

Public Services Committee

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

Thursday 8 July 2021

10.30 am

Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Hogan-Howe; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pitkeathley; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 23

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 162 - 176

Witnesses

[I](#): Leah; Elsa.

Examination of witnesses

Q162 **Lord Bichard:** It is great to have you with us and we are really grateful for you giving up the time. My name is Michael. I am a member of this committee, which is looking at how well vulnerable children are supported. We are really anxious to speak to people with real experience of what it has been like for them, rather than always just talking to the experts and the professionals. We think it is a really important part of our work, and we could not do that without people like you being prepared to talk to us, so we are very grateful, and what you say is very important to us. I am not going to ask you lots of difficult questions; there are no right and wrong answers. We just want to hear from you what your experience has been like.

We will record our conversation and agree with you afterwards a note of the conversation. When we have agreed that note, we will destroy the recording, so you should be confident that you have control of anything that we keep and how this conversation is recorded. I hope all that makes some sense.

Most of all, we just want to hear from you about what things have been like. To start, could you just tell us a little about what life was like for you when your mum was suffering from addiction, before you and your mum got any support? Just tell us, in your own words, what it was like for you on a day-to-day basis.

Leah: Life was pretty hard, to be honest. I was always trying to look after my mum and take care of my sister. I was struggling at school. My mum did not want support. She got clean through NA meetings. There were a lot of arguments at home, every day. I was failing at school a lot. I had moved schools and there was really no one to help me do my homework or anything. My mum would always wake up late, so I would get to school late. From being behind at school, I was behind for the rest of primary school. I only just started to catch up when I got to secondary school. Life for me was pretty difficult and I was quite sad a lot of the time.

Q163 **Lord Bichard:** How old were you during that period?

Leah: My mum was an addict for quite a long time in my childhood, until probably 10.

Lord Bichard: Aged eight, nine and 10, you were caring for the family.

Leah: Yes. From an early age, I was looking after my sister and trying to look after my mum.

Lord Bichard: You were getting no support at that time.

Leah: No, my mum did not want any support. The only support we would get was from my gran and family.

Q164 **Lord Bichard:** Tell us a bit about school. That was a problem. You changed schools, did you, in the midst of all this?

Leah: Yes. When I was six or seven, I moved schools. At my first school, my mum was really bad and she would not wake up in the morning, so I would get to school very late. I was behind at that school. When I moved school, that affected me a lot. As I said, no one helped me with any of my schoolwork or anything. From being in the bottom classes at primary school, they kept me in the bottom classes throughout the whole school, so I never had a chance to improve or get better. I only improved when I went to my secondary school.

Lord Bichard: That must have been really difficult. The school did not know anything about this. You are going in every day, often late. You are struggling with lessons. It must have been really hard for you.

Leah: Yes, it was.

Lord Bichard: You could not tell them what was going on at home, because your mother did not want you to.

Leah: Yes, they just did not know. If they knew, I definitely think they would have tried to help, but my mum did not want any help. It was mainly because she was scared of social services taking me and my sister away.

Q165 **Lord Bichard:** Did the school ask you what the problems were? They must have noticed you were coming in late. They must have known that

you were struggling in a way that had not been the case before.

Leah: No, they did not. I was only late at my first primary school. At my new primary school, we stopped doing the late thing. That just stopped. They did not know. It was clear that I was struggling, but they did not help.

Lord Bichard: They did not ask.

Leah: No.

Q166 **Lord Bichard:** This must have begun to affect your own mental health, mustn't it?

Leah: Yes, it did. I was always stressed, for starters, because of all the arguments that would always go on. I was upset that I was behind, because all my friends were above me. I just felt really isolated and alone at school.

Q167 **Lord Bichard:** When you look back on it, what would you like to have seen done differently by school or by anyone?

Leah: Even just having flyers up. We did so many assemblies. They could have done one assembly about alcoholic parents or parents and addiction, just to bring awareness, because I am sure I probably was not the only kid at my school who was going through the same thing. They could have discussed it in class or something.

Q168 **Lord Bichard:** Your mum was concerned about social workers because of the danger of losing you, but you must have been in contact with GPs and with the health service. To what extent did they get involved? Did they try to support you?

Leah: No, I do not think they knew. As I said, the only people who gave us support were my gran and my family. No one really knew about the situation outside of my house.

Lord Bichard: So not even the GP knew.

Leah: I do not think so.

Q169 **Lord Bichard:** That must have been such a tough time for you. You then got some support. Was that from Action on Addiction?

Leah: NA.

Lord Bichard: How did that come about? How did you move from this position of having no one knowing about your mum's addiction and getting no support and help at all to having a bit of support? How did that come about and what difference did it make to you?

Leah: My mum realised that she needed to get help and needed to get clean, so she found NA herself and started going to meetings. I was so happy when she was going to meetings, because she was getting out of bed, for starters, and not just sleeping through the day. It was almost as if she had a new addiction, which was going to NA. She was so proud of

herself, always coming back with all these keyrings—"One week clean" and all these keyrings that she was really proud of. It just made me happy to see that she was trying to do better.

Lord Bichard: How did she find out about the programmes? How did she get involved? Was that something she did entirely herself or did someone refer her?

Leah: I am pretty sure she did that all herself. She just found out about them. She might have had some friends who recommended it to her, but now she recommends it to all her friends. I am not sure.

Q170 **Lord Bichard:** That took an enormous load off of you, did it? You felt for the first time that there was someone else involved in this and there was some help around.

Leah: Yes, it was just nice to know that there was someone trying to help my mum, other than me and my gran and my family. It was not my responsibility anymore.

Lord Bichard: Did that enable you to share this with the school or did your mother still not want that?

Leah: No, the school was still not involved.

Lord Bichard: So they still were not aware of the kinds of pressures you were still working under.

Leah: Yes, they did not know.

Q171 **Lord Bichard:** You are incredibly articulate, so clearly things have developed. How are you doing at school now? How did you make up the gap?

Leah: When I went to secondary school, I pushed myself really hard to get into the higher classes. It was just because there were all these new kids and I just did not want to be behind anymore. When I went to secondary school, my mum was two years clean by then, so I was ready to crack on with learning. When I went home, there were fewer arguments as well, so I could revise and do homework properly.

Lord Bichard: Were you able then to talk to other children in the school about the kinds of things that had happened to you? Did you still keep that to yourself?

Leah: Yes. There was probably one of my friends, who I had been friends with through primary school, whose house I would always go to after school. That was probably the only person who knew everything. Apart from that, I would not talk to anyone else about it.

Q172 **Lord Bichard:** What we want to do is to try to make some suggestions on how someone in your situation could have been better supported. As you say, you are not alone. There are a lot of young people like you suffering from the same problems.

Again, looking back on it, what would you like to have seen done differently? You mentioned the possibility of flyers and assemblies, but what else could have been done differently? I understand that one of the problems is that your mother did not want others, for understandable reasons, to know about what was happening, but what do you think could have been done differently to help you during all this?

Leah: Just more awareness of the subject, just handing out flyers to kids, and just talking about it as if it is a normal thing that a lot of kids go through. It was not a subject that they would talk about. I am not sure if they just did not want kids to know that a lot of families have that problem and that not all families are perfect households. I just think they did not want the kids to know.

Lord Bichard: How old are you now?

Leah: Fifteen.

Lord Bichard: Is it something that you would want to be a part of—raising this level of understanding and maybe helping young people who are going through the same thing? I mean in the future.

Leah: Yes, possibly. I definitely think I would love to help kids, because I could relate to them on a personal level.

Lord Bichard: I hope you manage to do that. Congratulations on having done so well in caring for your family and in catching up on your education. It is absolutely brilliant. There is nothing that you will not be able to do in the future and we look forward to seeing how that goes.

Q173 **The Chair:** Good morning. I am Hilary, the Chair. I was having technical problems, so apologies. I just wondered about your sister and your relationship. How has she handled it? How do you now talk to her about what happened when things were not so good?

Leah: To be honest, we do not really talk about it. We go to M-PACT. We do not really talk about it now. My sister had it a lot easier than I did, because she was not having to look after anyone. It was me looking after her. I would say she was shielded. It did affect her but she was more shielded than I was. She was much younger than me, so she did not have to do that much.

The Chair: Good. Tell us about M-PACT.

Leah: I love M-PACT. If I did not do M-PACT, I would not be how I am right now, to be honest. I would have bottled up all those emotions. I just would not be what I am today. M-PACT really made me happy. My mum and I never spent any time together. For starters, my mum did M-PACT just with me, and then she did it later on with my sister and my gran. When she and I did it, it was just nice that she wanted to spend time and bond with me. It was even the car journeys, driving there, and going to M-PACT and just knowing that she cared about what I had to say and would listen. M-PACT also really helped me with knowing that I was not alone, because there were loads of other kids there who were going

through the same thing as me. If I had not met those kids at M-PACT, I would have thought that I was alone, probably to this day, unless I found someone else without I could relate to.

Q174 **Lord Bichard:** For those of us who do not know much about M-PACT, could you tell us what is involved in it? Who runs it? Who referred you to it? Tell us a bit more about it.

Leah: Matt runs it. I think my mum just found it. It is for people who are in recovery or still addicts. They can go to the meetings with a family member or someone they have affected. It is for two hours. It is a really good course that helps you get everything out that happened and helps you make your relationship stronger. It helps the other person realise what they did and then it can just improve your relationship.

The Chair: That is very helpful and very interesting. Are you still involved with M-PACT?

Leah: No, I am not still involved with M-PACT. I did the M-PACT course when I was 10 years old. My sister did it after me. M-PACT does this thing every year that me, my mum and my sister all still go to, just to say hi to Matt and see everyone.

The Chair: There is still some connectivity and you know that there are people there who you could talk to, if you really wanted to.

Leah: Yes, definitely.

The Chair: That is important.

Q175 **Lord Bichard:** In all this, have you found it easier to work with the voluntary agencies, by which I mean Action on Addiction and the M-PACT programme, than working with the statutory sector—social care, education, GPs and health? Is there a difference?

Leah: I would not be able to compare it, because I did not get any help from GPs or anything, but I would definitely say that M-PACT and NA, because they deal with those things more often, have a better understanding. They just did it so much better. They know how to help and they have been doing it for a long time. They have seen loads of families come in with all sorts of problems. I feel like they could help on so many levels.

Lord Bichard: You felt comfortable working with them and trusted them, did you?

Leah: Yes, I trusted M-PACT a lot, just because you could really tell how my and my mum's relationship changed after we did M-PACT, and how much closer we got.

Lord Bichard: That has been so helpful. Others are not coming in with questions, so we could probably draw the conversation to an end. I cannot tell you how helpful that is and I cannot tell you how impressed I am with what you have achieved. Thank you so much for sharing that

with us. Everyone will want to wish you, your mum and your sister well for the future. What you have done is absolutely brilliant. Thank you very much.

Leah: Thank you. My sister is coming in now.

Q176 **Lord Bichard:** Hello. I am Michael. We have had a great conversation with your sister and we are very grateful to both of you for being prepared to talk to us about what has happened to you, your mum's addiction and how you have handled that. We only have a few minutes left now, but is there anything particular that you would want to say to us? What we are interested in is how young people in your situation could be supported better. Is there anything that you want to say to us, looking back on what has happened to you, about what support you would have liked to have had?

Elsa: M-PACT really helped me, because my mum, my gran and I had loads of bonding time. Maybe I would say go to M-PACT. You get along and you have more time together.

Lord Bichard: With someone who is helping you have that conversation.

Elsa: Yes. Everyone gets to say what they want to say.

Lord Bichard: Is there anything that you think the school, the GP or others could have done? They did not really know what was going on, did they?

Elsa: No.

Lord Bichard: Because your mum, for understandable reasons, did not want this to be public knowledge, so you really had to deal with it yourselves.

Elsa: Yes, only family and friends knew.

Lord Bichard: We only have a couple of minutes, and your sister was fantastically helpful to us, so I will probably hand back to the Chair. Thank you again for the time you have both given us. We very much appreciate it.

The Chair: Thanks a lot. It is always difficult coming in front of all these people, but we are really grateful to you. We will use what you have been saying when we are thinking about what recommendations we make, so that other children and young people can grow up with the knowledge that there are people out there who will help them. Thanks very much indeed. Have a lovely day.