



Public Services Committee

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

Wednesday 30 June 2021

4 pm

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 17

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 132 - 133

Witnesses

[I](#): Julianne; Maria

Examination of witnesses

Julianne and Maria

The Chair: Hello, I am Hilary Armstrong. I chair the Public Services Committee in the House of Lords. We are enormously grateful to you for coming this afternoon. For this part of the session, my colleague Baroness Pitkeathley, Jill, is going to talk with you and we are all listening. I hope you do not mind us all listening in on the conversation that you are going to have with Jill.

Q132 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** Hello, my name is Jill. It is very good to see you. I am part of this group here in Parliament, and we are trying to find out as much as we can about public services—government, council and charity services—and how they affect people, perhaps when they are in difficulties. We are looking especially at vulnerable children at the moment. Lots of people have come to give evidence to us, to talk to us, and they have provided us with masses of paper. Nothing is more important to us than hearing the proper experiences of people who have actually been through difficult time.

We are very grateful to you for being willing to come and talk to us about things that are personal and perhaps upsetting. Please, do not feel under any pressure to answer questions if you do not want to. Let me assure you that the session is private, apart from all my colleagues in the group who are listening to you. If you would just tell us your name when you first answer, that would be really helpful. Can I ask you, Maria, what life was like for you and your children when you were, as I understand it, the victim of domestic abuse?

Maria: It was horrible and terrifying. We felt alone and left to fend for ourselves. We felt very unsafe and very traumatised. We did not know who to go to. We **were terrified of any contact with** my estranged husband. I experienced 29 years of profound domestic abuse, violence and coercive control, **he is** a professional nurse, and witnesses of the violence were professional nurses who actually did not protect us. They rather protected our perpetrator. They saw the knives he pointed at us, but were coerced to side with the perpetrator, to please him, to patch it up, and we were forced to live as usual. It was terrifying. I do not have any friends or family here. They are all in the Philippines, and I felt really alone. It is like we were left to fend for our own wounds.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Did you try to contact people—the GP, midwives or anyone like that?

Maria: Yes, I contacted the GP. We were scared to go there, because that is his GP as well. He moved into the next road. Then the GP referred us to private counselling, to Relate Birmingham, which we had to pay for. I was in a state of financial constraint and I had to scrape every penny and cut down our basic needs, just so we could avail of the counselling, because me and my children really desperately needed it.

Baroness Pitkeathley: How many children do you have?

Maria: We have three children.

Baroness Pitkeathley: How old are they now?

Maria: The eldest, who is a son, is 28, and the two daughters are 20 and 15 years old. During that time, my middle child experienced brutal rape, so we were going through a tremendous situation and we felt we needed help. Of course, as a mother, I did my best to provide support for my children. He *totally* cut us off financially, and the worst thing for a mother is to see her children go hungry. I wanted to provide them with proper food. We ended up eating *instant* noodles for a few days just so I could catch up with our bills, which he left me to shoulder—sorry.

Baroness Pitkeathley: You do not need to be sorry, Maria. It is very important for us to hear these things and we know it is upsetting. You are very brave to come here and tell us these things. Let me give you a little break, and move to ask Julianne to tell us about her experiences.

Julianne: My situation is a little different from Maria's, because when I was in the relationship there was no violent abuse. The abuse that was occurring was financial and emotional. This started over a decade ago, when these things were not really recognised to the extent that they are today. Essentially, the financial abuse started once I was pregnant, which we now know is a classic thing, a textbook thing, to happen, but I was not aware of this at the time. In my case, I would say that the stuff that really scared me started to happen only after separation. It is well known now that abuse escalates at the point of separation and after separation.

This was the point at which the ex started to use my child as a weapon, if you like, and to turn the abuse on them. That was the only means they still had of controlling me, because we had separated and no longer lived together, so child contact became the vehicle used for abuse. Some of that was emotional but, in our case, there was also medical abuse, which was extremely frightening. It involved withholding my child's asthma medication to the point where they became very ill. I was up all night with them struggling to breathe. We were in and out of hospital. That was just so frightening.

At the time, again, I did not really understand what was going on, because I was just thinking, "What on earth possesses somebody to do that to their own child?" I could not make any sense of it. When I tried to seek help, for example from GPs and stuff, I would be going to the GP and saying, "Look, their asthma is getting really bad, but their dad is not engaging. He's not giving the medication. Should I stop contact? What should I do?" The GPs were saying, "Well, we don't know either. We can't talk about contact", and this sort of thing, so nobody was flagging this as a problem. I felt really stuck. I tried to seek some legal advice, but everything was very downplayed again.

I was in this situation where I was terrified about what he was going to do next, essentially. He got that level of control over me by hurting the person I love the most in the entire world. That level of control means

you end up being hyper-compliant and doing whatever, even if it is not right for the child. At that point, the medical services could have given greater guidance. This was before coercive control laws came in, so unless it was recognised as neglect and child abuse, nothing could be done.

As time went on, after this incident, other things started to escalate as well, because my child was getting older and developing a bit more autonomy, and was able to voice that they were scared of dad and found going on contact stressful. There was other stuff going on. At this point, I called the NSPCC, because I was really stuck about where to turn. They said, "Yes, we don't like the sound of this either", and referred it to social services, which came back to me saying, "This is not our problem. This is a private or legal matter".

I was pushed back into a system where the only way I could get support, apparently, was through lawyers, which was going to cost me lots of money, and it did. We still did not really come to a satisfactory resolution. There was this insidious build-up of what, to me, was evidence of lots and lots of things happening, some of them quite dangerous, some of them psychologically dangerous, with emotional abuse going on. My child was really unhappy.

The lawyers were saying, "Well, contact's going to be ordered, so can you try and sort this out not through court? We will send you off to this Parenting Apart programme, which is child-centred. Work with them. See how it goes". Then I was in a position where I was in a room with the ex, with me voicing my concerns, because this was supposed to be giving a voice to the child, and him denying everything. The parenting programme was not abuse-informed or trauma-informed, and certainly did not recognise the behaviours as abuse. Essentially they said, "Is your child self-harming? Are they suicidal?" "No". "It's not abuse, then".

They tried to put an agreement in place whereby we could co-parent in a child-centred manner and give the child a voice. Of course, co-parenting cannot happen with an abuser because they counter-parent. That is part of the control. He just used this as a way to try to gaslight us and cause further chaos, essentially, for several more years.

Q133 Baroness Pitkeathley: You have both said that the signs of abuse were there to be seen, but they were not seen. Maria, you said that you felt people supported the perpetrator rather than you and your children. Could you give us a view on why you think those signs were not seen and acted on?

Maria: I **did** not have any friends, like I said. All my friends **were** his friends, so I **was** isolated. His friends, who were professional nurses and **a manager at** the hospital, even witnessed how he attacked me. We are both from the Philippines, and they were saying, because of our religion, culture, tradition and all of that, "You could patch this up. You could sort this out". I had a heart surgery, and I have been doing everything for the whole family. They just thought of that as the usual.

They kept saying, "You've been together for so long. You love each other. You have children". I love my children. I do not want them to have a broken family and to mess up the whole family system. In front of his group of friends, he even threatened that, if I separated from him, he would not support our children, so I would have no means to provide for them and would end up selling myself just so I could support my children. He recognised that he is controlling of me and my children. He is abusive. He had adulterous relationships even in front of me.

All his friends are aware of the way he treated me, but they did not do anything. I had a heart problem, angina, heart surgery and all of that, but they seem to have missed it. They would just dismiss it: "You are together". This is all part of the religion.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Aside from the friends, did any of the professionals, such as the GP or social services, listen to you?

Maria: Like I said, the GP referred me to Relate Birmingham. When I went there for counselling, I was so grateful that, after 10 minutes, the counsellor said, "Hang on, Maria. This is domestic abuse. We will focus on you. We will strengthen you so that you can protect yourself and your children". After a few sessions, because I opened up to her—I do not have anyone else to open up to—she said to me, "Maria, I am here with a bucket of cold water. I am pouring it on you no matter what. Your husband will not change and you need to do something to get some help".

She signposted me to Women's Aid, which did a risk assessment. They deemed us high risk. They even wanted us to go to a refuge. But I always consider my children's preferences first. They refused to go there, and they said, "They're going to put us in this one communal bedroom with other women **and children**. They're going to move us somewhere else. We're studying". I am studying at university as well. "We're going to get cut off from all our friends". Of course, I prioritise my children and we stayed.

I am grateful that Women's Aid had a MARAC meeting and got us a social service, Think Family Birmingham, which came and started helping me apply for benefits. I thought, "I don't want to apply for benefits, because I'm working. Other people could benefit from that". They got me universal credit, because I am working in the hospital as well and I am studying at university. They told me to apply to Birmingham Council, so I did not have to pay council tax. They started that ball rolling.

During the MARAC meeting, the police were there. Unfortunately, it took them almost seven months to come and take our statement and get evidence. I begged them, "Please, I have **this knives** I don't want to throw it away. My daughter and I are seeing it. It retraumatises us". I said, "Could you please take **this** evidence and all these documents?" They said, in the end, "The timeframe of reporting has passed".

Baroness Pitkeathley: That is because they took so long to come to see

you.

Maria: Yes, they came and investigated. They took pictures of the CCTV that my estranged husband had on us. He took our control, so he could activate our alarm remotely. We had to cover the cameras. I told the police, "Please do something. What can I do to protect us because we're being monitored?" They said, "We'll contact the CCTV company", and then they put on a SIG marker, so if we called the police they would act immediately. That is what they did.

That made us a bit safer, but our perpetrator continued to harass and intimidate us, bringing some men. I am grateful that my neighbour saw them. He brought three other men with him to the front of our house, and then my neighbour knocked on my door. "Maria, call the police". That is where we actually got the support from the police.

Baroness Pitkeathley: I will just have to stop you there, Maria, because I want to ask Julianne to tell us about how she finally got some help with her situation.

Julianne: Your original question was about why this is not recognised. I think, 10 years ago, I would have said that it was because the dynamics of abuse were not really so well understood. Nowadays, there is no excuse, because it is well documented, and a lot is now known about the biology and the impact of trauma. Organisations need to become trauma-informed to be able to tackle this problem properly.

This is essentially what happened to me, because after about seven years of chaos it was starting to have an impact on my mental health. I was starting to have physical symptoms of anxiety, not generally, but every time I had to interact with the perpetrator as part of the sit-down, child-centred discussions about transitions of care at contact. "Just go and have a coffee with him and talk about how much you love your child"; it was this kind of thing. It was starting to get really difficult, because his behaviour was going off the charts at this point.

I finally got an appointment with Birmingham Healthy Minds and talked to the psychologist, who diagnosed coercive control, essentially. You kind of go, "Yes, okay, it's not just me then". When you are saying, "I think there's a problem", and everybody else is going, "No, there isn't a problem", you start to question your own sanity, to be honest. She said, "Go to WE:ARE". I went to WE:ARE, and I thought, "Oh, I'm not the only one. There are lots and lots of people all in very similar situations", so we were able to come together.

I have done a lot of research on trauma in the last year or so. Group programmes are absolutely instrumental in being able to heal trauma, move on, try to set different boundaries and regain your self-confidence. That was a very validating experience.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Has WE:ARE helped you with that? Did it work?

Julianne: Yes, massively. Not only do you get the validation, as I say, but you realise that what happened to you was absolutely not okay. It was abuse. You realise that you are not the only one. You start to see the common patterns of behaviour. Whatever situations people have come from, whether they are violent or non-violent, whether they have children or not, there are certain stereotypical things that you see. You then have new eyes when you look at what is going on in the rest of the world. You are looking at things and thinking, "That is abusive. That is not okay".

As a result of that, I have been able to provide support to other people who have been in similar situations. I was able to help write to my employer's domestic abuse policy, and I work for a pretty large employer, so that can have a lot of impact, I hope. I have been able to talk to other people who have been having problems and say, "No, what you are experiencing is abuse. It is coercive control. Here are the places you can go and get help".

It just makes a huge difference, not only for me personally in supporting my child, because I understand how to support them when we have both experienced trauma, and that explains a lot about some of our behaviours and the issues we have been having, but in being able to give something back more widely and open other people's eyes to what is going on. That is super-important. I am very glad I have had the opportunity to come and speak here today as well.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Thank you very much indeed for that. You have certainly given back a great deal to us today. Maria, could I just ask about your experience with WE:ARE? Did you have a good experience with them too?

Maria: Absolutely, yes, after the police dismissed what happened to us during their investigation. They said, "It is just his behaviour", and I was told to "manage my fear and my children through counselling". They told us to manage our expectations because our perpetrator spent a few hours in custody twice. I went back to my counsellor from Relate, who actually recognised it: "Maria, you need further specialised therapy".

They sent me to intensive trauma therapy, and from intensive trauma therapy recommended me to WE:ARE, so I called WE:ARE. Immediately, they were there. They said, "Yes, we will take you in", and the next day I started my Freedom Programme, which is amazing. I never thought there was a service available like this that could empower me and help me with our healing and recovery. I finished the Freedom Programme, and I joined Own My Life. I recognised the abuse and torture, how sadistically my estranged husband treated me and **our** children, and what we had gone through. It gave me an understanding and awareness of our situation, because we were so confused.

Then the Freedom Programme and WE:ARE introduced me to mindfulness, which helped me to calm myself and my children, because especially my youngest daughter suffered from nightmares and sleep paralysis, always dreaming that her father is at the foot of the bed with a

knife. She is scared to go to the bus stop. She said, "I kept dreaming that my father repeatedly attacked me, stabbing me in the chest". Then she had trauma. When she was panicking, with the mindfulness that WE:ARE provided me, I was able to calm her and keep her safe. It has benefited not just me, but my young daughter especially.

Baroness Pitkeathley: That is very good news about WE:ARE. I am very sorry to say that we have run out of time. We could all have listened to you both for very much longer, but you have certainly, in your words, Maria, helped our understanding and awareness today. I know I speak for all my colleagues when I say we are extremely grateful to you and to WE:ARE for helping.

The Chair: We are very grateful to you both and to WE:ARE for working with you before you came here today. If there is anything you have not had the chance to say that, had we had a bit longer, you would have liked to, please let us know. I know that Jacky or whoever is on the call from WE:ARE has all our contact details and will be able to make sure that you can get any other messages to us. Thank you very much and best wishes for the future to you and your children.

Julianne: Thank you very much.

Maria: Thank you for this opportunity.