

Public Services Committee

Oral evidence: The role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Wednesday 7 July 2021

3.30 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 20

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 143 - 145

Witnesses

I: Jon Yates, Executive Director, Youth Endowment Fund; Natalie Perera, Chief Executive, Education Policy Institute.

Examination of witnesses

Jon Yates and Natalie Perera.

The Chair: I am very pleased to welcome Jon Yates and Natalie Perera. We are very grateful to you for spending some time with us this afternoon. Lord Bourne will put the first question in this session.

Q143 **Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth:** Welcome to the panel. On a well-worn but important theme, the Children's Commissioner's office told us that various strands of work led by different departments with vulnerable children and families, such as the Youth Endowment Fund, children's and families' mental health support and the summer schools programme, are insufficiently joined up, and that office argued that effective policy was inhibited by lack of shared outcomes, shared data and shared funding allocations. It is a somewhat leading question, but does this reflect your experience of working within government, and how do you think those barriers can be overcome?

Jon Yates: It is a pleasure to be with you this afternoon. For context, I am executive director of the Youth Endowment Fund, a £200 million fund held by an independent charity.

As your previous witness communicated very clearly, it is definitely right that responsibility for vulnerable children splits across a very diverse set of departments. In a previous life, I was a special adviser at the Department for Education. I would entirely agree with the description of that split and that sometimes it can make progress quite difficult.

The slight nuance is that it is hard to imagine any one Minister or Secretary of State being responsible for all the areas of policy that impact on a young person's life, so I think the division into separate departments is unavoidable. There is also a danger that we think that collaboration is always a good. In my experience, it is sometimes a good that is not realised, but sometimes it is a bad that sucks up unnecessary time in meetings. One of the things we need to be much better at, which comes back to the Youth Endowment Fund's responsibility, is being clear when collaboration helps and makes a massive difference, and when it makes no difference at all. We have been relatively weak at funding and properly evaluating where collaboration efforts drive positive impacts for children and families. I am more than happy to give some examples, if that is helpful.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Natalie, do you have something to add?

Natalie Perera: I thank the committee for having me. To give a bit of background, I am the chief executive of the Education Policy Institute, an independent charity that carries out research on educational and well-being outcomes for children and young people. Prior to that, I was a civil servant for about 14 years in the Department for Education and in the Cabinet Office.

I agree with the starting premise of the question that there is a lack of join-up across government and that responsibilities for young people are very disparate. I have an example of where it had an unintended consequence. Thinking back to the 2010 spending review, which is timely as we head into the next spending review period, a series of decisions was taken about school funding in the Department for Education. There was then a series of decisions taken about children's services funding, including Sure Start and other services, again in the Department for Education. Outside that, in the department of health and particularly in the Department for Work and Pensions, decisions were taken about health, welfare and poverty that impacted ultimately on what would happen with children and young people.

We assumed in the DfE that making some savings in our department then would be fine, but we did not take into account what was happening with wider welfare. That is just one example of how, if you do not have cross-government working, you could lose the ability to look at the combined impact of policy and spending decisions. That is why I think it is important to try to stitch together policies for young people.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Thank you. Perhaps I could explore one particular aspect of the effect of the pandemic on vulnerable children that has caused us great concern. It seems obvious that the incidence of domestic violence, mental health problems and so on increased during the pandemic, and that has affected children who have had their education disrupted, in many cases quite separately. Do you think that the plans for catch-up education are sufficient? What can we do to strengthen the provision of education, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are vulnerable, as we come out of the pandemic?

Natalie Perera: I absolutely do not think that current government plans for educational recovery are adequate. The total funding to which the Government have committed is about £3.1 billion since the onset of the pandemic last year. In per pupil funding, that pales in comparison with some higher-spending countries, including the US and the Netherlands. We are spending about £310 per pupil, whereas in the US it is about £1,800 and in the Netherlands it is about £2,500.

Not only is the quantum of funding very low in this country, as announced by this Government, but the breadth of services or policies to which they are committed is very limited. There is some funding for teacher quality and tutoring, all of which is fine and is good policy, but the Government have not committed anything for young people's mental health and well-being, for example. As you say, there have been increases in probable mental health cases among young people, as well as other indicators of vulnerability, including domestic violence. I do not think the package is enough both in absolute funding and in the breadth of policies that it needs to address.

Jon Yates: The Youth Endowment Fund focus is on how we reduce youth violence. I will probably not get drawn too much into the specifics of the attainment gap in education, but, hopefully, still within the breadth of your question, we need to be clearer and likely more ambitious when it comes to the knock-on effect of domestic abuse on violence that follows from young people who either witness it or experience it. At present, we do not have good evidence that proves the impact of domestic abuse on violence committed by children who witness it or live in those households. It seems intuitively highly likely that there is a strong correlation and strong causation, but it has not been proved in this country. One of the things that the fund has committed to do is to put in about £10 million to try to shore up that proof. It is likely that we will see the link, and we need to be much sharper.

It is noticeable that pupil premium funding targets children on free school meals. It does not vary according to whether the child is a child in need or whether, going further, the child is subject to a child protection plan or is a looked-after child. Yet if we think about what we have just been through, with children being educated at home, obviously their family environment is a highly important contributor to how much education they will have received, more so than their poverty, I suspect. I think we

could be a little more on the front foot about how we allocate some of that money as a result.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Thanks so much. There is so much fascinating stuff here, but I can see that the Chair is keen to have the baton back.

The Chair: Jon, I was very interested in what you just said about the lack of evidence about those who have experienced violence then committing violence. That may be true among children, but there is a lot of evidence that perpetrators of domestic violence themselves witnessed and experienced domestic violence. That is certainly what we are all dealing with as well, because then it cascades down into new families.

Jon Yates: To clarify my comment a little, the lack of evidence is about children witnessing violence in their home, not so much experiencing it.

The Chair: But I think there is also evidence that they then are more likely to become perpetrators. That is all. I will not get into the argument about it now. I have to tell you that several members of the committee were nodding when I said that, because we have just done a lot of work on this in the Domestic Abuse Bill, but we will move on.

Q144 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Recently, Josh McAlister told us that his review of children's social care had found that spending on non-statutory family help—the early intervention work, if you like—had decreased by 35% since 2012, while spending at the other end, statutory crisis intervention, had increased by some 26% over the same period. How strong is the evidence that the reduction in the funding of early intervention support, which so many of our witnesses have talked to us about, has resulted in poorer outcomes—education, health and justice—for children and increased financial pressures on statutory services? As a quick rider, apart from the obvious, what is preventing national government and local services from investing more in early family help?

Natalie Perera: What Josh McAlister told the Committee sounds to me like a very credible figure and certainly echoes our own research about the shift in focus being moved from early intervention to acute firefighting.

We know, particularly from international evidence, that the earlier you invest, the more likely you are to yield positive outcomes among young people. The latest evidence comes from Professor Kirabo Jackson in the US, who found that extra funding through the equivalent of the Government's Sure Start programme in the nought to five phase, combined with additional funding in the school-age phase, particularly targeted on disadvantaged areas, leads not only to improved educational outcomes but to higher graduation rates, higher labour market earnings and lower incarceration rates. There is a mounting body of evidence. That is in stark contrast to what we are doing in the UK, where, as we have seen, money has gone into later firefighting stages. We saw a real-terms cut of about 20% per child in children's services in the period 2010-20.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: On the “apart from the obvious” not very much money point, what is preventing government doing this? Is it lack of evidence that is preventing government from putting more money into early intervention, or is it something else?

Natalie Perera: I think the evidence is there. What has always been a problem is political cycles. If you put money into the early years, it takes time to yield outcomes; you do not start to see them until many years later, often in adulthood, if we think about things like incarceration rates. Politics can often play a part in spending decisions.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Thanks very much. Jon, can I have your take on that point?

Jon Yates: It would chime with a lot of what Natalie said. There is concern. I think the evidence for the impact of particular programmes is strong. There is much more doubt about the long-term ability to create a saving, which obviously creates an impact when it comes to a spending review and whether the saving will be realised. If we go slightly later in a child’s life, towards youth work and youth interventions, we see the problem of lack of evidence, partly because the activity tends not to be programmatic but much more practice-based. If a youth worker is working with a young person who is not following a specific programme of activity, impact evaluation is much harder and, therefore, the evidence is less clear. As a result, we have a lack of long-term core funding. That means we end up with a lot of short-term funding, which makes evaluation even more difficult, so you end up in somewhat of a vicious cycle.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Do you think the issue you highlighted about its being hard to demonstrate the long-term saving applies at local level as well, or is it simply resource pressures at local level that prevent more investment in early intervention and family support?

Jon Yates: My experience from conversations at local level has been driven much more by the budget the authority is working to, and the statutory requirements that are put on it. There is still the same conversation—“This will save us money”. “Will it really?”—but I was referencing more central government.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: As you mentioned it, I would like to ask both of you whether you think the pupil premium can be used more effectively by schools to target children who are most in need and would most benefit from early intervention support.

Natalie Perera: Something I did not mention earlier about the Government’s recovery package is that the £3.1 billion pales in comparison with the £10 billion to £15 billion that we have estimated is needed based on current evidence. We have recommended that part of that £10 billion to £15 billion should be to increase both the rate of the pupil premium and its coverage, extending it to children who are on a child protection plan, mirroring some of what Jon was talking about

earlier, and, importantly, bringing the early years pupil premium up to the same rate as in primary. At the moment, the early years pupil premium is very low.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: That is a really important point. Jon, what are your thoughts on schools using the pupil premium more effectively in this area?

Jon Yates: I agree with Natalie's point. She was agreeing with the point we were both making about particular family situations and children's vulnerability. There has been the lack of a single place to go to understand what sort of interventions a school and others—this brings us back to collaboration—could use to try to make it less likely that a child ends up committing an act of violence, or their life going wrong in a suite of ways that may not be picked up by an education measure.

The Youth Endowment Fund published just last week the YEF toolkit, which effectively is a *Which?* magazine for reducing violence. It takes 2,000 research studies and summarises them. Schools so far have not had something that is simply and plainly recommended—for example, the power of CBT and social skills training. I do not think teachers should be delivering all that, but schools are good places to connect with others to deliver some of that activity. The evidence has been there but not in an accessible way.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Natalie, I know that your organisation has recently published some new research in this area. Could you say how effective you think schools are at identifying children who may have special educational needs?

Natalie Perera: Our latest research has found a big variation across England in the extent to which children are identified with SEN, and most of that variation comes down to the type of school they attend. They are more likely to be identified if they are in a local authority school compared with an academy; they are also more likely to be identified if they are in an area that has more local authority schools compared with one that has more academies. It is a very interesting finding, and we want to get to the bottom of why there is that difference.

We also found that even in disadvantaged areas the children being identified were more likely to be from more affluent families. It suggests that there is still some element of parental influence over whether or not the child gets identified. Our research found very interesting trends in both how schools are behaving and the disparate nature of identification between poor children and their peers, which warrants further investigation.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Thanks. That is a really helpful point. Looking at the clock, I had better hand back to the Chair.

The Chair: I turn to Baroness Pitkeathley to put the last question in this session.

Q145 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you so much, Natalie and Jon, for your very interesting answers so far.

It was a bit of a surprise to this committee that the director of strategy at the Department for Education acknowledged to us that currently there was no cross-cutting government strategy on vulnerable children and families. If such a strategy were to be put in place, in your view what should it prioritise? Since we are a bit pressed for time, could you combine in your answer your view of the role that family hubs could play in either helping the integration of services or getting more early intervention as part of that national strategy?

Jon Yates: There are three areas that I would push for such strategy to focus on. The first would be school attendance. We have had a relatively vigorous debate about exclusion. We have not had such a strong debate of late about absence, yet the correlation between persistent absence and violence is greater than the correlation between exclusion and violence. I would make school presence, including exclusions and off-rolling, the first of the three.

The second would be that every child should have an adult they trust. I am focusing here more on children in my target age of 10 to 14, but it is obviously true for younger children as well. In the consultations we have done, I have been struck by the number of children vulnerable to being involved in violence who have said to me that they did not have a single adult they trust.

The third would be family. We have talked about the issue of conflict and abuse. Any strategy that is serious about vulnerable children has to be serious about families. That brings us to your point about family hubs. I am sure the committee is well aware that there has been some research on Sure Start centres, the equivalent of family hubs, which was relatively non-conclusive but seems to suggest that there is probably something really powerful there, depending on what is delivered inside the building. It is perhaps a little bit like the Millennium Dome; it depends on what happens inside it. Those would be my priorities.

Baroness Pitkeathley: That is very helpful. Natalie?

Natalie Perera: My first priority for a cross-government strategy would be reducing child poverty, which I think requires the efforts of a number of different government departments. Secondly, it would be about early years and early intervention. Dame Andrea cited our evidence in the earlier session that 40% of the disadvantage gap is already evident by the age of five. The third priority would be focusing on health, particularly mental health and well-being, among young people.

To go back to Sure Start children's centres, the evaluation was more positive than has been reported. We saw impacts on maternal mental health, among other indicators, and I would be happy to send the committee something in writing on that. Family hubs need to learn from best practice that is available, and focus particularly on how they can genuinely integrate services for children and young people, and think

about governance models so that they bring in not only health services but school representatives and people from local communities so that decisions are joined up.

Baroness Pitkeathley: I was going to ask about schools, so thank you for bringing them in. I think I speak for the committee when I say that we would very much like to see the evidence you mentioned to make sure that we know where we are as a result of Sure Start, because we too must learn from best practice. Looking at the clock, I must hand back to the Chair.

The Chair: I thank both witnesses. I am sorry this is so rushed. It is one of the trials we have to put up with, which we then impose on you. I am very sorry about that. I am pleased you have talked about research and the evidence base today. As Jill says, if there is anything of that nature you think we ought to take account of, we would be enormously grateful if you would forward it to us. We are very grateful indeed to you for coming this afternoon and sharing your experience with us.