

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus / Public Accounts Committee
Ymchwiliad i blant a phobl ifanc sydd wedi bod mewn gofal / Inquiry into care
experienced children and young people
PAC(5) CECYP - 14
Ymateb gan Y Grŵp Trawsbleidiol ar Blant sy'n Derbyn Gofal / Evidence from Cross
Party Group on Looked After Children

I write as Chair of the All Party Group on Looked After Children and to welcome your Committee's decision to undertake an inquiry looking at public services for care experienced children and young people.

The All Party Group was formed after the publication of the Waterhouse Report: *Lost in Care* which was published in 2000. Since then the Group has served as a forum to discuss issues relating to Looked After Children and Care Leavers and to put pressure on the Welsh Government and public agencies to achieve the sort of transformation that was set out in *Lost in Care* and other reports and initiatives since. We remain frustrated by the slow progress that has been achieved but welcome recent improvements in educational attainment figures for Looked After Children. Nevertheless, even here it must be noted that the attainment level remains well below that of the peer group.

In addition to poor educational attainment the All Party Group has looked at the following matters as areas of concern and needing considerable improvement:

- High premature death rates among care leavers
- High level of referrals to the criminal justice system among Looked After Children (note the report of Lord Laming: *In Care, Out of Trouble*)
- The lack of a national model for advocacy services and the inconsistencies of local provision in advocacy services
- The stability of care placements
- The role of corporate parenting in driving up standards
- The poverty of ambition in target setting for desired improvements and outcomes
- High numbers of care leavers in prison
- High propensity of early parenthood among care leavers
- Tenancy support for care leavers setting up home

One of the concerns we hear most frequently is the lack of effective joint working between relevant agencies. While good practice does exist it is not generally common practice. For example, to reduce the number of children who go missing from care it is necessary for work to be co-ordinated between the police, social services, foster carers and schools. The recent work of South Wales Police in Bridgend to reduce MISPERs is to be commended as a way to improve joint working.

Despite some recent improvements, educational attainment remains far too low and leads to a very real reduction in life chances for Looked After Children and care leavers. Here the role of the senior management team in schools needs to be improved. They need to track the progress of Looked After Children, act quickly to improve poor performance, ensure effective pastoral support, and so on. Local authorities must do their utmost to ensure a school placement is not jeopardised by a change in a care placement.

The All Party Group particularly welcomes the inclusion of “the effectiveness of local authority corporate parenting arrangements” in the committee’s terms of reference. In fact the corporate parenting obligation should extend across public services embracing health, housing, education and as the example above shows even the police. If we want to achieve a transformation this is the sort of radical thinking that is required. Corporate parenting cannot start and end in Children’s Services departments of local authorities. There are a number of ways the political side of corporate parenting could be improved:

- CPD for Local Authority cabinet members and the members of scrutiny committees
- A network for cabinet members with responsibility for children’s services to share best practice, discuss challenges and trends, and feed in advice to the Welsh Government and National Assembly
- A similar network for the chairs of scrutiny committees responsible for Looked After Children

You will recall that the Welsh Government has established a Ministerial Advisory Group on Improving Outcomes for Children and that I was appointed as the Chair of the Group in summer 2016. The All Party Group has welcomed the establishment of the MAG and I give the APG regular updates on its work. The MAG

is due to meet on 29th September to consider a framework for action (2017–2020). It will then exercise oversight on the implementation of the plan, produce regular reports on progress and a comprehensive annual overview. A limited number of sentinel indicators will be developed. To date the work has been progressed under three workstreams:

1. Preventing children entering care and early intervention
2. Improving outcomes for children already in care
3. Supporting care leavers to successful futures and independent living

The APG would welcome the application of the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act to help maximise the benefits of public expenditure in this field. Local authorities face many challenges and there is a need to plan more effectively to develop specialist provision, often on a regional basis. There are a wide range of providers offering services for Looked After Children including those from the independent and private sectors. Local authorities would benefit from shaping their commissioning work to develop greater co-ordination over local care economies. It is also the case that there has not been a consistent approach to investment in LAC services despite the demand and complexity of cases increasing. Greater transparency in local authorities children's budgeting would increase accountability and allow for a more accurate assessment of total spend on LAC services, and this in turn could be measured against outcomes.

The All Party Group regularly expresses concern about the level of investment in CAMHS services as many LAC need access to high quality mental health services. It should also be noted here that Care Leavers are liable to be overlooked in the planning of mental health services. Concerns have also been expressed about the impact of cuts in youth services which are often a key area of support for LAC.

Finally, it should be remembered that LAC rely on the dedication and professionalism of social workers, foster carers and teachers. It is important that investment in the workforce matches our ambition for improved and more ambitious outcomes.

I hope this response will prove useful to the work of the Public Accounts Committee in carrying out this important inquiry.