Meeting with Care Leavers at Who Cares? Scotland – Note of meeting

1. As part of its inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care, on Monday 17 December 2012 the Committee met a group of care leavers. The half day visit was organised and facilitated by Who Cares? Scotland.

2. Throughout the afternoon members met young people who had been in care and watched video presentations of their experiences. The afternoon included discussions on pre-care, the care experience and after-care.

3. The following is a note of specific points that were made by the care leavers during the afternoon—

Pre-care
- There was overwhelming consensus from care leavers that they had been left at home too long and that many chances were given to parents to improve with no action being taken;
- It was noted that, in several cases, the trigger for being taken into care was offending behaviour by the child, rather than parental neglect;
- The view was expressed that some of these children offended or “acted up” specifically in order to gain attention and to be removed from parental homes where neglect was prevalent but being ignored by decision makers. Equally, one young person spoke of having no desire to come into care despite the issues going on in the family home;
- It did not follow that the siblings of these children were also removed. Indeed, evidence from the care leavers the Committee met suggests that they were often left. Siblings coming into care were often separated, making family contact difficult. The view was expressed that siblings who were removed generally had improved chances in life whilst siblings who were left had worsened chances;
- Some care leavers expressed concern that, when looked after at home, their family would receive a visit from a social worker around once a week, who would not necessarily notice signs of neglect or emotional abuse. Better provision of intensive family support services would have helped families before they had to be removed from the family home;
Reflecting on their experience, some care leavers expressed the view that, if at ages 3 to 4, there are no signs of improved parenting, social workers ought to be intervening to remove children from the home;

Care leavers indicated that they would “put on a show” to social workers and generally be too scared (of parents) to tell the truth. There was a fear that their actions would have consequences for their family (such as splitting up siblings, being removed from their parents or losing links with wider family members and friends). A general feeling emerged that social workers generally did not speak to children;

It was noted that, in some cases, parents would have benefitted from having someone come to their house to help out with day to day tasks (such as a social work assistant);

When asked what should have been done differently based on their experience, care leavers provided the following thoughts—

- there should have been advocacy support to allow children to talk away from their parents;
- they felt that social work were there for their parents, not them;
- they felt that there was a lack of continuity in social work and that, in general, social workers lectured and preached without seeking to understand;
- there was a lack of information made available for them and therefore little dialogue with social workers

In school

- Concerns were raised by some care leavers about children in care being given special treatment by teachers, thereby stigmatising them and making them a target for bullies (wider concerns were also raised about the general stigma attached to being in care);
- A further concern was raised that teachers generally only look at the behaviour of children in care and do not consider deeper issues of what causes that behaviour;
- It was noted that there is a need for clearer guidelines for teachers on how to treat children who are in care in a sensitive manner;
- The view was expressed that all teachers ought to be trained on corporate parenting;

In Care

- Several care leavers noted that being taken into care was a frightening experience, especially where this involved going into residential care. Often this happened at extremely short notice, thereby exacerbating the trauma;
- There was a general view among care leavers that staff in care homes require more training on the issues faced by children after being taken into care. However many of the care leavers spoke positively about their relationships with care staff;
- Concerns were raised that, due to a lack of beds in residential units, some of the care leavers had ended up in secure units. However, it was noted by Who Cares? Scotland staff that this is not something that would happen nowadays;
- Concerns were also expressed about being moved between homes. One young person advised that he had been in one home for four years (where he
felt settled and had established strong relationships) then was moved to another home. This left him with a feeling of rejection;

- The importance of professionals building good relationships with children in care, understanding their needs, was stressed;
- It was noted that children in care experience too many placement moves. Several care leavers recounted up to 30-40 placement moves throughout their care journey (although this included moves after leaving care);
- Some care leavers described placement moves across local authority boundaries, where they were split up from their siblings. This led to a feeling that they were being punished by going into care, losing contact with all that was familiar to them;
- Mixed views were expressed about the extent to which children should have contact with their families when in care – some care leavers who had not wanted contact expressed concerns that it was forced upon them by professionals. However there was a general view that children ought to have the option of contact and be in control of how, where and when that contact takes place. A major concern was expressed over being split up from siblings;
- There was consensus that resources should not be an issue in respect of decision making on taking children into care and the child’s care journey;
- The view was expressed that there is a need for more high quality, trained foster carers;
- It was noted that it is hard when being moved around as there is the requirement to interact with new people all of the time and old friends are lost;
- Some care leavers indicated that they preferred residential care as there they did not feel as if they were imposing on foster families (although the general feeling was that foster care was inclusive and welcoming and recognised their issues);
- However, the view was expressed that foster parents were “not my parents”, and they did not want another mum or dad;
- There was a general feeling that children were not involved in the planning process for moves or in their care journey more generally;
- Concerns were expressed about restrictions being placed on liberty in care – for example not being allowed out individually, pocket money requiring to be accounted for, no sleep overs allowed without police checks, requiring social work permission to undertake school trips and cigarettes being issued one by one;
- It was noted that emergency admissions were difficult, both for those being admitted, and for those already there, due to the random but regular disruption caused;
- It was felt that social workers had power over their lives, including over school trips, travelling and applying for passports;

*Children’s Hearings*

- A range of views were expressed about the children’s hearings system. The concern was raised that, in general, there are too many people at hearings, creating an intimidating and stuffy atmosphere for children. A particular concern was raised that children only see some professionals (such as educational psychologists) very irregularly yet, they (the psychologists) attend the hearing and express an opinion;
Many of the care leavers were scared of the hearing system as going to a hearing was seen as a time when fundamental decisions were taken about their life. This caused them stress and affected other aspects of their life, such as school. In general it was noted that the system needed to be much more child-friendly.

Concerns were raised about the lack of continuity of panel members. It was, however, noted that children can request that one panel member continue. This was considered to be a good thing;

The care leavers stated that the best hearings occurred where they were listened to and the number of people in the room was reduced; A further concern raised by some care leavers was that an added tension was created by parents being present at children’s hearings.

Leaving Care

Concerns were expressed that general living skills are not taught to children in care and that it is difficult for care leavers to get work;

It was noted that some care leavers have been institutionalised due to a lack of basic living skills or maturity to survive and thrive in society independently, and desire to return to care. Many preferred going to prison where they are looked after with meals, education, a gym and friends, as an alternative to living without skills and alone with no support;

It was also claimed that a disproportionate amount of care leavers are stopped by the police, as they would be known to police from minor offending that occurred in the care home (such as absconding);

The general view was expressed that the guaranteed age of support for looked after children should be raised to 25;

Several care leavers expressed concerns that once they turned 16, provision was no longer available to them. One care leaver spoke of being moved to a homeless hostel upon turning 16. Another care leaver spoke of being allocated a care leaver who was unprepared for the role;

It was noted that over 80% of the group of care leavers the Committee met had been homeless at some point;

The point was made that young people need to receive practical help when leaving care, and advice on basic tasks and challenges faced by most adults (e.g. how to pay bills) and that the creation of a system of peer mentoring would be helpful;

Several care leavers spoke of having faced severe difficulties in getting a job;

In respect of doing further education courses, it was noted that the complex lifestyle that many care leavers have led does not lend itself to the routine of attending colleges – many care leavers end up dropping out. They need broader support to make the most of these opportunities;

It was, however, noted that there a number of organisations, including Who Cares? Scotland, the Scottish Throughtcare Forum, the Venture Trust and Move On, who work with care leavers to help them to realise their rights, have a voice and improve their outcomes;

Concerns were also expressed about the current quality of careers advice offered to care leavers;
• In general, concerns were raised about a lack of preparation and planning for children leaving care, a lack of opportunities for them in the job market and a lack of support by authorities;
• The importance of continued attachment and support for children leaving care was mentioned, and of emotional and practical preparation for the transition into adult life;
• Some care leavers noted that, on leaving secure accommodation and upon removal of a supervision order, they did not know what to do or who to turn to;
• The suggestion was made that there should be a “parent” help line available 24 hours a day to advise as problems arise;

**General**

• One care leaver stated tellingly – “it is always done to me, not with me, and if you tell me what to do I will tell you “no”. But if you treat me with respect I will respect you back.

*Neil Stewart*

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