

Child of the North APPG: Children in Care Report Launch

17 April 2024

Attendees: Emma Lewell-Buck MP (co-chair), Mary Robinson MP (co-chair), Kim Johnson MP (officer), Debbie Abrahams MP, Afzal Khan MP, Marie Rimmer MP, The Lord Bishop of Leeds, The Lord Bishop of Newcastle, Davara Bennett, University of Liverpool, Alexis Darby, Head of Public Affairs NHSA and Health Equity North, Professor David Taylor-Robinson, the University of Liverpool, Rebekah Pierre, lived experience person and author, Kirsty Lumsden, lived experience person, Amy Van Zyl, Chief Executive Officer, REFORM, Becky Plummer, Office of Bishop of Newcastle, Rebecca Natton, Office of Emma Lewell-Buck, Kate Pickett, University of York (via Teams), Hannah Davies Deputy CEO of NHSA and Executive Director Health Equity North (via Teams), Pari sLee, University of Liverpool (via Teams).

Apologies: Peter Gibson MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Liz Twist MP, Rachael Maskell MP.

Meeting Notes

Mary Robinson MP opened the meeting, remarked on the report and thanked all for attending.

Rebekah Pierre gave an overview of the number of children in the North in care and unregulated placements and shared her experience of being in an unregulated placement, the use of which has increased since 2010. She called for home to be a sanctuary and that we work to end the profiteering on care homes.

Kirsty Lumsden shared her experience of the care system when her daughter was taken into care. Kirsty spoke about her drug addiction as a teenage mum and that there was only punishment and no helpful intervention. She said it's vital government take a health perspective and help families. Currently, the state is repeating its own failed cycle.

Mary Robinson MP asked Kirsty about the effects this has had on her daughter and was pleased to hear Kirsty's daughter lives with her now.

Debbie Abrahams MP said: "Kirsty and Rebekah's stories must be acted on and we must provide more support. REFORM would have helped with this and when she was a social worker it was heartbreaking to see the local authority couldn't support families. Private accommodation is too high, and the inequality is disgraceful."

Davara Bennett said: "The government is willing to spend on care but not fund vital community organisations this means many parents don't trust the state but will trust communities."

Kim Johnson MP thanked both Rebekah and Kirsty for speaking to the group. Kim explained that when she worked in adult services at Liverpool Council they had to in-source services from the private sector and doing this for children in care is a moral failing, especially for unregulated care placements. REFORM deserve full funding not bidding every three years from the lottery, they need a security blanket. The hits to local authority funding have had a knock-on effect. Local authorities used to act as a pressure valve but not now.

Kim asked Rebekah what she sees now she is a social worker and has she seen any changes.

Rebekah Pierre said: “I don’t have a front-line role but I see desperation, children and families can’t even get to the point of thriving its surviving. There is a four years waiting list for counselling, there seems to be an apathy in gov and this room should be packed as this is a critical issue. I wanted to improve and change the system but there isn’t the funding and caseloads are through the roof.”

Marie Rimmer MP said there are not enough social workers, no support from managers, and not supervised discipline and there is too much pressure.

Amy Van Zyl said she spent time on the front line of children’s services and they said that they weren’t removing teenagers as there was nowhere to put them but they could remove babies. She has seen teenagers in horrible conditions and babies taken away from parents who need support. She said: “The services are driving action. Systems are so mechanical – we need social workers who have relationships and build confidence. There is another way to do this. It is not simple but it is easier than what we are doing now.”

The Bishop of Leeds said: “We can prioritise prevention, but we won't get solutions. If the government is consistently reducing the amount given to local authorities while demands keep going up then you reduce the capacity of good people to do good things. This is the fourth meeting I have been at in the last few days where we need more resources, the analysis in the report is great but what will we do in the next ten years while we wait for a government that will take long-term preventative measures? Sorry to be partisan but so much is broken. We must get rid of the two child limit.”

Davara Bennett said: “We saw in the pandemic the Universal Credit uplift and the changes that had for people. I hope that they are keeping some services alive as they want the zombie service to restart as easier than starting from the ground up.”

David Taylor-Robinson said: “The money is in the wrong place across the whole system we are investing in crisis and we need to reprofile this funding and we need to do this by reducing child poverty and it is reality cheap to reduce.”

Kate Pickett said: “Did everyone in the room hear today’s World at One, there was a reluctance to engage with the child poverty agenda on both sides of the spectrum and I know MPs in this room on both sides want to address this and I know we can use this evidence to push for the change. What can we do to help this and take this further - this is the golden thread that runs through our work.”

Mary Robinson MP said: “These figures get knocked about and we forget what this means for communities and families. The Communities Select Committee has looked at children and care homes. This gets sidetracked by arguments of the numbers but we need to focus on the outcomes.”

Kim Johnson MP said: “Cherie Blair’s campaign this week was to take children out of poverty by 2030, I have done private members' bills on the two-child cap and I mentioned it in the chamber - CPAG and lots of charities are pushing to scrap it – this report is relevant to Select Committees and Ministers and Shadows and people in this room need to have meetings – we have too many people living in poverty and the gaps are widening. Labour needs to be big and bold, we need Sure Start, an integrated approach and organisations coming together and working with children and families to take them out of poverty.”

Emma Lewell-Buck MP said: “There is money there and we need to reprioritize it – a Chief Executive on thousands, something is wrong with how the money is being spent and money spent in private places, no one should be profiteering from the care of vulnerable children – profit shouldn’t be the bottom line. The line on poverty isn’t cutting through maybe need to say there is money and how do we spend it?”

David Taylor-Robinson said: “We need to think about children's position – where is the advocacy for them and we are all responsible for that – children need a voice in these debates and health equity is at the heart of these debates.”

Mary Robinson MP said: “Local Authorities can look at how they deal with this and ask what this does for children and that doesn’t cost any money.”

David Taylor-Robinson said: “In Australia, there is international funding and stable funding for prevention and they made the economic case for putting children first and supporting children. In Wales we have the Healthy Generation Act – it is a progressive policy – they think about the next generation. What we are doing at the moment is unaffordable.”

Mary Robinson MP thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

Ends