Meeting with Young People from *Who Cares? Scotland* – Note of Meeting

1. As part of its inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care, on Tuesday 4 June 2013 the Committee met a group of young people with experience of being in care. The meeting took place in the Scottish Parliament and was facilitated by Who Cares? Scotland\(^1\).

2. The meeting began with a dramatic presentation by Kibble\(^2\) and young people from *Who Cares? Scotland*, followed by group discussions. Committee members and the young people were split into two groups, each with five to six young people, to discuss their experiences. This included issues such as the care system, social workers, family contact, foster care and placement moves.

3. The following is a note of specific points that were made by the young people—

   **General experience of going into care**

   - For many of the young people (who were in their mid- to late teens), social workers first had a presence early on in their life, typically around the age of five or six.

   - There was a very strong consensus that, as children, the young people had blamed themselves for being separated from their family and felt as though they were being punished. They spoke of a lack of explanation from social workers and other authorities as to why they were being taken away from their family. Similar points were raised when the Committee held an informal meeting with young people who had left the care system.\(^3\)

   - The young people also indicated that they would have benefitted from social workers explaining to them when they first entered the care system: exactly what care was; why they were being taken away from home; what the social workers’ role in their lives was; and what to expect from the entire process.

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\(^1\) Who Cares? Scotland is a national voluntary organisation providing a range of advocacy, advice and support services across Scotland for children and young people with experience of care up to age 25.

\(^2\) Kibble provides a stable, purposeful, safe and happy environment for young people in trouble, and has been providing child and youth care for over 150 years. It is now one of Scotland’s leading social enterprises enriching the lives of disadvantaged young people in Scotland.

\(^3\) Meeting with Care Leavers at Who Cares? Scotland (Monday 17 December 2012) – Note of meeting: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EducationandCultureCommittee/Inquiries/Meeting_with_Care_Leavers_-_note_of_meeting.pdf
Most stated that they were given no advance notice on where they were moving or that they would be moving soon (two mentioned they were given less than an hour’s notice).

- This led to some young people feeling like each placement was temporary; they were “being placed simply to be moved somewhere again”. The view was expressed that there was little consideration of the impact this would have on their wider life (e.g. going to school, meeting and making new friends), as this prevented many from getting to know the people they interacted with at home and elsewhere.

- Many agreed that they were often not told the truth when they were moving – either by omission or deliberately. This seemed to occur in initial moves from their family, and during their time in care. One young person spoke of being told he was ‘just switching bedrooms’, when he was leaving the carer’s house; another was told he was going on holiday. There seemed to some resentment towards social workers because of this; one person said “we’re not meant to lie to them, so why are they lying to us?” With hindsight, they considered the lack of notice arose in case they ran away. They could accept that if attempts were made to build trust, but generally felt they were being punished. In some cases, considerable time elapsed before reasons were given, if at all.

- Many of the young people agreed that, for a long time, it had been difficult to trust social workers; this often prevented the young people from telling them things that they now realise would have allowed the social workers to help them.

- When children were given a say in future placements, they tended to be more successful. One described a positive experience where the social worker asked what they wanted and discussed what would be possible to accommodate: “It’s better to get the ‘wrong’ answer but [get an explanation as to why], rather than nothing at all; that’s how can we build trust.”

- A number of them preferred residential units to placements with families, especially units that looked like small houses, stating that they felt “comfortable” at the children’s home.

- Several of the young people considered that they should have been taken into care more quickly.

- Many had attended multiple schools – in once case twelve different schools. Some felt singled out at school as being “in care” and did not always consider it appropriate that the school knew about their lives.

Number of social workers
- A majority considered that, for the most part, social workers appeared unprepared for meetings. Having to repeat their personal history every time they were allocated a new social worker was exasperating: “it’s not a
nice feeling to go over [my history] time and time again… they should have known my case before they came to me”. It also affected their faith in the decisions social workers made about their life, if they did not appear to know their case thoroughly.

- All the young people agreed that, considering the lack of stability in their family lives, there should be some consistency with regard to the social worker allocated – “it should be one person that knows everything about your life”. They questioned how it was possible to build a proper relationship when they had had ten or more social workers entering and leaving their lives.

- One young person was enjoying a very positive experience with his current social worker, saying that she “actually listens to me, takes me out, asks me if I have any problems and actually [spends] time with me, showing she cares… if she can’t do something she'll phone me the next day, rather than waiting for my next review as others [tended] to do.”

- Young people were aware of social workers’ heavy workload and several said they had felt guilty burdening them. As a result they had sometimes kept things to themselves so they did not add to their workload.

- Some young people had the impression that social workers did not want to invest much time in speaking or spending time with them when they were younger (“perhaps too immature”), but attempted to adopt a greater presence when they were older.

- On a broader note, some young people considered that they had too many professionals to speak to, and that they would prefer to speak to one trusted person rather than being referred to different agencies.

**Family contact**

- As noted in the Committee’s previous meeting with care leavers, there was a major concern surrounding separation from and contact with siblings. All young people were in agreement that the rules surrounding family contact (especially siblings from whom they had been separated) were too restrictive⁴.

- Most young people agreed that, where it was stipulated that family contact must be supervised, it took too long to make and confirm arrangements.

- However, it is worth noting that the young people who saw their family regularly were very happy with their personal arrangements (i.e. being personally responsible and heavily involved for how frequently they contacted their family).

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⁴ One young person stated that he was only allowed to see his younger brothers two days a year and wished he had a greater presence in their lives. Another stated that, now that their siblings were settled in a stable home elsewhere, they were discouraged from contacting them for fear of disrupting their stability.
Foster Families

• Some people voiced a concern that some foster parents were not providing care for the ‘right’ reasons. They believed they lived with foster carers who were ‘obviously just in it for the money’, as there were no attempts made to genuinely bond with them. In some instances, foster carers made it clear that they could do whatever or go wherever they wanted, as long as they were back by morning.

• This was not the case with all the young people present. One had a very good experience, stating: “I could go to them and they’ll always listen, and they communicate [whatever my concerns were] with everyone else in the household so I didn’t have to repeat it over and over again.”

• Many also expressed their discomfort about social workers checking on them while their foster carers were present, stating that the foster carers’ presence was “threatening” to them, and forced them to “play happy families”.

• One good example highlighted was informing the child of a move to a new foster carer well in advance to allow them a chance to meet. One young person noted that they were able to meet a new foster parent a few months in advance, and were given the chance to stay for a weekend or two, allowing them to move when they were ready and felt comfortable.

Children’s hearings

• Some of the young people expressed strong concerns about the children’s hearings system. In particular, some said that they had felt inhibited about speaking in front of their family as they may have had a comment to make about them. Some were unaware that they could speak to a panel member on their own and one said they had lied to a panel. There was mixed awareness of the support that an advocate could provide.

• Hearings were also considered to be too formal and lacking in flexibility.

Conclusion

4. After the group discussion the young people presented the Committee with four concluding messages—

• Young people should be better informed and included in the decision making process before, during and after leaving care;

• There should be consistent access to early intervention relating to family support;

• Young people should have fewer placement moves giving them more consistency in their care journey;

• Young people should have the option to continue their relationships with family and friends whilst in care.