



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Joint Committee on Human Rights

Oral evidence: The right to family life: children whose mothers are in prison, HC 1610

Wednesday 13 February 2019

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Members present: Ms Harriet Harman (Chair); Fiona Bruce; Karen Buck; Baroness Hamwee; Baroness Lawrence.

Questions 1–17

Witness[es]: Lina; Georgia.

Q1 Chair: This is our Joint Committee on Human Rights. We have our names in front of us. Fiona is a Member of Parliament, as am I, as is Karen Buck. We have Doreen Lawrence and Sally Hamwee from the House of Lords. We might have other members of the Committee coming in at a later stage. We are also going to have a vote in the House of Commons, which means there is going to be a massive ringing of bells. It is not a fire alarm or something terrible that has gone on in this Committee. It is just that the MPs will have to dash out because we will have to vote, but that will probably not be until about 4 pm. I hope you will have had a chance to say everything you want to say to us before then. We are very, very grateful indeed, Lina and Georgia, for you both agreeing to come and give evidence to this Select Committee.

We are the Joint Committee on Human Rights so we are concerned about human rights. Human rights include the rights of the child and the right to family life, which is the right of a child to have a family life and the right of the mother to have a family life. We are looking at the impact on mothers' and children's rights where the mother gets sent to prison. We are going to have Ministers giving evidence; we are going to have experts and policymakers giving evidence; we are going to look at written evidence on research, but the most important people we want to hear from are the people who have had experience of what it is like when this happens.

At the end of hearing our evidence, we will do a report, which will include a set of proposals. In making those proposals, we will have been able to learn from and understand what the experience was like from your point of view. Without your evidence, we would not have a proper picture of what we were talking about. Sometimes in the House of Commons it does

not bother us at all if we do not know what we are talking about but, on this occasion, we need to know what we are talking about and you are going to help us with that. We are very grateful indeed.

The Committee members will ask questions in turn as we go round, but if there is anything you want to say that is not asked in a question you have the floor and it is your right to speak. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to hear from you. Perhaps you could start, Lina, by introducing yourself and saying in a few sentences how you came to be in prison, what the experience of being a mother in prison was like, how long you were there and how old your children were at the time.

You have a glass of water and some cups there, if you need to steady and compose yourself, because this is very deep stuff that you will be talking about. Take your time. Perhaps I will ask you, Lina, to think about those points and tell us when in time we are talking about.

Lina: I am a mother of four children. Over a decade ago, I was with my ex-husband and I committed a crime, which was fraud. I was in a very lengthy domestic violence relationship. At that time, my children's ages were four, six, seven and a half, and 10. I was put on bail. My ex-husband escaped bail and left the country so I had to deal with everything with the courts. I relied on my solicitor. I was very isolated in the community because, being a British Muslim, my parents took my eldest daughter away from me to punish me for what I did. This was all before I went into prison. I was left with three children. I had a full-time job.

Chair: How old were you at this time, Lina?

Lina: I was 27. I was paying the bills. I was concentrating on my children while I was on bail and going through all the proceedings that I needed to. I relied on my solicitor because he was the only person in my life at that time who I trusted, because my ex left me. I listened to everything my solicitor said. It was my first ever offence. I had never had any caution or convictions before. My solicitor advised me to plead guilty to get a lesser sentence and to avoid a custodial sentence.

My probation officer guided me throughout the whole process and said that I would not get a custodial sentence. My solicitor also said that I would not get a custodial sentence because it was my first offence; I would be put on a community service order. The court was aware that I had three children in three different schools. The day of the hearing, I dropped my children off at the three different schools and parked my car up on a two-hour slot in front of the courtroom. Within 15 minutes, the judge made a decision to sentence me to three years to make an example out of me, and I went down the stairs.

Chair: Thank you. You have set the scene very well. We will have some further questions to hear what happened afterwards.

Georgia: I am 24 and my mother received a custodial sentence. I had always been raised by my mother. My dad has served lots of custodial sentences and he is an addict, so my mum was all I had. When I was 15, she got sent to prison for a fighting offence, which was really unexpected.

I lived at home with my brother, who was 16. A friend of the family made a referral to social services. They said because we had family around the area, not living with us, we did not meet the criteria to receive help from social services. I was left with all the responsibilities of going shopping, running a house, everything really, at the age of 15. I was a drop-out from college because it was taboo to have a mother in prison and I felt like I could not talk about it. I became very isolated and started to go down a really bad route of drinking, getting into trouble, expressing anger. That is basically what happened.

Q2 Fiona Bruce: Good afternoon. I am going to ask Lina a question first. Before I do, I have read your biography. It is very impressive and I am pleased to hear you say you have never been happier than you are now, which is so good to hear because you have had a traumatic experience, as you have begun to describe to us today. You went into court and were sentenced, which was a tremendous shock to you. Did the judge ask you anything about what family you had and whether you had children?

Lina: At the start, before the hearing, the probation report was available. It stated everything about me. It stated that I was in a job; I was not on benefits; I was paying rent. It said which schools my kids were in and their ages. My parents took my eldest away from me, and I would never go round my parents' at all with the younger three because of that situation. I was the only person for them at that time, as their father had left them.

Fiona Bruce: When you were sentenced, did the judge say anything about taking into account the fact that you had these children in your care that day?

Lina: Yes, I remember vaguely, but it was mentioned. I heard my solicitor say it. I voluntarily went to social services at the local authority a few weeks before my sentencing hearing and explained my situation: being isolated, I needed to gather information on what might happen if I had a custodial sentence. In reply to my question, social services said, "Nothing has happened yet. When it comes to that point, something will happen". I thought I was making every provision so, if anything happened to me, my children would be in the best place, which I knew was not with my parents but with social services, because they would be looked after. But that did not happen.

Fiona Bruce: You are going to tell us about that, no doubt, when my colleagues ask you questions. Your solicitor mentioned to the judge in court that you had children. What did the judge say?

Lina: I think it was just to make an example out of me, because of my husband escaping bail, and to put me down.

Fiona Bruce: When he was delivering the sentence, he did not say anything about having taken into account the fact that you had children.

Lina: He had taken the children into account; I heard that. But at that moment it is very difficult to concentrate on what is being said because it is not in our language. It is higher-end jargon, which is hard to understand.

Fiona Bruce: That in itself is interesting.

Lina: I had two female officers beside me, and I looked at them and tried to get a bit of understanding. It was almost as if I needed to have a dictionary to understand what they were trying to say. I kept looking at my solicitor to see if he could come to me and make contact, to tell me what had been said. Within a short space of time, my mothering roles, everything that I am as a woman, had been stripped and taken away, just because of this punishment.

Fiona Bruce: You were not aware on the day of whether the fact that you had children in your care was taken into account. Have you ever subsequently become aware that the judge might have taken it into account and perhaps given you a lesser sentence, although you clearly had quite a major sentence, bearing in mind what you expected?

Lina: Yes. Later on, after I went into prison, I appealed against my sentence and I got a year dropped off. I worked really hard inside, communicating with lots of barristers and explaining my story. Eventually, I appealed. Within months, I got an appeal at the High Court and a year was taken off. It is one of those bridges that you come across: you thought you had it ready, but you did not. As a mother, you try to prepare yourself and the children, but it is out of your hands at that time.

Fiona Bruce: Just help me—before I ask Georgia a question—when you had the year's reduction, was that because the original sentence was thought to be too harsh, because you were behaving very responsibly during the course of your sentence, or did any aspect of that reduction relate to you having three children?

Lina: It was nothing to do with the children. It was a harsh sentence.

Fiona Bruce: Georgia, good afternoon. I have been very moved by what you have told us already. You had a lot of responsibility put on you at a very young age. It was quite traumatic when your mother was committed to prison. Were you aware at the time that that might happen? Were you prepared for it?

Georgia: No, I was not aware. Around a week or two beforehand, I had gone to her trial with her and listened to all the prosecutors, which was very daunting. We had not been under the impression at all that she was going to go, because they put it for a pre-sentence report so she could explain that she had me and my brother at home and there was no one to look after us. We had it in our head that she was not going. On the day of her trial, I was at home in the living room, dancing to MTV, and I got a phone call from my brother. He said, "Mum's gone". I thought he was joking. I had to ask him about five times. From being the young girl who was dancing in the living room, I automatically took on my mum's role. I did not even have time to adjust to the custodial sentence. It just leaped.

Fiona Bruce: Your mum going to prison had a huge impact on you.

Georgia: It was huge.

Fiona Bruce: Did you have any opportunity—it sounds as though you did not—to tell the court what effect a custodial sentence and imprisonment might have on you, if that were to be the decision of the court?

Georgia: No, I did not get a chance myself, but my mum put it all to probation in the pre-sentence report—about having me and my brother at home. Our dad is a drug addict and has spent most of his life in prison, and my mum was all we had.

Fiona Bruce: Do you think there was any way in which your mother's sentence might have been reduced because of the fact that she had you at home to look after? Are you aware of that being taken into account in any way at all?

Georgia: No, not that I am aware of.

Fiona Bruce: You can only say what you think happened, but are you aware of whether your brother, who was at the court, had any opportunity to speak about the impact it might have on you both?

Georgia: No. This was my older brother. No, not that I know of, because it was sentencing day, so I do not think so.

Fiona Bruce: In other words, you were just left, the two of you, to make out a future for yourselves, with no thought put in on the day of sentencing as to what was going to happen to you on that very day.

Georgia: We had a letter posted three days later and it was from my mum in the chambers. She wrote that she loved us very much and she was sorry that we had to go through this. We had her bank card and we went to the bank every Thursday. We would go shopping at Iceland. I had to work out how gas and electric worked, how to cook meals, how to survive as an adult. It was daunting. Not just then did it have an effect on me, but even now I am petrified of any kind of authorities: social services, police officers. I am absolutely petrified.

Fiona Bruce: You were both still under 18.

Georgia: Yes.

Chair: Georgia, you were describing the moment that you were told by your brother that your mum had gone to prison as if that sentence just ended your childhood there and then.

Georgia: Yes. As I said, it was the flick of a switch. I went from teenager-me to mum-me, I suppose. My brother does not have learning difficulties but he has always needed a bit of coaching in school. They have always called me the little big sister. I was taking care of the house, my brother, me. I had help from family and they are who I relied on for transport to my mum but—and I am not saying this in a harsh way, because everybody does—my brothers had their own lives. Do you get what I am saying? I am not putting them down for one minute because they helped us in every way they could, but this is what angers me. It got put to social services that we had older brothers that were over the age of 18 in

surrounding areas, so we did not meet the criteria for help. To me, that seems absolutely mad. For instance, if we had a big house party and something really bad happened, social services would get involved then. Why were we left to fend for ourselves because our mum went to prison? It is madness.

Chair: There are four of you, are there: you and three brothers?

Georgia: There are four of us. There are three brothers.

Chair: There were two older brothers living away from home, and you and your brother.

Georgia: Yes. I was "little big sister".

Q3 **Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon:** Lina, when you first arrived at prison, did any of the prison guards or anybody else know that you had children?

Lina: The officers who had been next to me and came in the transport with me knew, but I did not know they knew. They could only have known from looking at my paperwork. It was at the point where you have to hand your things in. I had pictures of my children in my wallet. The officer asked, "Do you want to keep them?" "Yes, I do". Those were the things I was allowed to take into my room. At that point, it hit me that they knew I had children.

Also, you are only allowed to make one phone call. I did not know who to call because I was not told about social services. When I was downstairs in the cell at the courtroom, I knew social services had been called, and it was not 3 pm yet, so the children had enough time to be picked up. They had been told, so they would do what they needed to do. I thought, "I will leave it in their hands to deal with that. I will just have to concentrate on what I need to do now". But, after you come out of prison, you hear the stories from your children about really happened, and everything is totally different. So, no, the officers did not really know.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: At the time, were you reassured that your children would be picked up? Did anybody talk to you about that?

Lina: No.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: You had no idea what would happen to them.

Lina: It is like you are coming into prison with no identity. You are just a person with a number, and all that people know about you is whatever is in the file that you come in with, whatever is said in the phone call and communications, and which cell you are going into. When you are in the waiting room to go to the house block, you are sitting next to the other prisoners and speaking about how you ended up there, but that is about it.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Were your children at the same school or nursery school, or did they have to move?

Lina: They went into care.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Were they kept together when they went into care?

Lina: No, they were separated into three different foster placements because the local authority could not make any other provision. Certain foster carers already had two children in their care so they could only take one more. It was like that. All three were separated. Within the month, my son was taken away by family because he was the son. The two girls ended up going to the second foster placement together, which was permanent, where they suffered a great deal. I used to see them once a month in prison. They used to come up to visit me on family days and tell me everything that was happening. I used to have the contact supervisor sitting in front of me evidencing that my daughter is crying her eyes out because she is looking after her four-year-old sister in care. They both have nits. They are losing weight. All I could do was sob and say to the supervisor, "My hands are tied. I am a mother. I cannot do anything. You have to do something". In my cell, I was writing complaint letter after complaint letter to the local authority, to do something about it. It took the local authority three months to eventually move them to another foster placement, which was better. Even when I came out of prison, they were still there for three years.

After I came out, they were in care proceedings for three years. I went in for one punishment, which was for fraud, but later on I had to show social services my mothering skills—how to cook, how to look after adolescent children—to prove that I could look after children. It is a different punishment from the one I went in for in the first place. Being the daughter of a retired restaurateur who cooks curry, while I was cooking curry in the contact centre and teaching other contact centre supervisors how to make a curry, I was being punished for not knowing how to cook. So many things were thrown at me that I just took it in my stride. I knew that I was only there to fight for my children and get them back. My motive was to get my children back.

The reason it took three years is that, when I came out of prison, I went into a hostel for five days. Due to my circumstances of being a white British Muslim and coming back to an Asian area, I was instantly moved because of honour-based violence that would happen to me. I was moved into a different area, into a refuge, where I spent a year. My children could not return to my care because I was in a refuge. I did not have settled accommodation, even though the bedroom I was living in had two bunkbeds and a bed for me. It was a family-friendly home and there were other children living in the property.

I ended up working 60 to 70 hours a week, raising a deposit for a flat. As soon as I got a one-bedroom flat, which was what I could afford at that time, social services came to visit and said, "One bedroom is only for you; it is not for the children. You need three beds". I started again. I worked, worked, worked and I raised a £2,000 deposit. Even while working, I made sure I was meeting my children at the contact centre, going to the

court hearings and working around this. Eventually, I got a three-bedroom maisonette away from everything. When they came to visit me, I would take them to their schools, drop them off, go to work, pick them up, do what I used to do, cook for them, take them out and everything. This was all noted. Eventually, within the first three months of me getting the keys, I got my children back. It was a long road.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: When you were in prison, how far away from you were your children? When you came out, were you in easy distance so that you could see each other?

Lina: I was very far from my children when I was in prison, because from the south coast, with prisons all being further north, it is a very long drive. My children used to visit me once a month on family days.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Who used to take them to see you?

Lina: It was the contact supervisor. They used to come out on family days. The prison provided family days once a month for the children to come up. It was not just my children; it was everyone else's children. When I came back out, I was near where my children were living but, when I went to the refuge, I was about 10 miles from where my children were.

Chair: We are going to come back to some of this through other questions.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Georgia has told us most of the stuff. The question I was going to ask you is this. When you were still at home with your brother, were you both at school?

Georgia: We were both at college. We both dropped out of college because we felt like the role was too much—being at college, getting an education, running a house and mealtimes, gas, electric, washing, folding. So, yes, I dropped out.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Where is your brother now? How is he doing now? Has he gone back to college or is he working?

Georgia: He is settled and happy. He is married with children.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: That is brilliant.

Georgia: Yes, same as me. I have two children of my own now. I am happy. As I said, I cannot really speak for my brother because he is quite quiet. He is a man. He does not talk about it. For myself, like I mentioned earlier, I know that you should see authorities as someone to help you. When it comes to my children, I see them as people who help, but as a personal preference—and it has grown from my mum going—I am absolutely petrified of them. Even now, I have crazy things come into my head. Sarah from Children Heard and Seen used to be a social worker, and I will ring her up and panic, when I have nothing to panic over. I honestly believe it has stemmed from that.

Back then, if I had had a charity like Children Heard and Seen, I would not be suffering as I am now. I can give you an example. Unfortunately, my children have recently gone through a similar situation with the father

receiving a custodial. Because of Children Heard and Seen, my children were not alienated. They did not know the difference. They did not know that he had gone. They were with a bunch of other children and it felt normal—not that it was normal for a parent to go to prison, but it was normal to feel human and be accepted as a human. It was not so taboo. You are not living their punishment, really. I honestly believe that I and my brother served a bigger sentence than my mum ever received.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: What is the relationship between you and your mum now?

Georgia: We are like that.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: That is good.

Georgia: We are like two peas in a pod. People would say we were sisters. She feels so guilty. She carries the guilt around with her. It is a credit to see and to know how guilty she feels. She is such an inspiration: she gets up every morning and smiles, knowing that I and Conor were in this situation and she could not do anything about it; it was out of her hands. It is just remarkable that she gets up every day and carries on like nothing happened.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Can I ask what your mum went to prison for?

Georgia: It was a fighting offence.

Chair: Yes, she had said it was fighting.

Q4 **Ms Karen Buck:** We have heard quite a lot of what I was going to ask about. Lina, you have talked very movingly about the experience of your kids coming to see you in prison. Was there any assistance, any guidance, either to help you cope with that, or that was available for your children, in terms of not just the practicalities but the emotional experience for you and for them?

Lina: Looking back at my prison days, they were the making of me today. I do not look at it as prison; I look at it as Butlin's holiday camp. The reason I say that is that when I went in there it was all about me. For once I could think about myself and not about someone else. I did seven different qualifications. I did belly dancing in the first two weeks. I was experiencing things that I could not do outside. I was a different person. I was next to women who were self-harming, who were drug addicts, who did so many different offences. It was like opening your eyes.

The second day I was in there, the social worker, the person I had trusted with my children, came and visited me. They turned around and said to me, "By the way, just to let you know, your children are going to be adopted". Up to that time, there had been trust between the service and the parent. It came out of me as naturally as that: "I want to kill myself". I turned around and said, "When did you find this out?" "I have just been told today by my manager". "Could you not have explained this to me before I went into prison or anything like that?" You realise that the person on the other side, who is a professional, does not have a clue what

they are doing about your children. They turned round and said, "I just found out". I am thinking, "Who have I put my children in trust with? I am serving a punishment for something that I did. Now my children are serving another punishment for something they have not done". That is wrong.

Ms Karen Buck: I can imagine that hearing those words would be so overwhelming that it would be very hard to hear anything else that was going on, but did that person not explain to you what the process would be?

Lina: No. I do not want to go against those social services. I am trying to be as honest as possible. I had my views on them, but I worked with them very professionally after I came out because, at that time, I was built up as Lina. When I came out, I knew what I was dealing with. When I went in as a vulnerable, naive Lina, I expected so much professional guidance, timeline planning, everything, like my solicitor told me. Obviously, he told me to plead guilty, but in a trustworthy way. That did not happen.

Ms Karen Buck: Did you get legal advice afterwards? Did you get family law legal advice when your children were fostered after you had come out?

Lina: When I came out, the only person I relied upon was my support worker in the refuge. She guided me through the whole process. We did research together. We looked at everything. My only motive and plan, whatever they said to me, was to get my children back. In prison, yes, there was a lot of emotional support for me.

Ms Karen Buck: Georgia, in terms of your own experience, you have made very clear your feeling about social services and the more formal role of the state in your experience. First, was there anyone else? Was there any kind of voluntary organisation? What about the role of the college? Was there anybody in educational welfare who intervened at any stage with you?

Georgia: No, there was nothing.

Ms Karen Buck: They did not offer.

Georgia: There was no offer. No, there was nothing. There were rumours going around the college, so I presume that they knew but, no, there was nothing.

Ms Karen Buck: Your older brothers presumably had a formal expectation from social services in terms of their responsibility towards you. Was there a case conference approach? Were your circumstances reviewed, as far as you know?

Georgia: We were part of a family intervention programme, an FIP, before my mum went in. Our FIP worker came up to the house, the same day my mum was given the custodial sentence.

Ms Karen Buck: Did that FIP start at the point that your mother was going into the criminal justice process or was it before that?

Georgia: It was before that. The lady came up and she was the one who tried to make the referral to social services. Assessments were made and they said that we did not meet the criteria, so we were left to fend for ourselves. There was help there, like I said, from our older brothers, but we were just left like that.

Ms Karen Buck: You were under 16.

Georgia: Yes.

Ms Karen Buck: As far as you know, there was no formal process between social services and your older brothers, even though you were under 16 at the time.

Georgia: No, there was not any.

Chair: You were not living with them, anyway, were you?

Georgia: We were not living with them.

Ms Karen Buck: That is completely extraordinary.

Georgia: As Lina said, I am not going against social services. I just feel failed by them. I was rescued out of all of this. I could have taken a dark path; I could have become a user; I could have ended up in prison myself. I am not saying being a young mum is a bad thing, but I started going down that path, and the only thing that saved me was my child. I was only 18 when I had him. I was a teen mum. I just feel failed by the services that are meant to be there. This is why I am so grateful for Children Heard and Seen now, because my children have not been failed. I have not been failed. I do not carry guilt. I do not feel alienated. I feel human because of the Children Heard and Seen charity, and so do my children. They feel like normal happy children. They are not isolated at school.

I remember there was one moment where my eldest son got the mick taken out of him because of the father being in jail. Sarah from Children Heard and Seen said, "Right, I am going to write a letter to the headmistress and tell her". There was never that. I was a drop-out from college because there was not that. There was no one I could confide in. The only person I could confide in had been taken away from me and she could not call me more than probably three times a week, because she only had £2 credit. She had to use that credit to speak to us and say, "Oh, you need to get this from the shop; you need to put this on gas; you need to put that on electric". That was it. We were just dropped in the ocean.

Baroness Hamwee: I may have missed it, Georgia, but how young was your brother?

Georgia: There are 10 and a half months between us, so he was 16.

Q5 **Baroness Hamwee:** You have covered a lot of ground in a pretty short time. You said, Georgia, that you were able to stay in contact with your mum by phone, but that was only when she had credit on her phone.

Georgia: That was only when she had credit.

Baroness Hamwee: It was about three times a week, was it?

Georgia: Yes.

Baroness Hamwee: Did you visit her in prison?

Georgia: We visited when we could because, like I said, my elder brothers worked. When they were able to go, my brother and I were able to go, but we live in Oxfordshire and she was placed on the other side of London. We were only able to go once or twice a month. I remember the first time we went. We were having this discussion on the way up here. You walk in and you do not know how to act, because you see your mum in this room with other prisoners. You are almost shell-shocked and stripped of everything you want to say. You adjust to thinking, "Okay, this is my mum and she is in here". It never felt like a proper visit. It felt like a longer journey than it did a visit.

Baroness Hamwee: Was that the same sort of feeling that you had, Lina? You said that your children came up with lots of others for family days.

Lina: Yes, they came up on a minibus with other children, but they said after I came out that the security had put them off. The actual prison itself put on a really nice themed event with a bouncy castle. The day before family day, the mothers would go out and get ready for the event. We would put up pictures, blow up balloons and everything for when the children came. We were all waiting for that moment and, when that moment has gone, you cannot get it back again. You count down to the day that you will see them again.

I used to phone my children up every evening after school. The foster carer had to listen in to the conversation to see how my children were feeling at the time. I used to work. After I finished work and they had come back from school, I would phone them for five to 10 minutes, speaking to both of the girls. It was just a catch-up. Then I would say, "Okay, love you, and I will speak to you tomorrow". Every day, I used to phone them. For me, it was that reassurance: "Okay, another day has gone. Let's go to the next day and the next day". It was like that.

Baroness Hamwee: Do you want to say anything about the long-term effects of the separation on your relationship with the children? I know that might be difficult.

Lina: In the long term, it is almost like I have the guilt, as a mother. Since I came out, my perception has been that I do not put other people first. I do not put the husband first. I am putting my children and their needs first and foremost. It is almost like you change everything, the way you think, the way you act, your attitude to people. It changes, and the trust is a very, very big issue. You cannot trust anyone. I cannot trust professionals. Luckily, after the girls came back to live with me, it was like carrying on as if nothing had happened. In my relationship with the girls now, who are all grown up, we are the best of friends. We are going through their storms in life. But it has traumatised them.

My middle daughter suffers with a lot of self-harming in what she is going through. Every time she goes through a storm, she returns to this. She comes to this because this is how she can cope. As a family, the girls have lost their brother. My eldest daughter came back to live with me after I got my house and she turned 17. She ran away and found out I was living here. She came back to live with me.

The last time the girls and I saw my son was a very long time ago, and he was very young then. My second eldest daughter, who was seven at the time and has just turned 17, applied for a sibling contact order to see her brother. She went through the process without any legal representative; she represented herself. My three girls are all on the Family Justice Young People's Board, voicing what is wrong in the system and that their voice matters. It is not only that, but because she does all this she thought she could, without legal representation, apply for the sibling contact order, which she did. It got through. Eventually, my son did not want to see his sisters and we just left it at that. They are all bright students now.

Baroness Hamwee: I am conscious that the bell is going to go in about a minute.

Q6 **Chair:** We are going to have to wrap up, because the bells are going to ring. You have described the break-up of a family, traumatising of children, a complete loss to yourself. People will think, "She must have been a real danger to society for the judge to send her to prison, with those very young children suffering as a result, and not let her go home in her car". Was there any violence involved in your offence?

Lina: No, it was fraud. It was money, and they eventually found that I had not benefited from a single penny. I did the signing and my husband took the money, because I was in a domestic violence relationship. It did not matter.

Chair: I know exactly what my colleagues will be thinking. It seems that such a heavy penalty goes on the family. It is an enormous punishment of a family, an enormous punishment of the children. Do you think there should be a completely different sentencing approach in terms of custody and prison when you are talking about a family with young children or children who, while not very young, are still in their young teens? You were in a one-size-fits-all system, which did not recognise the rights of the family in any way, shape or form in all of this.

Georgia: This is the thing I always think about, and I think back to it quite a lot. I know my mum did wrong and deserved a punishment, but if you were to stand my mum up in that box with me and my brother, and someone turned around and said, "Do you sentence these three?", would the judge look at it differently?

Chair: That is an extremely good idea. What an extremely good idea, because you took the punishment along with your mum.

Georgia: We took a bigger punishment.

Chair: What do you think about that, Lina?

Lina: I totally agree with Georgia.

Chair: Your four children should have been in the dock with you.

Lina: As I said, it was like I was going to a Butlin's holiday camp. For me, I needed to start thinking about myself. My children were being punished, not me. That was not being punished. Women go in there. The next day, when they get their grant, they get a tent outside the prison, they put it outside the prison and they are waiting to go back in because they have lost everything. They have lost their families. After I left prison, I mentored a lot of women. I went back and forth to prisons on my jobseeker's allowance. I had never been on benefits before, but after I came out I was on benefits. I used to pick up ladies and drop them off at a hostel because they did not have anyone else. If I was not there, who would have done that? They did not have anyone. They lost their children. Their children were adopted. Women are killing themselves in prison. Does that not say anything?

Q7 **Fiona Bruce:** I just want to ask a question, because I really want to understand. You mentioned adoption then and you mentioned it before. Your social worker spoke to you and said that your children would be adopted, not fostered, not put into care, and you understood what that meant. That was permanent.

Lina: Yes. That was the day after I was sentenced. I am in prison. The first day, I go through all these protocols. The social worker comes to visit me and I still have not heard from my children. I do not know what is going on. Everything is in the process. I could not speak to them for weeks because the family liaison officer thought it was a child's case. Everything was up in the air, and suddenly they realised this was totally different. She came and told me those words: "Your children are going to be adopted". I turned around and I asked her, "When did you find this out?" It was like me judging her profession: "You should know what you are doing. You should have told me this".

Fiona Bruce: I just wanted to check. From what you have just said, that does happen to some women.

Lina: It does.

Fiona Bruce: They are taken into prison and their children, presumably without their say-so at all, are adopted, permanently removed from their families.

Lina: Exactly. Luckily, I am fortunate enough to be born and brought up in this country, and I can speak English. Women in there, whose second language is English and who can barely speak it, have letters coming to them through the prison. I am trying to explain and I am reading, "Your children are being adopted." How do I do that? I cannot even speak French. I am trying to explain to them. How do they know? Later on they realise, through interpreters and everything, that their children have been adopted.

Q8 Chair: The Secretary of State for Justice is looking at the question of prisons, both men in prison and women in prison. Would you say that he should try to find some way to punish women other than sending them to prison in a way that separates them from their family, and to search out other ways to make sure that they face punishment? Is that what he should do, Georgia?

Georgia: Yes, definitely. I just wanted to push one more thing in there before it is all ended. I wanted to take the opportunity to say thank you to the charity that not only has been working with me—15-year-old me; I am now 24—but is now helping my children. It is a charity. It is not funded. I want to say thank you so much to them because they are helping me now. If it was not for them, my children would probably grow up to be like me—not that being me is a bad thing, but they would have to deal with what I deal with on a daily basis in my head. My children now do not have to be like that. I want to say thank you to Children Heard and Seen.

Chair: We can add to the thanks, not only for the work that Children Heard and Seen has done with families, but for helping to bring the story here so that we can understand it and it can help shape the future policy.

Lina: Should the Ministers think about diverting women from prison and look at their family life before they make a decision? I do not think you can rehabilitate someone in prison. You can rehabilitate someone outside together with the family. If it is a mother, yes, you can. Education does not cost money. Prisons do. Educating me on the outside, taking me to groups, making the Freedom Programme and other programmes available to me and giving me a community service order would allow me to serve that sentence outside with my family. I would not lose my home. My children would not need to move to different schools and feel unsettled. At least they would have a settled upbringing.

Q9 Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Lina, when you talked about your children, it suddenly dawned on me that at no time did you mention your son because your parents had taken away your son. Towards the end you said he does not want to see his siblings.

Chair: That was the younger son.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Yes. As a boy they have taken him away because they think he is much better served by the family. How old is he now?

Lina: He is 16. I have three girls and a boy.

Chair: You have just one boy; okay.

Lina: I have one boy. I have a 21 year-old, a 19 year-old, a 16 year-old and a 14 year-old. My 16 year-old is the son.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: And he does not want to have anything to do with you.

Lina: No. The same happened with my 21-year-old. At that time of her life, when she was young, she said the same thing because of family.

When she realised that her sisters are doing well with mum and it is a different life out there, she left everything, ran away, phoned me and told me to pick her up. I picked her up. She is going to get engaged this year. She is doing well.

Q10 Chair: Are you saying it takes years, if ever, to put the family back together again when the justice system has broken it by putting the mother in prison? That is what you are saying, is it not, Georgia? Your mum still feels that guilt, so it can take years.

Lina: It does. You have to be very strong minded. Being a very strong-minded woman, I have managed to get my puzzle just about right, but many, many mums still need that support and it is very hard because sometimes, when a storm hits you, you do not know what to do. When I am very upset and low, I always think I should go back to prison. Why do I need to feel like that? It is because that was the only place I could hide out and have the four walls. If I was not placed in there and I was educated in a different way, I would never need to feel like that.

Chair: Lina and Georgia, you have really, really helped us to understand the depth of the experience. As I said to you, Lina, most people in this country would not think for a first offence of non-violence it would be justified to punish young children in that way, breaching their rights to a family.

Georgia: If anything, Conor and I should have been the ones. It just seems strange. It feels like Conor and I should have been Lina's kids, if that makes sense. Your kids got taken away for a non-violent crime but my mum has gone away for a violent crime and we are left at home.

Chair: Your point, Georgia, was such an important way of looking at it: the idea of visualising the children in the dock alongside the mother. You have really given incredibly forceful and powerful evidence.

I know that Government Ministers are questioning themselves at the moment and are reviewing how we send women to prison, with the thought of actually changing that, not just doing it because we have always done it. If we can get some changes through, you will have really played a very, very important part. Thank you very much for your evidence.

Questions 11 – 17

Witnesses

I: Witness B; Witness A.

Examination of Witnesses

Witness B and Witness A.

Q11 Chair: Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us.

This is a private evidence session, so we are going to listen to you and learn from what you say, but we are not going to tell anybody else what *you* said. We are not going to mention your name. We are not going to quote anything you have said that could identify you, and I hope that helps you know that you can say whatever you want and still feel free to say it, because it is in confidence and you can trust us. We can all keep secrets here. We all will do that. You heard the previous evidence session. Witness A, could you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about the circumstances of Witness B's mum being imprisoned?

Witness A: I am Witness B's grandmother. Our circumstances are a little different in that I already had the children when Witness B's mum went into prison. It was in the first few months of me having them. If I just give you a bit of background, my daughter, who is Witness B's mum, had previously been a heroin addict, as had Witness B's dad. When she got pregnant with Witness B she got herself clean. She then went on to have [xxx], Witness B's brother, [...]. She then split up from Witness B's dad. The relationship there was not very good. He went into prison. He did not solve his drug problem and, to reiterate, he died [...], so it is quite raw for Witness B still.

My daughter remarried. She married someone and was doing really well. She had another child, [yyy], [...]. Unfortunately, the marriage did not work out. They had moved out to a village. There were some debt problems. Things did not work out. [...]. It is a very complicated story. However, in the end, she had a complete mental breakdown. She got to the point where she did not feel she could look after the children. She had tendencies, being an addict. For addicts, when times are hard, it is the comfort blanket they always go back to. That was starting to come in. She had some severe mental health issues that came up, to the point where she handed the children over to their respective fathers and tried to commit suicide.

That was when I came in. I got a phone call from a social worker who was at the hospital with my daughter. Witness B and [xxx] had been handed to their father; [yyy] had been handed to his. Things went from bad to worse with her mental health. Over the next eight-week period she lost the house. Things just went from bad to worse. They were trying to section her, so she left to go and stay with a cousin in [...], to see if she could sort her life out, get herself better and start to provide a life that was just for her and the children.

She met a man while she was up there who was of a similar background to her. Witness B's dad was not really in a fit state to be looking after them. He had health problems and everything. [...] social services finally listened to me and gave me the children. It was still with a view to their mother sorting herself out and the family being reunited. Then, within a

couple of months, we got the call. She and her boyfriend had been involved in [...].

It went to court. We never thought for one minute that she would get a custodial sentence. [...]

I had to explain that to Witness B and [xxx]. I had always kept a healthy relationship with both mother and dad. I felt that for their well-being they ought to have contact with the parents. There was a lot of stuff they did not need to see, but it was still mum and dad, and they ought to have that contact with them. There were phone calls every night and visits when possible. That suddenly stopped and mother was put into [...] prison in [...], which meant that there would be no consideration of where the people who needed to see her, being her children, could see her.

We went to visit her once in the time she was in prison, because I am a kinship carer. I have no legal guardianship of Witness B and [xxx]. It is a family decision that they stay with us. Therefore, I get no help at all. We get no financial help. The only support that I got from social services was right at the beginning. They said, "The children are safe", and suddenly backed off. Children Heard and Seen has been the support for me and the children. Because my husband and I work and we are not on benefits, we are entitled to no help in getting the children to visit her. We could only do it once because it was a lot of money for the train fare to [...]. Even when you get to [...], they do not tell you, but it is then £10 for a taxi to get to [the prison], because it is in the middle of nowhere.

Chair: Where do you live?

Witness A: I live in [in the East Midlands]. The Welsh Assembly, however, paid for her boyfriend to go and visit her, even though he later went to prison himself for an attack on his mum. They are still together. She is doing a lot better. She lives in [...]. The most traumatic time of me having the children was the 14 months that she was in prison because there were no phone calls, or maybe a phone call once a week. There was only the one contact. The contact that we constantly tried to keep was all taken away. I wish, like previous people have said, that the children had been taken into some consideration regarding the sentencing—where she was going to go, who was having the children and what support there was for them. It is okay saying that I am their grandparent, and I would not have it any other way. Another decision would never have been made. They were coming to me, end of, but it affected my life a lot.

My children had all left home. I had retrained for a new job. I was being a community organiser. I was coming to work in London. I had this great new career, and I saw this all happening and had to put a hold on that. I now work lunchtimes as a cook to do school hours and to look after the children. I would not have it any other way, but more support would have been really helpful, especially at the time. As well as being their mother, she is my daughter. She got a custodial sentence the first time. Why did he walk away and not her? Why did people pay for him to go and see her and not the children? How should we treat the children and maintain their

welfare? It was very complicated, but I wish there had been more support, more thought. Instead of Children Heard and Seen picking up the pieces, there should have been more support there from the start.

Chair: Witness B, tell us about when you heard that your mum was going to prison. How old were you then? Did you have any idea of what it was going to mean for you?

Witness B: No, not really. I was [...].

Chair: You did not really know that it was going to mean that she was a long way away from you.

Witness B: No.

Q12 **Fiona Bruce:** Witness B, I know it is difficult. When your mum was sent to prison at that point, did you know before that day or on that day that she might be going to prison? Did you expect that to happen?

Witness B: No.

Fiona Bruce: It was not something that you thought would happen. Did you have any chance to speak with anyone on that day, either at the court or someone who would speak for you at the court, about what would happen when your mum was sentenced on that day?

Witness B: No, I did not.

Fiona Bruce: No one spoke on your behalf about what would happen to you when and if your mum went to prison.

Witness B: No.

Fiona Bruce: Witness A, you said that the judge was aware that Witness B's mum had children.

Witness A: I presume so. I was not at the court. I just got a phone call from the court usher. I had had a phone call before, because my daughter had given her my phone number. She phoned me before to say it was going on and then just afterwards to say it was a 14-month custodial sentence, which even she was shocked about.

Fiona Bruce: It sounds like you are not but are you aware, for the record, of whether the judge took into account at all the fact that there were children in the family?

Witness A: I believe not.

Fiona Bruce: It did not affect the sentencing. It was not taken into consideration in any way.

Witness A: No.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Witness A has answered some of the questions already about what support you had from social services, and it sounds as if there was nothing at all.

Witness A: There was some, mainly because of Witness B's father. [xxx] school and Witness B's school at the time were excellent and gave us support but, as far as social services was concerned, the criteria for the children being safe were that they were clean, at school and fed. As long as they were safe, that was about it. Once they were with me, they just

backed off completely. There were concerns when they were with their father, but they just backed off. I was suddenly left with two children to bring up again, 30 years on.

Can I just say something? I have the thoughts of [xxx], who was [...]. He did not want to be here today. He did not feel he could, but I have had several chats with [xxx], because of my coming here, about how he felt at the time. I have a little statement from him.

Chair: Would you like to read it out? We would be very pleased to hear it.

Witness A: [xxx] said, "I was worried about my mum when she was sent to prison. I did not know that it was going to happen. My dad had been to prison but that was not so bad as he could look after himself. I had seen things about prison and thought my mum may be upset and crying, and people may bully her. I had no way of knowing. When she did phone it was a long time. I worried a lot. I felt angry. Although I knew my mum was ill and I had to live with my grandparents, I now realised that this could be for a long time. It upset me most at night. I cried in the dark because I could not hear her voice. Just to say she was okay, and say goodnight and she loved me, and I could say I loved her, was all I needed.

"I know she did wrong and that if you do bad things you need to be punished, but I felt that I was being punished and it did not seem fair. I had done nothing wrong. I could only go and see her once because she was so far away and it cost too much money. When I did see her, I was scared of seeing what she would look like. I did not want to touch her in case she was hurt or started to cry. I did not know what to do. The visit was good but seemed to be over really quickly. I cried leaving her but I felt better after I talked and finally did hug her. I wish that I could have seen her more and heard her voice more. It felt very lonely. I found it hard for my friends to know where she was".

Chair: How old was he?

Witness A: He is now [...]. He was [...] at the time, but we had a conversation and there was some thinking back about how he felt at the time. It resonated with what Georgia said about children going to see them. You feel shell-shocked when you walk in that room. Half the visit was taken up with them not really knowing what to do, what to say, how to behave, so it would have been nice for that to have been longer and more often. We were unfortunate.

Chair: If you can, thank him very much for giving that statement through you to us. It is very helpful, particularly the point about him feeling he was being punished when he had not done anything wrong.

Witness A: He did feel he was being punished.

Q13 **Baroness Hamwee:** Witness B, we have heard that you visited your mother once. That is right, is it not? You talked to her on the phone once a week. When you visited, what did it feel like for you?

Witness B: It was all right.

Baroness Hamwee: Was that because your grandmother was there?

Witness B: Yes.

Baroness Hamwee: Were you able to stay in touch in any other way?

Witness B: No. She wrote letters. That was about it. She just told us how much she missed us and things.

Baroness Hamwee: And you wrote back, with a bit of help.

Witness B: Yes.

Baroness Hamwee: Did you talk to your brother about it?

Witness B: Yes.

Q14 **Ms Karen Buck:** It is quite a hard question to answer, particularly for Witness B. Going through the experience is bad enough, but do you have any thoughts about what the impact has been for you in the long term?

Witness B: I suppose, when I found out she went into prison, my behaviour changed. I started acting up. When she got out it was all right because I got to speak to her every day, but then I do not really know.

Ms Karen Buck: You were acting up. Presumably, you were trying to deal with lots of different kinds of emotions and lots of hard feelings, which you were struggling to manage.

Witness B: Yes. I started being naughty.

Chair: Was that at school or at home?

Witness B: It was at school.

Chair: Did the school punish you or did they help you?

Witness B: They punished me.

Chair: What did they do? Did they take you out of class or put you in detention?

Witness B: All of the above.

Chair: Basically, your mum was punished by being put in prison, and you were punished by detention, by being sent out of the class. Were you excluded at all?

Witness B: Yes.

Ms Karen Buck: It is part of the same question. Did they understand? Did they work with you to try to deal with some of those problems? It is a very hard thing for you to go through. Were they sympathetic?

Witness A: No.

Ms Karen Buck: You did not feel so, either.

Witness A: No. Witness B still has issues at school. She is still getting excluded. She is still getting isolation. I have no problem with her at all at home. She is an absolute treasure at home. With authority and things, she seems to really struggle. [xxx] is a different matter. [xxx] school has been so supportive, and dealt well with Witness B, but Witness B was only at that school for a few months before going on to secondary school, on top of everything else that was going on.

The school decided it ought to be on a need-to-know basis. Not everyone in the school knows Witness B's story, or knew Witness B's story, so they did not recognise that maybe her acting up was a reaction to something. There was a bit of other people saying things, wasn't there, Witness B?

Witness B: Yes.

Ms Karen Buck: They were saying things to you about your mum. Yes; kids can be pretty cruel, can they not? Witness A, you did not feel that, if you talked to the school, it would be able to help.

Witness A: No, they were just interested in the discipline and the other children. It is a different environment from primary school. It is not as pastoral as primary school. Children Heard and Seen, and Sarah here, have stepped in to take up that mantle and have got Witness B a mentor. Somebody else should maybe have been thinking about and providing that. I can be a mentor for Witness B but sometimes she looks at me and I am constantly lecturing, because we are trying to break cycles here. It is hard. When you think that you have been unfairly treated by society, by authority, it is very easy to want to fight back against that, not listen to authority and not want to listen to authority. We are trying to break those cycles and saying, "There are people here who give support. There are people in authority who are prepared to listen. You do have a say in how you feel". That is what we are here to promote, to break those cycles and to say, "Let us step in and help these children who are going through all this stuff that is no fault of their own".

Ms Karen Buck: That is exactly right. What could we do differently, right from the really big stuff? Should Witness B's mum have been in prison in the first place?

Witness A: I do not think so. This is going to sound awful, but I think it had a lot to do with her being English in north Wales. It was a very small Welsh-speaking community. I do not know whether it was more because he knew what was going on. He had been in trouble before, yet he walked out of the court.

Chair: It was not that he pleaded guilty and she pleaded not guilty.

Witness A: No, they both pleaded guilty to exactly the same offence, but he walked away from the court and she got a 14-month custodial sentence. Even the court usher who phoned me was quite incredulous as to what had happened and why it had happened. There was a lot of social media about it as well.

Chair: How many years ago was this?

Witness A: It was three years ago.

Chair: Which court was it?

Witness B: It was in Wales.

Witness A: [...]

Witness B: [...].

Witness A: [...]

Chair: Could you let us know when you get home? We would like to look into that because there is a real issue about sentencing here. You

heard us talk earlier about sentencing of women who have children. We are looking at sentencing of mothers in this context. We would like to look at this. Was it a jury or a magistrates' court?

Witness A: [...]

Chair: [...]

Witness A: [...]

Chair: Okay, we will get on to them and find out what actually happened. They will have reports that were given to the court for sentencing. We will want to look at what was in his report and what was in her report, and what actually happened. It might give you, as well as us, a bit of insight.

Witness A: I have what the newspapers were reporting at the time. I have her version of events, his version of events and everything, but it would be nice to know why that decision was made for such a custodial sentence. She had not even been in Wales that long.

Chair: We will find out. Remind me how long the sentence was.

Witness A: It was 14 months.

Chair: Does that not have to be a crown court?

Witness A: [...]

Chair: We will get to the bottom of it and we will get the papers, one way or another. Sorry, Karen was in the middle of asking you questions when I butted in.

Q15 **Ms Karen Buck:** Flowing on from that, if the two of you—answer this separately, if you can—were standing next to Witness B's mum as the judge was making the sentence and you had the chance to say something, what would you say?

Witness A: I would say that this woman needs rehabilitation. She does not need prison. She needs help. I do not know whether a background report had been done, but it should have been quite obvious to anybody that she had mental health issues. She has since been diagnosed with adult ADHD; she takes anti-psychotic drugs. I do not know, if that was taken into consideration, why you would then not have some sort of rehabilitation going on. I could not see how the prison sentence was benefiting anyone.

Ms Karen Buck: Witness B, from where you are now, if you had the chance and Harriet was the judge, what would you say?

Chair: Imagine that Witness A, your grandmother, is your mum. Imagine you are standing next to her in court and I am saying, "Right, I am going to pass a sentence of 17 months on your mum, but I want to hear from you, first, Witness B, whether that is a good idea, whether it is okay and what impact it would have on you".

Witness B: If it was just me there, they would not know that she had two other kids. If [yyy and xxx] were there, maybe they would think about it differently, because they would know that she had more than one kid and that she would like to see them.

Chair: You think the judge should have had in mind all of you kids, not just you, and the impact.

Witness B: Yes. It affected all of us, not just me.

Chair: That was because of the separation, effectively, and the bullying and unfairness at school.

Witness B: Yes.

Witness A: [yyy] is on the autistic scale, so he found things difficult to understand. [yyy] has several things. She had two children living with me and a child with her ex-husband, and the phone call money that she got worked out as £2 a week. She got £6 a week and she had to buy everything with that: her toiletries, tea, coffee—everything she needed. It left £2 for a phone call. It was like being in a telephone box with the money just going and going and going. Phoning them and then phoning him on a mobile took it in one go. That was why the phone call was only once a week. If she lost privileges, they lost a phone call to their mum.

Chair: It is a bit of an odd concept that children being able to receive a phone call from their mum is somehow a privilege, which should then be used as a punishment. You have the punishment of the sending to prison, but then you punish the children, even while the mother is in prison, by denying the phone calls.

Witness A: Yes, exactly. You cannot even say, "She will phone on this day at this time", in case there is a lockdown.

Witness B: It is like we are getting punished for her choices.

Witness A: Yes. Like [xxx] said, he cried himself to sleep at night because he did not know whether that phone call was coming. He would be expecting it and sitting by the phone hoping, and then the phone call did not come. As for their relationship with their father, [...], he would phone at 6 pm every night no matter what, no matter how bad he felt, unless he was in a way where he sounded ill. Then he would not phone, but to know that that was coming made it a much healthier relationship for them. To not be able to know that with their mum was just horrendous.

Chair: I am really sorry, Witness B, to hear about your dad's passing away. Please accept my sympathies. It is very sad to hear that.

Q16 **Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon:** Witness B, when you changed school, was there any teacher within the school you felt you could trust and you could talk to when things were getting really bad for you? Was there anybody within the school?

Chair: Do you mean the secondary school?

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Yes, when you changed school.

Witness B: Yes, but she left.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Did she leave soon after you got there, or after a year or so?

Witness B: It was two years.

Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon: Is that when things started getting really bad for you in school, because you did not have somebody like her?

Witness B: Yes.

Chair: We heard from Georgia. You heard us talking to Georgia about how her relationship with authority has been twisted up with this because of what authority did to her mum. Has it affected you, Witness B, in how you think of people in charge, because you felt they did something that hurt you, which was sending your mum to prison?

Witness B: Yes, kind of. It is a little unfair because her boyfriend did not get a sentence and my mum did.

Chair: Then it made you feel you could not trust the authorities because they would do things that seemed uneven.

Witness B: Yes, unfair.

Q17 **Baroness Hamwee:** Can I ask a slightly different question? Sarah has been sitting with you, and we heard from Lina and Georgia about the help from that organisation. I have not picked up whether you have a relationship with Children Heard and Seen. If you have, I wondered how that came about and how you got in touch with them.

Witness A: It was the lady at the school. When she first got to secondary school, there was a teacher there who was quite good. The first one left quite soon. That is the trouble. They get people in but people change jobs. She finds it very difficult to keep constantly trusting people. It was one teacher who put us in touch with Children Heard and Seen. Yes, we have an excellent relationship with them. Yes, they are wonderful, not only in providing a mentor for Witness B—and we have evenings—but the support for me is just amazing. I do not know what I would do without it.

I have now met other grandparents who are bringing up their grandchildren. We have been on days out; we have been treated and made to feel like we can be normal sometimes. They set up a writing group in [...] that was supposed to be for the children, and they said, "Let us do it for the adults and we will take the kids off to do something". They have given me space to be a bit more me again, because it was a point in my life, as it is with a lot of grandparents, where your children have gone and this is when you can start thinking about you. That is suddenly all taken away, so for somebody to say, "Let us go and do this; let us give you some time to be you; here are other people who are in the same boat", has just been amazing.

Chair: But for a small charitable organisation, you would have had nothing.

Witness A: There would have been nothing.

Chair: There would have been absolutely nothing for either Witness B or you.

Witness A: No.

Chair: You have been extremely helpful in your evidence and that will very much reinforce what we have heard already on the public record from Georgia and Lina. A lot of people do not realise what actually goes on, so you have done us a good public service by coming along.

Witness A: There are a lot of grandparents like me who are doing the job that foster carers would be doing, which would cost the state a hell of a lot of money. We get no help or support at all. It would have been nice to be able to say, "It is not me who needs to go and visit her. Her children need to go and visit". They should have been priority for someone saying, "We will pay towards the cost of you going to see her", even to go to the family days or whatever, but we could not have that because we work. Because we were not on benefits, we were not entitled to it. We were treated like we were the parents, but I am not her parent. I am her grandparent. The foster children get more rights than they do and it is not fair. We should be treated the same because we are doing the same job but saving the state a hell of a lot of money.

Chair: Thank you very, very much indeed for your evidence. We are going to carry on with our meeting, but you can go now.

Witness A: Thank you.

Chair: I know you have been offered a trip back to the House of Commons. If you want to see us doing our business at any other time, you can come and see us, debating Brexit probably.

Witness A: We would love that. Thanks for your time.

Chair: Thank you so much. Thank you, Children Heard and Seen.