

**‘No Good Options: one year on’**

**Minutes of Evidence session 4: Nadhim Zahawi MP, Children and Families Minister and Anne Longfield, Children’s Commissioner for England**

**Wednesday 9th May, 10am – 11am**

**Committee Room 12, 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

Tim Loughton MP, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) welcomed all attendees to this fourth evidence session as part of our current inquiry into children’ social care thresholds and funding. This is our final evidence session and report of the inquiry will be published in July. Today’s meeting will hear from from Nadhim Zahawi MP, Children’s Minister and from Anne Longfield, the Children’s Commissioner for England, about her office’s research into public attitudes towards spending on children’s social care.

**Anne Longfield OBE, Children’s Commissioner for England**

The Children’s Commissioner is today publishing [*Who Cares?*](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/who-cares/), a report on public expectations for the care of vulnerable children, looking at attitudes to spending and what we should spend on. This research is very relevant in terms of looking at thresholds and where we draw the line in terms of supporting children. The key message of the report is that the public have high expectations that the state should help vulnerable children but have little idea about the support that they do get. This report is part of a wider piece of work on spending on children.

Research on re-referrals shows that problems are persisting for around half of children. 1 in 50 children - so 10,000 children – are re-referred 4 or more times, which demonstrates that is the child doesn’t meet threshold, problem doesn’t go away. A 2015 Ofsted thematic inspection of early help services showed that where children didn’t receive early help, their circumstances deteriorated and they needed to be re-referred.

This research by the Children’s Commissioner, conducted in partnership with Ipsos MORI revealed that members of the public have high expectations about what the state should do. The study used three real life case studies of vulnerable children and families and asked the public to consider what to do – what kind of support the family should receive and who should offer it. The results show that there is very little knowledge about what social workers do and that the public threshold for intervention is much lower than current thresholds applied by social services.

The 3 case studies used in the research correspond to 3 different levels of intervention. Case study 1 would be unlikely to meet the threshold for children’s social care. In this family the mother was suffering from depression and had physical disability, the older child aged 10 was acting as a carer for the younger child aged 6 and the father was in prison. The public felt this was a “disaster waiting to happen” and wanted social services and a wide range of support services to intervene to support the family (rather than leaping into a child protection plan). In reality the family would be unlikely to receive support.

Case study 2 involved a child aged 3 and a baby aged 6 months. The real outcome for this case was support from children’s social care under a Child Protection Plan. The mother’s partner and father of one of the children has perpetrated domestic violence towards the mother, although he has not been violent towards the children. He also has problems with drug and alcohol abuse. They are currently separated but the mother is considering getting back together with the father. In this case the public response was close to the actual response by social services, with the public showing concern about the drugs, alcohol and violence and strongly wanting social services to become involved.

Case study 3 involved children aged 13, 8 and 6. The real outcome of this case was support from children’s services under a Children in Need plan. The family was living in homeless accommodation, and the mother was regularly leaving the children overnight in order to work night shifts. The oldest child was caring for her siblings and the school contacted social services due to concerns that the children were not being properly cared for. The public clearly expected social services and the children’s schools to respond to this situation, with some even suggesting foster care. Others suggested that social services should play a ‘coordinating’ role to help the mother improve her situation with regard to her working hours and the family’s housing situation.

Overall, the findings of this report demonstrate that it is clear the public want to offer a greater level of care than what is currently offered, particularly at the lower end of the spectrum. This warrants a wider discussion of what thresholds are for and the fact that they must reflect what a society wants for its children. It is clear from the research that most people are not aware of these issues and it is common for social workers to say that before starting their job they were not aware that children and families wouldn’t get help at this level of need. Early intervention being stripped back means there are fewer services to step forward. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner has heard from families who say that they can’t get help with problems early on when they need it, until they reach crisis point when the system then ‘takes over’ leaving them disempowered, there is also the issue that crisis care is obviously more expensive.

**Tim Loughton** thanked Anne Longfield for her contribution.

**Nadhim Zahawi MP, Parliamentary Under-secretary for Children and Families**

Nadhim Zahawi began by thanking the APPG for inviting him to speak. Nothing is more important than the work we do to ensure that individual children are identified early and receive the support they need. He recognised Tim Loughton’s key role in this formerly as Minister for Children and Families.

Mr Zahawi stated that he agrees with most of the themes identified in No Good Options and welcomes the APPG’s focus on ensuring effective children’s social care. Local authorities have overarching responsibility for safeguarding all the children in their area, and it is important for local authorities to be able to assess locally what the needs are and respond accordingly, with thresholds playing an important role in this. Equally if not more important in the provision of consistent, high quality social care is the application of thresholds in practice. Ofsted assesses whether thresholds are appropriate. The results of Ofsted inspections show us that some local authorities are excellent or good but most are not – this tells is that there is more that needs to be done.

He noted he points made by the APPGC and others on funding. The government is working between now and the spending review to get a sharp picture of funding needs to children’s services. However it is important to avoid simplistic arguments that more funding is the solution to all challenges we are facing, given that other factors are important such as leadership, the workforce and innovation. Mr Zahawi listed a series of initiatives undertaken by the government to improve standards and practice in the social care sector. Since 2010, the government has spent £800 million on training for social workers to reach new standards. A new social work regulator, Social Work England, is being established. £20 million has been spent on a regional improvement strategy, and £2 million is being invested in working with the Local Government Association in a new leadership programme. Leadership is key in the difference between good services and those in difficulties. This includes learning of best practice and then scaling up from this. In February, the Department for Education held the first learning conference sharing findings from the social care innovation fund. A “what works” centre for children’s social care is being established and will be independent of government. The government is also taking forward its manifesto commitment to a Children in Need review. There are dramatic gaps in opportunity between Children in Need in different local areas and we want to understand this better. Mr Zahawi is meeting with children and families wherever possible.

Across government, steps are being taken to address the causes of children needing support from social services, on issues such as domestic violence, mental health, support for children of parents with alcoholism and for families with multiple difficulties. So across government we are working to make progress on the issues which cause children to become Children in Need.

In conclusion, all children no matter where they live should have access to the high quality support which they need. Mr Zahawi ended by saying he is looking forward to learning more about these issues as part of this inquiry.

**Question and Answer session with the Minister**

**Tracey Brabin MP, Shadow Minister for Early Years** highlighted that 1,200 Sure Start centres have closed since 2010, Health Visitor numbers are declining and yet these are the services designed to support families struggling with issues such as domestic violence and alcoholism. If we can have a minister for loneliness, why can’t we have a minister for children to pull all of this together in a cohesive, over-arching look at the whole picture to avoid this becoming a lost generation?

On the closure of Sure Start centres, Mr Zahawi responded that the evidence shows that in the most disadvantaged areas children’s centres have stayed steady and that the reduction has been in better off areas. Some local authorities such as Newcastle and Staffordshire have chosen to do away with bricks and mortar buildings and spend their resources on outreach instead. Looking at children’s centres in isolation would lead us to the wrong conclusion as when Sure Start began, there wasn’t the the investment in childcare for disadvantaged 2 and 3 yr olds that the government now delivers.

**Baroness Tyler** asked whether the concept of social care precepts could be considered in relation to children’s services funding as it has been with adults. Mr Zahawi responded that he is looking at all suggestions on funding as part of his department’s workstream on this, and that this option is well worth considering.

**Baroness Walmsley** asked what is being done to support parents across the board (not just those with mental health or alcohol issues). Mr Zahawi said that his department has set up infrastructure to collect the evidence of what I hope we´ll be able to demonstrate, that will be best practice in terms of engaging parents and the home learning combined as well. The troubled families programme has also been expanded from 100,000 families to 400,000 families and DWP is running a separate programme on conflict in families.

**Anna Feuchtwang, CEO of NCB** highlighted the consistent message that has been heard during the inquiry that the variation between local authorities is greatest in early intervention services and asked whether the Minister was as surprised as the public about the variation in early intervention? Mr Zahawi highlighted a local authority in Hackney which he visited recently which made a deliberate policy decision to maintain their early intervention which is working well. Mr Zahawi stated that there is a lot we can do to make sure that early intervention is not seen as a ‘nice to have’ but actually is a ‘must have’.

**The Earl of Listowel** asked the minister whether he is concerned about the impact of the funding challenge on children’s social work. Mr Zahawi responded that he recognises funding is a challenge but this is not the whole picture as local authorities in similar circumstances may be performing differently due to the quality of leadership.

Wrap up

Tim Loughton thanked both speakers for their valuable contributions to this inquiry. The APPGC will invite the Minister and department back to respond following the publication of the report.

The report launch will take place on the afternoon of 11th July and further information will be circulated soon.

As Zoe Renton will shortly be leaving NCB after 12 years, on behalf of the APPG officers Tim thanked Zoe for all her hard work over the years.