

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Fostering](#), HC 340

Tuesday 7 November 2017

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; James Frith; Emma Hardy; Trudy Harrison; Ian Mearns; Thelma Walker; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 67-189

Witnesses

I: Rachel, Connor, and Luke Rodgers, young people with experience of foster care.

II: Robert Goodwill MP, Minister of State for Children and Families, Department for Education, **Katy Willison**, Director of Children's Social Care, Practice and Workforce, Department for Education, and **Rachel, Connor and Luke Rodgers**, young people with experience of foster care.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- Department for Education [[FOS0086](#)]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rachel, Connor, and Luke Rodgers.

Q67 Chair: Good morning. As you can see, we have a slightly different set-up for this morning's meeting. This is the final session of the Committee's inquiry into fostering. We are joined by Rachel, Connor and Luke, who are going to share their experiences of foster care, and at 10.45 Robert Goodwill, the Minister for Children and Families, and one of his senior civil servants, Katy Willison, will join us.

Rachel, Connor and Luke, welcome. As the Education Committee, we are responsible for looking at what the Government do in terms of schools and services for children and young people. How well do you think the foster care and school systems work together, and do you get the support you need?

Rachel: I feel that during high school I got quite a lot of support, because there was a nurture group I could go to straight away. As soon as I started high school they offered me a nurture group; they said you can go to talk to someone there if there are any issues. It wasn't like I had to, but it was there for me to go to, which was quite nice. Obviously, I got a mentor as well, who would take me out and help me out with different situations. If there were problems in school, she would help me out with English or maths, or anything I needed help with. I had a good experience with that.

Connor: When I first came into care, I was living in an area in West Yorkshire called Huddersfield, in a little area called Birkby. I was there for nearly a year and I was going to a school called Whitcliffe Mount, which was where I grew up, in Cleckheaton in West Yorkshire. The set-up there was good when I was in care, but I had to be supervised at all times around school and I think it could have been set up better. I got a taxi to school and, once my taxi had dropped me off, I had to wait in the reception area for a teacher to come and collect me. I got dropped off at lessons and got collected from lessons a bit before the end. I used to get my name shouted, to call me out of lessons. Then I got escorted to lessons, which I thought was very controlling, and I didn't get to interact with my peers. It just wasn't a really nice set-up.

But, since moving to Bridlington, the set-up was good because once I'd joined the school they set up an MTA who worked with all the class, so that I wasn't set apart from my peers. He worked with all the class and he wasn't with me all the time, constantly. The school itself was very supportive. It got me into a very nice friendship group straightaway. It's just a really good set-up at the school I'm at now. I've had two very different experiences. I feel that at the school I am at now I get the support I need in my current situation.

Q68 Thelma Walker: First, I give a personal thank you to the three of you for coming here today, because you are smoothing the journey for other young people who are going to be in schools and are going to be



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fostered. Thank you for that. It is about how schools can do it better. You have described your journey, Connor—and you are from my local area. As a former headteacher, I have worked professionally with young people who are meeting the challenges every day. If you were to write five top tips for schools about how they could improve that journey for you, what would you say? You have mentioned something already about inclusion and not feeling that you are different or separate. Are there key things that you would say to schools—“That really didn’t work for me. I was meant to feel different; I didn’t feel it was inclusive.”? What key things would you want to share with young people and schools in the future?

Luke Rodgers: Can I answer that one? It is a combination of both of those questions really. I am 26, so I left care a long time ago. I did not have a great experience; I reflect on it differently now.

I think some of the issues with schools and with foster carers are around information sharing. A child spends a third of his life at school and a third in care, but our system is set up to give people the least amount of information about the child, for several reasons around a need-to-know basis—do the schools need to know the details about a child; does the foster carer? Also, those two do not communicate with each other as well as they could, so young people tend to be misunderstood at school due to their behaviour. They are reacting to trauma in their lives or difficult experiences that schools do not understand; schools see it as bad behaviour.

Connor mentioned taxis, which point to a deeper issue. We have removed independence from young people. The amount of stories I hear of people leaving care, waiting for a taxi to work and not understanding why their employer has not sent a taxi. Our system is meant to give young people independence, but has unintentionally taken it away with things like taxis, because we are not allowing young people to get buses.

Looked-after children’s reviews as well are mainly done in schools. Not all, but a lot of foster carers are scared to have children’s parents at their homes, so looked-after reviews are done in schools. As Connor said, someone comes into your class, knocks on the door and says, “Your social worker’s here.” Then you have to walk out, so that is pure isolation.

As well, when young people misbehave at school with things that I would deem as child-appropriate behaviour, we review the child’s behaviour in a looked-after children’s review—so if six people at school are smoking a bit of cannabis or something, the four children who are not in care get grounded, and the two who are in care have an intervention meeting with a drugs worker and a police officer. That might be needed in some scenarios, but not all.

As well, the designated teacher in schools—the person who should know who all the looked-after children are—is the person who spends the least amount of time. Being a head teacher, you will know that the head teacher should know too, but there is more work that needs to be done in schools with everybody about trusting the institution to understand young



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people's experiences so that they can provide a better environment for them.

I do not blame schools for it. I think our system needs to improve to share information and trust the organisations better, so that young people can feel more comfortable in those institutions.

- Q69 **Thelma Walker:** That is really useful. So you are saying that the ethos and the culture of the school is really important.

Luke Rodgers: Yes. Also, we create policies that they interpret and that becomes their culture. We need to change policy around information sharing, for a start, and how we write things, such as many referrals that I have seen. To give my experience, my referral said several things: one was that I was at high risk of absconding; the other was that I was done for burglary and affray. My high risk of absconding was because I left the street when I was told not to, so I was reported missing. I was never missing; I was just at a skate park. The burglary and affray was stealing out-of-date beer out of my Dad's shed. He beat me up in the street and I got done for it.

When those things went on my referral, I had so many barriers to opportunities, because the information about my behaviour was misrepresented. We have to record information based on young people's experiences in a way that is more authentic and has the young person at the heart of it, so rather than unintentionally creating barriers, we are using the referral as a passport, if anything.

- Q70 **Thelma Walker:** That is really helpful. Rachel, you mentioned your nurture group as well, which helped you. Would you recommend that?

Rachel: Definitely, because it helps you to meet other young people and children who may be in the same situation as you or have the same behavioural problems as you. You can connect with them or the teachers. It is like a break away from school, because sometimes you can be a bit overwhelmed in school, and you just want to get out and be in a different environment. I found that quite helpful, because you'd have days when you were just not feeling it, and you didn't want to go home. You can just go to nurture and chill with them. They can talk to you and they care about what is going on in your life. Can I also add something linking on to what you said about a teacher knowing that the child is in care? I noticed in high school quite a lot of teachers knew that I was in foster care. I appreciated it, because a lot of teachers gave me support, but at the same time I thought it was a bit too much. Too many teachers would be coming up to me: "Are you okay, are you okay?" And I would be like: "Can you not?" because I want to have my own privacy and I don't want to always know that I'm a foster child and everyone knows I'm a foster child. I want to be like everyone else. Treat me like everyone else. Some teachers don't know how to manage the whole "You're in foster care" thing, and they give off a really bad vibe towards me and I feel, "Oh my gosh, I actually am in care". It's not nice.

- Q71 **Thelma Walker:** So, to go back to my earlier point, it's fundamentally



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about the ethos of a school. If it is inclusive it doesn't matter whether an individual is in foster care or not, because each child is an individual and each child is special. That is the important thing, isn't it?

Luke Rodgers: There is also some work being done around attachment-aware schools. I agree that is something that people don't want to know—when I was in care I wanted to hide away. I didn't want people to know. It is about the teachers having the capacity and confidence in themselves to be able to communicate with any young person that is in front of them. That is how I see it.

The vibe that they give off is their anxiety, usually about causing further harm: "What do I say to a young person who is in care because I've not had those experiences?" They become all flustered with it and that flustering gets misinterpreted by young people, because they think, "I feel differently", because that person doesn't have the confidence or capacity in themselves or the self-belief to communicate with young people who have been through trauma.

Q72 **Thelma Walker:** Do you think the curriculum could help with that? You talked about the ethos, but if you think about what you are actually learning and how you learn, and relationships, have you got any comments about the actual curriculum?

Luke Rodgers: Yes, absolutely. I teach enterprise skills, so my career has been built on social enterprise so I am quite biased towards that, only because a lot of young people who have been through care are really resourceful. They know how to survive, they can work things out. They can work our system out very quickly. They call young people manipulators. To me, they understand the system and know how to work it. There is something around that skill that we don't see as a resource or something we can tap into. I think asking young people to focus on a curriculum which is around memorising information, doing exams and sitting still for two hours, is very difficult when you are experiencing trauma and you have a lot of mental health issues, which is something we don't focus on enough in schools. To me, if a young person is struggling with mental health, and having to concentrate on school at the same time, that is going to become a lot more difficult.

Thelma Walker: Brilliant, thank you.

Q73 **Chair:** We are going to move on to placements. Can you both describe how many placements you have had and what has been your experience of it?

Connor: I have had three placements including this one I am with now. The first placement I was in, I moved in September 2015 and I was there nearly a year. Once that time finished, something happened within the placement which forced me to move—nothing to do with me. I was then moved, but I got no info telling me I was moving. So it was a very quick move. I stayed somewhere in Salendine Nook, which was also near Huddersfield for three days and then I went to stay in Brighouse for a weekend and then I came over to Bridlington for the summer, then went



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back to my second placement in Salendine Nook for the first couple of weeks of school. Before moving to Bridlington, I was still in Pemberley.

In my first placement, I didn't get much info about the carers I was going to live with, about what the house was like—is it comfortable, is it warm and stuff?

Q74 Chair: Did you get any choice at all? Nothing—you were just told, "You're put here".

Connor: Yes, I just got told the carer's name. I didn't get told what they were doing. I didn't get a prepared booklet from anyone. They said it was on emergency. The carer I was with said to me that she didn't get much info on me either. The only thing she got told by the local authority was, "Can you have a 12-year-old boy on emergency?" They said it would be a couple of weeks until they could find a suitable placement, but I was there for nearly a year with nothing to edge me on to think that I'm going to be here for a long time. It wasn't until I reached the end of the placement that I realised, "Oh, I've been here for quite a while and I'm suddenly moving out of nowhere."

Q75 Chair: How upsetting have you found the moving?

Connor: It was very, very stressful for me—

Q76 Chair: And unsettling and upsetting?

Connor: Yes, because I was within three different placements in a week, after I had been at one for a year. So, it was very stressful and very upsetting for me, but I have learned to expand beyond that now and cope with it, and cope with the stress. It's been a bit of a rollercoaster for me.

Q77 Chair: And how would you change it?

Connor: I would just say that the local authority should give information not only to the young person about the foster carers but to the foster carers about the young person, so they can work together and help each other, widen their views and welcome them into their home. I do not feel comfortable in the home with somebody that I don't know, but if I have got info on them I can know what they like doing, how they are, what they are like, and stuff. That is how I would improve it.

Rachel: When I first moved to my first placement, it was quite similar—like an emergency—just moving in, and they said to me that I was only staying in for seven days. And then, obviously, it lasted a long while, and then after that I got separated from my siblings, which meant I had to move to a different placement. But I thought that placement move then was a little bit better, because I got to meet the foster carer, go out with her, go for lunch with her, go shopping with her, see the house and meet the other people in the house. I kind of liked the way they did that with me, because they were setting up a full-time placement with me, so they let me settle in with her a bit before I moved straight in, which I think they should do with most young people before they just send them off, or



at least do the booklet, which I have noticed, because I interview foster carers with my advocate.

Recently, a few of them have started making a booklet about their life, what they enjoy, who they are and stuff, but I feel like they should show that to the young person before they move, so that the young person can understand who they are moving in with, because on that first day when I moved in with the first foster carer it was quite unnerving, because you don't know who they are, you don't know what to expect, you don't know what it is going to be like, what they are like or anything like that. I had a bad first placement move, but then the second one was quite good.

- Q78 **Chair:** Before I come on to Emma, in the notes you mention how upsetting it was that you were separated from your siblings. Can you talk about that—only if you want to—and how important you think it is that siblings, as much as possible, should be kept together?

Rachel: I feel very highly about keeping siblings together, because when I look at my own case and how it was done, I feel like there was probably another way to have done the situation, because I was told I was moved away from them because I was over-protective with them. In my eyes, as a sister when you're moving away from home, I feel like it is an instinct straight away just to be protective, because you are moving in with a stranger and you have to protect your siblings.

During the course of time, I was telling myself that I need to let this carer look after my siblings so I can grow up, because the aim of separating me was then I could grow up as well, as an adult. But I feel that instead of separating me from them, they could have done some work with me, to say that the foster carer can look after my siblings, or tell me I don't need to do everything for them and I don't have to put a barrier up. They could have given me time to settle in, so then they didn't have to separate us. But they separated us and then I wasn't allowed to see them for a long period of time, because they said that I was giving my little sister a lot of bad memories and bad thoughts, and I was thinking, "Have you actually sat down to question her, to find out whether she is crying because she misses me or because of this or this?"

I felt that if they had given that support to her, or maybe given her an advocate to speak to, we would not have had to be separated and we would not have lost this bond of sisters and brothers. I feel personally that we have a bond, but it is not as strong as I would like it to be, and that is quite hurtful to me, because to lose a bond with your own siblings is sad, because you are by yourself in the world and your siblings are practically your best friends, and now you're losing them. You have lost your parents and then your siblings, and it is like your whole world has crashed down really quite quickly.

Chair: I know that Luke wants to come in, but Emma, do you want to ask a question first?

- Q79 **Emma Hardy:** It is quite upsetting, really, that you've gone through that. I just think you are all so impressive, and brilliant, and I am just so



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pleased you are here. I just think you are fantastic and what you said about the resilience and the strength that you all have is just absolutely incredible. I am sure you will get your link back with your siblings—

Rachel: I see them now. I have contact now after a long process of fighting, going speaking, writing letters and getting an advocate and stuff. It took a while, but I have got there now and I see them once a month. It is quite nice.

Q80 **Emma Hardy:** You will be an amazing role model for them. I bet they will watch this and think how impressive you are, and how brilliant. Sisters are the best. I am not saying anything against brothers, but sisters—absolutely.

Luke, could you answer a little bit about how your placements were and your experience?

Luke Rodgers: First, I don't know why we have to fight for what is commonly a human right—to see siblings. On the assumption that you are giving negative thoughts, I mean, who is making those assumptions first and foremost? What I see is that, when young people are separated from parents and children, that is what causes bad behaviour. Yet we say, "You've been badly behaved, therefore you can't see your parents or your children, because it's causing it." We should work together to provide a space that is safe—but that is nothing to do with you, it is do with the professionals' fear of how to manage that relationship.

On the back of that, there is a diverse landscape of fostering, which we do not seem to understand. Fostering as it currently stands is around what I call silo placements. You get moved from placement to placement. My story is that I was in 13 different placements and two children's homes in five years, before being independent, at 15 years old, in a B&B. That is a more common story than any other that you will find.

As a child, I was very angry at moving around a lot, but now, looking back, I understand that it was down to the capacity of those individuals and the information that they had about me. My referral was terrible. Nobody would foster me; I was classed as unfosterable at 15 years old, for things written that I had done, and not who I was. When you looked through and understood the reasons why I had done the things that I had done, they were nowhere near as bad as they sounded at all.

That is what we create through our systems of recording and social workers responding to crisis constantly. We use the word "crisis"; an argument at home is called a crisis. So that is all they are writing down. When a placement is going well, a young person does not feel like they have got the attention from the social worker that they want, because the social worker is too busy responding to crises. That is an issue of our system in terms of the workload of social workers.

There is another thing around local authorities' in-house capacity. Local authorities just do not have enough foster carers for young people, so they have to go to private, independent providers to buy foster carers.



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What you have is independent providers that are for profit and those that are not. There is a diverse landscape; it is a marketplace. The issue you have is around culture. Local authorities might not go external for placements because of the cost or the illusion of cost, so they will not find the right placement for the child. So you have 50 placements in-house, and they will not search out of house for another foster placement because of its cost. You get the best of the in-house foster places, which might not be the best for the child, because of the refusal to buy an external foster place that would be better. That to me is a big issue.

The other thing is placement moves. Placement moves happen quite a lot, quite quickly. A lot needs to be done around that. I do not know what exactly, because it is such a complex landscape, but information sharing and things like that.

Chair: Thanks. We have to get through quite a few questions.

- Q81 **Emma Hardy:** I just have a really quick question. Rachel, you mentioned the booklet as being a good idea, with people getting to know each other a little bit first. I wonder if anybody else has any suggestions of how it could be improved. Any quick points any of you want to make?

Connor: As long as a foster carer and the young person have got the info about each other, they can make that work within the placement. As long as they have the information, such as what they like, what they like doing, how they live, the house rules they keep—that information is the main thing that I think young people and foster carers need to make that placement work.

Luke Rodgers: I would agree with that. An online digital platform is needed. Paper does not work any more, but we will not invest in an online digital platform. For a young person to move from A to B overnight, we give them a booklet on a car journey on the way there. No anxiety is going to be alleviated from that. There needs to be an online platform.

- Q82 **Ian Mearns:** I agree with Emma: I found that last discussion quite annoying, but also upsetting. It is about the relationships between young people who are in foster care or in the care system and the professionals and their employers, and who those professionals work for. My fundamental question is: do the professionals who work with you and their employers—the local authority or whoever—feel like your corporate parent? That is the phrase that has been coined for the relationship between the entities controlling the care system and the young people in our care. We are all meant to be the corporate parent, but what I am hearing is that the actions taken do not feel like those of any sort of parent, never mind a corporate parent.

Rachel: Because I am black, my first foster carer did not understand the simple things like the hair care and skin care that I needed. I know that is small, but sometimes it is the little things that matter quite a lot to me. So when I moved in with my black foster carer, she knew all the stuff I needed and she asked me, "What did your mum use to do with your hair? What sort of skin care do you use?" It is quite nice to have someone with



that connection with you, to have them ask me what my mum used to do and to not cut off my parents completely and just to ask me the simple question, "What sort of hair do you like? What do you want?" It is a little, but it means a lot.

Connor: I have had quite a lot of experience with social workers. In my first placement there were two working as a pair. They were classed as one social worker for me, but they worked as a pair. One time they came out for a visit. They sat me down and we went through an eight-page care plan of what my plans were for my future care. So I wrote eight pages of what I thought would make my care better. One thing I asked was if we could arrange a supervised contact at a Pizza Hut, a McDonald's or somewhere for a day out with my friend, because I really missed my best friend. He was at school and I was in Huddersfield. They said to me, "We've got quite a lot of cases going on right now, so we will see what we can do." It took them several months to even think about setting that up. It took them even longer to finalise it, and then it never got finalised. I never got to see my friend. So they did not do what was right for me. They didn't do what I had decided.

Then I lost them two and I got a new social worker who got everything done at the click of a finger. She got everything done for me. She got contacts set up with my siblings and with my mum. She got loads of stuff sorted out for me. You find good social workers, but you find bad social workers as well. You never get all good or all bad. There is always a mixed variety of social workers that you will get.

I had this social worker for quite a while and then she left because she was going into a different field of work, working with adults instead of young people. So I got a new social worker and for the first part he was good. He got quite a lot sorted out, but over the past few weeks and months he has been inconsistent with work. He has not been responding to calls and not responding to emails—nothing. I get that relationship and I lose that trust in social workers. You trust them with your decisions for your life, and they do not do anything about it.

Q83 **Chair:** Do you tell anyone if the social worker is not responding?

Connor: Yes.

Q84 **Chair:** Who do you tell?

Connor: I tell my foster carer mainly and she goes off to tell various people.

Q85 **Chair:** Does it make a difference once you have told the foster carer? Does the social worker explain why they have not been in contact?

Connor: The social worker never did, but my independent reviewing officer, who had been on leave, was very apologetic. He explained that he had been on leave and was not able to pick up a phone call. Last week—last Tuesday—there was family contact for me and my siblings and my mum. My social worker messaged us in the morning before he set off. We were wondering if all my siblings would be there. My youngest half-brother



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has missed one family contact with us. We were told that all siblings would be there. It was my youngest half-brother's birthday the day after, so everyone was going to come with his presents and his cards to give him to open on his birthday.

We set off with great excitement. I was on half term, but my siblings were back at school because of the different term dates. It links back to the relationship with the professionals and their employers. There was no communication between the contact team at the contact centre and my social worker about the term dates for the children, which was quite upsetting, because we never got told. We were told that all the siblings were going to be there, no matter what; so the plan was that I would have an hour with my mum first, at the contact centre, and then the other three siblings would join us after they had been picked up from school. That went fine: I had an hour with my mum and had a really nice time. We had a quick chat and then my siblings arrived with the contact team. But only two siblings arrived, so I said to them, "Where's my half-brother? We were told he was going to be coming." They said that he was not coming. So I said, "We got told that he was coming, so why isn't he here?" The contact officer who was with us explained everything. She said that his dad didn't have the funds to get him over. So that lack of communication from the contact team and the social worker left me feeling upset and quite angry, because we were told that he was coming. My social worker lied to us, and he not only lied to us: he didn't just let me down, but let us as a family down, because we were all excited to see him and give him his presents and cards for his birthday. He had been sat at home, wondering, on his birthday. He woke up the next morning, at home on his birthday, thinking that his mum and his other siblings, who he doesn't see that often, had got him nothing for his birthday, because he wasn't there to receive anything.

So, for me, the communication between the contact team and the social worker is just absolutely appalling.

Q86 Ian Mearns: Have you ever thought about an entitlement for somebody to act on your behalf who is not the social worker—like an advocate?

Connor: I have got an advocate who has been involved with quite a lot of things. I have been getting involved with this situation as well. She's been absolutely phenomenal; she's got a lot sorted for me.

Q87 Chair: You both mention the advocates.

Rachel: Yes, I had an advocate, so I could eventually have contact with my siblings.

Q88 Chair: Who have the advocates been, and how did you access them? Who advised you to access them?

Connor: I got the information on advocacy from my second social worker, the one who did everything. She gave me a book on advocacy. Because I live in Kirklees authority for the children's rights team, that's where my advocate is from. I got a little placky wallet with various information on things, like linking to who works on a team, how they



perform and what the visits are like. So that's how I got to know about advocacy—through my social worker.

Rachel: I got to know my advocate because there was a day I was feeling really bad and I went to my counsellor and spoke to him about my problem with my contact, how I have written a letter, done this and done that, and no one's listening to my views. He told me that I could get an advocate and my foster carer also told me after that that, yes, I could get an advocate. Eventually I got one; I sat down with him several times and we talked and talked. He told me about different perspectives, to see why they'd moved me away, how we could resolve it, and stuff like that. Eventually he spoke on behalf of me and I'm seeing them now. It has given me confidence to speak in my meetings now, because at first I didn't feel listened to. Ever since he has started to speak about my points and they've listened to it, I've realised that I can actually speak—that they will hear me, because my voice is important.

Q89 **James Frith:** What an amount of information to have listened to, and an inspirational series of contributions that you have made. It strikes me that when it has worked well, you have been treated as any child would hope to be treated by their loving parent. Where the system has let you down is through some quite clunky, careless breakdowns in basic things such as communication, as you talked about, Connor, and that sense of pride in appearance and cultural understanding, which you talked about, Rachel. I think those are really powerful. The hope I take from it is that it should be quite easy to resolve with some attention. Do you feel that that is the case? Would you say that advocacy is probably the strongest experience in tipping the balance from that clumsy, clunky state situation that you have experienced, to the loving, parental system that we want to replicate?

Rachel: I feel that advocacy makes social workers get up and do the job quicker. At first, when you are telling them, telling them and telling them, they are like, "Okay, we'll get to it." Then an advocate comes in and they really push it to get done as soon as possible. I feel that that helps, if someone is there to do that straightaway.

I talked about this before. What if, as soon as a child goes into foster care, they get an advocate—not one to keep, but an advocate to speak to about how they feel about the move and to let them know what exactly is happening? Because you don't know and when you don't know you feel lost and don't know what to do.

If you have an advocate who is not a social worker or the foster carer, you have someone who knows what is going on but is outside that whole system who can tell you what is happening, what has happened and to ask how you feel. They can just ask, "Are you okay and what do you want to happen next?" and help you to get there, because it is hard to speak, especially for younger children. It is hard to say, "I don't like this. I want this or that."



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If they have an advocate, they straightaway have someone to stand by their side and say, "This is what this child has said to me; this is what they are reacting to and this is what we should do next to progress", instead of just putting the kid in care, sitting back and saying, "Right, we have taken the kid out of that situation; we've done our job." You still need to do the job to try to get that kid home or into a stable living area.

Q90 **Chair:** Before I come to Lucy, did you want to say something, Luke? Then I will come to William.

Luke Rodgers: Going back to the question asked about corporate parenting—corporate being a group of people and parents being two individuals who should care for children—we don't get the concept of that enough, I don't think. I don't actually think we know what we mean when we say it. I think we just say it because we have to.

To me, it is about things such as the care leaver covenant that is going to come out. How do we involve people wider than the local authority within that? Employment needs to change to involve young people who have been through care into it, and education needs to change. These are all policies that have been created for the general population but, when you are in care, it is a specialist policy. So, something needs to adapt there so we can fully implement corporate parenting in the round.

I am really conscious that we do not fall into social work blame. In my experience I had some terrible social workers, if I'm honest, but I don't blame them. Social workers are just so overworked a lot of the time. They get into this job to help children and all they do is learn how to do paperwork. What you have created is a distance from their original reason for being in social work. I don't want to get into the culture of blaming social workers for the failings of young people, because it is a systematic issue, not an issue of individuals.

Q91 **Lucy Allan:** I am going to move on to talk about carers. There has been talk about professionalising the role of the foster carer, giving them the minimum wage, paid holidays and pensions, and turning it almost into employment. Perhaps Luke, you could start with how you think that would change the relationship between carer and child, and whether that would be a good thing or something that you would not welcome.

Luke Rodgers: Humanising social work would be a better way of doing it. Do foster carers want to be professionals? We hear this concept a lot in the sector. The struggle that we have got with that is that you are over-professionalising something that needs to be more human.

For me, it is more about how we can create a system that is more human, that can work with people on that human level, rather than have more rules and regulations around it. We have tried with foster carers before, with things around delegated authority, so that they have the right to make everyday decisions for children in care. It would go the same way as professionalising—it would give them rights.



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The issue you have got is around the culture: social workers are responsible for the child and they struggle to delegate that authority sometimes, because of a fear of retribution. If they do delegate, foster carers are sometimes scared to make those decisions for the same reasons.

For me, it is about making the system more child-focused and humanistic and being able to love and care for children, rather than professionalising it. The more we professionalise, the further and further away we are going to get from creating an authentic living space for young people in care.

Q92 Lucy Allan: What do you think, Rachel?

Rachel: Personally, from my experience of being in a foster home and seeing other kids come in and out, it is about the relationship between foster carers and social workers. I feel that the foster carer would know a lot more about the child because, obviously, they live with them, they know what the child is going through and they see their daily stuff. When I have watched my foster carer and social worker—obviously I do not know the exact details, but when I have looked at them—the social worker doesn't really listen to exactly what the foster carer has to say about the child's behaviours. I feel like that is very important, because they live with them, they see them on a daily basis, and they see the way they act.

They should be treated professionally, because they are doing a job that is really hard—looking after kids who might have ADHD, autism or something really difficult. They have to do quite a big job, and when people don't take them seriously or listen to what they are saying, it is quite hard. My foster carer had a lot to say to improve, to change and to help, and they just cut it off straight away. They could have got somewhere better if they had listened to the foster carer.

Q93 Lucy Allan: Did you feel that the social workers were basically ignoring the foster carers?

Rachel: Yes. They didn't class them as someone who they could communicate with on the same level, or listen to what they had to say. It was like, "You're a foster carer. You stick to that. Don't think you're trying to make their lives any better. You're not helping. We're the helpers; you're just the foster carer." They are doing a really big job. They should be appreciated more, and what they have to say should be considered.

Q94 Mr Wragg: Thank you to our three visitors for being so articulate and open about deeply personal experiences. I have a sense of how you felt involved or not involved in the different aspects of being in foster care, but rather than go over those again, I want to ask: if you had been able to design something in an ideal world, what amount of involvement and information would you have liked to receive? Rachel, you described a reasonably good experience of getting to know a foster carer earlier, but Connor, you were slightly concerned about not having that information.

Connor: Yes.

Q95 Mr Wragg: So I will ask you first, if you like.



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Connor: I have been involved in decisions about my care and how my care is handled, but the actions do not get carried forward and finalised. To my sense, that is a bit lacking. The social worker is lacking in my trust, because I am trusting them with my decisions about my life, how I can make my care better and how I can settle. I think young people should have full involvement in the decisions in their life, because it affects them. It is all about them. It is their life and their decisions.

Q96 **Mr Wragg:** Forgive me for interrupting, but would that perhaps involve determining the placement and getting to know a foster family?

Connor: Yes. If a child is going from living at home with their family and seeing their friends on a daily basis, to make the transition into the care system, there needs to be some sort of matching process. How can the local authorities match up that young person and their personality to the placement they will be going to? It's all right if a young person is full of energy, hyperactive all the time and bouncing off the walls, but what if they go to a placement that is more quiet and relaxed and doesn't really like high energy? It is all about the matching process. If you are not matched with the right carer, it's not going to work.

Q97 **Mr Wragg:** I understand. Thank you. Luke, from your experience in the sector, what would you say to that?

Luke Rodgers: I agree with what Connor said. If a young person comes into care for a safeguarding issue, it is difficult to transition them in, because we are trying to protect that young person from harm. That needs to be highlighted. We have a matching system. Like I said before, it is down to how what we write about young people does not represent young people generally. If a foster carer is matched with a child based on what is written, it is likely that that will not be the right match anyway, because what is written is a misrepresentation. To me, it is not about matching in terms of the process; it is about what we write, how we write and how we represent children in the truest light.

Q98 **Mr Wragg:** Rachel, is there anything you wanted to add? You described a process that was perhaps quite different.

Rachel: What was the question, sorry?

Mr Wragg: I was droning on, wasn't I? I often have that effect on people; don't worry. In an ideal world, how would you involve the person going into foster care?

Rachel: By having an advocate there straight away, because not everyone can speak for themselves very well. I can speak for myself now, but I used to not be able to. When you are not able to speak for yourself, you won't know, and they won't try to tell you. You have to force them to tell you exactly what is going on and what the next step is. We have the right to know, because it is our life that they are working with. I had to force it to find out. I feel everyone should get an advocate so they do not have to live their life and at some point think, "Wait a minute; how come I don't know?"



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Q99 Trudy Harrison: Thank you again for your contributions today; they have been really helpful to us in moving forward. In terms of your moving forward, what does the future look like, both career-wise and in life? How involved are you in that process? Rachel, have you been part of making any plans for the future, and have you heard of Staying Put?

Rachel: Not too long ago I had a meeting, like a PEP, with my leaving care worker, about what the future plan is. Basically, my foster carer is happy to keep me there. She is happy to have me there. I am going to go to university, but I want a home to come back to because it's horrible to go to uni and then you're looking round and you don't know where to go and there's no family and you can't go back to your parents. So she's offered that place for me; I've got a home in her house to go back to while I figure out what the next step in my life is. I am thinking of probably going into this sort of work, with Action for Children—I'll probably go to uni and do sociology or psychology and then get an internship somewhere.

Trudy Harrison: From listening to you this morning, I think that's an excellent choice.

Chair: Connor?

Connor: I am sorry, what was the question?

Q100 Trudy Harrison: It was just about moving on. Luke made a suggestion about enterprise, so I am keen to hear a bit more about that. How have you been involved with future planning?

Connor: In my first placement I did go through a care plan, like I mentioned earlier, but it never got finalised. Recently—only just yesterday—at my school we also had a PEP. The head of virtual school for Kirklees came to my school and we discussed how good I'm doing in school and how I've settled since coming into care—I've been in care nearly two years now. It's been a rollercoaster, but I've settled now, and in my PEP we discussed how well I'm doing in school. I'm doing phenomenally well and I've settled in great. I am on target or above target in pretty much all my subjects right now. We discussed how I, as a person, have influenced my settlement into this school life and this new life that I've found. I've had quite a lot of involvement in my care. I think it's great to have full involvement. If you're a young person and you're in care and you don't know your plans, you need to have that involvement in decision making.

Chair: We are going to come back to the three of you because you are going to be able to respond to the Minister. May I thank you not just for very moving testimony but for being absolutely outstanding? It has been a privilege for all the Committee members to hear you today. You all deserve a round of applause.

Q101 Thelma Walker: Rachel would just like to say something.

Rachel: It is linked to leaving care. I noticed that other kids who are in the foster home, where they live as a group, and not in a foster family, get kicked out quite soon. It is quite unfair. I get a choice to go back but they



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don't have that. It's like they've picked out who can have the option to go back home and have a family and get the support. I have support in being able to do washing and ironing and stuff, but I feel that they don't get that sort of support. They get kicked out as soon as they turn 18 and it's a bit unfair on them, because it's not their fault that they have not had that training and support. I felt that that needed to be said.

Chair: Okay. We may come to you and ask you what you think of what the Minister is saying.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robert Goodwill MP, Katy Willison, Rachel, Connor, and Luke Rodgers.

Q102 **Chair:** Welcome, Minister. Thank you for coming to listen to the testimony of our witnesses. Lucy is going to start with the stocktake, but before that I want to ask you one question, if I may.

Mr Goodwill: I was wondering if I could just briefly respond to one or two points that were made in the last session.

Chair: You hit the nail on the head, because I was going to ask you what you have learned from the testimony you have heard from the witnesses.

Mr Goodwill: I see part of my role as the Minister in this area to meet children in care—and care leavers in particular, as they can give me the whole story—and foster carers and social workers, so much of what I heard reflects what I have already heard around the country.

Fundamentally, we need to bear in mind that, from the Your Life, Your Care survey, 83% of children reported that they thought that being in foster care improved their lives. So, overall, the picture is good and is certainly better. I met some care leavers last week who'd been out of care for probably 10 years and some of the stories I heard were about being moved at short notice. For example, one of the young men had been moved in the middle of his GCSE exams and he was a two-hour journey from his school, so he couldn't complete his exams. That was so unacceptable.

I also hear mixed messages about social workers. Indeed, if you look at the Ofsted ratings of local government children's services around the country, you'll see that we have a small number of "outstandings" and lots of "goods", but unfortunately we have too many local authorities whose children's services are either "inadequate" or "requiring improvement". A key aim of my job is to improve those local authorities that are failing, through interventions. We have trusts up and down the countries, and we have partnerships working to improve the overall level of social work.

It isn't so much about the quality of the social workers; it's about the way they are organised. Some of them are given too many caseloads. For example, some of them who are new and inexperienced are given, maybe,



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cases that they shouldn't be given. So, overall, we need to improve social work.

I also spoke last week to foster carers and, regarding the point that was raised about social workers not listening to them, one of them said, "Look, they come four times a year. I see this child every single day. I know more about this child than the social worker could ever know." The concern from the foster carers was that maybe they are not listened to as much as they could be.

One of the points was about young children and young people in care and the criminal justice system. One of our aims is to try to prevent that from happening as much as possible. For example, if two of my children had a fight or if one of my children were to throw the remote control at me and it missed me and went through the window, I wouldn't report them to the police for criminal damage. It's about using that sort of latitude and there is a code of protocol in place.

Finally, and just quickly, in terms of the—

Chair: Very quickly, because we want shorter answers, so we can get the witnesses in as well.

Mr Goodwill: Delegated responsibility should be happening. My son had a friend at school who was in care and we were talking about a sleepover, and the foster carer said, "Just forget about it. It's going to be too complicated." That power's been given to foster carers, to make decision on school trips, sleepovers and similar, but some local authorities are risk-averse and not delivering that. We need to improve in certain parts of the country in that regard.

Q103 **Chair:** Okay. Before I move on to Lucy, I am going to ask Luke what you thought of what the Minister just said.

Luke Rodgers: Thank you, Mr Goodwill. So what was the survey that you said 86% of—?

Mr Goodwill: It was a Your Life, Your Care survey, and 83% of children in foster care said that their lives had been improved. Now, obviously, in some cases—

Luke Rodgers: Where did this survey come from?

Mr Goodwill: It was commissioned, to get feedback from foster carers. Now, bearing in mind that many of those children have had a pretty rough time with their birth parents, they have improved from where they were. But it does show that foster carers are doing a great job in the vast majority of cases in actually improving the lives of their children—

Chair: Okay. Could we have shorter answers, please?

Mr Goodwill: Yes. Sorry.

Chair: It is very important, because I want to get everybody in.

Luke Rodgers: Can I comment on that, please?

Chair: Please, just briefly.

Luke Rodgers: My role is around youth participation. I think surveys, if I'm honest, are quite useless in our sector, because they only engage the young people who want to engage, so only young people who have had good experiences come on surveys.

Also, I have seen a recent survey that has come from an organisation that should be expected to consult and engage with young people very well. One of the things that they asked for a young person to share—somebody who doesn't know them has to ask them—was, "How many placement breakdowns have you had in two years?", and, "Why?" To me, to ask a child to say how many placement breakdowns they have had within the last two years and why to someone who doesn't know them is a traumatic question that causes damage. And the organisation that came from is one that is recognised nationally as an organisation that should understand how to consult with young people.

Chair: Okay. Lucy, we are going to ask about the stocktake now.

Q104 **Lucy Allan:** Please never be complacent about a survey result; it is not an area I would want a Minister of State to be complacent about at all.

Your Department has been conducting a number of piecemeal reviews of different aspects of the care system, from residential, to adoption, SGOs, and friends and family. The fostering stocktake is another part of that. You know my views about wanting to have a top-down overall review of the care system, but can I just ask where you have got to with the stocktake in terms of preliminary findings, who you have been consulting, and when you propose to share those findings?

Mr Goodwill: The first point I would make is that Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers are the best people in the universe, in my view, to carry out this stocktake looking across the sector. They have been gathering evidence, and I expect to see a draft of their report before Christmas. It will then be published in the new year, so we will see it very soon.

Q105 **Lucy Allan:** And what will come out of that stocktake? What are the objectives?

Mr Goodwill: Well, they will be carrying out, as it says, a stocktake—seeing what we do well, what we could do better, and talking particularly to children who have experience of the care system. They will look at the way we commission services, because there is a debate about whether we should use agency foster carers or in-house, and how cost-effective that is.

The stocktake will also look at sufficiency—whether we have enough foster carers. Overall, the numbers look good, but specific skills are needed for certain specialisms, for example large sibling groups that you want to keep



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together, children with particular challenging behaviour, disabilities or mental health issues, and indeed the 6% of children in care who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The stocktake will look at how we need to improve the situation, what is working well—I am never complacent about anything like this—and what could be done better.

Q106 Chair: The Fostering Network suggests that 7,600 new foster parents are needed in England. You implied a moment ago that capacity is okay. What is your view about that?

Mr Goodwill: At the moment, 74% of looked-after children are in foster care—a 6% increase since 2013. There are currently 53,766 foster placements and 72,670 foster carers approved in the most recent figures. However, I think that hides the fact that we need to look at particular specialisms, and sometimes regional variation. That is part of the work that the stocktake will do to ensure that we have the right foster carers, giving young people and their social workers a choice in where they can be placed, so that they get the best possible placement.

A lot of factors need to be taken into account. We talk about ethnicity and religion, but there are other things, such as proximity to your birth parents if visiting is needed, and to your school.

Q107 Chair: Are you saying that the stocktake will examine whether the Fostering Network is wrong or right?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, they are looking at those figures. If you look at the raw figures of the number of foster carers and the number of placements needed, we have a surplus, but in the areas I have outlined we have shortages.

Q108 Chair: You also mentioned the local authorities that do not have good ratings from Ofsted in your opening remarks. I think only 35% are rated good or outstanding. Obviously, that covers not only fostering but children's services in general. As a result, it is impossible to make a comparison with private fostering agencies. Nevertheless, it is quite a dramatic figure. You mentioned that the Government were doing something about that. What are they doing?

Mr Goodwill: Well, we are doing lots. When a local authority becomes inadequate we have a number of options to work with them. In some cases, we have partnerships between a good authority and one that is not performing. For example, last week I was in Kirklees; Leeds is working with them to improve the situation. We have a number of those partnerships.

In other areas, for example Doncaster, we have a trust, which is set up outside the council but is still the council's responsibility legally, working to improve the situation. We have seen dramatic improvements in some areas, and we need to keep the pressure up.

Q109 Chair: Do you have targets? If you come to the Committee this time next year, do you think you will be able to say, "X has improved", or hopefully, "From 35% it has gone up to 50%."?



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Mr Goodwill: My target is for every local authority in the country to be good or outstanding. That may take some while to reach, but we have a £200 million innovation fund. There are some great systems and new programmes in place. I don't know if you are aware of the Mockingbird Constellations, which I saw in Doncaster. In a number of authorities—I think 12 around the country—a group of foster carers have a common support. They describe it as a virtual grandma, so, for example, if relationships start to break down in a foster placement, that child could go for the weekend to the virtual grandma. It does not have to be a person who is older, but in this case it was. We have other situations, like No Wrong Door, which I have seen in North Yorkshire, just to give that respite, and other initiatives to try to make a situation better.

Q110 **Chair:** Luke briefly, then Ian and then I'm going to come on to placements.

Luke Rodgers: I don't think there is a surplus. I think foster carers are registered based on the age of the child they want to look after—some foster carers look after young children and some look after older children, so depending on the demographics of what children are in care, we cannot say that there is a surplus, unless we know who is registered for young people and who for older people and the foster carers and young people within that.

One of the biggest issues in the sector is that there might be enough registered carers, but foster carers are not accepting teenage placements—so children with challenging behaviour. Therefore, in my case, they are a redundant carer.

I disagree with the consultation with young people based on the fostering stocktake. I work with the Fostering Network and with No Wrong Door on a lot of innovation programmes. The stocktake for young people to be consulted with is a one-page questionnaire of eight questions—very very dangerous questions to ask—which was sent out four weeks ago and asked for responses by the end of last month. The only other consultation we had was with three young people who have experienced care. I do not think the consultation on the fostering stocktake for young people is good enough.

Mr Goodwill: I absolutely agree with you that the needs of specific groups of children are not met in every part of the country, which is why the stocktake is looking at that. Once the stocktake has been published, there will be an opportunity for people to comment and raise further concerns.

Another of my concerns is that, while the three young people in the room here are very articulate and know how to put things across, many children are not articulate or not old enough to be able to put their views across, so I think we need to make sure we listen to all groups of children who are in the care system

Luke Rodgers: We need to create a platform to do that, Minister.



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Q111 **Chair:** I have been very remiss because I haven't welcomed Katy Willison, director of children's social care at the Department for Education. So, welcome to the stand. Please—you want to say something.

Katy Willison: I was simply going to add to that point. Luke has a perfectly fair challenge: the stocktake does need to engage with as many young people as possible. Martin Narey has told us that he has heard a lot of children voice their views about the questionnaire through social media and Twitter. He is genuinely trying to gather voices from lots of different platforms. You have talked about using social media more; he is genuinely trying to engage in that way and through meeting and talking to people. So he is taking different approaches and we hope he gets as much as possible from that aspect of the work.

Q112 **Ian Mearns:** I wonder if you have had any pause for thought about calling the review of the provision that you are undertaking a "stocktake" in the first place? We are not talking about tins of beans and which warehouse they are in or which shelf they are on. We are talking about children and their lives and their care provision. I wonder about this terminology. It sounds from my perspective a tad crass.

Mr Goodwill: To be honest, I don't really care what we call it, as long as it does what we want it to do. We are taking stock of the situation. We are not counting tins of beans, we are looking at how services are being delivered to children, how cost-effective that is, how effective it is and what we can do to improve it. We could call it what you like, it is what it actually does that makes a difference.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** I really do think in terms of the recipient audience that we are trying to impact on here, which is young people and the foster carers who are out there, the use of language is important. It reflects the importance that is placed on what they do and the position that they are in by the Government who are trying to organise that provision.

Mr Goodwill: It is a review. It is not simply counting what is there and reporting back. It is a review and will make recommendations, which I and the Government will consider and will then be subject to a consultation so that people can give their views on what has been suggested. Certainly, we do not want to waste time. If they make concrete suggestions, we need to be able to get on with improving the situation.

Chair: James, you had a quick question, I think.

James Frith: It was on the stocktaking.

Q114 **Emma Hardy:** Rachel raised a really important point that children who are leaving care in care homes are not treated in the same way as those leaving foster placements. I do not know whether you have seen the campaign called Every Child Leaving Care Matters. When you are talking about capacity and reviews—a care review, rather than a stocktake—would you look at the disparity between children leaving care homes and those leaving placements?



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Mr Goodwill: Obviously, children leaving care homes are in a completely different situation—indeed, we had Staying Put for children in foster care, and we now have Staying Close, which allows the young people to maintain contact with their foster home. I was in a foster home in the north of England last week, where they were saying that they often had children dropping in who had been in the residential care home. We also have personal advisers—people who can keep in touch. I was saying that in North Yorkshire I met a group of care leavers and their advisers who had a really good rapport when working together. So certainly we should not leave out children who have been in residential care from the continuation that we have created by improving the policy.

Rachel: If a child was doing GCSEs and they had to move, as you said, would that child be allowed to stay to finish off what they needed to finish off in that home they are in? Would that be something they were allowed to do, or would they still have to move out and just get extra support?

Mr Goodwill: We have looked at that and there are issues surrounding having adults in effect—over 18s—staying in a children's home. That would not be suitable. What we are seeing, however, is some universities—I hope to see a growing number of them—looking at 12-month accommodation. Often they turf the students out during the summer to have conferences and everything. I know of one university—don't quote me—and others are looking at it, that has that wraparound accommodation. Those students would also still have contact with their personal adviser.

Q115 **Chair:** We are going to move on to placements, because we have a lot to get through. I also want to bring in the other two in this part. All of you—you two in particular, Connor and Rachel—have spoken movingly and sensitively about the placements. You were talking about the number of placements you had, the very little advice that you had, and in particular about being separated from your siblings. Now, 71% of looked-after children in care with a sibling were separated from their brothers or sisters. The evidence suggests that when siblings are kept together, that is often associated with better outcomes in mental health, socialisation, academic achievement and placement stability. What are the Government doing about that? What more could be done to ensure that fewer children have the experience that Rachel had, or that Connor had with the lack of information and so many different placements?

Mr Goodwill: It is important where possible to keep sibling groups together. One of the problems in terms of the sufficiency of foster carers is finding foster parents able to take large sibling groups together. In Rachel's case, it sounds like it was the social workers who took the view that for some reason splitting the family would be a good thing. You obviously made representations through your advocate and managed to fix that situation to some extent—

Q116 **Chair:** But it took a long time—

Rachel: Yes, it took a long time.



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Q117 **Chair:** And obviously Rachel was even younger then. It did a lot of damage—

Rachel: Could I also add that basically I have once-a-month contact, but I have noticed that a number of other siblings might see each other twice a week? Connor had the same issue. Some people get contact regularly and some kids do not get contact regularly, which is quite unfair; we don't know why we don't get to see them regularly. Why am I the one who can't see them, when others get to see their parents and siblings regularly?

Connor: May I add to that? When I first came into care, my sibling contact was reduced. At the final court proceedings before everything got finalised and whatnot, the court decided that I would see my siblings six times a year—every holiday—which to me sounded all right at the time, but now, over the years since it has been happening, it is kind of getting to be that I'm missing them and I don't like not seeing them more regularly. My youngest half-brother missed last week's and he missed the Easter contact as well, so he has missed out on two family contacts. That is two times he has not seen his family or his brothers and his sister and his mum. So I inquired of my social worker and whoever else, how on earth are those two contacts going to proceed within the remaining two months of this year, because the six times a year contact proceedings is every calendar year? So in my head I am wondering how on earth those two outstanding contacts with my youngest half-brother will take place within the remaining two months of this year.

Mr Goodwill: I can understand your frustration. I know how sibling groups, even if there are quite big age differences, want to stick together and gel together. In this case, it sounds like it is not a case of not having capacity for a large enough foster placement. Decisions have been made by social workers and the courts, and there must have been reasons why those were made, which I cannot go into at this stage because I do not know what they are. If contact is arranged, that should go ahead. That is something social workers should prioritise to enable groups to stick together. It is very important that sibling groups stay together.

Q118 **Emma Hardy:** On that point, Connor mentioned that one of the reasons his brother missed the contact was because the father could not pay for the travel. Is that not something the Government should look at and actually fund and prioritise sibling link-up and sibling get-together? If families cannot afford the travel, could that not be provided for? It seems like an awful reason to miss contact, because somebody could not afford to pay for the transport there, when it clearly matters so much to the young people involved.

Mr Goodwill: It is obviously decisions made by social workers within the context of their local authority.

Q119 **Emma Hardy:** You could choose to fund that. You could say that we would make money available to ensure that sibling contact is prioritised. That is a decision that you and the Government could make.

Mr Goodwill: We block-fund local authorities that then fund their—



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Q120 Emma Hardy: But ring-fenced money could be provided to ensure that sibling contact is available. It is six times a year and he has missed out on two.

Mr Goodwill: By and large, the way we fund local authorities and they then fund their children's services is through the block funding. They have a £200 billion package through to the end of this decade, so they know what their funding will be. They make the decisions. We have local democracy in this country. It is councillors and directors of children's services working together who make the decisions and prioritise how they spend their money.

Q121 Ian Mearns: Minister, I do not want to rehearse what I said to the Secretary of State a couple of weeks ago, but the scale of cuts to local authorities from the revenue support grant was a unilateral decision of this Government, which decided to remove revenue support grant completely. That has a disparity-type effect on different local authorities based on their capability to raise council tax, based on the council tax banding system. I am afraid it is not good enough. You could hypothecate some funding for a particular issue such as this.

Mr Goodwill: There is not a straightforward correlation between what a local authority spends on children's services and the services they get. Indeed, in some of the excellent children's services being delivered, where they get the decision right first time, and where they do not, for example, employ large numbers of very expensive agency social workers or agency foster carers, they get better value for money, and that can free up money. So this idea that the more you put in, the more you get out, does not necessarily follow. Some of the best local authorities are doing it on quite lean funding, but doing it very well indeed. There is nothing more expensive than failure in terms of social work.

Luke Rodgers: In terms of contact for the majority of young people, there is quite a simple fix. If you look at foster carers, young people are moved from placement to placement with no contact with previous foster carers. You have already mentioned Mockingbird, which is a hub carer and acts like a grandma, with satellite carers around them. Sibling groups can stay in the satellite, because they can live with different placements attached to the same hub. If that was implemented more widely across the UK, you would be able to keep sibling groups together in the same family group if they cannot live together in the same home.

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely. I could not agree more.

Q122 Thelma Walker: I have a simple question. Why do you think so many local authorities are struggling to deliver adequate support for young people in care?

Mr Goodwill: I think, in a word, where you see children's services failing, it is down to leadership. If you have got a good director of children's services and a good cabinet member leading that, they can improve the service they give. If you have bad leadership, it permeates down the



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organisation. It is like in schools and many organisations. If you have good leadership, it works very well indeed.

Q123 Thelma Walker: So you don't think the cuts to the local government grant and the early intervention grant have had a detrimental effect?

Mr Goodwill: Obviously, local authorities have to—

Q124 Thelma Walker: So it is not the Government, it is the local authorities.

Mr Goodwill: The point I was making is that there is not a straightforward correlation between what a local authority spends on children's services and what it gets out at the other end. For example, I was talking last week to some local authority representatives about what it cost to have an agency social worker. It is double the cost.

Q125 Thelma Walker: But why do we need more agency staff?

Mr Goodwill: Because people do not want to work for failing authorities. It is a vicious circle.

Q126 Thelma Walker: And they are failing because?

Mr Goodwill: They are failing because of poor leadership, and poor organisation in many cases—

Q127 Thelma Walker: And the turnover of leaders is very high.

Mr Goodwill: The turnover of staff. That is why, for example, the partnerships are working so well. If you have a failing authority, nobody wants to go there, because they do not want that on their CV and they do not want to work in an organisation that isn't well organised, where their case load may not be managed. So it is all about leadership, I'm afraid. It isn't that it can be delivered well in the leafy shires and not well in the cities. We have some brilliant inner-city children's services in places like Leeds. We also have some failing authorities in places like Norfolk and Cumbria, which should be doing better.

Q128 James Frith: I support the notion that much of what we get right starts with strong leadership and much of what we get wrong starts with bad leadership, but "stocktaking" is an obnoxious term to use. I think it is remiss of a Minister to sit here and suggest that language does not matter in such a sensitive situation, and to have the idea that you take a contextual review of your services while ignoring cuts to local authorities, the impact of the removal of legal aid, the rise in in-work poverty in both the leafy shires and urban areas, the impact of universal credit and agency dependency—the move of previously employed local authority staff off the books into agencies, to be re-employed at a premium, with money then paid to agencies. Support for domestic violence and drug and alcohol funding has, in many instances, dried up. At what point do you say, as a Minister, that you are responsible for that—more so than any leadership or local councillor can and should be held responsible? Where are you designing a system that actually strengthens the prospects of these looked-after children—our looked-after children—and takes some responsibility for the seven years that you have been in Government?



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Mr Goodwill: It had not occurred to me before today that the word “stocktake” had any negative connotation. You take stock of a situation and you then decide how you can move forward. That is what the stocktake is about. It is not some counting tins of beans operation; it is about diving very deep into what is actually being delivered.

I will repeat the point I made before. There are 11 local authorities that have more than 90% of their foster carers in-house. Why have they been successful? Yes, we all understand that it is cheaper and sometimes better, although some very good foster care is being delivered through agencies. But in terms of cost-effectiveness, why is it that some local authorities are having to rely on agency social workers and agency foster carers? Often, it is because they have trouble recruiting staff. The reason they can’t recruit staff is because they are in require improvement or inadequate local authorities, where people do not want to go and work. So it is a vicious circle.

The interventions that we are making, backed up by £200 million of Government money, are about breaking that vicious circle—getting the interventions in there, setting up trusts in places like Sandwell, where a former Labour Home Secretary is heading up the trust for us. Up and down the country where we are making interventions, they are delivering. It is important that we do that. It would be simplistic to say that just because local authorities are constrained in terms of their spending, they are failing to deliver—

Q129 **James Frith:** Minister, I don’t think I said that. I listed seven or eight in-and-of-themselves quite complicated, distinct changes and challenges that local authorities and the context that we are discussing, looked-after children, are all experiencing. The notion that that list of seven or eight is somehow a simplistic picture!

My challenge to you is that this review appreciates the impact of your actions, as well as your responses to those actions, and that this is not in isolation. Parents, as with looked-after children’s services, operate within a context of an environment that you helped create. You are in government. You are in charge. You are responsible. You are also therefore to blame for some of this. I put it to you that you are sat here, removed from that appreciation.

Mr Goodwill: I don’t think it helps this Committee for this to descend into a party political slanging match.

Lucy Allan: I agree. We have it every week. I find it really unhelpful.

Mr Goodwill: However, could I also point out that we have the highest level of employment than ever before? We have 30 hours of free childcare being delivered for working families, getting them into employment. Only 8% of claimants are on universal credit, so 92% of claimants are not on to the universal credit system yet.

There is a lot going for this country. We are at the third lowest unemployment level in Europe. There are opportunities for people. People coming out of care can get into work because jobs are there for them.



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With that picture you have tried to paint, James, there is another side to the story.

Q130 Chair: Okay. You have made your point, James, and the Minister has responded. Before we go on to foster carers, I want to go back to what Connor and Rachel in particular were saying about placements.

Would you not accept that, even if the survey says one thing, there really is a postcode lottery on foster care and in terms of placements? The fact is that somebody can appear before you today and say that he is not even given any advice, not told about the placements and moved from place to place, with huge problems in terms of seeing or being with their siblings.

Surely there should be uniform rules on this, not just guidelines, from the Government, so as to ensure that the situation that Connor, Rachel and many others have faced does not have to be faced again. This has got nothing to do with funding. This is just a question of ensuring that rules happen and are followed.

Mr Goodwill: Every local authority I go to paints this picture of the Friday afternoon situation where a child is taken into care and needs an emergency placement, whether with foster carers or in residential care. They admit that often those decisions have to be made on the spur of the moment. Often they have to rely on agencies to do that and that is not always the perfect decision, but it is an emergency and it is Friday afternoon.

Q131 Chair: There will always be exceptions to the rules.

Mr Goodwill: That is a general problem on a Friday afternoon and that is something that I hope the stocktake—

Q132 Chair: Of course, but surely there should be general rules—not guidelines—that are in place. Could I just ask Ms Willison about that?

Katy Willison: The reflection I would make on that is that one of the things we are trying to do in social work is improve social workers' confident practice. The more we give them very, very precise rules under which to operate, the more people like Eileen Munro say to us that tick boxes, checklists and very precise rules are not the way we should do this. We should be empowering social workers, giving them the ability to practise confidently.

You are absolutely right that children need information about where they are going. One of our innovation programme projects in Peterborough is trialling an approach where instead of just giving information that is used at court, which is often very negative and tells of the awful things that have happened in the child's life, that information is rewritten for foster carers. It talks about the strengths of the child and the opportunities that might be presented. That sets a placement off on a different foot, because it is not all about this terrible thing that happened.

Q133 Chair: But what about national rules?



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Katy Willison: If we tell local authorities very precisely how to do things, it tends not to work. The best thing we can do is showcase the excellent work that some local authorities are doing and encourage others to take it on, rather than forcing them with checklists.

Q134 **Chair:** Can I ask Rachel and Connor to give a view on what has just been said, if they want to?

Rachel: I'm not too sure.

Chair: Okay, don't worry.

Q135 **Emma Hardy:** Luke made a suggestion about communications on where you are going. Surely, there is an electronic solution to this, even if it is a last-minute emergency placement. There could be a way to look on your phone and read a little bit about the person you are going to and their likes and dislikes. As Connor brilliantly articulated, that could include some of the house rules, traditions and what the family is like. I can see the point of getting a booklet ready, photocopied and printed, and giving it to the person when it is an emergency move, but everything is on here. Surely there is an electronic answer.

Mr Goodwill: The point is that social workers should always look at the best interests of the child and have as much information as possible about the child and the foster carers who are available.

Emma Hardy: I mean something for the child about the foster carers.

Chair: Luke first, and then Trudy is going to come on to foster carers.

Luke Rodgers: I agree with both points. I think the Friday night foster care placement is always a cop-out for local authorities. They just use it as an example. It happens less than you would expect.

I do not think creating more rules would work. I think it is much more about creating a platform, so that we can advocate and see what is available, and young people can experience it and we can empower young people within it. The more rules that we create, the more local authorities follow them. We sometimes misinterpret those things.

A lot needs to be done but I do not think rules are the right way. Local authorities give the example of this Friday night last-minute thing all the time. It is just a cop-out in my eyes. I think a lot more needs to be done in that area, with technology. There is a service called Link Maker that is trying to do it. Technology, I think, is the way forward.

Mr Goodwill: There has been talk of a national register and there may be merit in that but, on the other hand, it might introduce additional bureaucracy and, of course, it is important that people are placed as close as possible to their schools and their family, so the fact that there is a place available in Northumberland that would exactly meet requirements might be a secondary argument to the fact that it is just down the road from a school.



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Luke Rodgers: Ultimately, though, if we highlight the child in their correct light and show the people who are going to look after the child who the child truly is and not what we write about them, the placement will be more likely to work because they will understand who they are looking after. To me that is the underlying fundamental issue.

Mr Goodwill: I think, with the possible exception of James here, we are all on the same page on this. We really want to do the best for children and the stocktake is about outlining what we can do to improve the situation. Not everything out there is bad; we have some brilliant social workers doing fantastic work. Sadly for them, it is a bit like it is with politicians: only the ones who get it wrong get in the newspapers. The vast majority of social workers have great professionalism and great dedication, and, indeed, with our assessment and accreditation system that we are bringing in, they will be even more recognised for their professionalism. But they do need good leadership, and—I repeat—where things go wrong in a local authority it is often down to leadership, either political or the—

Rachel: I have got two quick points. You said that there are not many foster carers and I was wondering how you would get more. I was also wondering about the Friday night they always talk about, when you just need to quickly put someone in care. Could they select certain foster carers who can do that, who you could put online straightaway? If you do not want to put all of them online, just get a certain selection of those you know you can put a quick placement to, who are flexible and have learned about different ethnicities. They can do that quickly, in a way.

Mr Goodwill: I will let Katy have a go; I am conscious that I have been hogging the responses.

Katy Willison: We have heard from lots of people that we need more foster carers, and we had that discussion about how, technically, there are enough places, but in reality local authorities consistently tell us they do not have a big choice, also regarding foster carers with particular experience or skills, like for teenagers or for big sibling groups. We are hearing that consistently. What we do want to do—and it is very close now—is hear the results of the stocktake, to tell us exactly what we should be doing in this area. Should we be looking at national campaigns? Should we be targeting particular groups? Should we be targeting particular areas? We are very open to that.

Rachel: Have you ever considered getting young people to go out to speak to the public about why they don't want to become foster carers, or if they do want to become foster carers? I know that a lot of older people do not know they can become foster carers.

Katy Willison: What we do know is that the best recruitment method for foster carers is other foster carers. That is what we hear consistently, that it is that word of mouth and people seeing what it is like. The other thing is that any national campaign has to be carefully done, because we know



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that the traditional adverts on buses, which is what everybody is used to, are not really particularly effective. So if we do this, we want to do it right.

I think you are absolutely right about this Friday point. I know some of them do it really well, but what I would like to see is local authorities and agencies who recruit foster carers, not central Government, doing more consistent and really good commissioning, so that they genuinely have a choice and they do not have this, what they tell us and what we do not always buy—

Q136 Trudy Harrison: I am really keen to know what the Government is doing around procuring and commissioning services. Luke mentioned humanising social work and he made some really good points, so could you bear in mind some of those in the answers?

Mr Goodwill: It is local authorities that have responsibility for delivering children's services on the ground, and there is tremendous variation up and down the country in terms of how effective that is. Ofsted are just completing their review and are now going back to the ones that require improvement and, indeed, the inadequate ones. But we have a number of interventions from central Government. I go to these areas. We have set up, in some cases, trusts that take over control but work with the council. In other areas, partnerships work very well—

Q137 Trudy Harrison: May I just interrupt? How would that make a difference?

Mr Goodwill: It is already making a difference. I was in Kirklees, which was a failing authority, last week. Working in partnership with Leeds, it is really getting its act together. Doncaster is doing great work; it was one of the authorities that was not delivering and it is in a much better place now than ever before. There are authorities like that up and down the country. Unfortunately, other ones occasionally fall out. Why would Worcestershire and Surrey be failing, for example? But they are, and we need to work with them to improve their situation.

Chair: We are running out of time, so if you could make a very brief point, please.

Luke Rodgers: One of the things that we do not look into is that there are a lot of foster carers out there who do not want to foster full time any more, and we do not see them as a resource. There are a few issues around going into respite—when a foster placement is going well, you get put somewhere else for a few weeks—and young people who go to university and who might want somewhere to come home to. It is the same with residential. I think something needs to be done about the foster carers who do not want to foster full time any more, but who would still like to foster in some capacity—putting them together with young people, so they can have them as a consistent person throughout difficult periods in their life. That area, in its entirety, is untapped.

On recruitment, we had a programme that involved young people in the recruitment of foster carers. There were 400 times more inquiries through the local authority than in the previous year.



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Q138 Mr Wragg: Thank you for that. Following on, dare I go back to matters of cost? I know that seemed controversial earlier. Perhaps I will pose the question slightly differently, and gently. Minister, you acknowledged that agency costs are high. What will the Government do to improve the system for commissioning and procuring placements and services, bearing in mind those high agency costs?

Mr Goodwill: The first point I should make is that agencies are inspected, and 90% of them are good or better. So I am not saying that the foster care delivered by agencies is not good, but they generally deliver more expensive services. As I said, 11 local authorities have more than 90% in house. I think part of the stocktake will be looking at what local authorities that rely on agencies to a great extent can do, if they want to, to bring more in house.

It is the same with social workers. Agency workers are very expensive, you do not get continuity and you are managing the situation at a distance. There are a number of areas that I know Martin and Mark will be reporting on, and I am sure that the reliance on agency social workers and foster carers will be part of that. When I look at local authorities that have their own in-house foster carers, the impression I get is that there is much more teamwork and collaboration. Introducing initiatives such as Mockingbird, for example, gives those foster carers the support they need.

Q139 Mr Wragg: Briefly, because you allude to it—obviously the report will give a clearer direction of steer on that—have you given any thought to the “them and us” mentality that perhaps exists between private providers and local authority provision, in terms of detriment to the system?

Mr Goodwill: As I said, the foster care delivered by agencies is inspected, and 90% is good or better, so I am not saying that they are not delivering good care for children. I am just suggesting that when the stocktake reports, I will be very interested to see what their view is on this. If their next suggestion is what local authorities can do to bring more in house, whether they recruit more—I hear stories about local authority foster carers being recruited by agencies and offered better money, for example payments when they are not taking children—that may well be part of it, but as I said, I will not pre-empt what the stocktake will say. I think how it goes forward will make interesting reading.

It is not just in this area; it is midwives, nurses, supply teachers. There are all sorts of area around the country where public services are being provided through agencies or contractors, which in some cases could be seen as not as cost-effective as in-house. In other areas, contractors provide a very good service. If you are cleaning a school, there is no reason why that should not be done by a private company.

Q140 James Frith: With a view on the future, Minister, please offer your thoughts. How do you see local authorities’ children’s services departments structured in future? Do you think the mixed landscape that we have discussed is beneficial to the experiences of young people? You cited Doncaster, and we took some excellent evidence from Doncaster in



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recent weeks. But you also cite—and rightly so—the good practice going on in house. Is it your view that it is simply a blended what-works approach, and do you draw the line at privatising the service?

Mr Goodwill: To be honest, we do not really like going in to a local authority and intervening. I would be highly delighted if every single local authority in the country was delivering excellent, outstanding or good children's services, and we would not have to get involved. It is expensive for us; it gives us a load of headaches back at the centre. But we cannot allow children to be let down by failing services. There is a variety of different interventions that we make, and there is a variety of different levels of support that we can give to improve those services, but there is no reason why, once those services have been fixed, they should not return back to the local authority. There is certainly no agenda from this Government to privatise the situation.

Katy Willison: I agree with the Minister. I would say that we do not have a particular ideology here, but we are very much interested in what works. One of the things we have done through the innovation programme is encourage local authorities to think imaginatively about the best way of delivering the best possible services for children. For some of them that is staying in house, for some of them that has been looking—the Peterborough example I used has been outsourcing to a not-for-profit organisation. We are going to be watching that really closely, because if that goes well it could give us a model that other local authorities want to follow. But there is no ideology; it is about the best interests of the child.

Mr Goodwill: There are failing Tory authorities and there are failing Labour authorities.

Q141 **James Frith:** Do you draw the line at not-for-profit moving into a private and profit-making operation? Do you see that playing a role in the emerging mixed landscape?

Chair: One-word answer, if you can.

Q142 **Mr Goodwill:** The trusts and interventions are not profit-making organisations.

Chair: Very quickly, Thelma.

Q143 **Thelma Walker:** At the beginning I said to Luke, Connor and Rachel, have you got five top tips on how we could improve support for young people in care? What I have got from this is that you would want phased transition, Connor, rather than just being moved one second. An authentic living space, you talked about, and respect for human rights and being human, rather than professional, in whatever we do. That is what I have got from it; that it will take an awful lot more—

Q144 **Chair:** We must end with discussing foster carers. As a general point, do you think there should be a national register of foster carers, both in terms of what you were talking about earlier—the emergency side of things—and a general national register?



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Mr Goodwill: There are pros and cons. Let's wait and see what the stock take comes up with. The jury is out, as far as I am concerned; let us look at the evidence they have collected. We do not want a system that is bureaucratic; we certainly do not want to limit the way in which good social workers can make great decisions. Let us see what the stock take actually says.

Q145 **Emma Hardy:** Foster carers are regularly asked to care for some of the most vulnerable children in our society, often with high levels of need, on less than the minimum wage. If you will excuse me, I am going to read this quickly from two foster carers who have written to me. They said, "I work 24 hours. 365 days a year. Don't get holiday pay. Don't get pension. Don't get sick pay - Don't get payment between placements. So in this job I'm in less than the minimum wage by far. They tell us we are skilled at what we do. They tell us what caring life changing people we are. I can't get a full time or part time job to compensate because that would encroach on the fostering with all the meetings with various agencies we have to attend." Is the financial support carers receive commensurate with the work that they are expected to do?

Mr Goodwill: I think that being a foster carer is not like any job.

Q146 **Emma Hardy:** No, but as she said, you cannot get another job if you are going to be available to attend meetings and things like that. You are not going to be able to work in another way. So, bearing in mind that they cannot work in paid employment, is it commensurate with the work that they are expected to do?

Mr Goodwill: People become foster carers for a variety of reasons. Not all foster carers would feel comfortable calling themselves workers or employees. We must remember that children should be looked after by families, within a family setting. Indeed, many foster carers have their own children that they are looking after as well. There are not many jobs that you can do where you can look after your own children, you can go for days out, you can do all those things that you do as a family. It is absolutely vital that we maintain the model of a foster carer caring for children within that family environment.

Emma Hardy: Yes, but they need to get compensated—

Mr Goodwill: Any move to employees would be a bad move. I think that, also, we are able to recruit foster carers who see themselves in this role and not just as taking another job—this is something that people are passionate about. We must make sure that they are not out of pocket, and of course—

Q147 **Trudy Harrison:** On that point I would like to reflect on what I thought was some excellent practice by a company called Morgan Sindall in my area, which has a policy for foster carers. Are you aware of that and could more be done to encourage employers to be sympathetic and helpful to people who care?



Mr Goodwill: I am not aware of that particular one. In some cases, foster carers will have one or more of the partners working, in the same way that you have your own children and you can juggle that. Of course, foster children are eligible for the 15 hours' free childcare so in some cases people may use that opportunity to carry out some work.

When people make the decision to become a foster carer it is not like a decision to go and do any other job. This is something that they really are committed to and I am so impressed as I go up and down the country meeting foster carers, who express some frustrations and would like to see improvements in the way that they are treated by social workers. There is an issue of allegations being made against them where they are not treated in the same way as a teacher or a social worker. I was told last week that allegations remain on the file, whereas in other cases they would not be. It is not unknown for a child to make an allegation about a foster carer because they want to move. That is something that we need to work on—to improve the status of foster carers. But becoming employees, with all the things that go with that, is not something that the bulk of foster carers that I meet want.

Chair: Yesterday in Education questions, if I heard you correctly, you said, "It is great that foster carers do not need to do apprenticeships".

Mr Goodwill: No, that was a question that was meant to have come later.

Q148 **Chair:** Okay. Do you think that there should be more formalised training for foster carers or not?

Mr Goodwill: We have training in place—perhaps Katy could list what goes on. There is a two-stage qualification process, which involves training and expertise. Some specific niche roles, where you have to deal with children with particular needs, require additional training.

Q149 **Chair:** Should it be more formalised?

Katy Willison: Within the first 12 months of being a foster carer you are required to undertake the training support and development standards, which cover seven specific areas. Foster carers are obliged to do that. We have then left it to local authorities to decide. One of those training standards is to think about your continuing development and what training you might need in the future. We have left it to local authorities to work to provide something that is tailored to their area, because it is quite—

Chair: So we go back to the postcode lottery issue.

Katy Willison: Well, it is postcode lottery or it is local democracy. Part of what we are trying to do is to make sure that local areas can make their own choices rather than have that checklist of rules that governs them.

Chair: But the Government have national standards for a load of other things.

Katy Willison: The national standards are set out in that first 12 months and then allow the flexibility over and above that.



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Q150 **Chair:** To sum up, we want to ask the three guests, starting with Luke, what did you think of the Minister's comments and the overall session?

Mr Goodwill: No pressure!

Luke Rodgers: I think that we are in a difficult position because this was not our review to begin with. I think that you have come into this situation and have been running around asking questions and trying to answer difficult questions, and I sympathise with that. From my perspective, I do not think that the stocktake has involved young people in any way; it has been effective in this setting for communicating, and I appreciate spending the time with you—I love doing this sort of stuff. But how we have involved young people in the stocktake—it is for them—has been diabolical, if I am honest. We need to involve young people more in these things, to get their opinions and voices heard. We need to provide a more diverse platform for that, not just a questionnaire to a couple of people on social media. I think that we need a diverse platform to engage with young people and it needs to improve.

Connor: Linking back to what Luke said, I have similar thoughts. One thing that I thought was if the Government could set up a national survey for young people in the care system, to get their views directly, so they can just focus, and if they have any comments or thoughts or ideas they want to put across, they can put them across in that survey.

Rachel: I have two things but they are very short. To add to what Emma said, about foster carers not getting paid, the answer for me was that they do that job but it is not that special because everyone looks after kids. But I feel that they are important because they do the job of taking care of someone else's child. I feel that they should get paid a little bit more because sometimes they have to take money out of their own pockets for trips and activities for the child, when sometimes they can't actually afford it. It is hard for them trying to balance their life and that child's life together. Emma said that they can't get another job. I feel it is not appropriate to say that, if you have children, you can't get a job. As a foster carer, it is harder to get a second job while being a foster carer—comparing that to a parent with a child.

My second comment is a small question. Overall, in your opinion, what is the whole aim of the foster care system? It is a small question but—

Q151 **Chair:** May I suggest, Minister, that you reply briefly to all the three guests, just to say what you would say in response to what they have just said?

Mr Goodwill: The aim of the childcare system is to put the needs of the child first. Where the state has to step in, we need to ensure that we are the responsible parent, the legal parent, and that we deliver those same sort of supports and services that a parent would in that situation. I think—

Rachel: What is the outcome that you are expecting of the care system?



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Mr Goodwill: We want the young people who go through the care system to have the same advantages in life as children who do not, and sadly when you look at the statistics in terms of those not in employment or training or those who sadly become involved with the criminal justice system, that does not make good reading. Similarly, with educational achievement. It is absolutely vital, and as part of our aim of reducing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and the average, we want to make sure that children in care—along with other groups—are the ones given particular help. That is part of my job, to make sure that we deliver on that. The stocktake is outlining what we can do to improve the situation.

Q152 **Chair:** Do you want to respond to anything the others said in the final moments?

Mr Goodwill: Generally, people have been very positive about the work that foster carers do. When the right placement is made, that child has a great opportunity to rebuild their life after a load of stuff that has gone on before which has probably not helped them at all. It is important that we—

Q153 **Chair:** And what about both Luke and Connor's wider point about making sure that more young people are involved in the stocktake?

Mr Goodwill: We have a general problem in society that young people do not necessarily get engaged—although that did change at the general election a bit, didn't it? We have a problem with what young people think about being able to make their points. If all young people were as articulate and switched on as the three we have here—in fact, when I came in I thought Rachel was a Labour MP I had not come across yet—

Emma Hardy: That will happen!

Mr Goodwill: I know all our new ones, but I have not come across everyone. But this is about young people being able to put their point across. Once we have published the results of the stocktake, I hope that young people will use social media and all the other ways in which we can now communicate to feed in their points. I hope that they will welcome it and see that Martin and Mark have actually got it right—I hope they will.

James Frith: On that point, briefly and conciliatorily, it is incumbent on us all to engage with young people in a way that they will respond to—and they should be expecting to be engaged with. It is not for us to stand firm where we are and expect young people to find us; we must find them. Once we change that prism—that we expect engagement from young people, and the same goes for those who do not engage with many other things in society—that is a fundamental change. Social media give us huge advantages.

Q154 **Chair:** Luke has one last point to make. Then we will pass on to Katy and wrap it up.

Luke Rodgers: Just to build on that—how a lot of the time we say that young people do not engage—we need to create a platform for that engagement. That is the work that I have been doing for so long. We need



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to stop hiding behind that idea that they are not engaging; we are not providing a space for the variety of young people in care to engage with us.

Katy Willison: I would like to finish by thanking the three of you. You were incredibly impressive advocates. We will take away and think about what you have said about the stocktake. We have tried to engage, but we will make sure that Martin and Mark get that feedback. It is quite close to the end, but we will see what we can do about that.

Q155 **Chair:** May I end the sitting by again thanking our brilliant and wonderful very special advocates. This is unique—Committees do not normally operate like this—

Mr Goodwill: Do you think DEFRA will invite farmers next time? That would be interesting.

Chair: This is unique, and we want the Committee to carry on in this way—to be very special and to involve advocates such as yourselves regularly. May I also give particular thanks to Ms Willison, whom I rudely did not introduce at the beginning, and to the Minister, who not only listened to the advocates before his session began but was willing and open to engage with all of you, whether you agreed or disagreed with what he said? As a Committee we are grateful to you, Minister, for participating and being actively involved. We look forward to you coming before us in the new year, once the stocktake has been finished.

Mr Goodwill: Me too.