

Public Services Committee

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

Thursday 8 July 2021

10 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. 22

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 151 - 161

Witnesses

[I](#): Nadia

Q151 **The Chair:** My name is Hilary and I am the Chair of the committee. As I was saying to Anna, who is on the call with you as your support worker, I have had a long involvement with Revolving Doors. I am what they call a patron. They do not give me any money, but I just say what a good organisation they are, mainly.

We are really grateful to you for coming along. I have worked with a lot of women who have been in your position too. I know how tough it is to come out and say what it has been like for you, so we are really grateful to you for that.

The committee is looking at what is happening to children, what leads them to be vulnerable and what we need to do about that. We are looking across a range of things: education and what has happened over Covid, children who are in poverty and children who have been in families where there has been abuse. We are looking at all those things, and so your perspective will be really helpful to us, because we want to hear from people who have been and are going through it, not just what the experts think. That is what this session is all about.

We will take notes and a recording, but nobody's name will be mentioned and we will get rid of the recording as soon as you have agreed the notes.

Welcome. There are a fair number of other members of the committee here, but I will ask the questions and work with you this morning. I know that you have had real struggles and challenges with addiction, and I just

wanted you to tell us what that was like and what the effect has been on your children.

Nadia: I was involved in drugs and alcohol. In a domestic violence relationship, you try to keep that little family going as much as you can. I tried to lie about certain things to certain people, and that had a knock-on effect on my son. My son felt like he could not express his feelings. He then felt quite untrusting of people. He was scared—[*Inaudible.*]*—*which—[*Inaudible.*]*—*had an effect on his schooling when he went into school; he was either upset or just did not feel up to it. He would then speak to someone, because I had social services in my life. I tried to keep everything at that time at bay, because I was too frightened to lose him. I thought that if they got wind of anything, they would not want to help; they would want to take him and give him to someone who can give him what I cannot right now.

At that moment in time, I could not meet his emotional needs. I knew that I was feeding him and taking him to school, that he had clean clothes on and had had a bath, and that I had done all the normal day-to-day things, but his emotional and mental needs were not being met. I might have read him a book at bedtime, but I did not ask him how he was feeling or reflect on how his mental well-being was at the time. It was all about me, drugs, his dad and the toxic relationship. It did have a knock-on effect on my son.

Q152 **The Chair:** What happened to get you to start to change things?

Nadia: This is a little while down the line now. This question you are asking me is a little further in my journey. It was not until I came out of prison. I had done a year on probation and then got myself into a bit of a pickle again. I found myself at the courts and had one last chance. They gave me 18 months' supervision again. It was seeing someone from an organisation outside probation that made me want to completely change it. Of course, I wanted to change it for my son in my head, but having the resources and utilising those was near-on impossible with just probation.

It was kind of a hi-and-bye system for that first year after I had been in prison and come out. I had 12 weeks. The funny thing about that 12 weeks was that, when they gave me that sentence—obviously, it was double that; it was 24 weeks—I could have lost my house within days of coming out because of that 12-week period. That would have left me in a really difficult position for my son, who I was trying to get back, but you have to go through the process of social services and assessments. It is a lengthy process.

In this time I was finding out who Nadia was when she came back out of prison and being a mother. I had absolutely no support in terms of, "How are you feeling?" You are going into a house that is an empty shell of what used to be your little family; your son is not there and you are not getting up and taking him to school. That was not the best of times, but

you are not doing these things anymore. It was: "He's with your dad and you'll see him at set times, and that's that".

That was very difficult, so I turned back to the drugs and the alcohol to try to block it out, which then ended up with me back at court again. I am trying to explain to you the process of change.

The Chair: When you were in prison, your son went to stay with his dad.

Nadia: With my dad, so his grandad. Sorry, I should have worded it a bit differently. He went to his grandad's.

The Chair: I was anxious that the perpetrator was—

Nadia: It all happened really quickly. I understand that they have guidelines and things they need to do and put in place, but they almost homed in on my dad and made him have this special guardianship order, which then gave him 51% custody of my son, and me and his dad, because we have parental rights—we are on the birth certificate—had 24.5%.

My dad was working alongside me, because he knew that I did not want to be in this world. I did not want to carry on the way I was. I was trying to make some sort of changes, but I just could not seem to do it without watching somebody else progress with it and seeing that it is possible to be in a meeting like this today, or work alongside people and feel valuable and that you are bringing something to the table, not just being looked at as, like you say, a perpetrator, a criminal or someone who cannot do anything. I might have gone off on a bit of a tangent there, but I hope that answers part of the question.

Q153 **The Chair:** No, you have not at all. Did your dad get any support for your son while you were in prison?

Nadia: My dad was working full-time. I had a friend who was my son's godmother. It felt like they wanted to know, as soon as I had gone. They did not mind talking about that. As soon as his godmother picked him up from school, because my dad could not just leave work it was like, "Right, you have him for the weekend and we'll catch up with you Monday". Luckily enough, this girl was already doing a degree on social care, so she had skills under her belt to utilise on my son in coping that weekend with talking to my dad.

After the weekend, they gave her and my dad some support by giving them some money to get a blow-up bed and some fresher clothes—not that he did not have clothes anyway; it was just because they did want to go straight back to the house and traumatise him anymore—and some belongings that he needed at the time.

They did that, but they were passed from social worker to social worker. I had one visit. I know how difficult it is to get visits—especially over Covid, but I mean pre-Covid—from social workers in prison, so I was quite lucky to have one, but I will say that I needed more than that. I was in an

absolute heap when she came to see me about my son, and all she could say to me was, "It's all right. Your dad's got him", not, "This will be okay. You will be able to do this, this, this and this", and set out a plan. It was just, "Don't worry. Your dad's got him".

She did not get me. She was very different. It is all about getting that balance with the person as well. She did not grasp why I stayed in the relationship and things like that. I had gone through a cycle that my mum and dad had put me through, and I went and recreated that, without her giving me any help to try to underpin the underlying issues that I had gone through as a child, making me see that this is the norm, when actually it was not.

The Chair: You thought that violence in a relationship was just what happened.

Nadia: Yes, I thought that was just what you put up with in that day and age, and that is how you got on. I tried to keep that stereotypical family life as a mum and dad and son together in the wrong context completely.

Q154 **The Chair:** Do you think that things got worse for your son because people were not giving your dad or your friend any support?

Nadia: Yes, I do. I believe that my son became very confused. With his emotions, he is very good now, because we have come a long way. I could talk all day. We have come a long way and he is all right, but he has some underpinning issues that he now needs counselling for, because he finds it hard to manage his emotions. That is what he saw me do all the time. I could not manage my emotions. One minute I was here; the next minute I was down there. There was no happy medium like there is now, with me doing all the courses and parenting courses that I have done and continue to work on for myself.

Q155 **The Chair:** Were you able to keep the house when you came out?

Nadia: By the skin of my teeth, I kept the house.

The Chair: Because nobody would have been paying the rent, so you were in rent arrears.

Nadia: Yes, because I was on benefits at the time. I was on personal independence payment at the time. When I came out, I tried to reapply. Jumping on a little bit, once I had progressed to watching other people progress, and realising that I could achieve that, I came away from personal independence payment and all my medication, because I grew and I am okay. I deal with it in different ways now.

The Chair: How old is your son now?

Nadia: He is nine, and I have a 16 month-old.

The Chair: Oh my goodness—great. How are you managing with that?

Nadia: He has hit the terrible twos already, but it is all right. Solihull Approach and Circle of Security, which are parenting courses, have really helped me so much. I was forced to do it when junior was little, because I was going through a family support plan, child in need and all that, at the school. I was forced to do it. I made excuses and said I had to leave because it was too traumatising. I just did not want to know at the time.

When I came out and met my current partner, who is a childhood sweetheart, believe it or not, I asked for those courses and for that help to make sure that I could be the best parent I can to both my kids, not just repairing what has happened with Robert but making sure it is right for Reginald as well.

Q156 **The Chair:** Well done; that is good. Do you receive any support now?

Nadia: I have been through the Wellbeing Service, so I will champion that. It is brilliant. I got in a lot quicker than I thought. I got therapy much more quickly than I thought. I was a bit gutted that was not face to face, but what can we do? We are in a pandemic. I have had support through that, but it was a shut-and-cut four sessions and, "That's it. That's your lot at the moment". That is all they could offer.

My only other support would be the RDA, Revolving Doors. I volunteer for what was the CRC but is not anymore, so I am not quite sure where my role stands at the minute. I volunteer as a peer mentor for the CRC as well. My manager there could support me sometimes, but other than that, no. I just seek support from my support network and the RDA when needed. They are not direct support, but they are great at it.

Q157 **The Chair:** What about your son and school now?

Nadia: We have moved from where we used to be, which was quite a built-up estate area, not that there is anything wrong with an estate at all. Now we are quite rural; we are not out in the sticks but enough out of the loop. He goes to a church school, although I am not saying that that is any different either. I am not saying that church schools are any better. I am just saying that they have a little more time for him and have also paid for him to have a behavioural psychiatrist come in.

I just signed the papers, literally about two weeks ago, for that, so I look forward to trying to get him the extra support that he needs at school and, foremost, for high school. He is now going up to year 5 and has only two years left at that school, so that needs addressing before he gets to high school. If not, he will have very unhealthy relationships as he grows up.

The Chair: What about his reading and his writing? "Academic" is not the right word for a nine-year-old, but you know what I mean.

Nadia: He is very good at reading. He could neaten up his writing a little bit. They have said he is about a year behind, but I have spoken to a few mums and it is kind of a Covid thing. He is level, where he should be. He

just does not enjoy school as much as I would like him to, which is like most children, I guess.

The Chair: You say that he has trouble with relationships. Is that with teachers or with other kids?

Nadia: It is mainly with children. He is a kind of one-man soldier, if you know what I mean. He is on his own and he tries to branch out to his peers, but he gets really offended if they do not want to play. He gets really irate and angry quickly, which he is working on, bless him, but he seems to think that everyone is against him. That is something that I have put into him. I do not know how to say it, because I am not very articulate, but I am very much like that so he is very much like that. He has learned it from me, in a nutshell.

Q158 **The Chair:** That is interesting. Did you ever come before any family court or anything like that?

Nadia: I did, but a lot of my family court was done while I was in prison, so I did not get the chance. I just got the papers through my door and that was it. I just had to deal with it.

The Chair: That was a difficult experience. Did anybody take you through the papers?

Nadia: No, nobody took me through the papers. I got delivered my letters, as you usually would, through the mail. I did not think that would quite touch me like it has, but it took me back to reading, and sitting and thinking, "Well, his dad's not going to read that and think anything of it, because he's just probably off his head all the time. Hopefully, I can bring it back when I get out". I just lived in hope that I would sort myself out.

My most important thing to emphasise today is that it is charities like Revolving Doors, User Voice and others that are out there helping people want to carry on. To want to carry on, you have to have consistency. If not, there is no point. You think, "I've done a little bit of work here and then I'll go off". The consistency they have given me and watching people move from just finding out what they are like to managerial roles is really inspiring, and it makes me want to show my children that anything is achievable.

Robert does not know I have been to prison. He thinks I have gone to work. There was no support with "Mummy's just gone to work". We all thought that it was in his best interests to think that I had gone to work. Of course that is better than knowing that I have gone to prison, but hang on a minute: "Mummy is home 24/7 and now she has just gone away for work", not even at home for work. That would be a bit more difficult in this day and age, because of Covid, but literally I just went away, with no support around.

Yes, I made sure I phoned him every day, so he got to speak to me every day. There was, I will say, a positive part of the prison. I was on basic and I did not have a lot of credit, because you only get £4 for the week.

One of the officers really did go out of their way to make sure that I had a phone call to my son. Much as I am saying that probation did not really help, and this and that, there are some positives. There are some people in those prisons who do it because they have had some life experience, have family who have had a life experience, or genuinely, from the heart, want to help people rehabilitate themselves.

Q159 **The Chair:** Brilliant. That is a very good story. Did you meet User Voice when you were in prison?

Nadia: I met User Voice when I went on to my second lot of probation, outside of probation. I was just coming out one day and there was a woman who was taking surveys for them, and she just got me straightaway. We instantly clicked and she said, "You could do so much great work. We need someone like you. I can just feel your aura", and I just thought, "You know what? I will grab that with both hands and I'll run", and that then took me on to Revolving Doors. I have not looked back ever since.

Q160 **The Chair:** That is very good. What are you planning now, between you and your children?

Nadia: At the moment, for our relationship, Robert and I have certain things that we do. It might be swimming or a walk out in the woods, where we are on our own, so we get our own time. We have also spoken about how Robert feels. He wants some counselling, so I got on to something called Point 1, which is for children's mental well-being. He is on the waiting list. They gave me a task to do, which is what I just told you. We sit and he has a worry jar. If he ever has any worries, he puts them in there. I will go and check it, and I will sit and talk to him about those worries. They then leave the pot and we do not worry about it anymore. We spend our time, when we can, on our own.

Robert has got a lot better since we moved and resettled. All I can say is that I am just going to keep going with the good work that I am trying to do. The moral of what I was trying to say a moment ago is, although Robert does not know that I have been to prison, as he gets older and gets to a certain age, I will sit down with him. When he knows what drugs do to people, what impact things can have on life and all that, I will sit down and explain exactly how my life went, from a child right through to right now, where I am doing the best for him. I might even have a job, say in a year's time, because I would like a career in this sector. I will show him that anything is achievable and that, if you do go down the wrong path, you can turn it around and it is not the end.

Q161 **The Chair:** That is brilliant. Well done. Is there anything else you think we should know?

Nadia: Interventions in school are very important, so more intervening in the school. My family support worker was not that great, to say the least. She was very abrupt. Then you had another one who was down from her, and I really got on with her, but because she was not in that role she could not do anything about it. There could be a bit more communication

and a bit more sharing of good practice and what it looks like from other services. If it is doing all right in one area, why is it not doing the same in the other area? I mean with children. It is just about intervening a bit more quickly.

If he had stayed at that mainstream school, because there are a lot more children, would that school have paid out for that behavioural psychiatrist or would they just have said, "It's because of what he's been through"? That really makes me wonder. I know that you cannot just pluck money from a jar—we would all love to do that—but there could be a bit more funding for some peer support for these children. Robert had an ELSA session for a period of six months. I do not know what it stands for. Anna would be able to tell you.

Anna Hamill: Emotional literacy support.

Nadia: Yes, something along those lines. There could be more of those and more sessions, and greater breaking down of the stigma, saying, "We're not going to take your children away if you work with us. We want to work with you. We're not against you", and that being from the school, from a teacher or from the courts—anywhere. Emphasising that they want to work with you and not against you, because that is what puts the frighteners up us women: that you will rip away our babies. As I know, I went down and did the same thing, because I then had to figure out who I was. This is all about me giving back a bit as well for being naughty all those years.

The Chair: That is one way of putting it, yes.

Nadia: I want change and I am very passionate about not having everyone fall through the system. I know we will have a minority of people fall through the system; it is inevitable and you cannot help that, but I want to help even one woman to not be in the same position that I was for that stupid, short period of my life. I was put away for 12 weeks. They could have intervened and given me a CSTR—community sentence treatment requirement—programme or a mental health treatment requirement, and I would have been okay. I would have had that support already, but they thought, "I'll make an example of you. See you later". Twelve weeks gone, you nearly lose your house and you have lost your son. You are building up from scratch, literally.

That is all I can emphasise: more interventions, more diversion and some more sessions for the kids. It has a very big impact on their mental health. My son has struggled. It is not my fault. It is a cycle I have learned from being a child myself. Maybe they could look at parent support for trauma-informed stuff as well—I have gone through a lot of trauma that I am still dealing with—so that they find it easier not to repeat the cycle. I hope that I have now broken it and that my children are not going to repeat that.

The Chair: I hope so too, and I hope you feel that you can always keep in contact with organisations like Revolving Doors to help you. You are

not on your own in this. If you are on your own, it is really tough. This is me becoming a social worker again, I am sorry. I just want to thank you enormously for coming and being so open with us this morning.

Nadia: I just hope I have answered some of your questions all right, because I always doubt myself at the end. Hopefully, I have answered your questions.

The Chair: You have indeed. We all have to deal with difficulties and we are much better if we help each other through that. I hope you will, by making sure that we know, make sure that we say the right things, so that we get services better for people in the future.

Nadia: One more thing is just about language and how you word things to others, such as parents and children.

The Chair: Yes, I know that too, but thank you for that. Thanks a lot, Nadia, and thank you to Anna too for all your work in supporting Nadia.

Anna Hamill: That is not a problem, thank you.