

Public Accounts Committee

PAC(5)–27–17 23 October 2017

Inquiry into Care Experienced Children and Young People

Background

As part of the Public Accounts Committee inquiry into public services for care experienced children and young people in Wales, the National Assembly's Outreach Team have been capturing the views and experiences of children and young people with experience of care from across Wales through focus groups. Some of these sessions were attended by some of the Committee Members.

Participants were a mix of young people sourced through contacts developed by the Assembly and those provided by third sector groups. Young people were sourced through a range of representative bodies, including organisations such as Voices from Care and Action for Children and we also talked to young people through Local Authority Looked After Children teams. Participants were also sourced through utilising contacts developed by the Communications team over time.

Seven sessions were held in different locations across Wales (Anglesey, Conwy, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Swansea and Rhondda Cynon Taff) with young people between the ages of 6 and 25 from almost all local authorities in Wales. Participants included children and young people currently in care as well as young people who have recently left the care system. In some of the sessions, the young people were supported by their social workers and a foster carer who also provided their views. 30 children and young people attended the sessions in total.

Format

Participants were asked the following questions as part of the focus group sessions:

- What are the different issues you have faced being a care experienced child or young person. This can be good or bad experience.
- What support do you receive as care experienced children and young people?
- Are there any challenges in accessing the support you need?



- If you could change 1 thing for care experienced children and young people, what would that change be?

Summary of key themes and contributions

Key themes: issues experienced by children and young people in care

1. Lack of consistency

“I’ve had 14 different placements in 1 year.”

The majority of participants highlighted the disruptive nature of the number of both placements and social workers they had experienced. Many felt they had been moved more often than they would like and had experienced a high turnover in social workers. The quality of social workers was also raised as an inconsistency. One participant talked about “*broken promises*” in arranging to meet or communicate with their social worker and another that their social worker “*seemed not to care*”. From the group discussions, it is clear that many feel they are seen only as a casefile by their social worker(s) and that this, along with the disruption of frequently moving to new placements and the high turnover of social workers, was detrimental in building trust in those supporting them.

2. Lack of understanding

“Being misunderstood and disappointed”

Every group raised the issue of not feeling like they were listened to by their social worker(s) and in some cases their foster carer(s). The majority of participants felt they had raised issues that were not taken seriously or not listened to at all. This sometimes related to not being given enough independence at home, or not feeling comfortable with the placements they had been offered. Many participants felt let down by those who were supposed to be supporting them and felt that they were not trusted. A number of participants also said they had been made to feel they didn’t deserve the support they were asking for. In one extreme case, a young person said it had even taken trying to take their own life to try and get someone to listen to them.

Many participants also talked about being misunderstood by new social workers or foster carers, which they felt stemmed from the notes included in their casefiles. Some participants complained that they had not been given access to their casefiles and were



not only unsure of what was recorded, but also unhappy that they weren't able to provide their own account of previous placements or situations.

3. Lack of information about the support available

“Not knowing the support is there is the big challenge”

When asked about the support they receive, the majority of participants talked positively about the third sector organisations supporting them, providing much needed support. However, finding out about this support was difficult. Many said they had been lucky to come across the support offered by these organisations. One participant said *“you need to know about it to get something out of it”*. A foster carer mentioned that they had also found it difficult to access information directly from the local authority on behalf of their foster child and that all the effort had been on their part to find the appropriate support.

4. Transition from care

“There is a massive gap from care to leaving care and living independently”

A number of care leavers who participated in the focus groups offered an insight into the transition from care at the age of 18. The majority emphasised the challenges faced during this transition and attempting to live independently. Although the 'After Care' programme provided a degree of support, the majority felt the support was too infrequent and inconsistent. Inconsistency in the support provided by Personal Advisors was raised in particular. A large number of care leavers in the groups had fallen into financial difficulty, through lack of awareness or understanding of household bills and benefit schemes. Many felt they had *“been dumped”* when they turned 18 and that they had not been prepared for the transition of leaving care.

5. Opportunities

“With Voices from Care I was given the opportunity to go to Bulgaria. We went there to work with Roma children. We raised money to go, it was really enjoyable and made us realise how lucky we are to live in Wales.”

Although participants commented on some of the negative experiences they had encountered, many also talked about the opportunities they had been given. A number of participants mentioned opportunities to go on trips, work on projects and to spend



time with other young people in care, which they felt had helped them gain confidence. These opportunities were primarily offered through third sector groups.

Solutions to providing more effective services and support

1. More training

“More training should be available for foster carers to help them understand the issues facing young people – this might help to reduce the amount they are moved around.”

Training was raised by a number of participants, both for foster carers and young people themselves. Participants felt that more training needed to be offered to foster carers about the issues facing young people to improve understanding and relationships. Training for carers on transgender, LGBTQ+ and different cultural or religious backgrounds were raised in particular, as well as dealing with anger and mental ill health.

Training for the young people themselves was also suggested in the majority of the sessions. One participant called for *“independent living skills training when in care”* and another suggested that a *“scheme offering skills for future living needs to be available at an earlier age”*.

2. More resource

“There aren’t enough social workers to complete their caseloads which makes it difficult for the individual. When they do find someone they leave which is hard for the individual to be able to open up.”

The high number of social workers and the inconsistencies in the support received from them was raised by the majority of participants. One participant mentioned having had 5 different workers in a space of 2 years and one said *“I guess I have a personal adviser but I may as well not have one because she never gets in contact, answers phone or emails.”* This lack of contact was attributed by many to the high case load of social workers and personal advisors and when asked about one thing they



would change to help young people in care, more social workers was the most frequent answer given.

3. Second chances

“Mistakes! You only get one chance and then you are thrown out.”

A common theme throughout the sessions was a feeling of not being able to make mistakes. One young person talked about the number of times they had been moved to different placements because of a misunderstanding or bad behaviour. *“There is a lack of stability – young people need room to rebel and should be given second chances.”* There was also a strong feeling amongst care leavers that there needed to be room to make mistakes, especially if they were expected to transition to living independently with no support. Some had been offered some flexibility in re-paying Council Tax for example but other household bills agencies had not been as understanding, housing associations in particular.

4. More support post 18

“There should be more support after 18. This is when you’re expected to become more independent so it is important to be supported through this process.”

A number of participants felt that more support post-18 is needed. One care leaver said that when you turn 18 the *“support shrinks”* and one participant said that a visit was offered every 6 weeks by their personal advisor but *“a lot can happen in 6 weeks”*. Participants who had left the care system wanted more frequent contact and a higher level of support, for example training and advice. The majority welcomed the ‘When I’m Ready’ scheme which gives the option to stay with foster carers until the age of 21, however, this had not been an option for many of the participants. Most felt that the support offered by their personal advisors was better than the support they had received from their social workers, but that more of them were needed in order to provide the level of support they all felt they required having left the care system.



We would like to thank all the young people who participated in these focus group sessions for sharing their stories with us. Thank you also to the organisations who worked with us to gather these views and experiences:

Isle of Anglesey County Council

Voices from Care

Action for Children

Fabric

