

Child of the North APPG: AGM and Children in Care Evidence Session 24 January 2024

Attendees of the AGM: Emma Lewell–Buck MP (co-chair), Peter Gibson MP, Kim Johnson MP, Afzal Khan MP, Liz Twist MP, Alexis Darby, Head of Public Affairs NHSA and Health Equity North – as a non-pass holder observer.

Apologies: Mary Foy MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Simon Fell MP.

AGM Meeting Notes

Elected:

- Emma Lewell–Buck MP, as co-chair and registered officer
- Mary Robinson MP, as co-chair and registered officer
- Peter Gibson MP, registered officer
- Kim Johnson MP, registered officer

The income and expenditure statement was approved.

Evidence Session Meeting Notes

Attendees of the Evidence Session: Emma Lewell–Buck MP (co-chair), Mary Robinson MP (co-chair), Peter Gibson MP, Liz Twist MP, Alexis Darby, Head of Public Affairs NHSA and Health Equity North, Hannah Davies, CEO NHSA and Executive Director of Health Equity North, Professor David Taylor-Robinson, the University of Liverpool, Professor Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University, Amy Van Zyl, Chief Executive Officer, REFORM, Katelin Kay, 'The Social Brokers' project, Liverpool, Paul Walmsley, The Social Brokers' project, Liverpool, Becky Plummer, Office of Bishop of Durham, Rebecca Natton, Office of Emma Lewell-Buck, Paris Lee, University of Liverpool, Mia Hankinson, University of Liverpool, Kate Pickett, University of York (via Teams), Davara Bennett, University of Liverpool (via Teams).

Opening and Introduction from Emma Lewell-Buck MP

Professor David Taylor-Robinson and Professor Karen Broadhurst provided a comprehensive update on the current status of children living in care in the UK. Key highlights from the discussions included:

- Identification of key areas in the North consistently reporting high rates of children in care, notably in the North East.
- Examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in child poverty, particularly in the North.
- Acknowledgment of the unrelenting strain on local authorities, especially in the North, where the concentration of children in care is high. This region also bears the burden of hosting more children's care homes, intensifying the pressure on services.
- Child poverty was covered along with the cuts to prevention and care entry.

Professor Karen Broadhurst focused on foster care. The challenges facing foster care were explored, and key factors were identified including:

- Insights from Ofsted documentation, indicating a decline in foster carers, due to a range of factors including an aging demographic of carers within the foster care community.
- Identification of inappropriate placements in residential care in the North, driven by a shortage of suitable foster care matches.
- Recognition of the impact of the cost of living crisis, contributing to both an increase in children entering care and caregivers choosing to leave their roles.
- The costs of care were analysed and current spending patterns within the care system were revealed.

Amy Van Zyl, Chief Executive Officer, REFORM gave an overview of parental support provided by social services, and examples of support REFORM offers to women whose children have been taken into care.

- REFORM aims to improve outcomes for mothers at risk of child removal. Amy explained that the health outcomes for women whose children have been removed are very poor- they are more likely to experience poor mental health, engage in substance use, go back to ex partners who were perpetrators of violence and are more likely to commit suicide.
- Amy further elaborated on the experiences of mothers and fathers undergoing the removal process, stating that individuals suffering from various mental health illnesses and addictions are not adequately treated. Instead, they are subjected to a stressful judicial process that doesn't necessarily remove children at reasonable doubt but rather at the first suspicion.
- This approach, she emphasised, leads to a situation where mothers are facing two types of challenges. Firstly, mothers must confront the underlying issues, such as addiction, that prompted child services' involvement. Simultaneously, they navigate the stressful legal proceedings associated with having their children taken away. This dual challenge significantly increases stress levels and the likelihood of exacerbating the existing issues.

Katelin Kay from 'The Social Brokers' project, Liverpool spoke about her experience of the care system and support for young adults leaving the care system.

- Katelin explained her experiences since turning 17 and the challenges she has faced in terms of housing and personal guidance during her transition to independent living.
- Katelin raised concerns about the availability and suitability of housing options for care leavers.

Mia Hankinson, University of Liverpool, shared her experiences providing insights into the challenges faced by children in care.

- Mia detailed her journey through six different placements, many of which she felt lacked compatibility. She highlighted the overall inadequacy of services for children in care, including mental health services.
- Mia's experiences shed light on the broader impact of the care system on families and the need for comprehensive support structures.

All MPs thanked Katelin and Mia for sharing their experiences.

Peter Gibson MP highlighted the good work the local authority is doing in his constituency but is aware the system isn't supporting children and young people in the way it should. Asked what role

Universities can play in supporting local authorities on this – a collaboration. We need to map out best practices across the Noth so we can learn from the good stuff.

Mary Robinson MP highlighted that pivotal to young people is the period between being in care and moving out - this is a gap. Referenced the Homeless Act and certain aspects that apply to young people in care and maybe this is an area we could look at.

Emma Lewell-Buck MP said that poverty should not be a reason for someone entering care. But the threshold has now changed, when she was social worker she wouldn't have classed poverty as a reason to admit children to care.

Closing remarks

Emma Lewell-Buck MP: thanked everyone for attending and asked if Katelin and Mia would come back to Parliament for the report launch.

ENDS