

# Children and Young People Committee

## CYP(3)-13-09 - Paper 2 - 6 October 2009

### Committee Inquiry into arrangements for the placement of children into care in Wales

Voices From Care is giving evidence to the Children and Young People Committee based on the experiences and views of children and young people receiving advice and support from the Voices From Care and also on the experiences and views of our members and volunteers. As we work across Wales experiences and views do not relate to any one particular local authority but are gathered from children and young people in the various local authorities across Wales. The organisation wants to ensure that the views and experiences of children and young people are included in the focused enquiry on placements into care.

Voices From Care has not tried to provide evidence in relation to all the questions of the Children and Young People's Committee as we have not experienced the behind the scenes workings of the Children's Commissioning Support Resource Database. However we hope our evidence will help inform the Children and Young People Committee on the views and experiences as told to us by children and young people.

Suggestions for areas of change are in bold type. Brief case studies are provided at the end of our written evidence to illustrate some of the situations children and young people bring to Voices From Care.

### Background Information On Voices From Care

Voices from Care is an organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after by local authorities in Wales. Voices from Care is unique in that it is run by people who have experienced the care system themselves.

At VOICES FROM CARE we bring children and young people together throughout Wales, who are, or have been looked after by local authorities, in order to: 1) provide opportunities, 2) improve conditions, 3) promote the voice of children and young people, 4) protect their interests.

In the 1980's children and young people in England and Wales began to ask questions about how the care system (as it was known then) was being run. They were unhappy with: 1) some of the conditions in residential units, 2) having to buy their clothes from certain shops, 3) they were not being listened to individually or as a group about what being in care should be like.

Some children and young people spoke up about the physical and even sexual abuse they were witnessing and suffering in the care system, including in residential units in Wales. This activity resulted, in March 1993, in the development of VOICES FROM CARE - a name chosen by children and young people - and in the north Wales Tribunal Enquiry, looking at how the care system had failed to protect children and young people, and making strong recommendations for change.

VOICES FROM CARE is an all Wales organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after in local authority care. Most of the staff have had experience of being looked after. VOICES FROM CARE is a user - led organisation. Young people are involved in our work, either as volunteers or board members. Volunteers assist in the work of the organisation - in training and consultation work. Young people also sit as Board members on the Board of Trustees, assisting in the main management decisions of the organisation. They are supported on the Board by professional trustees.

Any child or young person, who is or has been looked after in Wales, is welcome to become a member of VOICES FROM CARE and to be kept in touch with the work of the organisation.

VOICES FROM CARE provides an Advice and Support Work Service for children and young people who are or have been looked after. Examples of work in the area are: - supporting young people at meetings, assisting them to ensure that they have support from Social Services in their education / leaving care etc., helping them to seek legal advice, support to become involved in the work of the organisation.

VOICES FROM CARE operates a training service that involves young people in the training of those who work with young people who are or have been in the looked after system. Children's and young people's experiences are used to educate others.

VOICES FROM CARE needs to know exactly what is happening to children and young people who are or have been looked after, so we know what things need to change. The organisation engages in research - asking members and volunteers about their experiences and issues. This research is then used to inform the other work areas of VOICES FROM CARE.

VOICES FROM CARE exists to improve conditions and outcomes for young people who are or have been looked after. The organisation actively campaigns around issues which are of concern to children and young people, and works to ensure that those making decisions about the looked after system consider the voices of children and young people.

Voices From Care wants to begin its written evidence by drawing to the attention of the Children and Young People Committee that a placement for a child or

young person looked after is much more than the term 'placement' seems to suggest. A placement is much more than a place to stay. For a vulnerable child or young person who is unable to remain living in their family home, a 'placement' and the adults responsible for that 'placement' (foster carers, social workers and other professionals) will define the educational provision, the health care, the

social and leisure opportunities, contact arrangements, in essence all the aspects of that child or young person's current life. For this reason the importance of the matching and monitoring process in relation to placements cannot be underestimated.

Voices From Care is of the view that the process of gathering information about a child probably works well when a child is younger and if they have had less

moves between family members, between geographical areas and between foster placements. However for the children and young people Voices From Care meets who have had several moves either between family and friends or within the looked after system this becomes more complicated and more likely to be problematic. Our experience is mostly in working with children and young people when there are moves within the looked after system. Our experience is that in some Local Authorities there are some good examples of information sharing and decision making inter agency panels (Stable lives, Brighter Futures Panels, Transition Panels) However not all Local Authorities seem to have as effective mechanisms. Also some agencies seem to have mechanisms for inviting agencies and individuals involved with a child / young person together, whereas other agencies do not seem to have this capacity (Team Parenting meetings).

In our experience most foster carers would say that they had not been given enough information about a child or young person. This could be for several reasons - the information may not have been available, social workers not having enough time to share the information they do have or to discuss the possible implications of information. The giving of information is also a process - for example as a foster carer gets to know a child / young person they may realise there is more information they need or that the child or young person is asking about. A good example of this is when young people approach adolescence and foster carers have a particular concern about a young person's behavior, health or education. The foster carer and other professionals often seek more background information to help them assess the cause or implications of certain concerns. Voices From Care is working with several children / young people who are in the process of seeking additional information about their birth family and extended birth family - in all these cases it seems that social workers do not have enough time / resources to be able to get the requested information, leaving unanswered questions for the child / young person and carers.

Information gathering / analysis (in that much information is incomplete / unsubstantiated) and subsequent discussion regarding implications needs to be given more status and importance.

Processes for information gathering and decision making (various panels) need to be more transparent and information needs to be passed to children and young people about how decisions are made. It is our experience that children and young people do not have enough information about how these processes work and how they can input into these processes.

It is generally clear in the cases with the children and young people we work with that Social Services is ultimately accountable for children and young people's care. However this can be problematic, particularly if education and health are not really on board. Voices From Care is working with young people where there is a lack of clarity over a young person's needs, for example there may be several assessments each outlining a child / young person's needs, but agencies are requiring a firm conclusion (label) before services can be accessed (or funding for services secured). This can have a great impact on a placement where a carer has identified certain issues or behaviours but is unable to get services / support to deal with the issues. There is quite a lot of discrepancy between authorities about how much responsibility a foster carer can have to make decisions and take initiative to get issues sorted - for example education and health. This can cause difficulties with foster carers getting in trouble for allegedly overstepping their role or waiting unacceptably long amounts of time for a social worker or another professional to get issues sorted. Of course the role of the foster carer might vary with each placement, but there needs to be flexibility, with a social worker overseeing and ultimately being responsible for a child / young person's care. Such arrangements need to also take into account the views of children / young people.

Greater clarity is needed about the role of foster carers and their responsibilities or not in terms of education and health. There should be more consistency across Wales and across agencies on this issue.

The looked after reviewing system is a key forum for agencies to agree on decision -making in regards to placements and support for placements. Agreement on information needed can be reached at these forums. Although there has been much progress over the last few years in guaranteeing the independence of the Independent Reviewing Officers and in strengthening the role of the Independent Reviewing Officers, Voices From Care is of the view that this could be improved further. Many of the Advice and Support work cases involve situations where recommendations from previous Looked After Children reviews have not been carried out - these can range across all kinds of recommendations, some involving key decisions on placements or support for placements.

Voices From Care is of the view that Independent Reviewing Officers should have more power to question why recommendations have not been carried out. Although Independent Reviewing Officers can refer to CAFCASS, in the cases Voices From Care comes across it is not so much about the overall content of the care plan, it is about the details of placements, funding and support for placements. Children, young people and foster carers can wait unacceptably long periods of time waiting for decisions, putting unnecessary stress on everyone involved. In such situations we have assisted children and young people to utilise the Social Services complaints process with its tight time scales to get decisions made. The option of holding earlier Looked After Review meetings (3 monthly) has helped, but the situation of recommendations not being implemented still continues.

Independent Reviewing Officers should have a stronger role in ensuring decision making is effective and efficient and results in agreed actions being carried out. There needs to be clarity about how recommendations from Looked After Children Reviews relate to other decision - making panels.

Independent Reviewing Officers also need to have a clearer role in terms of education and health. Many of the decisions are waiting for input from these agencies - Independent Reviewing Officers should also be able to ensure recommendations referring to these agencies

are actioned. There should be more consistency in how Independent Reviewing Officers carry out their role - some seem to be more independent and challenging than others. Some seem to follow up on recommendations between Looked After Children reviews, others don't.

The experience of Voices From Care is generally with children and young people in longer term placements. It seems that the issue of planning of placements is something that children and young people don't seem to have a lot of influence over. Most children and young people would experience this as something which has gone on behind the scenes without their input. Children and young people speaking to our organisation support the idea of placement choice - with the process of information, introductions etc that 'choice' would entail. However it is rare that we have actually come across children and young people who can say they have had that experience.

Voices From Care has worked with children and young people who once in a placement have voiced their wish to remain in the placement or to leave, despite that not being the plan. The planning of placements does often not lend itself easily to timescales which can cause issues - in that children and young people may become settled in placements and in school. Our experience is that planning foster placements is not an exact science and needs to be able to take into account 'the human factor' - i.e. that some children / young people and carers will click, others will not.

Keeping to timescales in planning makes things easier. However there always needs to be some flexibility within plans to take account of on-going views and wishes.

#### Children and Young People's Participation in their own placement process

There are several points in the placement process at which children and young people could participate. In terms of contributing to the provision of information about themselves or being involved in placement planning - the experience of Voices From Care is that this is something that does not happen. Participation may be more limited when children and young people first become looked after, as they may not know very well how the system works and there may have been emergency situations and a need to not put too much on the child / young person. However Voices From Care believes that children and young people should be encouraged to participate in the information sharing process which takes place as they spend time looked after and their needs and wishes are explored.

Children and young people have consistently identified that the focus of information shared about them is negative - on their problems and needs in terms of what they lack, rather than on their positives and what they do well. There is not much information on what is important to them, what they treasure and their aspirations. If children and young people are to be engaged in their own information this the balance needs to be altered.

There needs to be better recording of where information has come from and also more fairness about the credibility of information. An example of this is where children and young people have moved on from placements. Voices From Care has seen where these are automatically assumed as 'breakdowns' or 'disruptions' when children and young people have moved for other reasons such as a change in carer's circumstances or other such reasons. The language of the looked after system can be very negative.

Voices From Care is aware that there are processes for children and young people to give their views on placements and the care they receive via consultation papers in Looked After Children Review meetings and via the foster care review process. It is our experience that these processes are not always as independent as possible for example completing consultation forms as part of the foster carer review, but doing this aided by their foster carers. In terms of gathering views on a child / young person's experience of a placement, this needs to be done independently of the foster carer. The independence of these processes needs to be developed. Voices From Care is aware of strategies such as exit interviews to gather the views and experiences of children and young people. Such strategies need to be further developed and embedded in general practice, rather than being seen as an optional extra or as a response to a particular situation.

The reality surrounding many foster placements is that there is limited choice of foster placements. The reality also is that children and young people views and judgments are sometimes seen as unreliable. Children and young people often struggle to be heard, particularly in a system where there are several professionals wanting to be heard or agencies not wanting to make decisions or to save money. The voice and participation of children and young people needs to be prioritised for children and young people to be heard.

The priorities and wishes of children and young people need to have a place in the system. One example might be where a child or young person wishes to keep in contact with carers they have lived with. This is possible, but the system does not generally encourage it. This child / young person won't particularly feel like participating in future placement processes just because that's when the adults decide they can.

Strategies for listening and promoting the participation of children and young people need to be embedded into practice, with opportunities for mechanisms for participation facilitated via independent channels.

A young person is in a placement with a foster carer with a private fostering agency. The placement is planned to be very short term (being reviewed every 28 days). The young person remains in placement for 3 months and feels that the placement is really good for them. The young person wants to remain in the placement long term. They feel that professionals are not listening and seek support.

A young person is in a foster placement and identified move on plans have funding implications. Various assessments show that the identified move on placement is the right option for the young person and is where the young person wants to move to. Three Looked After Children review meetings make a recommendation that a decision on funding needs to be made. This does not happen. The young person does not know where they will move onto. The young person seeks support.

A young person has been in a foster placement for several years. They are now a teenager and exhibiting concerning behavior. There

have been several assessments but none of these on their own have proved conclusive. The young person is concerned what is going to happen and is questioning why more support is not being provided and seeks support.

### **Recommendations**

Information gathering / analysis (in that much information is incomplete / unsubstantiated) and subsequent discussion regarding implications needs to be given more status and importance.

Processes for information gathering and decision making (various panels) need to be more transparent and information needs to be passed to children and young people about how decisions are made. It is our experience that children and young people do not have enough information about how these processes work and how they can input into these processes.

Greater clarity is needed about the role of foster carers and their responsibilities or not in terms of education and health. There should be more consistency across Wales and across agencies on this issue.

Independent Reviewing Officers should have a stronger role in ensuring decision making is effective and efficient and results in agreed actions being carried out. There needs to be clarity about how recommendations from Looked After Children Reviews relate to other decision - making panels.

Keeping to timescales in planning makes things easier. However there always needs to be some flexibility within plans to take account of on-going views and wishes.

Strategies for listening and promoting the participation of children and young people need to be embedded into practice, with opportunities for mechanisms for participation facilitated via independent channels.