



Public Services Committee

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

Wednesday 30 June 2021

3 pm

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.

Evidence Session No. 15

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 124 - 127

Witnesses

[I](#): Charlotte; Kayla.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Charlotte and Kayla.

Q124 **The Chair:** We are really grateful to you for joining us this afternoon. We are a committee in the House of Lords. We look at different things about public services, how they are working and what people experience from them. At the moment, we are looking in particular at vulnerable children and their families, how families handle all the challenges that are out there, but also how organisations in our world help or do not help those families and the people within them. We are particularly looking, as I say, at families where children end up being vulnerable because of what is happening in the family.

We have loads of people coming to talk to us about this: people who work for social services, people in education, teachers and inspectors. We have Ministers coming to talk to us about it. We have civil servants. We have charities that work with children and families to coming to talk with us as well. But we were determined not to look at this without getting the evidence of people with lived experience, and that is why you are here today. We want to hear your experiences.

We will make sure that we handle this in a way that you are comfortable with. This is not a public session. As an ordinary member of the public, you can watch most of our sessions. Because we do not want that for you, this is a private session for us. It means that all the faces you see are members of the committee. They will be listening to what you have to say, which will be very important for our report as the voice of those who really know, at the sharp end, what it is like.

As I say, that is why we have asked you today. Inevitably, it is a fairly short time, because we have other witnesses who have different lived experiences this afternoon, from whom we want to hear too. I just wanted to say thank you very much. I know what it is like to have to do this. As I say, I did a lot of work with Agenda and met lots of women who had suffered from abuse, violence and so on in their lives, both as children and as adults. We looked at what needed to be done about that. Do not tell us anything you do not want to. Do not feel pressured that you have to say particular things, because you do not. On the other hand, say what you feel you want to say. If we are not getting it right, we are very happy for you to tell us that.

As I say, my name is Hilary. When you come in, just introduce yourself so that we know what your name is. Again, we will not publish that, but it is much easier when we are talking this afternoon if we get your name right and all of that. As I say, thanks enormously for doing this. I just want you to talk a little bit about what it was like growing up in a family where there were problems. What were the problems that most affected you as a child, which you now have to deal with?

Kayla: Overall, I would say I had a pretty good childhood in the beginning. There were not many problems until I got older—*[Inaudible.]* It got to the point where I was getting bullied severely at school. I was

basically giving my mum a load of grief, saying that I did not want to go. I was refusing to go. My mum did not get it; she did not understand it. I was pulled out of school. I tried three other schools, and I was still getting bullied relentlessly. My mum eventually bit the bullet and pulled me out of school altogether, and I was home schooled instead because of the bullying, which was leading to self-harm, anxiety and depression.

Basically, then, in turn that made my mum's mental health worse, because she felt like she could not do anything. She felt like she was helpless and that she was doing something wrong by pulling me out of school. It turned my mum into having quite severe anger problems to the point where she would punch doors, walls and windows. It would not necessarily be in front of me, but I would be in the house so I knew it was happening.

My mum and dad still argue a lot. They have very different opinions about different things. It causes them to argue relentlessly. They are both very hot-headed people, so they would argue to the point where it would get physical. My mum and dad would not inflict pain on each other, but they would be pushing and shoving, and then my mum would take her anger out by punching the doors or the windows.

They did that while I was in the house, and it made my anxiety worse. It made me have constant anxiety about loud noises and shouting. Even having my own son now, I still hate shouting. I flinch. I get shaky and trembly if someone starts to shout. I have never been diagnosed with PTSD or anything, but it is definitely something of that sort from the constant shouting and arguing.

After 20-odd years of marriage, they still argue. They are both that hot-headed and that stubborn that they refuse to cut ties—[*Inaudible.*] In the same respect, maybe they will not. They refuse to try therapy or any of that. That was an issue ever since I was about eight or nine years old, and I still suffer the consequences of it now.

Charlotte: We suffered with financial difficulties when I was little. My mum was poor. We could not afford basic necessities. Growing up, it was a very tough life for us, because we had to rely on food banks constantly. As we grew up, my mum could not afford school uniform. We had to go to my nanna's house for that, for food or for stuff that our friends had.

It got to the point where my sister and I rebelled against my mother, and she could not cope with that. We started lashing out; we started to almost blame our mum for stuff that she had done or what she could have done better. We had social services involved. It got to the point where my mum was self-harming in front of us, but no one was listening. We got the police involved, because we were moved from home to home. We were moved from my mum's house to my nanna's house to my dad's house to my auntie's house. There was a constant cycle: "Where are we actually going to live?" We were trying to postpone it, but the fact was that we could not afford to live. My mum could barely pay the rent. To this day, she has debt that she cannot pay.

I have my own place, but that is still a financial struggle for me. I constantly worry about paying my bills. I work; my partner works as well. I am still constantly in fear: "Can I pay this? Am I going to have a roof over my head? Am I going to be able to feed my child?" That is one thing that has triggered my anxiety, my anger and my hatred for the world. I hated my family. I just wanted to run away. I was getting in trouble with the police constantly, because I could not deal with what was going on, to the point where I just did not want to be in that situation. When I was a lot older, I got out of that situation.

We had social services, but social services did not want to do anything really, because they thought my mum could cope. I mean in the sense of lying. Every time they came, she would make out like it was okay and we were doing brilliantly, when we were not. The next day, we would go back to the same stuff again. We would constantly have the neighbours complaining and people doing horrible things to our house: throwing things through our letterbox or smashing windows. It was just a bad neighbourhood that we were brought up in as well. It got to the point where in school we got bullied quite a lot, because we could not afford the necessities. That is about it.

Q125 **The Chair:** Did either of you feel that you got the support that you needed from the people out there?

Charlotte: No, definitely not.

The Chair: Can you speak just a little bit about that?

Charlotte: With the support we had back in the day from social services, they did not want to do anything more to help my mum or help us financially. Even the schools did not really want to help. Yes, they fed us and gave us meals, but when we went in we were not very well dressed, with clothes that had holes in them and stuff. They could see that, but they still did not want to help. The police just labelled us as troubled children. They did not want to physically look into it and say, "There's clearly something going on here". We got in trouble with the police more, to the point where they did not look into it properly when really they should have.

When I had my child, I got that support. I go to a charity that helps me with my anxiety and depression. It helps me be a mother. Other services have not done that. When I went to a GP before, they did not listen to me. When I said, "I'm suffering here. I need help", they said, "It's fine, it's okay. You've just had a child. You're fine". When I was little, they said, "You're fine. You're going through a hormone stage". It was not the case. They just did not want to listen to it.

The Chair: What about you, Kayla?

Kayla: I feel like there were times when social services came out to see me, when I was home schooled, and my mum even rang them herself on me, because I was that badly behaved. They basically said to her, "We can't do anything for you". Very similarly, they would say I was just

rebelling. In hindsight, looking back, I was just rebelling, but I had undiagnosed mental health conditions up until literally a couple of years ago.

It took until I had my son and I basically said, "There is something not right here". It was even a battle to get my son diagnosed, because he is disabled. I was battling with that and I was also battling with my own mental health. It got to the point where a doctor completely devalued me when I said, "I have anxiety. I have depression". Up until last year, I was just told, "It's just anxiety. You'll get over it". Then I got diagnosed properly with health anxiety. That is probably one of my worst mental health problems. People still say, "You're a hypochondriac. You're just worrying". People still devalue that, even though I have a confirmed doctor's diagnosis of it.

Now I am looking into a possible diagnosis of BPD as well. They are still not really listening. They are still saying, "It's unlikely. That's wrong". They are saying that it is unlikely that there is something not right with me. They assume that I am just stressed or worried. Because my son is the way he is, they assume I am just always stressed about that and my health anxiety stems from the fact that he is disabled. Most of it does, but there are serious things that go on in my mind when I am having a panic attack or a depressive episode. There were times when I almost had to ring the crisis team, because I just did not know what to do any more.

I do not refuse to take medication, but I have never really been offered medication that would actually help without making me feel worse first. Because I am already in a bad place, I do not want to take medication that is going to put me further down that hole. At 20, doctors still do not listen to me now. I have had issues with doctors since I was 15, when I had my son. Almost five years down the line, they still will not listen.

The only ones who have helped me since I have had my son, ironically enough, are social services. They are helping me now. We have a specific disability social worker. She is the only one who helps us. She says that she can be a voice for us to the health professionals. She can build bridges, given the communication issues. Because of my anxiety, I struggle to communicate with health professionals especially.

Q126 The Chair: How do you think all of this has affected your children?

Kayla: We are pushing for an ASD diagnosis for my son. He hates loud noise; he cannot cope with it. With my mental health, if I am crying, shouting, having a panic attack or something, it will make him cry. He will hold me, pull on my clothes or ask, "What's wrong, mum? Have I done something wrong?" It is almost like he blames himself for what is wrong with me. It takes a lot of reassurance on our end, as his mum and dad, to say, "It's okay, it's not your fault, it's fine". Because he is so young, we cannot explain to him why I feel like that. As bad as it sounds, sometimes I just have to say, "Mammy was just feeling a little bit silly

then" or, "Mammy was just a little bit upset then, but I'm okay now". It affects him now.

With the anxiety factor, he has never stayed away from me. My anxiety is so bad that I cannot bring myself to give him to somebody, because there is such a lack of trust with everybody. "What if they don't look after him right? What if he cries when he's away from me?" Those things are constantly going through my head. He is now nearly five and the only time he has stayed away overnight is when he was in hospital and he had to stay with my mum. The only reason I could not stay with him was that my panic attack was so bad that I ended up in A&E myself. I had to leave him in children's A&E while I went over the corridor to adults A&E because I could not calm my breathing down and I was being sick. I felt like I was going to pass out, all because of a panic attack.

I did not know what was wrong with him, because at the—[*Inaudible.*]—but he did not have it. He was being sick and then I was being sick. He was going in and out of consciousness, and then I was going in and out of consciousness. It was probably to this day one of the worst nights of my life. I still remember it in such horrible ways.

The Chair: That is very tough, Kayla.

Charlotte: Similarly to Kayla, I have a disabled son. He is profoundly deaf. Marcus—that is his name—gets angry, so we are trying to get a diagnosis of autism at the moment. He does not understand. When mummy is experiencing a bit of anxiety or feeling a bit down, he does not understand why that is happening. He will get more angry, to the point where he will come and hit me or get violent, because he does not understand. When we are outside, if I am taking him to nursery or taking him somewhere, he does not understand road safety so he will just run in front of the cars in the road.

He will have a meltdown, and people will look at us and stare at us, and I will have to try to calm him down. I have had many people say, "You're quite young to be looking after a child like that" or, "You're not doing it right, because you're a young parent. You shouldn't be doing that". I think, "You don't know what my son is going through, so how dare you say that?" A parent at 40, 50 or whatever is going to be doing exactly the same as I am doing at age 20. At the end of the day, I am going through exactly the same thing. It is just the anxiety of people staring and telling me those things. It is just the rudeness of telling me that I am not doing it right.

He does not understand, and the way that people stare just makes me feel even worse. It feels like I am by myself, to the point where I cannot cope with Marcus or I am struggling to get him to where we need to be. It got to the point where I had to call someone to come and help, because I could not do it; I broke down in the middle of the road. Some people are very kind, and I like it when people ask, "Do you need any help?" That is perfectly fine. I will say yes or, "No, thank you". People staring or making a rude comment is what makes me angry, to the point

where my son can see that, and he starts getting angry and shouting, or he starts screaming, because he is non-verbal as well. He just screams, hits and taps you when he wants something. Once he sees that in me and he can reflect off me, it just makes him a lot worse, when I am not feeling right.

Q127 **The Chair:** What would make a real difference for each of you?

Charlotte: It would be having support services that can help. I now go to a charity-based support service. I have recently been referred—it has taken five years—to talking therapy, but I still do not think that is enough, because I suffer to this day. I have been to the doctor’s multiple times and they have not listened. They need to understand what people are going through and help. More services out there need to sit down and listen to young vulnerable children. If they do not listen, people are going to end up in my situation. I do not want that to happen to my son. That is why I tried to make a better life for him than what I went through.

It is really helpful for people to understand the tips on how to deal with financial struggle or how to deal with the people who are in place and the things that are in place for you to go to, if you need that sort of help. We need people to actually listen, to do something about it, and to see that you are struggling and it is not because of different issues or things that have gone on.

The Chair: How about you, Kayla? What would make a difference?

Kayla: There could definitely be more awareness of the help services. A good example would be to have things in school. It would be beneficial to make the services more known to schoolchildren, in case, heaven forbid, they ever need a domestic violence hotline, a suicide prevention hotline or something like that. They are not very widely known. Even with the domestic abuse hand signal, I had to learn that from social media, when I feel like I could have learned it in school. Then it would be ingrained. Should I ever need that in any way, it would be there.

We need more awareness but less judgment. I feel like there is a lot of judgment, not just of young mothers—because I can speak as somebody who is in a very happy relationship and has been for many years now—but of young parents as a whole. When I and my partner first got together, we were judged very heavily. People said it would never work, that having a child would completely ruin our relationship, that we would have nothing going for us and that we would have no career prospects or anything. That was not even coming from friends or friends of friends; it was coming from health professionals as well. They were saying that we would not be good parents because we were younger.

My partner and I both have mental health problems. We are very similar to each other, but, even now we are a lot older, we still get stigmatised. “Do you not struggle? Is it not difficult for you?” The most hurtful thing was when one of the health professionals said, “There would be no judgment here if you wanted to put your child up for adoption”. Because I

was only 15, they assumed that I would not want my son. It made me almost feel like I was put on the spot, and I had to stand up to them and say, "I want to keep the pregnancy". They automatically just assumed.

I have noticed that a lot of my friends who are the same age as I am have had very similar issues. "Abortion or adoption is an option". That is the first option, and then they tell you that you could keep it after they have already told you that you could abort the pregnancy. It almost makes you feel uncomfortable, knowing that you could abort it or put your child up for adoption, particularly for somebody who has suffered miscarriages, as I did after I had my son, and who was brought up in a very conservative family that does not believe in abortion, adoption or things like that.

They are still very much like that now. It took them a while to accept that I was not going to abort the pregnancy. Even at the age that me and my partner are at now, we are even considering adopting another child at some stage. It is hard to tell such a conservative family that you do not have to settle to be in a relationship for ever, that you do not have to have a child or that your life is not over.

We need less judgment all round, not only from health professionals but from families. If they had a better understanding, it would make it easier for them to understand the next generation's problems.

The Chair: We have to understand the next generation's problems. You have set us some challenges today. Thank you very much indeed. We are really grateful to you for speaking with us. I am sorry that we have to cut off, but we have other people we need to talk to. All the best to both of you, and thanks also to Maggie for facilitating this and making sure that you had a bit of a clue as to what you were going to face from us today. If there is anything else, just let Maggie know and she can let us know. Thanks very much indeed.