

Written evidence submitted by Serenity Welfare (CYP0022)

1. General comments

We welcome the Health and Social Care Select Committee's inquiry into children and young people's mental health. This submission addresses questions 2 and 3 of the inquiry's call for evidence.

2. About Serenity Welfare

2.1 Serenity Welfare is a uniquely integrated organisation that works with UK-wide local authorities, children's charities, schools, alternative education providers, youth offending services and other healthcare professionals, to offer a comprehensive transportation and welfare service for vulnerable children and young adults, including those who are in or on the edge of care, 24-hours-a-day, seven days per week.

2.2 We provide safe, comfortable and secure transportation services to children aged between 10 and 17 across the UK, completing upwards of 200 journeys a year on average. We also offer 24/7 wrap around care, crisis intervention services, educational talks and presentations on gangs and county lines, and high-quality mentoring services.

3. About the Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign

3.1 This year, we are launching our Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign. Our founder, Emily Aklan, decided to launch the campaign after being horrified to discover that children in care, some as young as 10-years-old, are being securely transported between care homes and picked up from other secure settings, such as police stations (after absconding episodes) in handcuffs and/or with their feet tied. This is happening to children who have not committed a crime at an alarming rate. We discuss the Hope instead of Handcuffs in more detail in our responses to the Committee's call for evidence (below).

4. Responses to questions

- **How inpatient care can be improved so that it is not creating additional stress on children and young people, and how the use of physical and medical restraint can be reduced**

4.1 Most organisations that are tasked with transporting looked after children to and from care homes, schools, hospitals, court dates and appointments have an official policy of only handcuffing or restraining young people in exceptional circumstances. Yet many of these organisations train their staff to use restraint techniques against children, including head control and handcuffing. If a child who is deemed "high-risk" needs to be transported somewhere, they are automatically put in handcuffs or in caged vehicles similar to police vans. However, a child does not even need to be considered "high-risk" to be put in handcuffs: any child who displays signs of distress or upset risks being put in them or subject to other forms of restraint.

4.2 There are numerous reports of a deeply worrying prevalence of organisations and authorities handcuffing or restraining children, despite the practice being condemned by the Children's Commissioner, the UN Committee Against Torture and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Parliamentary Joint Commission on Human Rights recently cited [Ministry of Justice statistics](#) of

6600 incidents of the use of restraint involving 300 children in the year ending March 2018. A separate Ministry of Justice-sponsored report into juvenile restraint found that there it is “inherently unsafe” and that “even where it does not end in physical injury, the experience and memory can be profoundly damaging psychologically”.

4.3 We believe that handcuffs and restraint are extremely damaging to children, both physically and mentally. Central to our operation as an organisation is never to use handcuffs against children and we have a 100% success rate. Instead, our focus is always on non-violent de-escalation and mentoring as part of a humanistic and compassionate provision of care. We are licensed to use Maybo, an internationally renowned technique that allows us to understand a child’s psychological requirements and safely de-escalate emotionally charged situations. All of our staff members are also highly skilled in coaching and mentoring, meaning that if there is an incident of conflict or stress, our staff are able to diffuse the situation effectively, without the need for the use of force. We advocate for moving away from using restraint in the care system towards de-escalation, which is an effective method without being damaging to a child’s physical and mental wellbeing.

4.4 The Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign is calling on the government to legislate to ban the handcuffing, restraining, or caging of children except when there is a considerable risk of the child harming themselves or others. It is also calling on the government to mandate that all organisations involved in the transportation of children be legally obliged to report any instances of the handcuffing of children. We know that the use of restraint and handcuffs is a common feature of transporting looked after children and young people, with some organisations advertising that they use handcuffs on their website. At Serenity Welfare, we can tell if a child has been handcuffed by other organisations from the marks left on their wrists.

4.5 Some data is collected on the use of restraint against youth offenders, which includes the number of planned and spontaneous incidents of restraint, the reason for their use, the duration and position of the child (i.e. seated or standing). However, organisations that provide transportation and welfare services for children are not legally obliged to report incidents of handcuffing, or other methods of restraint. This prevents us from having an empirical understanding of how widespread the use of restraint and handcuffs is, as well as monitoring whether the practice is increasing or decreasing. A recent [report](#) by the Children’s Commissioner in England stated that in 2019, restraint was used to overpower children around 6,300 times, which is a 16% increase from the previous year and the highest level in the last five years. If the use of restraint is increasing, it is likely that the use of handcuffs is too.

- **The wider changes needed in the system as a whole, and to what extent it should be reformed in favour of a model that focuses on early intervention in children and young people’s mental health to prevent more severe illness developing**

4.6 At Serenity Welfare, we understand that the children we work with in the care system have too often gone through a range of trauma, from domestic abuse to sexual exploitation to gang violence. These experiences have long-lasting, damaging impacts on these children, often making them disengaged from society. But this does not make them less worthy of compassionate care and the opportunities afforded to other children. Most importantly, their experiences do not make them criminals. That is why the Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign is also calling on the government to recognise that a new approach is needed that treats vulnerable children – such as those exploited by

county lines gangs – as victims instead of criminals and which provides them with the consistent, timely, high-quality interventions they need to rebuild their lives.

4.7 We also support a stronger focus on and more funding for emotional mentoring. Mentoring is a vital part of our service, providing the children we care for with a safe and confidential space to explore coping mechanisms and outlets for their mental health. It helps to diminish the chance of our interventions as a provider of children’s transportation and welfare services contributing to any further trauma. We believe that the mentoring of vulnerable children, including looked after children, should be a priority for this government as it undertakes a review of children’s social care in the UK. That is why we are calling on the government to allocate specific responsibility for supporting the mentoring of vulnerable and at-risk children to a government minister in the relevant department. This will help to demonstrate a commitment to helping these children rebuild their lives.

5. A summary of our asks of government

5.1 The Hope instead of Handcuffs campaign is calling on the government to:

- Legislate to ban the handcuffing, restraining, or caging of children except when there is a considerable risk of the child harming themselves or others;
- Mandate that all organisations involved in the transportation of children be legally obliged to report any instances of the handcuffing of children;
- Recognise that a new approach is needed that treats vulnerable children—such as those exploited by county lines gangs—as victims instead of criminals and which provides them with the consistent, timely, high-quality interventions they need to rebuild their lives; and
- Allocate specific responsibility for supporting the mentoring of vulnerable and at-risk children to a government minister in the relevant department.

March 2021