

Public Services Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Implementation strategy for children's social care

Wednesday 22 March 2023

3 pm

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Members present: Baroness Morris of Yardley (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Campbell of Surbiton; Lord Carter of Coles; Lord Porter of Spalding; Lord Prentis of Leeds; Lord Shipley; Lord Willis of Knaresborough.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 8 - 11

Witnesses

I: Cathy Ashley OBE, Chief Executive, Family Rights Group; Joe Lane, Head of Policy and Research, Action for Children; Anne-Marie Douglas, Chief Executive Officer/Founder, Peer Power Youth; and Rose Akinsulire, Peer Leader, Peer Power Youth.

Examination of witnesses

Cathy Ashley, Joe Lane, Anne-Marie Douglas and Rose Akinsulire.

Q8 The Chair: Thank you very much for coming before the committee today. This is the second evidence session of the Public Services Committee's new inquiry into the implementation of the children's social care strategy. To begin with, I will ask you to say where you are from.

Joe Lane: I am from Action for Children.

Cathy Ashley: I am chief executive of the charity Family Rights Group.

Anne-Marie Douglas: I am founder and CEO of Peer Power Youth, a lived experience-led charity.

Rose Akinsulire: I am a young care-experienced person, and I am also with Peer Power Youth.

Q9 The Chair: Ms Ashley, will you comment on how far the Government's

priorities in their implementation plan reflect the very complex lives and challenges that children and families face?

Cathy Ashley: In our experience, the strategy's direction of travel is welcome.

As for some of the strategy's language, I have just been with some kinship carers, who applauded its recognition of kinship care; for the first time, it feels much more central. The emphasis on early help and trying to prevent crises from developing is welcome, as is the importance of loving relationships.

That is all very welcome, but there are some buts. At your previous session, Josh MacAlister and Anne Longfield talked very eloquently about how the amount of money going into only a small number of pathfinder areas would not be the major reset that the children's social care system needs.

I know that there were questions about the level of poverty families face. I think it is worth quoting from a study by academics from Liverpool and Huddersfield Universities. They found that worsening poverty had resulted in 10,356 more children in England becoming looked after in the care system between 2015 and 2022, and they estimated that it had led to 22,000 additional children being placed on child protection plans.

Experience from our advice line, parents panel and kinship care panel resonates with the struggles that families currently face. We met the parents panel—mothers and fathers involved with the child welfare system—earlier this week. We met our kinship care panel just a couple of hours ago.

What the mothers on the parents panel said to us resonated with our advice line in relation to their experience as victims of domestic abuse. They are often deemed by the system to have failed to protect their child and, instead of getting support as adults and children gaining support as victims, they have faced a system where their children have been removed, leading in some cases to the adoption of their children.

We have found that that is shrinking as more and more systems are in crisis. Those early preventive domestic abuse support services are shrinking in the main, and there is very little indeed in terms of perpetrator programmes.

They also talked about how the cost of living crisis and insecure housing, alongside the shrinking availability of support services, are adding to the problems, which means that their options and choices are often extremely limited. They described, such is the limitation, that often it is a rational decision to stay with the abuser, given what other options are available.

They also said that once their children had been removed and adopted, the court assessment is often that they need specialist therapeutic interventions, which are just not available, so they are in a complete

Catch-22; they cannot access the therapeutic support that would put them in the best position to be able either to get their children back or prevent another child in the family from going into care.

The kinship carers we talked to earlier all talked about the strain of the cost of living crisis. In some cases—this includes experience from our advice line—they had to stop work. Fifty per cent of kinship carers have to give up work to take on the children. They are then reliant on the benefits system, which is not designed for their needs or those of their children. Special guardianship allowances are highly variable—a postcode lottery.

We also have the heartbreak that sometimes disability living allowance and other disability payments that the kinship carer gets may be for other children, even those in the household, but they are then treated as income by the local authority and assessed. Therefore, they do not qualify for special guardianship allowance, so they are ruled out by means test.

One last thing that they wanted to convey is the importance of independent advice, particularly legal advice, in order that they can make the right decisions for their child and navigate the child welfare system. That is not really touched on in either the Government's response or even in Josh's review.

Anne-Marie Douglas: In considering the question, I would like to tell you a little bit about why I founded Peer Power; it is directly related to the question.

I founded the charity Peer Power on my own lived experience of trauma and adversity and experiences of social care and associated systems. The charity works in partnership with young people with lived experience of care, mental health and justice. They support each other as peers on their journey to adulthood, and we are working together to give feedback to and improve support services in the statutory sector.

When I set up the charity six years ago it was founded directly by what children and young people with extensive experience of care, justice and mental health services said would make the most difference to them in service design and delivery.

Pertinent to the session today, these are children who are least heard and are undersupported with this experience. I heard from children all around the country and set up the charity based on the three big things that they said would make the most difference to improve the system.

The first and biggest within that was relationships, love and care, and the importance of consistent, trusted and caring relationships throughout their lives, in particular within these support services. I absolutely support and welcome the focus on love and consistent relationships within the Government's strategy.

The young people we work with will have tens of support workers coming in and out of their lives by the time they are 25, some over 30. Those are many experiences of fractured trust and fractured relationships within the system.

I would like to see more clarity around the Government's plans to ensure that approaches to care are co-ordinated across those multiple agencies with trusted relationships at the centre; otherwise, there is a real risk that nothing changes in that merry-go-round of services around a child and significant numbers of children still fall through the net.

The other area of focus for the charity is involvement. Children want to be heard, have good independent advocacy and know their rights; to be done with, rather than to, in the system.

Finally, they want support for their future with training, education and employment. We welcome the commitment to increase the independent advocacy services. I will talk a little bit more about that later.

A particular interest for us is what seems to be a lack of parental responsibility in the report around local authorities and older children and young people, particularly in relation to totally inadequate and, in many cases, harmful accommodation. There are nearly 7,500 children living in accommodation without that day-to-day care and routine adult attention and protection. I do not know whether Rose wants to add anything to that.

Rose Akinsulire: Regarding accommodation, as I understand it, the local authority is meant to be the corporate parent. I think they should hold that responsibility and be held accountable when things are missing in terms of having a home to stay in.

The idea that it is suitable for you to leave home at 16 should not be the norm or standard for young people. It is important that you are able to stay as long as you can in the care system and get as much as you need from it before you are sent out, often on your own.

As Cathy said, there are people who struggle living on their own. So many young people are living through the financial crisis right now. They do not have people or family to talk to, and often the local authority does not have the resources, or is not present enough, to support them in what they need.

That often leads them to go into other areas. They cannot find adequate employment for all kinds of reasons—maybe education, or just access. They can make money in other ways that are not suitable for them. That could have other consequences.

Even with university accommodation, support is very inadequate. Not enough young people have been spoken to about the experiences they are having directly. It is all about the process from the local authority's point of view. It is understandable why it is looked at that way, but they do not see the impact on young people. That should be the main focus—

how it is affecting them, even though it makes sense to strategise it in that way.

Anne-Marie Douglas: Do you want to answer Question 1 any further?

Rose Akinsulire: There are a few things.

It is a very loaded question. It is quite difficult to pinpoint anything specific in depth to say what should be prioritised; there are many areas, but one of the things I took away from it was that not enough was given in terms of children under 16. A lot of it was about 16 and up and most of the people in the care system are below that, because by the time you reach 16 you are ageing out of the system at that point, so you will be transitioned out.

In order to give 16-and-up care leavers the support that they need and give them access to education and employment, they are trying to gain support for that age group. If young people who have been in care have had problem experiences before that age, they may not be willing to accept that support by the time they become 16. That is another barrier that should be looked into because they are not really heard very much. I do not feel that it is sending a positive message to children under 16 if they feel that they are not represented and already are not listened to, and the decisions are often made for them. Is there time to say more?

The Chair: Can I ask a follow-up question? You talked about the local authority being accountable and about post-16. You explained that very clearly, because it is not—nobody is taking responsibility.

When you speak to those people in care under 16, do you think that they feel that the local authority is accountable, when it does have that legal responsibility, or do they feel as though, although it is legally accountable, it cannot see that it is accountable?

Rose Akinsulire: I am currently running my own campaign on this. People I have spoken to often do not feel they are listened to, but it is on all sides; it is not just the local authority, it is kinship care, foster parents or a care home they are in. They do not feel they are being listened to; they do not feel they are being supported. They often feel that decisions are being made for them in their best interests, but it is harming them; because it is harming them and they are under 16 they are told that their opinion or views are not necessarily valid. I do not think that should be the way to see it.

Joe Lane: In terms of the complexity, one area that the strategy has improved is the commonality of interactions with the children's social care system, moving away from the idea that it is quite an unusual experience to have a complex life as a child or a family. Over the course of their childhood, one in four children will engage with the children's social care system and so will have a social worker. It is capturing that, so it is a very dynamic interaction with the children's social care system.

A second area where it has responded to complexity in the strategy is to ask: how can we spend more time helping children and families rather than assessing them? The current system is very boundary-led: can we put children or families in a bucket? Is there a child in need? Do they need a child protection plan, *et cetera*? Those are static categories, but people's lives are complex and we spend more of our time dealing with the real complexities of people's lives. We think that the movement towards early help should deal with that.

We think that the strategy is good at identifying the issues where the social care system adds to the complexity in children's and families' lives. As we have heard, there are very poor-quality standards of care where children are moved around; they are moved away from their homes, often a very long way, which challenges their existing relationships.

There is a merry-go-round of services that people interact with at the moment that makes their lives feel complex. There is a lack of support for care leavers, so they are then dealing with additional challenges on top of the complexities they have experienced in childhood.

There are areas where the system has not done enough to respond to those complexities. There are two specific ones and one general one. One specific one is that we do not think that the strategy says enough about the calamity that is the provision of placements or homes for children in care. The CMA called the market 'dysfunctional'. We know this is a key driver of funding costs in the system and for local authorities more generally. At the moment, the proposal to run two regional care co-operative pathfinders is pretty minimal. We could easily be sitting here in three years or four years, potentially longer, with the same problems facing children and families and the system.

A second area, which is much less well known, is reunification. The most common way for a child to leave care is to move back with the family from whom they were removed in the first place. Around 10,000 children a year are referred to as reunified, but that is often a missing experience and both the care review and the Government's implementation strategy missed that completely. That is one of the complexities that is caused by that dynamic nature of social care. You are neither in care nor out of it; people move in and out of the care system through their childhood.

A final point—we heard a bit about it—is whether there is enough focus on the need for cultural change in the system and that accountability, which is obviously missing at the moment. You will be well aware that the longer away from the initial review you get, the memories of the problems fade and attention moves towards the problems of implementation. How do we keep that focus on authorities? People with corporate parenting responsibilities really are not living up to the job that they are supposed to be doing.

Lord Shipley: I would like to ask Cathy and Anne-Marie some supplementaries. If I say what they are, you might build them into your reply to the question I am going to ask.

I was very struck by your description, Cathy, of the problems of kinship care, if I understood correctly: there was 50% at work; it is a postcode lottery; and some have heartbreak. There is also loss of hardship support from other funding sources, because the multiagency working is not joined up. Anne-Marie, you told us what I think we already know—that it is very difficult for the multiagency approach to function effectively for everybody. Any further comments you can give us on that I would find useful.

I want to look first at the period before decisions are made about children being taken into care. Could you give us your views on the Government's measures to support children and families before they come into care? Joe, what do you think of the Government's plans to support children and families before a decision is made?

Joe Lane: We think that the strategy on this is quite strong—the theory of it. Although the review proposed the new family help teams, the strategy proposes to do that in nine to 12 pathfinders in local authorities. Crucially, those family help teams are envisaged, on our reading of it, as being interdisciplinary teams, or multiagency teams. How do we get the children and families to build relationships with a clear institution that owns that relationship and responsibility? How do we help this family to avoid further intervention in the social care system?

Crucially, it addresses two quite distinct problems. The first problem is baked in the Children Act: what is the obligation of the local authority when a child under Section 17 is in need? The proposal is that these family help teams will owe specific obligations to children once they are in need, whereas that is quite unclear at the moment in the current legislative or statutory framework. What ends up happening is that a child becomes in need and nothing really happens.

From Action for Children's perspective, one thing we experience is that we support a child or family before they are categorised as in need. We might do some quite in-depth work with them. We refer them to a local authority because we think the issues have become worse, and they report back to us in, say, 12 months or so. That child, having been a child in need, has not received any support. We think that real focus on family help teams providing support to children in need is one area where there can be added clarity.

Related to that, and because of that problem, over the past decade or so this newish area of early help has emerged partly as a response to the problems of delivering Section 17. That has created additional confusion. At the moment, in some local authorities one in six children are receiving it; in other local authorities, it is one in 150. It is a public service that looks completely different depending on where you are around the country. There is at least the kernel of a proposal from government to say, 'We are going to provide policy clarity on what helps a child in need of support', and we hope that should mean there is less need for this additional early help category.

People in this room will know that many of these changes are not new; we have been grappling with this issue of whether we prevent or protect, and how do we balance the resources of Section 17 versus Section 47 support? One thing that has happened in the past decade or so is that there is a bit of a consensus around what that means. We cannot rely on universal services to do the specific safeguarding work that should be happening for children and families at risk of going into care. The family help teams should be really dedicated resources to say, 'That is a family at risk of social care intervention. It needs specific support'.

The second one is to concentrate officials' time on the nuts and bolts of what is going on with those families—those interdisciplinary teams, what needs to be included in that support for mental health problems and for things like substance abuse and domestic abuse, those really common issues that drag children and families into the social care system. There are lots there.

There are two challenges. One is that there is still a little bit of confusion in the strategy. We think that the family help teams should be mandated. The Government need to give a clear sense of direction if they want them to happen.

That is the key area. We have the beginnings of a good system, but the Government could go a bit further in the support that they give to the initial proposals they have made.

Cathy Ashley: Since 2009-10, there has been a 144% increase in child protection inquiries. Only 29% of them resulted in a child protection plan—the child protection conference determining that there is significant harm.

We have a lot of families being caught in a child protection system. With the right support in place, they would not need to be there because the ramifications for families when they are in child protection can be huge with levels of fear, anxiety, distrust and recriminations. We need to shift the system far more in terms of early support.

In relation to the strategy, the investment needed to make this happen across the country is just not there. It is looking very much at individual, small pathfinders. We know what works; we know family group conferences work. You do not need a pathfinder to determine that. There is a balance in relation to that. There may be some areas of innovation in these pathfinders, but in the main what we need is early support and investment.

There is very little, if anything, in relation to early legal advice and specialist support for families trying to avoid ending up in a situation where they may be seen as failing to engage by children's services. One of the key reasons you end up with decisions to go into pre-proceedings or into care is the view by the local authority that the family is not engaging constructively with you. You have to look at how to build up the trust that Anne-Marie talked about.

One of my concerns about the pathfinders is the proposal to introduce expert child protection social workers. There is quite a lot of controversy around that, both among social work professionals and families, because the danger is that you will end up with another torn relationship. A family will be working with the family help team and then along comes the expert child protection social worker, who will by nature probably have more power in terms of the dynamics, and then it is another relationship often viewed through the lens of anxiety and risk.

I want to talk a little about the question you asked in relation to kinship. I emphasise that, first, the vast majority of children living in kinship care are not formally in the looked after system. You could use family group conferences much more effectively to ensure that the support network is around parents to enable them to parent effectively and safely, particularly where there are concerns, and to do some contingency planning if things do go wrong.

What we are seeing at the moment from kinship carers is that, first, there is nothing in legislation that defines kinship care. Although the strategy talks about definition, it does not talk about that being in primary legislation. If you had a definition in primary legislation, it would allow clarity. People often don't recognise themselves as kinship carers; they just think of themselves as the granny taking on a grandchild, or aunts and uncles taking them on. First, it would help people to recognise themselves as kinship carers; it would help public agencies so that kinship carers would not have to keep explaining who they are on occasions. But also you could then have passporting into a basic level of service provision that would be there for kinship carers and the children they are raising regardless of the legal status—things such as priority school admissions and bereavement support. That could include a minimum financial allowance.

If you look at what is in the Government's response, it feels very much like a response from the Department for Education, not a government-wide response. I want to give one example. In relation to kinship care, the document refers to, 'We will work across government to explore additional workplace entitlements'. This is a government strategy. A long case has been made very convincingly around kinship carers having the same rights to paid leave as adopters so that they do not have to give up work in order to take on children. Therefore, it feels very weak in relation to saying that we are just making the argument now around workforce entitlements with other government departments when this is meant to be a government-wide strategy.

Anne-Marie Douglas: We absolutely support better help and prevention approaches for children and families to prevent more children from coming into the care system, and the strategy around teachers, doctors, nurses, police and so on working together to keep children safe in an intervening area.

I want to speak to the point on trust and interagency working. What is very important about the strategy—I guess I am bound to say this given

the organisation I come from—is that there seems to be a weakness around how they are going to listen to children in the system and have them fully and meaningfully involved in the commissioning and design of those services, particularly those outside social care, that would support the strategy.

That is how you build trust and that is a huge gap. The strategy talks about encouraging listening to children and people. That is not enough; it needs resource and commitment throughout, and it should really be a golden thread that runs throughout the strategy.

I also want to speak briefly about advocacy and the extension of advocacy throughout before children come into care. Many of the young people we are engaging with at Peer Power seem to be experiencing much higher support needs. I know that is the case for many other small grass-roots charities that are limited in resource and that we are trying to support. We know that some of these needs are beyond statutory universal services. There is a real need for that independent advocacy, and it seems that much of our work is going that way in any case. I do not know whether Rose has any comment on advocacy.

Rose Akinsulire: The services that advocacy comes from are not always appropriate, based upon personal experience and young people I have spoken to and care leavers. Based on the personal experience of my siblings, they have had an advocate and the advocate did not really prioritise the issues they were facing. I am thinking about the support that the young person needed, because in a way they were supporting the local authority.

It sounds rather strange, but this comes back to the ongoing problem I have experienced myself where outsourced services did not provide me with the support I needed and it caused further problems because the issue I had was not dealt with properly. I had to find ways to manage that while also believing I was being supported, but it just was not working. Meanwhile, the person who was supporting me was doing it through the local authority—I told them to support me.

On the issues I have faced, I had a very bad experience in foster care, which included abuse and some really horrible things happened. It was not dealt with properly, and the support I needed was not given properly, because there was just a need to protect the local authority from having any bigger problems.

There is another issue I want to speak about at this time. I think kinship care is positive and is a really good alternative, but it depends on the state of the family—the family situation. If there are severe mental health difficulties that are not being managed properly, or issues like severe neglect or just criminal negligence or abuse, determining whether kinship care would be useful is important to think about, because sometimes putting them with another family member would still keep them in the family unit; they could still have access to that person who could be causing that child harm. It might seem like things are okay because of

the person they are living with, but they are still being harmed inadvertently by having to be around family gatherings, or going to that person's house and things like that.

I think that we should consider options around who would be best or most suitable, depending on where they live, because sometimes what can be really difficult is having young people travel far away from their families, and then they are disconnected in that way.

Sometimes, that is useful if that person needs to be put away from that family member. I had a young person who was temporarily a foster sibling in the same house. It was temporary, but their father was on class A drugs and he was taken from the home because of that. He and I had spoken about the difficulties he was facing. He was about 14 or 15 at the time and did not want to be at home. A social worker was involved, but he was only temporarily in care. As they were investigating the situation, he did not want to go back there and he was going to go into other stuff to deal with it.

Even though he was speaking to the social worker about what he wanted, he was not listened to and he ended up going back to that person's house. Where is all the support and the things I have been speaking about? This is to try to sort out this problem, but it should not be happening because so much harm is being done. I feel that it is not giving the consequences to the people who need it; it is almost as if the child has to put up with dealing with someone they did not choose to have as a parent.

The Chair: It damaged both sides.

Lord Bach: I have a brief question about kinship. It is pretty detailed, but it seems to me it is fundamental. It does not matter what I think; it is what you think.

Legal aid problems for kinship families have clearly been an issue in the past. Is there anything in the Government's response that makes you more comfortable about what might happen in that area, or has it not been touched upon at all?

Cathy Ashley: We welcome the fact that the Government have committed and the regulations have gone through. From May of this year, means-tested legal aid will be available to prospective special guardians in private law proceedings. That is extremely welcome and it will make a difference to some special guardians.

However, it is means-tested. For example, a grandparent who has their own home will not be able to have legal aid in that circumstance. The vast majority of special guardianship orders arise in public law proceedings, so at the end of care proceedings. That is not in scope at the moment.

What we are very keen to see—it would be wonderful if there was a recommendation from this committee—is ideally an extension of legal

aid. We do not want it means-tested, but extended legal aid so that kinship carers and prospective special guardians can have legal advice and representation. It is really important. Often, that is when decisions are made about what planned support is available to the child and the carers. Given the delays and problems within our family courts at the moment, the danger is that people will just be pushed to agree things. If you do not get the support plan right and the carers do not understand exactly what they are agreeing to—if they have not had sight, for example, of questions around the assessment of the child and their needs—the danger is that it will not work in the best interests of the child. It would be great if that was included.

Q10 Lord Porter of Spalding: We are going to make the assumption that there will be something positive in this strategy, but that might be a big ask at the moment. What is in the strategy that you think might help the experience of staff on the ground who are working with children and young people?

Joe Lane: I mentioned the experience of our staff where they think a child has been referred around the system and it does not look like they have been helped very much. Action for Children provides family help or support to about 40,000 people each year, children and families. Family support workers get dragged into that system, so they spend lots of their time feeding into things like assessments when they want to be out and about helping families navigate other services and deal with the challenges they are facing.

We think that family help teams, which propose an interdisciplinary way of working, could facilitate family support workers spending more of their time talking to families. That would be really positive.

A second area where that would help is multiagency working and the move to interdisciplinary working. Can we remove a number of organisational handovers, or the challenges of information sharing, that multiagency working poses? That might be a family support worker waiting for a case file or for information from a school on attendance and those types of thing, because that data is held by the family support team. People have referred to the nitty-gritty things—whether they can log on to a computer and read information about their family that is coming in from multiple services.

A third area where we think it could make a difference to staff is giving more coherence, particularly to that early family support system. Where we think that makes a difference is in making family support a more mature public service. At the moment, it feels like a very young public service with what is actually happening in family support looking very different in different parts of the country. That undermines professionalism; it prevents organisations from investing in training and qualifications, because approaches to family support change all the time. If you are a family support worker in one local authority and you have been there for 10 or 20 years, as many of our workers have, you might

have seen trends and fads come and go day to day. You would hope it was a bit more stable.

One challenge I want to raise in the experience of staff is that there has not been any way to deal with what we as a charity experience in commissioning uncertainty. Children's services are often delivered in very short-term contracts by local authorities. It can be a one-year contract, but often it is two or three-year contracts to deliver a service. What happens is that you hire people and build relationships, but three years later you lose that contract and that impacts on the family and staff. There could be more in the provision of services. Can we provide that greater security and consistency for staff? That should work for families and children.

Cathy Ashley: I was reflecting on this because I think that the direction in which the strategy is going is one that accords with the reasons many people chose to go into social work, family support or become foster carers. That emphasis on the importance of relationships does accord with what staff want. If you are in one of the pathfinders, some exciting opportunities may develop, including being able to change those relationships.

We welcome the fact that the Government have committed £30 million over the next two years in relation to befriending, mentoring and what they describe as family finding for young people in care, or care-experienced young people.

The approach that Family Rights Group has developed very successfully is called Lifelong Links, which is about building a support network around young people and critically—this resonates with what Rose said—it is done with the young person. It happens only if the young person wants it, and it is at the young person's pace. Basically, it is trying to turn our care system on its head so that we stop breaking and start building constructive relationships.

The Government have committed to investing £30 million in that. I have spoken to local authorities. There is interest and excitement around that, but there is a problem, in that at the same time they are having to make significant cuts. We spoke to a local authority the other day. They know that, for example, the family group conference service is effective in successfully keeping children out of the care system, where appropriate, but they also have to make savings. Their money is going on residential placements at huge cost, often with private providers making huge profits in the process, not necessarily meeting the needs of the children who are living in those placements. As a result, local authorities are making some very short-term cuts that have devastating consequences for children and are hugely demoralising for staff.

It feels as though we have a bit of a push-me-pull-you going on at the moment in relation to our child welfare system. As Josh said last week, the danger is that what is proposed is not going to reverse the current trend.

Anne-Marie Douglas: I will keep my response brief so I can pass over to Rose.

Some of our work at Peer Power is around coaching and support for professionals in the system. We know that practitioners are burned out in an unempathetic system that does not meet their needs or their well-being and care. The point I am keen to make is that, without listening to the workforce, as well as children and young people, and with them not being cared for and prioritised and being able to look after themselves given the vicarious trauma that the work can present, how will children and families then receive adequate care from them? Therefore, we welcome the focus on loving relationships in the strategy, but I would ask that this be extended to the workforce.

Rose Akinsulire: I am very happy with the fact that this is being looked into and an improvement has been made. One beneficial thing would be creating forums or spaces for young people to come together and have a support network. I know this is being looked into for staff members—social workers, *et cetera*. There is a lot of support out there for them already, but not much for young people. That would be a very useful thing to add.

I have been looking into research on the number of young people and children in the system who are abused. Hardly any research can be found on this. That is not great. In order to find out if this is going to work and how to support young people properly you need to do work to figure out what is going on with the young people themselves, because the only way to measure how effective it is is through their experiences.

The Chair: Do you know of any local authorities that have a network of young people in care who can meet and talk with the local authority?

Rose Akinsulire: There are some local authorities that do have groups that come together, like a board or set-up. Once a year, you can come to a big hall.

We have quite difficult experiences among young people. Having one day organised by social workers is not always comfortable. You do not feel that you are coming to meet your friends. That should be looked into because young people not in the care system would not necessarily want to do that, either. I think that should be looked into as well.

There is one other thing around fostering and training around foster carers. I know there is the idea to increase the number of foster carers for young people who need to find homes, but there is not enough training for these foster carers in order to support young people properly. By increasing the numbers, you might put more young people at risk because there are not enough people being trained well enough to know how to deal with the complex needs of young people who have gone through a lot of trauma—they might respond in ways that they are not used to, or damage things in their homes, or respond emotionally in ways that are quite detrimental. It is understandable why they act that way,

but they need more training and learning how to nurture young people in a way that is helpful to them in the long run.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton: I have a very quick question and it is to Rose and Anne-Marie. I am very struck by the emphasis that all of you place on the importance of clear support, clear power and clear advocacy. Do you think the strategy sufficiently recognises the important part that this plays within the well-being of children and families?

I am hearing from you—correct me if I am wrong—that, with regard to children’s understanding of or expertise in their own situation and how to improve it, there is no structured way to influence that important part of empowering young people and those who care for them in difficult situations at home to improve their own situation with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Rose certainly brought that to the fore in her discussions about her own experience and those for whom they care and support. Can you tell me a bit about whether you think that this structure does anything to enable that to flourish, because it seems really important to know that.

Anne-Marie Douglas: Obviously, there are children in care councils associated with local authorities with the legal right to have a voice. In my experience, if there were enough of those I would not have needed to set up Peer Power. My hope is that soon we will be out of business because they will be everywhere and that will just be the norm.

There are children and young people to whom those places are not accessible because they have lack of trust of statutory services. I would argue that these peer support communities should be independent of local authorities and should be lived experience and peer-led.

I welcome the increase in advocacy services that the strategy talks about. That is fantastic and a real move forward. As I said earlier, children and young people, and indeed adults who have lived experience and can give that reflective view, could be much more involved in the commissioning and design of services than they are in the report. From my perspective, it still is not sufficiently there.

The Chair: I should like to bring in Lord Carter for the last question. We might need relatively brief answers.

Q11 **Lord Carter of Coles:** Thank you for your time. I should declare that I have no interests relevant to this inquiry.

It is sometimes observed that public services have done everything right once, so my question is about the dissemination of good practice. I wonder whether you would like to comment on the Government’s strategy to identify, support and spread the implementation of good practice between the different partners delivering services, and specifically how they should do it.

Anne-Marie Douglas: I shall keep my point brief because I do not think I have as much to add as in other areas.

The main point I want to bring up is our experience listening to children who have been in secure care and moved outside their home areas. For example, we heard from children who might live in London but were moved as far away as Newcastle or Wales. There is an impact on their sense of belonging and well-being. How can good practice and communication be supported when those partners and services are so far apart?

Cathy Ashley: I have a vested interest because Family Rights Group created the Lifelong Links approach with young people in care. The Government strategy highlights that as an effective approach that local authorities may want to adopt in building relationships for children in care.

There are certain illustrations of that but, without sounding like a broken record, for local authorities to share their expertise and knowledge and learn from an evidence base of what is working, you need money. At the moment, in some areas that is not happening. I am not clear how we are going to move from the pathfinders more widely without that significant investment in play.

The other point, to enforce what Anne-Marie said, is that those with experience of the system, children and adults, are those with the best insight into what could be improved often at minimal cost, because they know what does and does not work from the ground.

Lord Carter of Coles: Cathy, if there was the money, who would do it? Where would we look to for dissemination?

Cathy Ashley: That is a very interesting question, but there is a lot of expertise within the sector. There is a lot of expertise among those who have been subject to children's social care intervention, including young people and parents. There is also a lot of expertise among children's services leaders and councillors.

There is no lack of expertise around if the resource and financial capacity are there for people to be able to invest, but at the moment, on the whole, we are crisis-driven. That means we are not using people's time, effort and commitment in the best possible way. We are haemorrhaging social workers from our system at the moment because they are burning out.

Joe Lane: There are two good things that the strategy has done, and one risk.

One good thing is that it has pointed to specific instances of good practice—for example, lifelong links.

The second is that it talks about a learning system—some of the 'Who does it?' that you asked about in the follow-up: for example, the What Works centre and the virtual hub for social workers to share good practice.

The big risk is that we are coming up to a general election and lots of the policy work has yet to be done. One of the risks is the idea that if we just follow the best practice we do not need to do lots of the policy work. We would say that the policy structures are not there on which to build good practice. There are simple things. For example, we do not have in place the minimum requirements for support for children in need; we do not have a very good system for providing care homes for children in care, or residential placements; we do not have the guarantees in place to ensure that care leavers get the support they need.

We also need the legislative and statutory minimum on which to build good practice, and it is important not to lose that.

The Chair: Before we bring this meeting to a conclusion, is there anything that anybody wants to say if we have not given them a chance to do so? I am conscious of the fact that we have covered quite a lot of important areas in a relatively short time.

If you prefer to put something in writing, or you think of things after this, we would welcome anything along the lines of our questions that you would like to send to us. Does anybody want to add anything before we conclude this session?

Rose Akinsulire: There is one thing. It is about making information more accessible to young people. It should be something that is easy for young people to read. Although I was able to read the report, a lot of young people in care may not have the best literary skills; they may not have had access to as much schooling. It is important for them to know the situation about themselves.

The Chair: There was not a version written for them.

Anne-Marie Douglas: There is a children and young people's version. It is readable, but it could be presented in a different way.

The Chair: It did not do the job. I think that is what you are saying. That is a really important point, otherwise we might not have picked that up.

Cathy Ashley: There is just one point about the Illegal Migration Bill and the difference between the way children are proposed to be treated under the Bill and this children's social care strategy. We are talking about children. I want to highlight that the children's social care strategy needs to be for all children who are vulnerable and in need, in contrast with what is proposed in that Bill.

Rose Akinsulire: When people are transitioning out of care, what happens in supporting them to have access to their families again? This is something that should be looked into. If they are able to access or make connections with their families, that should be looked into.

The Chair: The numbers reconnecting quite startled me.

This has been a helpful and useful session and has given us a lot of

information on which to reflect. I feel that in the past hour I have learnt a great deal. Thank you to all of you.