporting young people with positive aspirations (eg to study at university) and are less good at providing support to a young person who is struggling. Examples of the type of support included things like paying rent for young people who go to university, and making improvements such as ending the practice of putting young people in B&Bs as temporary accommodation. Other kinds of support which YP felt would be useful are support with apprenticeships, work schemes and courses.

Communication about key decisions affecting YPs’ lives was often inadequate. One YP explained that his younger siblings have been adopted and he is not allowed to make contact with them until they turn 18, but no-one has ever explained to him why this is the case. Similarly, the reason for the decision to take a child into care may have been explained to the child at a young age, or may not have been explained at all. Children may also misremember, for example thinking they were removed from their family by the police rather than social services. It is important to give children and young people the option of a ‘refresher’ discussion when they are old enough to understand fully about what happened when they were younger.

If young people don’t receive the support they need the risks are that they won’t achieve and they may get into dangerous situations and risk drug or alcohol abuse. The personal advisor or social worker may be the only person providing support to that YP.

The members of the YPBMF had some knowledge of how local authorities make decisions, explaining that this is on a case by case basis and that sometimes people do slip under the radar. Decisions are on a needs basis in terms of financial support. It would be better if additional support was offered rather than needing to be requested as YP may not know their entitlements.

Differences in levels of support provided to YPs in different areas of the country were discussed. In many cases these are due to the variation in the cost of living in different parts of the country however support workers sometimes find it difficult to explain and justify these decisions to YP.

The YP were asked whether they felt involved in decisions about the level of support they received. The young people broadly felt that they were, with **Billie-Jo** commenting that she did as she was allowed to attend her review meetings and was given a phone number to call if she needed to speak to someone at any time. **Duncan** said that social services respected his decision to pursue his independence and stop meeting with his social worker, although the social worker was still available for him in the background.

The role of local authorities in supporting young people to understand what support they are entitled to was discussed. Many YP do not know their entitlements, particularly as the entitlements change frequently. YPs often seek information online, which tends to be national rather than regional. Innovative ways of reaching YP with this information were discussed, including through apps and social media.

Members of the YPBMF offered practical examples of how to encourage participation of YP in decisions that affect their care. All three services represented by the YP on the panel have policies to pay young people for their time in cash rather than vouchers, in recognition that they are professional whose experience is being sought. Other examples given include a service director who organises a dinner with YP as opportunity for discussion and a corporate parent bbq. The YP felt that it is good practice to offer formal and informal opportunities to encourage participation.

The YP were asked if they have access to decision makers. There is variation across boroughs but every local authority should be doing this. One YP felt that ‘the only opportunities for change have come through access to decision makers.’ Examples of good practice given were quarterly meetings between Children in Care Councils and the corporate parent board with regular reports back on progress since the last meeting; and a local authority in which the Children in Care Council have a stamp of approval on all new policies and guidance reflecting the principle of ‘nothing about us without us.’

**Tim** thanked **Billie-Jo, Duncan and Faye** for sharing their insights and experiences and thanked **Tutu** for her excellent role as questioner.

Panel 2: Practitioners

During the second session, the APPG heard from two experienced social workers and representatives of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW): **Melanie Adegbite** and **Karen Goodman** along with two deputy headteachers who are Designated Safeguarding Leads for their schools**: Adrian Dudley** of Bishop’s Hatfield Girls’ School in Hertfordshire and **Russell Clarke** of Haslingden High School in Rossendale.

**Tim Loughton MP** began by asking whether the practitioners have observed that thresholds for intervention by social services have risen. **Karen Goodman** advised that thresholds have risen, but so have the circumstances which give rise to interventions. Threshold documents in use across different local authorities are largely similar but may define risks in different ways. **Melanie Adegbite** observed that her local authority uses the London Child Protection Procedures and Practice Guidance which is meant to be guidance but many local authorities have adopted in a very prescriptive way.

Local authorities with a lack of resources have found ways to refer to other services as opposed to providing initial support for that family meaning that families then come to social services at later stage when they are then much more complex cases. **Melanie Adegbite** felt that cases she would have worked on earlier in her career twenty years are now worked on by services outside local authorities. Karen Goodman said feedback from BASW members supports this, and that section 17 cases are being escalated to section 47 cases. Social workers would like to undertake the work on an early basis and have time to do the necessary work with the child.

The deputy headteachers were asked whether they are having more interaction with social services. **Russell Clarke**’s school is located on the border of three local authorities and he observes significant variation across these. He has empathy with social services where services are diminishing. He described the difficulties for schools where staff are working more as social workers than teachers. In seven years as a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) he has seen staff draw in on issues beyond their capabilities. Reflecting on what the YP mentioned in the previous session, hr emphasised that communication and information are the missing link and are not expensive to provide.

**Adrian Dudley** commended his local authority, Hertfordshire, but said the key issue is consistency. School staff are on shifting sands as they get used to a set of criteria, then a year later these change. Over his 12 years as a DSL these have changed hugely. He also expressed sympathy and empathy with children’s social care for carrying out a ‘thankless task’ hampered by a lack of resources and limited by guidelines on whether they can intervene. He mentioned examples of cases where the school feels the case does meet the threshold but social services disagrees and it is bounced back to school which then– with persistence – eventually does get referred to children’s social care on same criteria as the initial referral – in these cases it is unclear why the referral was not initially accepted.

**Melanie Adegbite** highlighted that to take a case to court proceedings social services need to have evidence. With lots of small incidents over a period of time social workers have the opportunity to collect evidence and understand the journey of that case. If cases are batted back to other services such as Early Help, social workers don’t have the opportunity to collect evidence and understand the case or the time and capacity to do the work they want to. Passing families back and forth between different services also negatively impacts professionals’ ability to form relationship with families that are necessary to give the support they need.

**Karen Goodman** discussed the challenges the social work profession faces in recruiting and retaining social workers. There is a lot of “churn” of staff. CYP want consistent social workers and the system should allow for relationships to develop. **Adrian Dudley** gave an example of a young person who has had twenty different social workers over four years and said that the high turnover of social workers is also a challenge for teachers seeking to establish a professional relationship with social workers. In some cases schools are the most consistent thing in a young person’s life. The challenge is compounded by the fact that the numbers of children coming into services are increasing and BASW members have raised concerns about increasing levels of decentralisation, outsourcing and variation. Services are delivered on the basis of resources and are not adequately needs-led. Workloads are a problem - competent social workers are given additional work and those who challenge things can be seen as trouble-causers, meaning that frequent job changes can be an act of self-preservation.

**Russell Clarke** emphasised that schools are a Tier 1 service but he feels that the policy guidance has crept beyond the expectations this. Schools provide an important service but are not able to go through the front door to see what’s happening in the young person’s home, so it is vital that information on this is shared by social services with schools.

The discussion moved on to the appropriateness of threshold levels and the factors that influence how levels are set. **Karen Goodman** responded that threshold levels are influenced by local resources, by the findings of serious case reviews and by the social composition of the area in terms of poverty and other factors. Local decision making has been taken away from the front line and is often resource-led.

A point was raised about young people accessing their case files, the support they receive to do this and the effects of how things are written up. **Billie-Jo, Duncan and Faye** spoke about their peers’ experiences of accessing case files, including negative experiences. Issues discussed include family members’ names being crossed out for safeguarding reasons, disproportionate focus on relatively minor points such as a lost bus ticket and comments being framed in an overly negative light (in some cases to strengthen the case for support). The young people recommended that that practitioners writing up files should always bear in mind that at some point their comments may be read by the young person being spoken about. It is also important that YP are always supported at the point of accessing their files.

Baroness Walmsley asked whether schools can be too good at providing support leading to them taking on a greater role in safeguarding and social care than should be their responsibility. Russell Clarke said that introducing Designated Safeguarding Leads was a positive move but success in this area does lead to an increased workload. The timeline for referrals being picked up by social services is one day but only in the most serious cases do things happen this quickly.

**George Eustice MP** asked about the barriers to information being shared with CYP. The practitioners advised that this is due to a number of factors – sometimes schools don’t hold the full information. There is a lot of misinformation about what information can be shared – schools should have one place to go to for guidelines.

From a social work perspective, situations can vary – if a child has been adopted the court order is in place until the child is 18. Sometimes the adoptive parent may not want the child to have contact with siblings, for example if the siblings are in touch with the child’s biological parents. **Baroness Tyler** as chair of CAFCASS highlighted that relationships with siblings are one of the most frequent issues which arise for CAFCASS. The issue of contact with siblings after adoption should be revisited as a policy issue from the perspective of the rights of the child.

Summary and closing remarks from Tim Loughton MP

Tim Loughton MP thanked all of the speakers, particularly those who travelled long distances to give evidence. The points discussed today will feed into the next stages of the enquiry. The next evidence session will be held on 7th February.