

**‘No Good Options: one year on’**

**Minutes of Evidence Session 3**

**4.15 - 6pm**

**Monday 19th March**

**Committee Room 16, Palace of Westminster**

**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

**Speakers:**

* Emma Lewell-Buck, Shadow Minister for Children and Families
* Richard Watts, Local Government Association (LGA)

**Tim Loughton MP** welcomed everyone to the meeting. This is the third evidence session as part of the current inquiry into children’s social work thresholds. Today we will be hearing from Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Shadow Minister for Children and Families and Richard Watts, Chair of the Local Government Association Children and Young People Board. Unfortunately Noel Arnold, co-chair of the Association of Lawyers for Children, who was scheduled to speak is no longer able to join us today.

**Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Shadow Minister for Children and Families:** We are observing a worrying trend in children’s social care in which the shift towards late intervention is getting worse not better, the rate of re-referrals is increasing and cuts to early intervention mean that cases are being closed prematurely. In her experience as a social worker before entering Parliament, Emma saw that cases were frequently closed and re-referred by professionals and that cases may become more complex than at the time of the initial referral and still be closed a second time due to lack of resources. 60% of social workers said that austerity cuts have affected their ability to do their jobs. There is a need to record re-referral rates and extrapolate data to identify any correlations. It is not surprising that thresholds are increasing given austerity, Sure Start closures, cuts to children’s centres, family support programmes and early intervention overall. The Munro Review recommended a legal duty for local authorities to provide enough early intervention services but this was not adopted. Social work evolves and changes depending on the socio-economic environment. Thresholds will inevitably change – but cuts do not fall equally on different areas. The most deprived areas are having their spend disproportionately cut. Given the increasing levels of inequality in British society between different areas it follows that thresholds would vary. There is a need for ongoing profess development for social workers who have lots of autonomy & subjectivity in their roles and can become de-sensitised as their personal frame of reference changes with time. So even when thresholds have not changed on paper, subjective thresholds of those practicing on the ground may have changed. Overall the disparities in thresholds in social care are a direct result of the economic environment we are now in, geographic inequality and lack of support or respect for the profession of social work.

**Tim Loughton MP** thanked Emma Lewell-Buck MP for the points she raised and reiterated the importance of valuing social workers and recognising the pressures they work under day in day out. He then introduced Richard Watts, Chair of the Local Government Association (LGA).

**Richard Watts, Local Government Association (LGA):** Richard thanked the APPG for inviting him and advised that although he is a Labour councillor he will be talking from the perspective of the cross-party LGA. There are lots of reasons for concern about children’s social services, some reasons for optimism, both of which he will cover. He will also talk the LGA’s research on this topic and where we should go from here.

In terms of areas of concern, money is the biggest: the LGA is warning of a £2bn shortfall by the end of the decade, and this is a conservative estimate which imagines that demand will stay the same (when in fact it is increasing). With a legal duty to balance the budget and rising demand in the need for statutory services, early intervention is one of the only places councils can look to make cuts. The short sightedness of this approach is well understood. £500m has been taken out of early intervention since 2013 and in the current situation we have to ask where is the support for family who don’t quite make threshold for statutory services?

Other areas of concern are the shortage of social workers – nationally there is a shortage of 9,000 social workers. This drives perverse behaviours such as councils poaching each other’s’ social workers and having to pay them more to do this. The only solution to this is a national recruitment campaign.

Looking now at reasons for optimism, the vast majority of services still work and there are not many rated inadequate (although of course none should be rated inadequate) – the proportion rated inadequate is less than two years ago which suggests that councils are coping well with the cuts. Moreover, there is evidence that children’s social care is the least cut service, with research from Action for Children and The Children’s Society. The vast majority of council income goes on services that are used by less than 5% of people and therefore disparities between council tax and expenditure grows worse each year. That is quite quickly going to cause a crisis in confidence in local government financing

What should we do? We need to understand the financial picture better. Treasury figures show that spend per child shows little relation to the Ofsted rating of services in a particular area, which leads to questions as to why more money is needed. The LGA did some digging into these figures through by commissioning financial analysts to do an in-depth breakdown of children’s social services spend across eight local authorities. The researchers considered three factors: geographical/economic, operational and national financial return. The full findings are still to be published, but based on interim findings, the research shows than 30-50% of variation in spend can be explained by geographic and economic factors. The one common fact is that deprivation rates show the highest correlation to spend of all the factors considered by the researchers. One caveat/consideration is that there are subjective differences in the way councils report their figures and code their spending, such as the way overheads are accounted for. Between one third and two thirds of variation in spend is related to local operational factors – efficiencies, relationships with partner bodies, local market factors (eg differential costs of housing in different areas). Richard concluded that this is the current picture of the research findings and he would be happy to return to the APPG when it is completed.

**Question and Answer Discussion**

Members of the APPG were then invited to ask questions. **Tim Loughton MP** began by asking about children who are taken off child protection plans and then put back on them and whether LGA members are expressing frustration about seeing the same children again. Richard Watts said it is important to recognise that not every re-referral is a mistake by the authorities and that sometimes circumstances do change. The financial pressure that drives this to happen is not an explicit one, rather it is implicit in a subjective decision making process in which the culture drives organisational decision making.

The **Earl of Listowel** said that the NSPCC has raised questions about children coming in and out of care and the age profile of children taking into care changing. Richard Watts confirmed that he would write to the APPG to answer these questions more fully. Richard Watts emphasised that one vital role of children’s social services is to take children into care for their own safety and a difficult trade off that social workers have to make is that if you are going to take a child into care, it is better to do it as early as possible. This is a subjective judgement.

**Baroness Tyler** said that CAFCASS has recently undertaken work looking at different local authorities in terms of variation, spend and deprivation. They also found that local operational factors were key, including leadership, levels of risk aversion, relationships between chief officers and members. Should the ‘heavy end’ of work – which is expensive but achieves strong results – be funded nationally in order to sustain it?

**Richard Watts** responded that operational efficiency essentially equates to the quality of leadership and quality of staff and that it is cheaper for local authorities to ‘stay good’ than to go from poor to good quality, including because staff will want to remain with a good local authority. One argument for localism is that areas are different and a central government-imposed, one size fits all approach will not be effective. The relationship between citizens and local government is fundamentally broken because local politicians are held accountable for tax and spending without having any power to make democratic decisions over these.

Tim Loughton MP then moved on to take questions from the audience.

**Carol Pigale from NAGALRO** emphasised that social worker supervision is a key issue and that the quality of professional support and supervision is not valued enough. The attitude of the press towards social workers is affecting the quality of people entering the profession, particularly working with children and families. There is huge pressure on social services to lower the numbers of children on child protection registers as having large numbers is seen as shameful. She recalls seeing cases in which There is also an issue in which senior managers are on performance-related pay linked to keeping the numbers down. Families with a high level of need would come off the register with only a low level of intervention.

**Emma Lewell-Buck MP** said that social work is about identifying need and managing risk, which doesn’t always fit into a particular category. If there isn’t enough support and external agencies willing to intervene, social workers have to focus on other cases where there are higher levels of need. This sometimes leads to a strategic decision by a social worker to close a case so that it will come back onto the radar when the family comes back into contact with professionals (rather than leave the case open). Lots of social workers have no supervision for years – there is no time, and he workload is manic – which means that people are often frantically winging it. There are also scenarios in which social workers are working in situations for which there is no guidance or support, for example, a peak in children aged 16 and over related to the numbers of children seeking asylum, which social workers were working on for a long time before any guidance came out.

Richard Watts emphasised that the long-term impact of trauma is not well understood. A study of children with experiences of gangs found a strong link to trauma and PTSD because of witnessing violence in the home.

**Elaine Fulton from the Stefanou Foundation** highlighted that her organisation is working with a US foundation on how to collectively change the discourse around adverse childhood experiences. We are still using science from the last century – not just behaviour that is affective by adverse childhood experiences, also social and emotional development etc.

**Anna Feuchtwang, CEO of the National Children’s Bureau** asked in relation to the issue of thresholds, what should we be looking at more specifically and what would be the most useful evidence we could be collecting in this inquiry, and whether there is any data or evidence which could tell us consistently whether thresholds have changed. **Emma Lewell-Buck** said that in relation to the Government’s current review of children in need, what she would rather see is a review of the care system overall because social work and social services is holistic, so you can’t just separate one bit from the rest of it. Moreover at the moment Government statistical releases don’t include re-re-referrals. But this inquiry could question local authorities as to why and could get a couple of local authorities in to talk about what their re-re-referral rates are and what the issues are around them. **Tim Loughton** added that, as part of this inquiry, we have obtained valuable evidence through a survey of Directors of Children’s Services and of social workers, conducted by the British Association of Social Workers.

There was a discussion about the relationship between kinship care and social care. **Maeve Thompson from Grandparents Plus** said that hear that there is and see the family as part of the problem despite the fact that we can show through research that children who grow up in social care and have consistent care and who are supported do better than children who go into social care. So, how can this debate be widened to children and families as well? **Tim Loughton** added that it would be good to understand how kinship care is affected by rising numbers of children going into social care and whether this is keeping pace. Other points raised during this discussion were the need for a cultural shift underpinned by legislation supporting the role of kinship carers, and the impact of under-resourcing leading social workers to remove children from families rather than explore other options. **Richard Watts** qualified this with a reminder that in the tragic cases of Victoria Climbié and Baby P, social workers focused disproportionately on supporting families and to some extent forgot their role to protect children from abusive parents and families. **Tim Loughton** recalled the previous evidence session in this inquiry in which Professor Featherstone said that families were translating stories of help into stories of risk in order to get the response on a risk basis rather than on a help and intervention basis.

**Baroness Tyler** returned to the point made earlier about the possibility of a national recruitment campaign for social work and how the APPGC might be able to support this. The importance of restoring the reputation of social work as a profession and learning from successful campaigns in other sectors such as teaching were emphasised.

**Tim Loughton** drew the session to a close and thanked the speakers for their contributions.

The next session will take place on 18th April when we will hear from the Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi MP.