



## Education Committee

### Oral evidence: [Children's Social Care](#), HC 430

Tuesday 11 February 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 February 2024.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Swards; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 384 - 430

#### Witnesses

**I:** Dan Turnbull, Senior Director for Markets, Competition and Markets Authority; Denise Rawls, Executive Director, National Network for the Education of Care Leavers; Sam Turner, Associate Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Kinship; and Roger Gough, Children's Service Spokesperson, County Councils Network.

**II:** Lamar Mohsen; Georgia Sullivan; Louise Fitt; and Jake Hartley; Care experienced young people.

#### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dan Turnbull, Denise Rawls, Sam Turner and Roger Gough.

Q384 **Chair:** We now begin the public proceedings of our Education Select Committee evidence session this morning. I welcome our witnesses and Committee Members to this session. This morning we are scrutinising the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and looking, in particular, at the elements of the Bill that relate to children's social care.

In the second panel, after a short break, we will be hearing directly from young adults who have direct experience of the care system. That session will take a slightly different format so we may have a slightly longer pause than normal between the two panels just to allow us to reconfigure ourselves.

Welcome to this first session. Just a note for the record that one of our witnesses is struggling with queues coming through security and will join us shortly. We will get him to introduce himself when he does arrive. In the meantime, I will ask our three witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Dan Turnbull.

**Dan Turnbull:** My name is Dan Turnbull. I am the Senior Director of Markets at the Competition and Markets Authority.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Denise Rawls:** Hi, I am Denise Rawls. I am the Executive Director at the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers. At this point, I will just say that I am care experienced.

**Sam Turner:** I am Sam Turner; I am Associate Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the charity Kinship.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. Our fourth witness will be Roger Gough, who is the Children's Services Spokesperson for the County Councils Network. I am going to begin with some questions to Dan Turnbull on financial oversight of non-local authority providers of children's social care placements. We are talking about providers of children's homes and providers of foster care placements who are in the private or the not-for-profit sector and how they are regulated.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill provides for a financial oversight scheme for those non-local authority providers of children's social care. How far does this address the CMA's recommendation for a market oversight function?

**Dan Turnbull:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to come and speak about this really important matter today. On the question of financial oversight, when we carried out our market study, a couple of years ago now, we identified that some of the providers of children's homes and independent fostering services were carrying significantly high levels of debt, and we were concerned that that debt could lead to them getting into financial difficulty, which would cause significant problems for both local authorities and the children in their care if alternative arrangements had to be found very urgently.

In order to address that we recommended, as you say, that there should be a financial oversight system in place and as an inspiration we very much looked to the system that had been put in place for adult social care.

In terms of what we see in the Bill, we think that the main points that we wanted there are covered. The two key points that we thought were important were that there was somebody with access to the right type of information to be able to understand the financial situation of these companies on an ongoing basis; secondly, that there was a process in place to require these providers to put in place what you might call a living will to say, "What do we need to do if we do get into trouble to make sure that those services will be protected and the wellbeing of the children who rely on those services are protected?"

We are content that those key things are in the Bill but, as with so much, really, that is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for this to be successful. We think what is important is that, once this legislation comes into effect, the right type of expertise and resource is put into managing this. Even with all our experience and expertise in financial analysis, we found it quite difficult to understand the financial position of some of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

these companies. It took us a long time. So that real expertise is going to be absolutely key.

Q385 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Can I just pause and allow our fourth witness to introduce himself to us this morning?

**Roger Gough:** Thank you, Chair. I am Roger Gough; I am the Children's Services Spokesperson for the County Councils Network. I am also the leader of Kent County Council. That may have some relevance because, although I am here in a CCN capacity, there could be some points of our experience in Kent that may be helpful.

Q386 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We have just begun with some questioning around the financial oversight of non-local authority providers of children's homes and foster care placements.

Returning to my question to Dan Turnbull, should any further measures over and above what you have described be put in place to address the concerns about providers exiting the market? In addition to the concerns that you raised in your previous report, which were about the risks around exiting, a great deal of concern has been raised about profiteering and the outcomes but also the value for money implications of providers that make excessive profits from providing children's social care placements. Do you have any views about how well the Bill has the capability to deal with those concerns and whether it needs to be strengthened in any way?

**Dan Turnbull:** In terms of the financial oversight, we think that the key provisions are there, but the proof will be in the implementation. In terms of the profitability of firms in this sector, we found that the levels of profitability were more than we would expect in a well-functioning market. We think to address that the key thing is to deal with the way in which commissioning and procurement is done in this market. When we studied this, our main concern was that many—if not most—local authorities were simply operating at too small a scale to effectively engage with and shape the market as they go forward.

Our recommendation was that some of this procurement and commissioning forecasting activity needs to be done at a higher geographical scale so that that can be done more effectively. This is provided for in the Bill in the ability of the Secretary of State to direct local authorities to form regional care co-operatives. This fits with the vision that we have for improving that demand side of the market. We are very supportive of that.

As with the financial oversight provisions, again, it is necessary but not sufficient to make improvements in the market. If those regional care co-operatives are set up and engage with the market in the same way as local authorities are doing at the moment, and do not reduce the amount of spot purchasing that is happening in the market, we can expect similar results.



What we need is for those regional care co-operatives to take the opportunity, which they will have, to engage with the market more proactively, particularly around things like block contracts and making sure that there is available capacity in that broader area to drive better outcomes in terms of the prices that they are paying and their engagement with the market.

**Q387 Chair:** We will come to some detailed questions on those aspects of the Bill in a short while. Do you think it is appropriate for the Department to run the financial oversight scheme, or should it be run by an arm's length body, such as Ofsted?

**Dan Turnbull:** In our report we were relatively agnostic about exactly institutionally where that was placed. To us the key things are the expertise and the independence to be able to assess those financial situations objectively. We think that that could be achieved within the Department but there are alternative options there.

**Q388 Chair:** I will turn to Roger Gough and ask about the implications of the proposed financial oversight scheme for local authorities.

**Roger Gough:** We would welcome it, again, for being very conscious of the dangers of any sort of collapse. So far, perhaps, that has historically been an issue that local authorities have seen, particularly in the adult social care market. Nonetheless, that is a significant risk. I think we are supportive of that.

We would echo being agnostic as to exactly how it was structured. One thing that is very clear—and it is perhaps unusual for local authorities to say this—is it should not be us. We are there as purchasers and commissioners. There would clearly be a conflict of interest and not necessarily the expertise or capacity either. From our point of view that is a welcome set of provisions, and we would be very clear, if not necessarily on who it is then certainly who it isn't.

**Q389 Mrs Brackenridge:** Many of us here have heard concerns regarding excessive profits by non-local authority providers and yet we hear concerns about outcomes being simply not good enough. This Bill will deliver the Secretary of State the power to cap profits of non-local authority providers if other measures have not reduced profits. I would like to hear your views on this, starting with Roger.

**Roger Gough:** The last bit of what you said is absolutely the right thing and I do think the Bill gets the balance about right, so it is worth having as a power if other measures don't work. Dan can speak about this with much more depth and authority, but I think the CMA report was quite clear about where the biggest failings in the market actually sat, and tackling some of those things seems to us to be the first and foremost measure that you would want to take.

When we look at it, although the excess profit impact is material, it is not by any means the biggest factor in terms of the overall costs that local



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

authorities face. We ourselves did a report. We commissioned ISOS to do this for the County Councils Network, called "The Way We Care", which again sought to draw together quite a lot of the work that has been going on in this space.

There were points of commonality with what CMA had said in the past, looking to areas like registration and planning, the ability for new entrants to come into the market because I think part of the emphasis was that these excess profits did not then result in building up further capacity, as well as strengthening capacity on the commissioning side, a whole series of measures of that kind.

The danger of going straight to some kind of profit cap or whatever would be that you could well end up restricting supply at a time when there is not enough of it. Clearly excess profits are not something that you wish to see in a sector, it tells you that something is not working. I think you want to tackle the root of that and then have that as a backup.

**Dan Turnbull:** I very much agree with what Roger has just said. It is very sensible to have as a backstop. We would not recommend it as the first policy direction to go in because there are risks and difficulties with design and implementation of any profit cap. That does not mean that it is not a useful thing to have on the statute book, if you get through the process of trying these more market-based interventions and find that you are not getting the results that you need because it is clear that something needs to change in this market.

Q390 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Let's say that, despite more market interventions, the Secretary of State believes that it is the right thing to do, to place a cap, what would be the likely impact on the sector and how should any negative effects be mitigated?

**Dan Turnbull:** The devil is hugely in the detail of how you would implement and design that profit cap and, in particular, the level at which you would set it, what types of profits it would capture and so on. It is also important to think about the context in which a profit cap will be put into place. If you were to go straight to a profit cap now, when three quarters of provision in children's homes is from the private sector, and where there is this significant mismatch between the needs that we have nationally to find placements for children and the placements that are available, those risks are going to be quite high. Because if the profit cap leads to exit from the market, we are making that situation worse as Roger just suggested.

However, in a few years if we are in a situation where some of the intervention has worked—so the demand for residential placements is not as high—if we are in a situation where there is more diversity in the market out there, a bit more resilience in the market, those risks of imposing a profit cap are lower. Those kinds of details of when you are imposing it, and how you are designing it, will be absolutely key.



Q391 **Mrs Brackenridge:** We have heard suggestions that larger providers may find ways to avoid the cap. In your opinion, how likely is this and what should be put in place to prevent this?

**Dan Turnbull:** This is one of the reasons why at the CMA, if we are thinking about a price cap or a profit cap we think very carefully because they are difficult to design and implement. Price and profit caps are easiest to implement if you have a market where what is being sold is a commodity, say, milk or oil or something. Where you have very different types of things being provided, as in children's social care, because the needs of different children are so great, that adds to the complexity of designing that. That is one important thing to think about.

The other thing to think about is: are there opportunities for profit to be hidden, diverted, and allocated in other ways that would make it difficult to get at? Almost certainly there would be ways in which a company that was determined to do that could seek to do it. If a profit cap were to be put in place by the Secretary of State, I think you would want to do that in quite a flexible, nimble way, so that you have the clarity of what is captured for the companies but there is the opportunity then to say, "Actually, in response to that we see particular types of behaviour, those rules should be able to be quickly understood and adapted to capture that".

Q392 **Manuela Perteghella:** We will keep with the cap and the test of when the Secretary of State applies the cap. The Bill sets out that the profit cap would only be applied if the Secretary of State is satisfied that it is necessary with regard to the public interest of placements representing value for money. Is this test the right one?

**Dan Turnbull:** That is clearly a very important test. As I understand it, in the Bill there are also tests around the welfare of children needing placements, around the rights of companies and the need to make a profit and so on. Those three things taken together are the key ones to think about as we go through this. There are lots and lots of detail below those.

In particular, just focusing in on this public interest in value for money, there are questions about short-term value for money versus longer-term value for money. That will be quite important as that is considered.

Q393 **Manuela Perteghella:** In your view, will other measures in the Bill be sufficient to rein in profiteering without the need for a cap?

**Dan Turnbull:** Similar to what we were discussing about the financial oversight piece, the measures that are in the Bill are necessary to facilitate a change but on their own they are not enough. It is about how the regional care co-operatives and local authorities react to this new situation, how they are able to engage with the market to move it to a better place. There are factors outside this that will be important as well. The number of children coming into care and, therefore, what that kind of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

ongoing demand is will also be an important factor in determining how successful this can be.

Q394 **Jess Asato:** This is to Roger. The Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to direct local authorities to establish regional co-operative arrangements. What impact will this have and is there any lesson from regional adoption agencies that we should be learning?

**Roger Gough:** Yes. The general principle seems to be a sound one. The fact that we have pilots going on at the moment is helpful. Two worth noting are the Greater Manchester and the south-east that—as I mentioned from a Kent County Council point of view—we are a part of. I think there needs to be quite extensive learning from how those play out.

My impression—and I am not close to it—is that the Greater Manchester model is working quite well. From our own point of view in Kent, we would have some reservations at the moment about how exactly the south-eastern model is developing. Some of that is to do with geography. I think getting the geography right is important.

For instance, at the moment the south-eastern co-operative covers all those south-eastern counties running from Kent across to—at least in theory—Hampshire. That may not necessarily make a great deal of sense from the point of view of what your catchment area or area of overlap is.

From a Kent point of view, for example, big parts of south London are an important point of overlap. We have many children from London authorities placed in parts of Kent, so there would be significant interest in getting that overlap right. Clearly the geography there is very different.

You mentioned regional adoption agencies; our local regional adoption agency is Kent, Bexley and Medway. I am not suggesting you would replicate that, but you are looking there at a somewhat more compact geography. Part of this is about overcoming—and I think Dan mentioned this—the problem of small local authorities having insufficient capacity to operate effectively in the market and being, in effect, outgunned, if you like, by the providers. Clearly in the case for ourselves, and we are not unique in this, being a very large local authority it is a somewhat different equation.

There are also lessons that can be learned from how the RAAs have worked, which seem to be often quite effective. I am not sure necessarily that the regional care co-operative that we have at the moment is fully embracing that. So, there are some lessons to be learned but I think the principle is good. The idea of aggregating up is absolutely right, at least in certain areas, but there is a lot of detail to be sorted and hopefully we can learn from the pilots.

Q395 **Jess Asato:** There was some concern about too wide an area creating distance in places. One of the worries is that children are placed far away



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

from where they should be. Do you think there are going to be enough checks and balances in RCCs to make sure that doesn't happen in practice?

**Roger Gough:** That partly comes back to the point about getting the geography right. Of course, the other thing is in terms of placement far from home that happens already. In some ways, if you could get that geographical base right, you might be able to address that problem more effectively because in parts of Kent we have—they are not the parts closest to London, they are along the coast heading towards east Kent. In fact, Thanet is a good case in point. You have very large numbers of young people placed there from other areas. They are a long way from home and from any sort of connection. I think you already have that problem.

I don't think an RCC in itself makes it worse but if you get the geography right you might be able to make it better.

Q396 **Jess Asato:** My next question is to Dan. The CMA also recommended that the Government should put in place national level support for local authorities in forecasting the demand for and supply of placements: should this be included in the Bill?

**Dan Turnbull:** That was about helping to provide expertise to local authorities. While we did not do a thorough review of the sufficiency documents that local authorities are required to pull together, we did look at some of them and we saw a wide variation in the expertise and quality that was going into those documents.

There is a resource difficulty for some local authorities in maintaining the expertise to do that effectively, so we thought that there was a role for the Department to support that on a national basis. We do not think that that necessarily needs to be in legislation, but we think it is an important policy point.

**Chair:** Thank you. We are going to come now to some questions on kinship care and family group decision-making. The Bill would require local authorities to offer family group decision-making. It is a question to Sam Turner in the first instance and other witnesses may want to comment as well. What are your views on this and what impact is it likely to have on the numbers of children being taken into care?

**Sam Turner:** Broadly, we welcome the idea of family group decision-making, and certainly high quality family group decision-making, being more commonplace across local authorities. It is absolutely right that families should have the chance to come up with solutions themselves and are supported to do that.

What I would be interested in doing is zooming out a little bit and thinking about what we think the impact of that is going to be on the kinship care landscape. One of the consequences of increased family





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

group decision-making will be highlighting some of the dysfunctionality in how the kinship care legislative landscape works at the minute.

One of the things that the Government's impact assessment for the Bill looks at is the numbers of children who may move into the care system but also into forms of kinship care if family group decision-making is more commonplace. It suggests—and that is largely based on the evidence from the randomised control trial that we had—that it could lead to reducing the numbers of children who go into local authority care.

The impact assessment also suggests that it may increase the numbers of children who go into kinship care. The challenge that we find ourselves with there is that if at the end of a family group decision-making process, if the local authority deems it in the child's best interests to be placed with a family member or a friend, the mechanism they have to do that is to place the child into care, and that would be into kinship foster care. There are not the same mechanisms available to support a child into a well-supported kinship care arrangement outside of the care system.

One of the challenges that the impact assessment for the Bill has is reconciling this contrast. What we would want to see at the same time, is the Government getting the sequencing of reform right. That means making sure that all of the kinship care arrangements outside of the care system are as well supported as those within the care system. Because only then will I think they see both the reductions in the numbers of children coming into local authority care but also the number of children going into other forms of alternative care, particularly kinship care arrangements.

**Q397 Chair:** Do you want to tell us a little bit more about what would be required to achieve that?

**Sam Turner:** Over the last five years, we have seen the number of children in kinship foster care increase by about 18%. That is the arrangement where children are looked after in the local authority care system and their kinship carers are kinship foster carers. Comparably we have seen almost completely stable numbers of children leaving the care system each year to special guardianship or child arrangement orders.

There are a lot of different reasons for that but when we asked kinship carers and when we surveyed them, one of the big reasons is the poor support that exists outside of there. They talk particularly about things like financial support, so outside of the care system there is no guaranteed minimum financial allowance like there would be if they were a kinship foster carer. Often the children will then become ineligible for some potential therapeutic support. The level of support there might be for things like contact particularly is almost exclusively there for kinship foster carers and not for special guardians.

What we would like to see the Government do is consider equalising the practical, the financial and the emotional support that is available across



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

all different types of kinship care arrangements, because our evidence—and what we hear from kinship families directly—is that they all share common strengths, they all share common needs and experiences. Instead, I think that what some of the measures in this Bill will do is highlight what we know about those experiences being very different and the support being largely based on not the child's needs but the child's journey into kinship care, the legal order they have instead.

**Q398 Chair:** Do any other witnesses want to comment on the principle of the introduction of family group conferencing in the care system?

**Roger Gough:** Just to say it is good that it is there. It is building on quite a lot of the experience that many of us have and, therefore, there is quite a lot of learning from that. Certainly, in Kent we have 20 years' experience in that, and, in fact, it is part of a wider pattern. The one thing to say is it is important that sort of service is not out there on its own, that it is very much integrated into the practice of authorities overall.

**Q399 Chair:** Concerns have been expressed from some quarters that there is a risk of perpetrators of domestic abuse, or perhaps family members who have not been able to show evidence of good parenting in the past themselves, or maybe there is a history of neglect being given the care of children under such a set of arrangements that are designed to keep children within their families. Do you think there are sufficient safeguards in the Bill to stop that from happening, to make sure that where family group conferencing takes place it does always result in the best possible outcome for every child? If not, is there more that needs to be done?

**Sam Turner:** I would probably defer to those who are more in the intricacies of the family group conferencing practice and family group decision-making practice.

**Roger Gough:** In some elements of this it is important that you have, for example, two parts of this, so that there are two parts of the meetings that take place such that a young person can be in that case not necessarily confronted with those but someone who is potentially a perpetrator and there is a degree of separation can take place within that.

Also—and again it is a related point—there is a question of how much, particularly if you are thinking about family or kinship solutions, under some circumstances a parent can seek to block elements of that and the ability for a local authority, if necessary, to override that would be quite important. Those are some of the practical solutions you would be looking to.

**Q400 Chair:** We heard very compelling evidence from Claire Throssell at a previous evidence session, whose children were murdered by their father on a visit that had been mandated by the family courts, even though he was a known abuser and even though the children did not want to be



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

with him. Family group conferencing is obviously a different type of process to that, but I think it is probably incumbent on all of us who are scrutinising this Bill just to be absolutely confident that there are sufficient safeguards in place to make sure that that kind of circumstance cannot come about inadvertently in a process that is designed to achieve the opposite, I suppose.

Is there anything that you think is needed to draw a line to make sure that that kind of appalling outcome could not happen?

**Roger Gough:** I am not sure I can add much to what I have already said. Certainly, there are elements of practice that can seek to take account of that, but I can't go beyond what I have said already, Chair.

Q401 **Caroline Voaden:** I have got a supplementary question for Sam on family group decision-making. The Bill says that children may be involved in the family group decision-making process. What are your views on that, and do you think that language of the Bill should be strengthened to say that children should, wherever possible, be part of that family group decision-making process?

**Sam Turner:** I think it is right, as part of good rights-based social work practice, that children have the ability to be involved where it is in their best interests and where the local authority and others are confident that that can be safely supported and managed. It is important in the context of family group decision-making practice and kinship care to recognise that family group decision-making practice is not inherently a kinship care piece of reform. It is right that wider family group members are being involved at an earlier stage, and we would be very supportive of that. There are resources in that wider family that can be used effectively.

However, the outcome of a family group decision-making practice could be anything from a grandparent or an aunt or uncle providing ad hoc childcare support all the way through to, if deemed in the best interest of the child, that moving into a kinship care arrangement. It is true that the majority of kinship care arrangements will not result from a family group decision-making practice, nor will most family group decision-making practices result in a kinship care arrangement.

Just in the context of scrutiny of the Bill, I think it is helpful to slightly separate out the kinship care part of the reform from family group decision-making practice. There are other organisations and individuals who are probably better to answer the specific questions around the practice of the family group decision-making side.

Q402 **Manuela Perteghella:** My question is for Sam. The Bill introduces a legal definition of a child living in kinship care. Do you support this definition? Is the definition the right one or should it be expanded to include different care arrangements?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Sam Turner:** Yes, I think we welcome the idea of a definition, and it is positive that it is bringing in some relationships and kinship care arrangements, which may not otherwise be identified through other definitions that are already included in legislation.

It is also positive that the Government are interested in using the definition to try to improve understanding of kinship care. Broadly, the definition gets it right in terms of the breadth. Kinship particularly is very strongly in support of advocating for those informal kinship families who often are the least likely to be accessing support.

One of the challenges with the definition is that I would question some of the impact assessment in the sense that it will lead in itself to greater awareness and understanding among children service professionals but, also, all of the other professionals across the local authority wider services that kinship carers will engage with.

There is a lot more that the Government will need to do alongside the definition to improve understanding and awareness. It is still the case that in the actions that the Government are looking to take, in the Bill as well as outside, that they will be undermining the very value of that definition by continuing to specifically support certain groups of kinship children or kinship carers.

The benefit of a definition is recognising that across all of these different kinship care arrangements children have common needs and experiences and strengths, but yet the support that is available for kinship families continues to be siloed, based on the child's journey into kinship care, whether they were previously looked after, in the legal order they have. We would want to see the definition taken and wielded in its best way.

Q403 **Caroline Voaden:** Sam, what are your views on the measures in the Bill requiring local authorities to publish a kinship offer and extending the role of virtual school heads? I do not know whether you could answer this, but do you think virtual school heads should also be extended to include adopted children who do not feature in the Bill?

**Sam Turner:** The introduction of a new legal requirement on the local offer is positive. We know from our annual survey of kinship carers in 2023, only 7% of kinship carers had said that they had ever seen their local authority's family and friends care policy, which was the requirement that predates now the local offer. About a third of kinship carers told us last year that the information from their local authority was very poor.

There are clearly things that need to be done to improve the information that is provided to kinship carers, and I think the local offer should hopefully make a difference to that. One of the things that the local offer will do is highlight the absence of support for particular groups of kinship carers. While we would welcome improved signposting support, there isn't a huge amount of signposting to support, which does not exist. So,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

what the local offer does not do is place a duty on local authorities to provide or deliver support, just to provide information about where it is if it does exist.

We are the largest provider of advice and support services for kinship families, and I think the kinship local offer sits in a different context to maybe some of the other local offers that are available for care leavers or for children with SEND, where there are wider, more well-established systems of both statutory and wider support. As part of local authorities developing their local offer, we would want and encourage them to think about the types of support that are available.

You also asked about the virtual school extension as well. It is positive to see the Government recognise that kinship children deserve some additional support and education. We know from our research that around nearly a third of kinship children have social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and levels of prevalence of SEND are broadly comparable to other children's social care groups, including children who are looked after in care.

It is worth considering the different landscape in which we are operating for kinship children, particularly in the extension of duties to virtual schools who are not going to be as well resourced to support them, particularly because most kinship children, unless they were previously looked after, are not eligible for pupil premium plus. That is a tool that is available for other groups of children that is not available for a number of kinship children.

Also, the data picture, virtual schools are going to have a more difficult time because we do not routinely collect educational outcomes data for those beyond those in the care system or those who were previously looked after.

It is right that we are extending additional educational support. I would be more interested in thinking about what is unique about kinship children in all of the different forms and what is best there, rather than where we found ourselves in the recent years, which has been these gradual stepped extensions to certain groups, which again comes back to that point around undermining what is unique about kinship children in the round.

Q404 **Caroline Voaden:** The offer is clearly very patchy and not very good. Do you have confidence that legislating—putting it in the Bill—will make a difference?

**Sam Turner:** It will be positive for kinship children, and it will make a difference because when we ask kinship carers about experiences that they had with their virtual school, they are broadly positive. There is something special about that interface between the school and the local authority, which clearly works. There is good practice that does exist



around this group particularly. If you look to somewhere like Leeds and the virtual school there, they have done some great work with kinship.

There is a limitation to how well the reform will deliver the advice and information that kinship families need without considering all of the other bits like pupil premium plus, access to designated teacher support in the schools, improving the data that we collect in order to evaluate the impact of that too. I think in future legislation, after the spending review, absolutely what we will be looking to do is thinking about how we harmonise that patchwork of educational support for all children who have experienced some kind of trauma, separation and loss.

**Q405 Caroline Voaden:** Lastly to Roger, what do you think the implications of these measures are for local authorities? The age-old question: will additional resources be required?

**Roger Gough:** I can probably give you the age-old answer to the last question. I think it is some and some. Building a little bit on what Sam was saying. First, it is worth saying, of course, virtual schools have been a terrific success. If you look at the impact that they have had, it has not been even, it has been quite patchy across different parts of the country, but the overall impact in areas like attendance, attainment, has been very significant.

The principle of expanding it is a good one. You have to be a little careful on it for a couple of reasons. One is the resourcing point. The second is, particularly if you go back to the origins of virtual schools, the idea was very much linked to the corporate parenting role and playing the role that a parent would. Well, clearly in the case of a number of groups, including kinship carers, you will have in effect guardians or others who will be acting in that sort of role. So, it is going to be a slightly different type of thing.

There is a little bit of a danger of spreading a good thing too thinly and that is where perhaps your point about resourcing comes in. Again, there is the question of any further expansion, tailoring it a little bit to the fact that the groups involved are not necessarily identical in terms of the needs, the particular support that they have compared with those on whom the virtual schools were originally targeted.

**Q406 Mark Swards:** Just before we move on from kinship care to care leavers, I want to ask Sam one more question. Sam, your answers have been good today, very extensive, you have covered a lot of territory. You might want to touch on something you have already said but there might be something new you want to add to this one. On kinship care, is there anything additional the Government should be doing outside the scope of the Bill to improve kinship care? Are there any priorities that the Government should focus on?

**Sam Turner:** The two priorities for us would be ensuring that there is financial support available to kinship carers particularly, and that is



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

something that we are looking for out of the future spending review particularly. It is welcome that the Government introduced, after the autumn budget, this trial of a kinship allowance.

However, we think the evidence is there particularly for the Government to go further and to roll out a national minimum allowance that is equivalent to the fostering allowance, because what that would do is enable that group of kinship children who are currently in kinship foster care but who maybe could be well supported outside of the care system to move to something like special guardianship. Our evidence suggests that for every 100 children who are looked after in well-supported kinship care rather than local authority care, the Government save £4 million per year and improves the life earnings of those children by £2 million.

The other thing that we look to out of the forthcoming parental leave review is additional employment rights for kinship carers. That is particularly a right to paid leave from employment, at least on a par with that that is provided to adopters. We know from our evidence as well that more than eight in 10 kinship carers are either forced to leave work after taking on the role or reduce their hours and that not only has a significant impact on children, their stability, the family income, but also for the state.

We know that kinship carers are pushed into the benefit system, and they are removed disproportionately out of sectors like health care, adult social care, education where we desperately need to keep vital workers. Outside of the Bill it would particularly be financial support and employment leave.

**Q407 Jess Asato:** This is for Denise. What are your views on the Bill's proposals on supporting care leavers? What difference will they make to the support that is currently provided?

**Denise Rawls:** Thank you for inviting us along today. We think that generally it is positive. We do not think that it quite goes far enough in that many things could be a little bit more explicit. One of those is around accommodation. The Bill does not explicitly say that our young people will be supported through university. Currently young people are generally supported very well in the first year, local authorities will work with the university but there is not a requirement for local authorities to act as a guarantor in second and third years. In the first year you are in halls, which is great. In the second year, you are often on your own and that is when we see our young people drop out of university.

The dropout rate is 38% of our young people. That is our main one, that we would like that to be a lot more explicit because local authorities are leaving it to the universities to fill the gap and therefore not delivering on their responsibility to young people.

**Q408 Jess Asato:** In terms of the proposals supporting care leavers, will care leavers be able to take legal action if they do not receive the support that



is currently outlined in the Bill? How likely is this in practice to be used as a right?

**Denise Rawls:** I think it is incredibly unlikely. As a young person the last thing you are going to be thinking about—already disempowered—is taking legal action against your local authority. How do you do that? I did not take mine to court and they failed me, so I think it is incredibly unlikely. You just want to move on with your life. It is such a hindrance to think that what you need to do to have what you deserve is to take legal action.

Q409 **Jess Asato:** Finally to Roger, will local authorities need any additional resources to be able to fulfil these requirements, in particular the extension of staying close support?

**Roger Gough:** They may. Going back to my answer to a previous question, first, the general principle we would absolutely endorse—particularly, given the kind of relationship that many parents find they have with their children well into their 20s—it would seem entirely logical that that is matched in the case of corporate parenting. I think we would be supportive of that.

There are some real challenges and complexities within this. One is actually worth remembering that for the present at least, and conscious this is supposed to be subject to change but over a number of years, we still have large parts of the country that are two-tier areas. Therefore, the housing authorities, in particular, are not the same as those who have the prime children's services responsibility and therefore the question of how that works out in practice. Clearly there is a principle of extending corporate parenting responsibility across a whole range of other bodies, including in this case it would be district councils.

Whether that necessarily plays out in terms of the detail, if I could draw an analogy, is a little bit like in areas of special educational needs and disability where in theory a number of local partners, including health for example, are almost equal partners in an area that is assessed. The truth is, first and foremost, it comes to the children's services authority. You would need to ensure that other partners were fully brought in.

There are some questions, interestingly, about those young people who have been in children's homes as well, because I think that is a very different dynamic from when you have got foster carers. There may be a question, when the young person is in that later age group, whether it is a case of them staying in that area or whether actually building back to their relationships with their original family or kinship at least, may be a better way of taking things forward.

Q410 **Jess Asato:** Lastly, what further measures should the Government prioritise to improve support for care leavers? Should there be some sort of national care offer?





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Denise Rawls:** We would strongly support a revised national offer. The local authority offers—we did some research recently—and every single one is different. If you are going to university, you need access to wi-fi, I think everybody knows that, but not all local authorities will do that. The allowances that our young people get are all incredibly different. People are expected to apply for bursaries to top up their accommodation, which will mean that they have to work more hours, so everyone is having a different experience.

When we look at apprenticeships within local authorities, some will have a ringfenced apprenticeship for care leavers, others do not. The local authority offer absolutely needs to be revised. We do not want anyone to miss out from that, so we do not want people to make that less than it is, but it needs to reflect what our young people need now.

Q411 **Jess Asato:** Did anyone else on the panel want to answer that question?

**Roger Gough:** Only perhaps that we almost link the two questions. I can see entirely the logic of what Denise says. That would of course reinforce the whole argument about new burdens, because local authorities inevitably find themselves under a whole set of different obligations. If they have a set of stricter obligations in this area, then there is most likely a funding ask that goes with it.

Q412 **Chair:** Could I just come back to the question of university accommodation? From my own constituency caseload and other examples that have been brought to my attention, I have seen that universities currently have quite varying practice on accommodation. Some of them will make accommodation available to care-experienced students throughout the year. They will do that because they know that often care-experienced students don't necessarily have anywhere to go during the holidays and can sometimes be a bit surprised that their accommodation is not available, and it causes real problems. Others do not and have very different approaches.

Do you think there is a need for strengthening of the requirement on universities to model best practice across the board for care experience students so that there is a consistent assurance of access to accommodation?

**Denise Rawls:** Absolutely. We work with local authorities and with universities and colleges across the country. The ones that we work with have considered this deeply and have a strong offer of accommodation. It very much depends on what accommodation the university has. Not all universities have their own accommodation, so that depends. The universities that we work with have considered this and we do generally see that the ones we don't work with don't have the best offer that they could. Or, as you say, the young people will be surprised at the end of year one that they cannot get a guarantor. That is why the dropout rate is so high.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

A standardised approach in Greater Manchester, we are working with all post-16 education providers to make sure that they have the best offer available and that that is a regional approach. In the north-east they are doing something very similar.

There are models of good practice but there are too many universities we feel are being left—there is not an explicit requirement on them—but it needs to work with the local authority, it is not either/or, it has to work together.

**Q413 Chair:** I want finally to ask about another area that we know makes a big difference, particularly to young people across the board but perhaps particularly young people who have care experience, which is access to mental health support and whether you think there is anything that needs to be done to strengthen the availability of mental health support to students.

**Denise Rawls:** Absolutely, yes. With our quality mark, our universities will check in with their students and ask: what was the main reason you stayed? What was the best level of support that you received? Rather than accommodation it is always mental health support and having someone check in with them if they have not been to classes for a couple of days, what is going on.

Also, it is having someone to graduate with, it is having birthday cards and “What are you doing at Christmas?” It is making sure that there is community building, that those young people absolutely feel that they belong and making sure that—at one of our universities, all of their care experienced young people will have a gym membership, they will go to the gym and it is one of the things that those young people say is the best thing that they could have because if they do not know what to do with the emotion, they just go to the gym.

The mental health support and putting in additional support is one of the critical things that young people need to stay in university.

**Q414 Chair:** Finally, I will ask all of our witnesses: is there anything else that you would like to tell us, anything else that you think the Committee should be aware of in relation to the Bill and the ways in which it could be strengthened or anything else you would like to say?

**Roger Gough:** I would just add one comment, if I may, which is that many aspects of the Bill are extremely welcome. I think they build in many ways on work that has been going on in different guises over a number of years, going back to work, including what the CMA did, but also Josh MacAlister’s review.

The elephant in the room on this, of course, is the funding ask that was put in Josh MacAlister’s review. It is welcome that we saw the prevention grant that came in in the autumn statement. From a CCN point of view, we would like to view that as a down payment on ultimately reaching what was put forward in the Josh MacAlister review.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

An important part of this is about releasing some of the pressure that there is in the areas that we were talking about right at the start, is the number of young people coming into local authority care and the number who are or are not achieving safe and efficient exits into other forms of support. I think you do need those measures to be able to get to that.

**Dan Turnbull:** Very similar to what Roger has said, we are extremely pleased and supportive of so much that is in this Bill, and we think it is a huge step in the right direction. No market—particularly a market that is requiring long-term investment in buildings, accommodation, people—can cope with rapid increase in demand that is uncontrolled.

The other side of this is what is so important to make the market function is to control the number of children that are coming into the system, which is why I would agree that the investment in kinship care is so important as alternatives to the formal system. Equally, outside this Bill, investment in preventative measures, family support, is just of huge importance.

**Denise Rawls:** We have two for the Bill. The first is that the local offer is easy to navigate. It is incredibly hard to find your way through a local authority website to find out what you are entitled to. Also, the personal advisers within the local authority have a baseline of training in post-16 education, because currently there is very little understanding.

**Sam Turner:** I would just like to emphasise the point that Roger made around considering not just only the numbers of children coming into the care system because, overwhelmingly, I think policy focuses on controlling that but thinking about actually where it is safe and effective for children to be supported out of the care system. That is reflective of the national data if you look at growth in the care system over the last five to 10 years. It has largely come from fewer children leaving more than it has for more children entering and so we need to continue the focus on the factors we know influence entry to the care system, which is largely poverty and deprivation as well as the erosion of early family help.

We absolutely have to also think about what happens to children when they are in the care system, and that is things like family reunification, but it is also movement into kinship care arrangements where they are well supported, for example, as well. I think that the consideration of entry and exit is important for the Bill as well as for the Committee's wider children's social care inquiry.

**Chair:** I thank all of our witnesses from the first panel for giving your evidence to us this morning. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses



Witnesses: Lamar Mohsen, Georgia Sullivan, Louise Fitt and Jake Hartley.

Q415 **Chair:** Welcome to our second panel this morning. In this panel we want to hear the experience of some young adults who have all got experience of being in local authority care. I want to welcome all of our witnesses here today and say to you that we are grateful to you all for giving up your time to come and share your experiences with us.

We want to do this session because it is the most important thing that your direct personal experiences inform both our scrutiny, our looking at the Bill that is in front of Parliament at the moment and trying to work out whether it is as good as it needs to be and whether it can be strengthened in any way.

We are also doing this as part of a wider inquiry on children's social care where we will make recommendations to the Government and what we want is for those recommendations to be informed by some of the experiences that you have had and your expert knowledge of how the system works at the moment, perhaps the ways in which it does not work as well as it could and the ways in which it could be better in the future.

Please feel comfortable here today; we just want to hear from you. There is water, help yourself to that. We also have some space outside if you felt that you needed to take a break at all during the session this morning. We have no trick questions at all; we just want to hear your experience. If there is a question that you do not feel that you want to answer, please just say that and that is absolutely fine. Thank you again for being with us here this morning.

What we are going to do first is go around each of our witnesses and ask you to say a little bit about yourself, your experience, the kind of placements that you have been in while you have been in care and anything that you want to tell us by way of an introduction this morning. I am going to start with Georgia, if that is okay.

**Georgia Sullivan:** I am Georgia Sullivan. I am 26 years old, nearly—actually next week—and I have had a variety of placements throughout the care system. I initially went into kinship care, and it was an informal arrangement, which I would like to talk about a bit later on. I later went into supported accommodation, a variety of supported accommodations, and I moved four times between the ages of 17 and 19 before going to university.

I moved from London, which was my local authority, my local area, to the University of Nottingham to study nursing. The work that I have been doing recently—with Become and some other charities and organisations around mental health—has been a wonderful experience to reflect on things that could have improved, things that could be better. Yes, that is me.

**Louise Fitt:** Hi everyone, I am Louise Fitt. I am 24. I am from London. I also have a toddler. I am currently working in the civil service at the



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

moment. I got into it through the care leavers internship. I am also involved with a few charities like Barnardo's and Become.

Q416 **Chair:** Do you want to say a little bit about the types of experience you had in the care system?

**Louise Fitt:** I was in foster care from 11 years old to 18 and then I moved as a care leaver into my own supported accommodation.

Q417 **Chair:** Were you in the same foster placement throughout that time?

**Louise Fitt:** No. I was moved four times throughout my time in care.

**Jake Hartley:** I am Jake Hartley. I am 24. I am from Lancashire. I am a care leaver apprentice for Lancashire County Council. I have spent time with kinship care, foster care, respite and supportive accommodation.

**Lamar Mohsen:** Hi, I am Lamar. I am from the south-east of England. I have worked with Become for just over two years now and the types of placements I have been in has been short-term respite care and long-term care orders, and I have been in multiple of those.

Q418 **Chair:** Do you want to share more about your experience? Have you prepared something?

**Lamar Mohsen:** Yes, is that okay?

**Chair:** Yes.

**Lamar Mohsen:** Okay. Hi, my name is Lamar. I am 19. I am a care-experienced individual who is currently on a staying put agreement with my foster carers in the south-east of England. I may switch between "I" and "me" and "we" and "us", as I share mine and my siblings' experiences in care together. I went into local authoritative care at 10 years old, along with my three sisters firstly, and then my two brothers joined, who were placed away from us.

Initially, when we went into foster care, I will say there was no mental health support. I did not get that check-in. I was 12 when I first realised that I was not going back to my parents and my guardians were actually my foster carers. I was on a long-term care order. When that reality hit, I spiralled into devastating mental health problems, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and self-harm, which consumed most of my teenage years.

I cannot remember most of my childhood as a consequence of this, so I am arguing for a solution. A mandated regular check-in to the child, either by the learning support teacher if the child is in school or a check-in by the social worker to explain to the child what is happening.

As my years in care began to grow and my experiences became more negative, respite care became more frequent. For those who are unaware, respite care can happen when the foster carer the child is



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

originally placed with decides to go on holiday and that child is placed with temporary carers. My previous foster carer went on three holidays within the space of six months. For me and my siblings that meant we had to learn the locations of three different areas as well as only just having moved to those carers, so learning four different areas within the space of six months, it is draining.

During the ages of 14 to 17 my most used app was Maps, but for other children their most used apps were YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. Moreover, these frequent moves to respite were often during school term, which affected me in more ways than I can explain. Sitting in reception after school hours, after school was closed, waiting for taxis to come to get us. Sometimes social services never booked them. I remember being told to "Think of it as a holiday for you too". While they were off to Mallorca, I was off to Luton. Personally, I was placed 100 miles away from my area for two weeks only a month before my GCSEs, so this is why the Gone Too Far campaign that Become is doing is particularly important for me.

Another key point I would like to say is sibling contact. When I began to understand the ins and outs of the reasons why I was in care and what that meant for my future, I reduced contact with my parents and ultimately stopped going to contact. This unfortunately meant that my contact with my siblings also stopped. My choice in not seeing my parents does not mean that I also chose to stop seeing my siblings. Birthdays and Christmas presents have sometimes gone months without them receiving them. I currently have two Christmas presents under my bed yet to be unwrapped by them. I am arguing that the contact team at social services should also arrange sibling contact for the children. This should be communicated across all foster carers, if applicable, to agree on time and date to have the children see each other. This is because my relationships with some of my siblings are not strained but just awkward. The bonding and communication that should have happened as we grew up just did not. We all became independent at a very young age.

Last year I turned 18, which inevitably meant I am no longer a child in care. As I previously stated, I am on a staying put agreement, so with only three months until my A-levels, everyone's attention shifted on to rent, universal credits and DBS checking. Navigating this with A-levels and my part-time job was extremely stressful.

For the first couple of months, I had to pay £580 per month in rent and when I had to reduce my hours that I worked in order to study for A-levels, I could not afford the rent. I remember being on the train to college realising I could not afford it. I started crying. Was this what it was going to be like from now on? Now, after an understanding with my foster carers, I am now paying £340 a month for quite literally a single room.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Five days ago, I turned 19. In 44 days two of my siblings may be presented as homeless to the council as they turn 18. A year on from a staying put agreement and I have not saved up a single penny. This reinforced quite a new feeling for me. I felt far behind for my age. Only just having left education and my career ladder barely even starting yet, there is a pit in my stomach that is absolutely terrified for the future. My biggest worry is moving out, and every time I look at my savings, my worry grows. I am not even sure if I am doing well for my age, but I have to remind myself that I am.

At 16, I finished my GCSEs with 9s, 8s and 7s, after being moved 100 miles away a month prior. At 17, I supported myself with driving lessons. I passed. I bought my car and the insurance after having to move placements at the end of first year in college. At 19, here I am today speaking to you all looking for change for my little siblings and for any children in care. For foster carers and for social workers too, we have all been let down by the system.

I have just said I have not pursued higher education due to the frequent moves. I cannot. I think another big change is something I would not be able to handle.

**Chair:** Thank you so much for sharing that with us, and I think we would all reinforce that you are doing incredibly well.

**Lamar Mohsen:** Thank you.

Q419 **Chair:** That was a very powerful statement indeed. Thank you very much, Lamar. You said quite a lot about your experience, and I think it is very clear to us what some of the things are that went wrong and some of the things that could perhaps have been done to have made sure that you and your siblings had more stability and a better experience.

Can I ask the other witnesses, perhaps starting with Jake, were the placements and the carers that you had the right ones for you, do you think, and what were the things that could have been done to make it a better experience?

**Jake Hartley:** As I mentioned, I was in kinship care, so that was the first thing. I lived with my Nan and my uncle for a number of years. Then unfortunately, my Nan became ill, so I moved into foster care. It was hit and miss. My foster mum is absolutely amazing, and I am still in contact with her today. She has helped me through so much when I was struggling with mental health, coming to terms with not being with my family and understanding what was going on. Whereas my foster dad, he made me feel worse. He made me feel like it was my fault, that I was a burden. I endured that for six and a half years because I felt scared to say something.

In terms of professionals, I felt let down. My first social worker, she never saw me. She never made the effort. Just one day she just said, "You are



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

going away for a few weeks". A few weeks turned into six and a half years. She just never communicated. One of my first IROs, I was adamant that I did not want contact with one of my siblings and she kept pressuring me. She just said, "Well, why don't you have one more session? Why don't you just do this? Why don't you just see him one more time?" I ended up flipping out because I was angry, and I could not express myself. I told her "No" and she did not understand that.

The same with my first PA, she never made contact with me, she never made the effort even though I struggle with trust, and I struggle with communicating, she just never made that effort no matter how many times people told her. In that sense, I felt let down by them.

I did have a couple of good professionals who went above and beyond, and as I have mentioned, I have been in respite and supported accommodation. I felt let down by the support workers in the supported accommodation to the point where I got angry at them. They made fun of my mental health; they never supported me, just left me to it and then blamed me for being angry, for lashing out, for struggling.

**Q420 Chair:** Thank you. Louise, do you want to say anything about the placements that you were placed in? Did you feel that they were the right placements for you, and were there things that could have been done differently or better?

**Louise Fitt:** Yes, some of the placements were not appropriate, in my eyes, and there is a lot more that could have been done better. Sometimes you are not able to, but where possible, it is especially important to tell the young person what is going on. A lot of the time I was told, "You are going here, you are leaving today", no warning, no notice, and not even being told why. As a young person or child, that is horrible. You do not even know where you are going; you do not know who you are going to live with. That is very scary and daunting. I definitely think they should inform us more, tell us, obviously, where possible, where appropriate, what is happening.

For me, some of the placements were great, some of them were not. One of the ones that were not great was—I am from London; they had moved me to Kent. I grew up in a very multicultural, diverse London city and moved to a very quiet rural area. For the first time, I experienced racism. This is when I was about 14 or 15 for the first time. I did not know what was happening. I did not understand. I did not realise it was a big issue, and I know it sounds a little bit naive. I struggled so much in the school. I was bullied physically and verbally.

I spoke to my social workers, but they did not listen to me, because they said to me that the school was outstanding and that I had to stay there. They did not take into consideration that mentally I could not focus because I was scared to go to school, and I also did not feel safe. A child should be able to go to school and learn and have fun, not be bullied because of something they cannot control.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I cannot control my culture. That was not very fair, and because of that it affected me mentally. I also was in year 10 and 11. I felt like I gave up. I was not able to focus on my education and love it, because I did not want to be there. I just wanted to leave and go. I stopped putting effort into school, and that led to me having to leave the school.

In year 11, I was put in alternative provision, and I went from doing six GCSEs to doing two. So again, I felt let down as well when I am in year 11, I do not get another chance, and to be told I am only going to sit two GCSEs, I thought that I cannot go to college or sixth form or uni. I felt like they wanted me to fail. I deserve an education too, regardless of whether there is a breakdown in education or settings.

My future is still important. I am still worthy. Again, I had to fight for that, and it was not until I did not pass in year 11, I said, "Right, get me back to London now, let me go to sixth form. I know I am smart. I know if I apply myself, I can pass". They moved me back to sixth form in London, and I passed the first year. It was the environment I was in. I was not able to concentrate and fully apply myself because I could not focus. I definitely think there is more support that could be done and that it does matter where a young person is from or culture, it is important in the environment they are in, they feel safe, and they feel welcome.

**Georgia Sullivan:** I forgot to mention that when I was asked to come today, it was in the context of care experienced young people with complex needs and neurodiversity or disability. The context of my involvement with social care revolved around my mental health. I first went into kinship care after a variety of difficult, interfamilial challenges that had a significant impact on my mental health. I began self-harming at a young age, 11 years old, and I also experienced chronic suicidality as a result of a diagnosis of acute PTSD when I was 13, which I had also received a diagnosis of when I was six years old. That was a relapse of that particular difficulty.

I was presented to social services when I was 14 because I attempted to take my life. I was initially placed into respite care with a family member, which broke down temporarily. It was a short period of time that I was with her, but it broke down because my complex needs were not being met. A different member of my family very kindly took me in. However, this was in a different location. My initial area was Stevenage, so North Hertfordshire and my kinship carers' site that I went to live with was in North London. That is where I was initially from. Due to some other scenarios in childhood we had to move out of London, so we went to Stevenage. That was one move. Then in Stevenage we moved twice throughout my childhood, so that was three moves by the time I was 13, and then another one when I went to my kinship carers.

You asked the question: was it the right placement for me? It absolutely would have been if they were provided the right support and if social care social services had communicated and recognised that my needs were



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

absolutely worthy of their attention and input. During this time, I was 14, 15, and I was in a mental health hospital for a prolonged period of time. While this was happening, my initial local authority—I have recently read my notes from this hospital, so it is quite fresh in my mind—there was a quote that it was clinically imperative and from a social care perspective necessary for me to go into this kinship placement.

The Stevenage local authority did not hand me over to London—Camden was the area—social services, so I was moved into an informal kinship arrangement that meant that my carers had no legal responsibility, no parental responsibility and also that the state did not have any responsibility to provide access or funding to support my family to support me.

One issue that I am particularly passionate about is how kinship carers are exploited, absolutely exploited. Their sense of duty, their love is taken advantage of, partially because it costs money for a child to be declared looked-after, but in the long run it costs more money to support someone to manage the consequences of their experiences through the care system. Apologies, I am talking for a period of time, but I feel like this is the context I am coming from. It also links to a lot of the things we want to talk about later, so I feel like it is important for you to have that bit of background knowledge.

My kinship placement eventually broke down because they were not afforded the supports, the emotional and psychological support as well as the funding. Obviously, money is a huge issue in this scenario, but the psychological and social support was actually more important to us as a family. That relationship with my carers was absolutely fundamental to my wellbeing and my mental health. It was a loving, caring, beautiful environment where I felt nurtured and valued, and I felt known, and I felt seen. That is something that many people in the care system do not get to experience, which again I would love to talk about a bit later on. However, their needs were not met to support me and so they could not meet my needs, and my mental health deteriorated.

I was readmitted to a mental health hospital, and during that episode of care—I was there for over a year, so it was an extended period of time, and again, at this time I was not under social services, which in my opinion is shocking—it was a mutual agreement with my clinical team that I be declared homeless because that was the only way that I could be entitled to the support that I needed and to have my emotional needs met.

During that process of being declared homeless at the age of 16 or 17, might I add, which had an extremely profound impact on me emotionally and on my mental health, which I would love to talk about more in private, particularly about many of us being very happy about care leavers being excluded from the homelessness intentionality rules, but



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

that process was very difficult and because of my age, I was not deemed appropriate for foster care.

I was discharged from hospital to a supported accommodation to live semi-independently. At this point I had been somewhat institutionalised. In hospital, everything is provided for you because you are unable to provide it for yourself and I was thrown into that semi-independent space. I was lucky that at the first place that I went to there was a high level of support. My local authority has a 'steps to independence' programme where there are a variety of step-down services, so you have to make your way through different supported accommodations to prove that you have the skills to be independent.

This particular service, despite the circumstances, was fantastic. I might add that it was a third sector run service by Depaul UK, which is a national charity and the length of time that I had there, the support, the integration between my mental health, education and social care was very effective. Again, I would be happy to go into more detail about how that was. It was more expensive to house me in that environment because of the levels of support. I was given about a year and then forced to move through the rest of the steps to independence system.

I think the fact that the following placements were private services is important to recognise versus the third sector service I was in. Those two following placements, I was also going through A-levels. I sat my GCSEs in hospital. I sat my A-levels while I was moving around in supported accommodations and navigating a plethora of other personal challenges. Those following placements, I was one of the few that had their head down in school. I was in a flat with someone else, another care leaver, with no support, no staff on site. It was just a flat share. Many of the people that I lived with had difficulties with substance misuse. They had involvement with gang-related activity. There was a lot of exploitation happening. There was county lines involvement, and this was the environment that I had to live in and move between. I had two further moves.

I would also like to say that I hold no ill will against these individuals, because I recognise that the context that they were in was because they did not have the support that they needed. There is a huge population of care experienced young people in the criminal justice system, and there are many reasons for that.

Anyway, this is the last part, I promise. Following those two moves, doing my A-levels, and then the other things that were going on, I had a mental health relapse. I was nearly readmitted to hospital. At this point, I was an adult, so I had left care. I was told that I was very lucky to have received funding to go back to that initial supported accommodation. I should not have had to feel lucky that that was the case. I should not have had to feel lucky, and I feel lucky for a huge variety of things that I have in my life and people that I have had in my life, and I should not



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

feel lucky. That should be everyone's experience, and that should be every care leaver's right. That is my piece on placements.

Q421 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I appreciate you sharing that with us in such detail. I will ask a quick question now, and then I will pass to some other colleagues to ask some questions. You have all shared a lot about the things that were not right. That is clear and there is a lot for us to reflect on in terms of things that you have gone through that no child should have to go through.

One of the things that we know is that in the care system care experienced children encounter lots of different professionals, often too many professionals and often not enough continuity of professionals. Could you tell us a little bit about the best or most helpful person you came across? Where did they sit within the system? Was it a social worker, a support worker, somebody in school? Who were the people you felt did make a positive difference in a very difficult set of circumstances? I might start with you, Lamar, if that is okay.

**Lamar Mohsen:** During my years in secondary school, the most important person, I would say, that has been there continuously for me was this learning support staff. Every week I would have a session with her and talk about what was going on. It was for an hour. It was the best thing that could have helped me throughout my secondary school experience. When I left secondary, my worry began about whom do I have to speak to? Luckily, I had my friends that I bonded with during college.

My most important person right now in terms of helping me through my adult years, as I near 21, 25, whatever the age is, is probably my personal adviser. She speaks to me directly and she does not patronise me like I am still a child. She was there since I was probably 16 or 17, helping me throughout when I transitioned to 18, and what that would look like in terms of staying put.

Before the staying put thing, we had this whole supported lodgings accommodation that we were talking about, but she helped me through the supported accommodation thing and then the staying put agreement as well as universal credit. She helped me throughout all of that and she is probably my most important person right now for me.

**Jake Hartley:** Not so much as a professional but my foster mum. I have very complex mental health and when I was in foster care, when I was living with my foster mum, it impacted me a lot. My social worker let me down, saying she was going to help support me go to my GP and be under the mental health team, but she did not. My foster mum said, "Enough is enough. I am doing this with you. I am doing this for you" and she actually took the time to come with me to my mental health appointments, took me to the hospital when I was having a mental breakdown, and I stayed in the hospital for a bit because of that.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

She researched and learnt mental health coping mechanisms for me, which I still use to this day. She was always fighting by my side when it came to professionals, when they kept letting me down, when they were not doing their job. She was there fighting, saying, “Why are you not doing your job? Why do you keep letting Jake down? Why are you not doing this? Why are you not doing that?”

As a care leaver, most recently, my personal adviser—she has just left, which I was a bit gutted about—was always there coming with me to my mental health appointments. When I was homeless and the council was putting me here, there and everywhere, and she was helping me through that. Especially during that time, my mental health was bad to the point where I thought I was going to have to section myself, and I was nearly fired from my job because I kept getting moved around. I was in Morecambe; they were going to put me in Blackpool, Wigan. I worked in Leyland at the time.

If it was not for her always checking up on me, or Barnardo’s has always been a big part in terms of professionals. Barnardo’s has always been there and has always supported me. I have been a part of Barnardo’s for nearly 13 years. I would not do that if Barnardo’s was not great.

**Louise Fitt:** For me, I have had various different people in my life, positive people, people who have helped me; like mentors, people who were social workers or people who were volunteers. I had a volunteer from when I was 11. A month after I went into care I had a volunteer, an independent visitor. She volunteered her own time to support a young person in care and just to be there for them. I have had her ever since, even when I passed 18. For me, having that one person who was external to everything, who just cared about me, who just wanted to see if I was okay and see me and hear me, meant the world to me. I felt seen, I felt heard, and hence why she is still in my life now as an adult. It made a world of a difference.

When I was struggling to communicate with my foster carers and my social workers, or I was being bullied at school, I was able to come to her and she was also able to speak on my behalf. It is so important that a young person has someone for us where it is not just a job; it is because they genuinely care, and they want to. Our wellbeing is so important, but unfortunately a lot of times it is not taken into consideration. We all need somebody, even as adults, regardless. Because of her, she made a lot of a difference in my life, and I am so grateful for her.

**Georgia Sullivan:** During and after my time in care, I have had eight social workers and PAs, and that is between the age of 16 or 17 and 25. I think that is quite a common scenario. As a looked-after child, I cannot remember a social worker or PA that I feel like I had a connection with or that I felt was in my corner and fighting for what was best for me, things that were in my best interests.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

As a care leaver, I had a couple of PAs—and honestly, I do not want to get emotional—and one in particular was fundamental in a part of my life that was difficult to navigate. I think sometimes it is hard for people to conceptualise what that looks like, why someone is meaningful and important. For me, that was things like being taken for a coffee when we met, or going for a walk, instead of me having to go to these dingy offices because they did not have enough time.

I found that often social workers, PAs, professionals made a lot of time for me, but I do not feel like that was because they wanted to, but because they felt the need to because my risk was high, but also because I was invested in education and they wanted to see me succeed, but also because I was personable when I was younger, because I wanted to form attachments and have positive relationships with safe adults.

I feel that the workforce wellbeing is a huge issue, so consistency in relationships with professionals was something that was fundamental to me and has had a long-term impact on my mental health, particularly being in the mental health system where staff turnover is high, supported accommodation where staff turnover is high, and then social care. I cannot put a number on the amount of professionals I have had in my life.

I promise I will wrap this up in a second. One of the most important parts of my journey in care was my identity, my sense of self, and I think many care leavers that have labels, we are referred to as “the looked-after child” or “the patient”. Who we are is a very difficult thing to understand and come to. Those two PAs saw me as a whole person. They approached me with a holistic approach versus trying to segregate and separate the different parts of my life that were under different teams, for example. Making time for me, investing in me emotionally and psychologically, but I do believe I am again lucky. I am a minority of people that have had that. Social care professionals go into the field because they care deeply, and unfortunately many burn out because they have caseloads that are completely unmanageable and also many of them with complex needs, complex cases that struggle with engagement. I was someone that always did engage because I wanted that support. I actively sought that support.

I would also like to say that I am still in touch with one of those PAs and I am Aunty Georgia to his two children, and it is beautiful. It is a beautiful and an extremely important relationship in my life.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. I will pass to Manuela now to ask a question.

Q422 **Manuela Perteghella:** Thank you, all of you, for sharing your experiences. It is humbling for us to hear it. We heard that you had lots of placements, and sometimes you were moved far away from your local area, from your safety network, your friends, and your support staff. What impact have these out-of-area placements had on you, and did you



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

get any support when you were moved? I do not know who wants to start.

**Jake Hartley:** I was not moved too far away. It was still in Lancashire, but I was far away from my Nan. As I mentioned, when I left my Nan's care she was quite ill. I had to fight for years in order to have contact with her, and that affected me quite a lot. My Nan was the one who rang social services, so she saved my life in a way, and it affected me a lot when I could not see her.

I remember when I had my court case, my foster family was only meant to be short-term, but they fought for long-term and my dad came up because he wanted me to be under his care, but he lives in London. I said, "Well, I don't know you. To me, you are a stranger. I have met you twice in 13 and a half years and you are going to move me away from everything I have ever known—from my Nan who is ill. It is not happening".

Unfortunately, I don't have a relationship with him. I think probably one of the main reasons why is because I did not want to live with him. Thankfully I didn't, in a way, because I managed to spend quality time with my Nan before she passed away. I am still in contact with my foster mum. She is still a big part of my life.

**Lamar Mohsen:** Personally, I was moved 100 miles away. I am from the south-east of England. I was moved to Luton for two weeks. Although it was respite care, it was not long-term like other people may be in this room. It did affect me because it was half on a school term, half on a holiday. Do you know what I mean? I had to pack. Where other children were going out seeing each other, I was in an area I did not know, and I was in a room that I did not know. I was in a house that I did not know with people I did not know. We were told to call them "auntie" and "uncle", so I did not even know their names of those that I lived with.

I think it is more the journey up there; the frustration that I felt. I became so lonely that I did not know who to turn to. It was just like, "Right, that's it; I just have to get on with it. It is going to come to an end anyway. I am going to be back at home" and I should not have to feel like that. I should not be in Luton if I am from the south. I should be going to school in the south. I should not be in Luton at any point in my life unless I wanted to go to Luton. Yes, it was just horrible. It was a horrible experience. I would not want to do that again. I had all of my school stuff packed away and I did not even touch it. I did not revise or anything because I was just so stressed out in this room. It was horrible.

**Louise Fitt:** I am from London. I lived in Kent for two years. When I moved to Kent, I was in the middle of year 10. As you can imagine, that is not ideal because year 11 is around the corner. Everyone has their friendship groups, their cliques. Also, moving to an area I did not know, I did not know the people. I lived with a solo foster carer. She was lovely and she was great. My sisters were all in London, so I had to request to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

travel to see them. That would sometimes be once a month, sometimes twice a month.

As you can imagine, you are moved from the people you love, from places you know, and relationships are going to be strained. I think till this day our relationship is a little bit strange and awkward because of how far away we were. No one talks about how the further you go it is a lot harder to maintain contact. Even though we did see each other once a month, a lot happens in a month. A lot happens.

Sometimes, when you are going through a problem or situation, I was not allowed a phone for the first year, so I could not even call my sisters or speak to them when I was being bullied or having a hard time. I had to go through my foster carer. As you can imagine, when you are going through a tough time and you cannot even speak to someone, your sibling, say, "Oh, this is what's happening to me". You have to wait. It does build a lot of resentment and anger, and you do miss out. You miss out on so much. For me, that placement negatively affected me because of the bullying. I did not have anyone to turn to or see my sisters to go through that journey.

I may have siblings, but our relationship is not as usual or as close as it could have been if they made more of an effort or did not move me so far away. Obviously, I was moved far away because there was no availability in London, which I understand, but I also did not think it was appropriate because they did not take my cultural needs into consideration or the environment I was in, and unfortunately not everyone is going to be welcoming and kind.

**Georgia Sullivan:** My movement into kinship care, again, this is not as a formerly looked-after child, it was a complicated time for my entire family. Social care had made a lot of attempts for reunification, which was something that I was actively advocating against. Because they were attempting reunification, it took a very long time for it to be acknowledged or agreed that I would be staying with my kinship carers long-term.

That meant that they would not allow me to move school. They would not allow me to formally move to the area, so I continued going to school in Stevenage, which is not too far out of London, but to get to and from school I was travelling. I was getting up at 4.00 in the morning. We were all getting up at 4.00 in the morning and I would go to school. I would do my makeup on the train because I wanted to feel like me, I guess, and then I would do my homework on the train back.

I often got on the wrong train. I was going from King's Cross, as a 14 or 15-year-old. I was taking national public transport, the national train service, and I would often get on the wrong train. A couple of times I ended up in York. One time I ended up in Leeds, because that was the first stop of that long distance train that was going up to Inverness or something. That interrupted my education. There was an element of





wanting to stay at that school, because I had good friends there who knew me as a person. Again, going back to identity, I was very fearful of losing the people who were important to me, so I agreed to stay going to that school that was supportive.

A positive thing is that social care did fund my travel. I had a travel card to do that, but it caused significant strain on my family, on my kinship carers. Eventually, it was acknowledged after an in-patient stay that it would be a long-term arrangement with my kinship carers. While I was in supported accommodation, I stayed within borough.

**Q423 Caroline Voaden:** I would like to talk to you a little bit about school and/or college. Could you tell us a little bit about what you think schools and colleges could do to make sure that children who are in care are supported to thrive and to do well and to make the most of school? Is there anything you think schools should not do, should avoid doing?

**Jake Hartley:** I personally felt like I was not supported too much in school in terms of teacher-wise. Pastoral care, I had a deputy headteacher, she was great, and she was very supportive. In terms of education-wise, I was treated differently by my teachers for the pure fact that I was a looked-after child, and I feel like that should not happen. No child should have to feel excluded or different just because of the situation that they are in.

I was heavily bullied by my peers, mainly for the fact that I was a looked-after child. I was one of two or three that was well known in the year that was a looked-after child, as well as being a victim of hate crimes by my peers. I did not get much support with that either. The teachers just brushed it under the carpet and said, "Well, it happens". I think some of my teachers did not like the fact that I missed lessons when I had my child looked-after reviews or mental health appointments, and counselling appointments. They always hated that, and they said, "Is it because you are looked-after?" That should not happen; it should not be like that.

**Q424 Caroline Voaden:** It sounds like it is a lack of understanding of your circumstances and what your life was like, expecting you to be the same as every other child.

**Jake Hartley:** Yes. Then they made a point to basically blame it on me being a looked-after child. It got to about year 10 and I just gave up and thought, "What is the point?" I did not revise. I started messing around more in lessons, not listening. I thought, "If they are going to treat me different, I am going to act different". My foster mum got me back on track.

In terms of college, I dropped out of college. I felt like the support was not there in terms of my mental health and things like that, so again a lack of understanding and miscommunication.

**Caroline Voaden:** Your foster mum sounds like an amazing woman.



**Jake Hartley:** She is. She saved my life more times than—

Q425 **Caroline Voaden:** Louise, do you want to tell us about school? What worked for you? What could school have done better?

**Louise Fitt:** Throughout my childhood, I was bullied. There were different aspects, but I was bullied. I always kept my head down. I did not want people to see me. I wanted to be quiet and just be left alone, which actually made it worse. Because of that, teachers thought, "Oh, she's fine. She doesn't cause any problems. Just leave her alone". Especially being care experienced. When I went into foster care, they thought, "Oh, she's not a problem. We will just leave her. She's fine". Actually, I think that is where they went wrong. Just because a young person is quiet or does not speak up, I was suffering in silence. I did not know how to articulate, or I was scared to tell in case it made it worse.

The various schools I went to, the support varied. I had some great teachers and pastoral care. Some of them did not know what to do or how to help. When I went to sixth form, especially having no GCSEs at the time, they believed in me. They were amazing. They gave me mental health support in-house in the sixth form. I was able to get a support worker. In fact, if I was late by 10 minutes, they would call me, "Where are you? Are you coming?" At the time I was living by myself. For me, that made a world of a difference. I felt like someone was checking up on me, "Are you okay? Do you need any help?"

When I started the first year, I was doing my GCSEs and also multiple BTECs. In the second year, they said, "Actually, how about we drop one A-level, just because we know you live by yourself, you are on your own". In fact, they supported me so much that when I told them that I had to drop out because I had to work, because I was in supported accommodation and I could not afford to not work, they tried their hardest to help me stay and continue. Things like that: checking in on the young person, making sure they are okay.

You don't realise how much that makes a difference when you have nobody making sure, "Are you getting home safe? Are you okay? What do you need? Do you need support?" For me, they were amazing, and I am so grateful for them.

**Lamar Mohsen:** What was the question?

Q426 **Caroline Voaden:** The question was just about school. What do you think supported you when you were at school and what do you think school could have done better?

**Lamar Mohsen:** Throughout school, I was like one of the lucky few. School was fine for me with the support they gave me. I think because of where I had the regular, once a week check-in, twice a week if I went up to them and asked to have another session. That was all fine.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

When I went into college, I think there is a big misunderstanding with growing older, especially with attendance. A lot of the time, I was not in college because I had to move placements from first year to second year. All of my stuff was in bin bags and boxes. All of my school stuff was in bin bags and boxes. I could not get any of my college stuff to bring in. I remember walking into my law lesson, and then my law teacher going, "Lamar, where's your work? Lamar, where's your work?"

I literally have gone up to another member of staff—my support staff at college—and said to him, "Could you tell all my teachers that I have got nothing on me? They are all packed away". Then I went into this lesson, and they started screaming at me about my work. It is this miscommunication with all of these teachers, all of these adults, who need to speak with each other before having a go at me, who is still a young child in care.

My attendance was harshly picked on. I think I left college with about 70% attendance, and I managed to get three Bs. That was purely because of my own hard work. There needs to be a bit more understanding about the young person's area, what is going on in their personal lives, and how they empathise with them.

**Georgia Sullivan:** I have a lot of positives about my experience with education, which I suppose is one of the reasons I feel lucky. My primary school education was—I say that I have positives—less so because of a scenario as a young child when we had to move locations. I was essentially forced to move to a religious school by the state, as a young child. This is a seven, eight-year-old, and that was actively against my wishes, which I was able to communicate as a seven, eight-year-old.

I am someone that, for the most part, has been able to communicate my wishes. There are many that don't or cannot. I was severely bullied at that school. I was not a looked-after child. Although we were known to social services, I was not a looked-after child. The school did not pick up or report on very clear and obvious signs of difficulties that my siblings and I were experiencing. I have a distinct recollection of mouthing the words of prayer in lessons because I did not believe in it. I felt like it was wrong. This is an eight-year-old, seven, eight-year-old, I was mouthing the words of prayer, and I was getting in trouble for it. That experience of being forced to go to a religious school against my wishes was very difficult.

In secondary education, I had an affinity towards education, and I have been told that that was a trauma response because it was somewhere that, if I worked hard and got a piece of paper that said I did well, I would get support and validation. I did well in school, and I stayed. I did every extracurricular activity. I was a senior ambassador at school and all of those things and that was because I did not want to go home. It was a safe place, and I had good relationships with teachers because they were safe adults. That set me up well for education in general.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

As I formally entered the care system—I mentioned before that as a teenager I was in and out of psychiatric hospitals—for the most part my education was well facilitated. There was a hospital that I went to that was 300 miles away. There was a particular bed crisis at the time. It was 300 miles away and they were sending stuff down in the post. My pastoral team from the school were sending things down in the post to me because they knew that the education available at the hospital was not enough.

Then I was transferred to somewhere more local, and my pastoral team at school came to visit me on maybe a fortnightly basis to sit and go through work with me, which was amazing. The hospital also had a fantastic education team; there was a dedicated and well-facilitated classroom. I sat my GCSEs when I was in hospital and my school, my state school, made a lot of accommodations for me to be able to take exams on site at school if I wanted to, if I felt able to, but I also was able to sit them in hospital if I felt able to.

Throughout college, moving so many times during college—like Lamar—everything was in bin bags, boxes, laundry bags. I had many possessions and that was because I collected things, and I attached a lot of meaning to them because they reminded me of who I was. I think that is something a lot of care-experienced young people do, but it meant that moving was extremely inconvenient, shall we say. That interrupted my education.

Also, having been in hospital, having moved between locations geographically, but then within the borough, meant that I had to re-sit a year of my GCSEs. That was mainly because I had moved in the middle of the academic year, and they did not have the same GCSEs. I was not facilitated to go in in the middle of the academic year, which meant that my whole peer group were a year younger than me. That does not seem like a big deal, but when you are 16 it is. I was doing my A-levels, and I achieved highly in them, but again, I threw myself into education, because I saw it as my way out.

One final thing, my PAs were heavily involved with my education, which was fantastic. I also had my pastoral team who would come to LAC reviews, which was important to me, and they did a lot of things to meet my needs, and they worked with my family also. There is lots of evidence of good practice in terms of facilitating education in my experience, but that is not the experience of most people.

**Chair:** Just so you know where we are, there are two more members who would like to ask you questions and then we will wrap up. We are running a little bit over time, but this is important so I will allow it to do that and that is absolutely fine. Manuela, I know, has to go, so please just understand if members have other appointments that they have to make; it is not because they don't want to be here. I will pass to Mark now to pick up questioning.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Q427 Mark Swards:** In the interests of time, I will ask you several questions at once. I will repeat any of them if you want me to. You don't even need to answer them all, just answer the parts that are most important to you, most prevalent to you. What were your experiences of actually leaving care? What was the support like, specifically around housing and finance? Did any of you have what is called a personal adviser and if you did, how useful or not useful were they? I am very happy to start with anyone. We can start with Georgia, if that is okay.

**Georgia Sullivan:** Yes. My experience in living in care was somewhat cushioned by the fact that I lived in supported accommodation. I did not drop off of the care cliff in the sense that many people who are in foster or residential services do. Many people are kicked out on the morning of their 18th birthday, which is very poor to transition. Mine was buffered. However, the communication between different agencies in my life dropped off massively because there was no legal responsibility for my care from the state. Not having LAC reviews, not having mandatory attendance of many professionals and services in my life meant that things got much more complicated.

My experience in terms of accommodation, I mentioned earlier on about moving so many times in supported accommodation and steps to independence issues. One of the aspects around housing and finances was having to pay a service charge. As soon as you are hitting 18 you are applying for housing benefit. At the time for me, universal credit was not in practice. I was applying for three or four different types of benefit: housing benefit, personal independence payment, and income support. Applying for all of those during my A-Levels was extremely stressful and, as it is for anyone, it is a difficult experience to go through.

I had a lot of support from my PA. He came to the jobcentre with me, and he knew people at the local jobcentre because he had supported other care-experienced people to go. I also had support from the support workers at my accommodation. Financially, it was very difficult. The reason I was on these benefits was because I was in education still. I felt a lot of shame around being on benefits. I was in education. It was not because I was lazy. It was not because of the stigma. It was because of the societal stigma around relying on the state. It had a big emotional impact.

In terms of further housing, leaving the supported state-run housing, I had to choose between staying in Camden and applying for council housing, or going to university. I got into universities in London, but I realised fairly early on that if I had the opportunity to move out of Camden, I would, because I had so many traumatic memories there, and there were so many people in Camden from my past that made it very difficult to be in the area.

Moving to university, I decided to essentially sacrifice my right to social housing and that has a lot of consequences I could not foresee. One of them is I am now trapped in private renting. I also wanted the student



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

experience. I wanted to live in halls, and I wanted to live in a house with my peers. That was important to me because I wanted to feel normal. Now, I am trapped in private renting, which is not just a financial issue, but it is a housing security issue emotionally. I could be moved out at any time. I cannot afford to live independently by myself, so I have a flatmate. If they decide to move at any time my housing is insecure like that. I would welcome care leavers to be exempt from the local area connection test.

**Mark Swards:** Brilliant, thank you. We will go to Jake next, if that is okay.

**Jake Hartley:** Yes, sorry, could you repeat the question?

Q428 **Mark Swards:** Of course, yes. What is your experience of leaving care? What sort of support did you receive? I am talking specifically about financial support or housing support. Did you have a personal adviser and, if so, were they useful?

**Jake Hartley:** I had several personal advisers. My first one, as I mentioned before, she did not communicate with me, she did not build the relationship up with me. She was meant to help me apply for universal credit when I was in supported accommodation and did not tell me that the leaving care allowance would stop on my 18th birthday, so I went several weeks without any money, and I was using food banks and having to borrow money to pay for electric and things like that. Whereas I had other young people who had this person as a PA and she was taking them out, she was giving them the pay point for the Care leaver allowance even after their 18th birthday, and she saw them a lot more.

I have experienced homelessness three times recently in the past year or so, or over a year, and my PA at the time was absolutely amazing. She helped me in terms of moving van, storage unit, appointments, and things like that. I had a housing officer, and I had to basically get a list of my mental health diagnoses to prove that I had mental health, and I had to take it in and give it to them. She fought by my side. They were putting me in Morecambe, Blackpool, Wigan, and I worked in Leyland, and she was like, "You can't just keep doing this".

She was always making sure that I knew about the care leaver local offer, what I was entitled to, and always going above and beyond making sure I had everything in place; the setting up home allowance, the first month's rent and deposit for when I did move into my own flat. A few years after leaving care it was quite positive but at the start transitioning it was not the best.

**Mark Swards:** Very helpful, thank you very much. Lamar?

**Lamar Mohsen:** Before I turned 18 I was with my previous foster carers, the ones who went on holiday about three times in the space of six months. During that time, I met my current foster carers now who I am



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

on the staying put agreement and got their contact details from there on my time in respite. Then when we went back to those carers that placement broke down. They wanted to retire, so we all had to move out.

During that whole time, I was the one that had to message my respite carer that I found, and that should not be on my shoulders. That communication should be across foster carers, social workers, all of those professionals. It should not be on me to message who I know, what respite carers I have been to, "Have you got spaces?" I should not be doing that. When we messaged they said that they would do staying put for me and that was my experience turning 18 in care.

I went to my current carers now; I don't know what to call them because they are not technically my foster carers because I am 18, but landlord sounds a bit too professional. I then turned 18 in their care and then obviously it was the whole DBS check in, universal credit, all of that. My DBS did not come until about six or seven months later after I signed up. It is all built on trust, so it was all fine; the main bit was rent. I am paying too much, I think. I have not saved a single penny. At first it was £580 per month and then it got decreased to £340 when I said I could not afford it. That is too much for anyone, especially going through A-levels. Why am I paying just over £500 if I am studying my A-levels? I cannot be working and earning that much money while studying. It is hard. That was my experience.

**Mark Swards:** Incredibly insightful, thank you. Then finally, Louise?

**Louise Fitt:** My one is a bit different because I made a plan with my foster carer and the social worker to actually have staying put. After I turned 18, my foster carer decided she did not want that and she wanted me out, and in fact she decided one day, "I don't want you anymore". Because it was all of a sudden I had to use bin bags and backpacks. I had to go and stay with an emergency respite carer. I was there for about three weeks until I was able to get supported accommodation.

I was going into my second year of A-levels. I passed the first year, got my GCSEs, I was so happy, I was so settled. I felt excited. To then have to move overnight in my second year of A-levels to a studio flat, I don't know anybody, I don't know the area, I don't know the people, then to be told I have to pay a service charge. I was not working at the time because that was not my focus; my focus was: let me study, let me get this, I want to go to university.

Overnight I had to worry about credit scores. I had to use my savings to buy my phone because I did not have a credit score. I did not even know what a credit score was. I could not get finance; I had just turned 18 and there was no credit history. To go from having to cook, clean, to, "Who do you call for this?" and credit scores and having to pay service charge.

Then it got to a point where I could not even juggle my A-levels and working, I had to drop A-levels because I had to afford to eat and live. I



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

was on universal credit at the time, but I have always wanted to work. I always wanted an education, but I had to sacrifice that because I have to eat, I have to have a roof over my head; that is so important. We should not have to choose between that. We should be allowed to study if we want to. We should not have to worry about, "No, drop that, and try to go to work".

Also, when I had gone to the jobcentres they were very ill-prepared. They did not know any support for care leavers. There were certain grants I could have had to get back into education; they did not inform me, in fact, everything that I have done now is from me Googling it basically or asking people. That should not be the case. I was not prepared for the adult world; I was scared, I was ill-prepared, and there could have been a different turn.

I am so grateful that I persevered, and I was able to speak up and get some help because not everybody can do that. It is not nice being left on your own at 18 to go into the adult world and to figure it out. Not everybody is able to so I think there should be more support, and if we want to we should be allowed to study in education, or if we want to go to university we should not be made homeless or have to give up a roof over our heads.

**Q429 Jess Asato:** I will make this quick because I know many of you have already spoken quite extensively about mental health and the support you did or did not receive, but there have been some suggestions that when children go into care there should be a right to a mental health assessment in the same way as there is a physical assessment. I want to hear your reflections on how that might have helped you or whether you did get it, and whether you did then get the support you needed. Did you get the mental health support all the way through your time in care, and what would have made a difference? Jake?

**Jake Hartley:** As I mentioned, my social worker was meant to help me get referred to mental health, but she did not, so my foster mum did it. I went to CAMHS for several years and that is when I got my diagnosis. I transitioned from 16 to 18 under the adult mental health team. My care co-ordinator, she only worked with adults, so I was the first young person in a sense that she worked with, and it was not the right fit. I have been in and out of the community mental health team, different therapies, and I am still under them to this day.

I feel like even though the professionals can be quite good I do not think there is much knowledge around care experience for young people in terms of the trauma that they go through, and how to help them. I lost a good friend of mine in 2017 due to mental health. She was under the care system as well, and I feel like a lot of young people slip through the cracks because of the fact that there is not much support there, or they don't know how to access the right support.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

You can undergo CAMHS, and you might be suggested this and that, but it might not be right for you. As a young person you might now know what is right for you, and the same as you are transitioning from a young person to a care leaver. You still do not know what is right for you sometimes. As I have mentioned, I have gone through different therapies, talking therapy sessions, been in hospitals, and some of them have not worked. I am still figuring out to this day what is going to work for me.

**Lamar Mohsen:** Growing up it was only physical assessments; we did not have mental health check-ins at all. I stated before I was 10 when I went into care and I had nothing explained to me, it was off in a taxi and then "Here are the new people". Then I had to figure out what was going on in my life. I had no one to explain to me what was going on in my life and I was a child who could not comprehend the big change that was happening. I was wondering, "Where are my brothers? Where are they?" I did not know where they were.

I think if my mental health was taken more seriously from a young age, if I had that person to check-in with me at least once every two weeks at most, I would probably be so much better. I would not have mental health problems growing up. I do think that mental health check-ins are equally as important—if not more important—as physical check-ins for children in care.

**Georgia Sullivan:** Mental health. I feel that access to services for looked-after children and mental health services—and for most people—are determined by levels of risk. Criteria for access to CAMHS is determined by risk. I was under services for all of my time in the care system. However, that does not mean that I was in the right mental health services. As an inpatient in CAMHS, I experienced medical abuse, over-sedation, and a plethora of pretty horrendous things.

Also, having jumped between so many mental health teams from the time of 13, 14 when I first presented up until leaving care or leaving my local authority, I had been under eight mental health teams. I would say that services like—I will give a shout out—the Hive in North London, that is a transition service, so 16 to 25. It is also a third sector and is like a holistic mental health service. I would say especially for young people leaving care the transition from CAMHS services to adult mental health services is significant. It is for everyone but for care leavers alongside the care cliff can be extremely destabilising, so I would say transition services are important.

I would also say that looked-after children should get mandatory assessments, as with physical health. Also, if they are referred to CAMHS the waitlists are horrific right now, and I know that is something that is being addressed in other areas of politics but, yes, looked-after children should have fast tracks and there should be more funding for specialist teams. There are some foster kinship and adoption teams, but they are



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

specialist and only in certain locations. There should be teams more locally that are accessible to anyone; looked-after children but children in need or relevant children, as was I until I was 17.

**Louise Fitt:** I went into care when I was 11 but before that I was in short term respite every other weekend. I got therapy through my primary school when I was in about year 2, and I had that until I went to year 7 and was not allowed to have it anymore and I was transitioned to CAMHS. Again, because I was moved so frequently we had to start again, a new person. Some therapists were not the right fit or they would not understand.

Also, I think foster carers or professionals working with a young person may not understand the young person. Because they are not in the sessions with you, you could be going through something but not want to tell them because maybe we do not feel comfortable enough or to trust them.

I feel a lot could be explained if they understood the experience of trauma. It will take time. It will not go away at night, and sometimes before it gets better it could get worse. No one talks about that. You will not be okay if you are going into care; there is a reason why you are there, and so it is important that the minute you go into care every child should have a mandatory assessment, physical and mental, and there should be that on-call support for them and for whoever is looking after the young person to understand them.

You also need empathy. You are dealing with a young child who has experienced some horrific things. Professionals need to be empathetic and caring. If that was their child they would not want to be treated like that, so why can't we be seen as a child and that consideration being given to us, especially when we have had to go through some hardships. I think that is important, that empathetic, holistic approach and it is so important from the beginning. Otherwise, if you leave that until later on, well, obviously it has more severe consequences.

**Jess Asato:** Thank you. That was incredibly helpful.

Q430 **Mrs Brackenridge:** As we close this session, I have to thank you for coming here and sharing your lived experiences. That is important and powerful, and we are all very grateful for that.

In terms of everything that you have shared—the real, incredible experiences that you have shared—if there was something that you could ask this Government to change for children that are currently in care or care leavers, what would that be? Bearing in mind what you have already shared, so this is an opportunity to for something that you would request to change. I am happy for anybody to start, but maybe Lamar, seeing that you are opposite me?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Lamar Mohsen:** Yes. To me, sibling contact is the most important thing. I have five siblings. If there was contact between the siblings and I our relationship would be much better. Like I said before, it is not awkward—well, it is awkward. I have not got that normal brother/sister relationship that I see many other children have. I live with one of my sisters but when we grew up we were not placed together, and where we both experienced trauma and we both perceived it sort of differently we clashed as we grew up.

I also think there needs to be like a mediator with the siblings and one person to speak it all out because the siblings should not be against each other. We should not. The one sister that I live with now, we were arguing as we grew up and now we just see each other in the house. We do not speak much. My other siblings I do not see as much because they are all still in care and also I am placed away from them.

It is hard because I have to sort of remove the blame that I have against myself because I have chosen not to see my parents. I have sort of had this whole conflict in my head, "Should I go to contact just to see my siblings?" For a lot of the time, I went to see my dad, even though that took more of a toll on my mental health, just so I could see my brothers, just so I could see my sisters. Yes, so that is one thing I could ask the Government to change.

**Jake Hartley:** There are quite a few things, but I feel like right person, right support, right place, and right time. I know that can be quite difficult to achieve sometimes but one person can make a world of difference to the young person. For me, it is mainly my foster mum, and my friend; maybe if she had the right support maybe she would still be here, but obviously we don't know that. That can apply to anything; it could be a social worker, mental health, personal adviser, school, college, work. Yes, that is what I feel.

**Louise Fitt:** I think making sure that the wellbeing of the young person and the professionals working with the young person is at centre. Because if the adult is burnt out or does not want to be there, as the child we can see that. We can see who cares and who doesn't, and it makes a world of a difference. If their wellbeing and ours is looked after that makes a world of difference.

It is so important that the people that are doing it are doing it because they want to do it, that they genuinely care, and they are being supported to do it. Not a resentment or just another job, because we are not just another kid. We all have lives and how they treat us we will remember for the rest of our lives, and it will affect us, so it is important they get it right where possible. So, yes, wellbeing is at the centre of it.

**Georgia Sullivan:** First of all, stronger rights for kinship carers, early intervention and prevention when young people present to social care, acknowledgement of their needs and how they can be met by social care,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

rather than just thinking about funding and also thinking about long term consequences and outcomes for the young person.

If you want to keep young people in loving, familial environments with people they have connections with, and who actively want to and care about looking after them, you need to provide them the adequate support in all aspects.

I would also say that there needs to be a national offer for care leavers. The postcode lottery is profound, and also things like not knowing what your local offer is, and things being needs assessed and also having to sacrifice your entitlements to make decisions for your future. Because I did not go to university I did not get to use my leaving care grant to set up a home, because everywhere I lived had been furnished.

Exemption for the local area connection test so that care leavers can leave their local areas where they have experienced so much trauma and so many difficult things, giving them some autonomy in their life and how they want their adulthood and independence to look.

Lastly, a whole system approach to children in social care, so an extension of—what is the word?—corporate parenting to wider Department bodies, governmental bodies. I would also say a care leaver being a protected characteristic because that is an opportunity to provide equity for care experienced young people, because our experience is not just shaped by the people that look after us but our interaction with all of the systems around us throughout all of our lives, of which there are many because we are looked after. There are many things and those are a couple of my priorities. Thank you.

**Chair:** Can I say thank you so much to all of you. I know it is not easy to talk about such personal experiences, particularly such personal experiences that have often been so difficult and that have had such a profound impact on you. It has been important to us that you have been able to do that today and to share with us.

It is very important to us as a Committee that we put the lived experience of children, who have been in the care system, and care leavers at the heart of our report. Our report will be better because of the information that you have shared with us today, so we are very grateful to you; it has been an incredibly powerful session. I think it has been very moving for all of us, and we will do our very best to put the information that you have shared with us to good use in making the strongest recommendations that we can to the Government. Thank you very much.