Children England -Transcription of House of lords Public Services Committee event submitted as written evidence (PSC0066)

Introductions

Chloe (Children England staff): What is life-like for children whose families are not receiving support?

Witness 1: Support itself can be limiting. Benefits have a correlation of being given the bare minimum just to get by and it traps people rather than inspires them to confidence and act as a steppingstone to improve that person's life rather than just be dependent on it. We also looked at how school can be really important and that it's a safe space if you have issues at home, especially precarious or bad quality housing, it can be a safe place for vulnerable children. A quote we got was "school is my me time." Which shows that person feels safer in the school environment. If you don't get the proper support for one issue it can have a knock-on effect for other areas of your life, especially school and housing. It offers safety and security which is what everyone needs.

Witness 2: Accessing the support can be negative. We found that young people accessing benefits were very aware of the income poverty trap that came with that and a couple of them spoke about the idea of only working a certain amount of hours, not taking on any extra hours, or not looking for promotion because they knew more hours or that little bit of extra pay would actually reduce the amount of benefits they would receive and potentially reduce their overall earnings. In a way receiving the report is almost like not getting any because it limits the direction a young person can go in. It's the inverse of what the welfare state and public services should be there to do. We saw that young people spoke about worsening mental health when accessing the benefits system. This is not something that is just true of young people but it's another example of where accessing public services, which should be there to support vulnerable young people, is making some of the problems worse. There is awareness around the stigma of collecting benefits and how negative that stigma is puts people off claiming benefits in the first place. The removal of benefits can have hugely damaging effects. One of my friend's mum was receiving benefits and because of a glitch in the system their Universal Credit payments were stopped which resulted in them losing their house, her mental health suffering, her ability to perform in school was reduced. It shows the knock-on effect of one part of public services failing – each failure can be integral to the failure of other aspects of public services. Finally, there's a point of listening to young people, especially in the context of mental health services. Quite a few young people talked about the idea of being in the CAMHS system for a long time and being prescribed the same treatments even though they didn't work. So, the support there didn't adapt to the young people and when support is too rigid it's not support any more. And because waiting lists for mental health are so long it's stopping young people from asking for help because they know that there won't be support there for a long time.

Witness 3: We found in our research that a lot of the families were plagued with instabilities which had a knock-on effect on all aspect of their lives. Something as simple as an address dictates their ability to receive benefits and register for health care. So, these families often have to reach a crisis point before they enter the public service system. Which then makes it more difficult to act on their issues and they're in a bad place for a long the time. The young people in these situations have to take on a lot and it's tough to balance other areas of their life. Such as in schools, some students have to take on part time work to afford travel and resources. If these issues aren't addressed, they're missing out on an integral part of reaching their aspirations and creates a vicious cycle of becoming a product of their environment as they aren't given support they need at the correct time. If children can't afford internet at home then they're being left behind, especially during the pandemic. For example, a local secondary school in my area printed out work packs for children, but they had a different experience to children who get to speak to their teachers face-to-face.

Witness 2 It matters that public services get it right every time. And its not just the child accessing all the services available to them but the people around them need to access the services available to them too.

Q2: How difficult is it for children to access the support they need?

Witness 1: We saw young people appreciate their communities and local support, like youth centres. But it felt more like a service, somewhere where you're not involved. Young people were appreciating but like you went there for a reason rather than to enjoy yourself. You go there because you want to be alone or your parents need you to go, not because you go there with your friends. Furthermore, was the time limit for support, especially to the mental health aspect. My friend was getting support and they gave her a two-year limit. It helped but after that they couldn't give her support again because the two years had passed. Furthermore, young people help older people access their benefits. It can be complicated for older people to access benefits, so the young people have to learn how to get it and qualify.

Witness 2: Young people enjoy getting support in their local communities. We found that young people with disabilities, due to physical mobility issues, we found that they were excluded from youth groups in their local communities because they can't get into the building or there isn't the staff for them to deal with any additional needs, so they don't have that independence that other young people have. People also felt they weren't being looked at as an individual, for example LGBTQ+ people had struggled to access social housing because people they were asked to share with weren't supportive of their sexual identity, but they weren't able to move, and so they weren't in safe housing. Housing is especially ad at responding to individual needs. People trying to access social housing often have negative or damaging relationships with family so just having a relative in the same city doesn't mean they have somewhere to stay that is safe or nurturing. You're opening young vulnerable people to bad experiences. A lot of negative press about accessing services is creating barriers to accessing it because it creates negative ideas about those who claim it. Turning 18 is a big issue, and why I'm excited about the Young Minds campaign that mental health supports goes all the way to 25, because people that need mental health support reach 17 and a half or 18 and they just fall off a cliff.

Young people's issues don't just stop when they've had a birthday, in fact many of the issues, leaving home, leaving school, starting uni or starting a job and exacerbate many of the issues which might be why they were seeking help in the first place. Instead of having more, they get less as all services retract their support at the same time, leaving vulnerable people in even more vulnerable positions. Young people feel they're stuck in a system rather than a support network. It's hard for an adult to advocate for themselves so especially difficult for a young person. If you take health care for example, if you're not listening to a child about their condition that can have really massive implications for the healthcare they receive. This is especially important for the diagnosis of women and young girls. Another thing I wanted to talk about was safeguarding and confidentiality. Safeguarding exists for a really important reason, but the safeguarding apparatus, and problems about where you break confidentiality, has become a barrier because young people are afraid of seeking support if they know the thin they need support around is going to bring up a safeguarding issue, because then it has to be escalated and the way they live at that moment has to change, and for some the way the system tackles the issue can exacerbate it. Which means often people that don't need safeguarding are able to access mainstreams support through schools because they're confident that it's not going to result in lots of adults coming in and changing precarious situations or coming in heavy handed. For example, something I do with my friends if they're thinking of not accessing support at all, is sit down with them and work out of they can have a conversation with a professional without triggering a safeguarding response. Because the experience of having your case escalated can be really negative. I once sat in on a case, I was there as peer support, and it got escalated to a safeguarding lead which was a member of the Senior Leadership Team at the school, which is scary to talk about personal issues to lots of adults, maybe 5 in the school that you know, and then you have to advocate for yourself. It felt like the child was in trouble, but it should be supportive and not what you want to portray. Because they'd initiated the safeguarding process it felt like the child was not in control and that fear of being out of control is a huge barrier.

Witness 3: Young people felt that support wasn't available to access where young people actually are. So, if they wanted to access help they would have to go through avenues where parents would have to be involved which could discourage them to share, especially mental health and stigma. If teachers weren't trained, they felt they would be turned away or deemed less serious. When they speak to someone the found that not being able to speak about multiple issues at the same time can discourage them. Care leavers, and those in the care system, not having parental support or knowledge can put them at a disadvantage to other people. Even when children are in the system, for example one child was in hospital for a suicide attempt, even then at that crisis point it still took them five months to receive counselling. They had to repeat themselves multiple times and they didn't feel like professionals were trusting of their experience or how they felt, and they felt like a burden.

Q3: Can you give examples of how intervention from services or agencies was able to improve a child or young person's situation?

Chloe: So, the research did bring up information on this but also the young leaders have some ideas themselves and have some proposals of what good services and community support should look like.

Witness 1: Before even the intervention of a service, it's just knowing a service is available and having that comfort that you know its there to help you, that awareness brings a positive aspect. Also, children are easily influenced and affected by these things and they don't have much power in influencing and affecting things. It's good that young people have agency, and a voice, and that decisions are made with them rather than about them. When you go to a service, children are often left in the dark and the adults make the decisions but when the children and young people are included it has a positive affect on them. And how young people are supported in housing. One quote that we have is where "a support worker made me fell really welcome and I always have confidence in what's decided and the staff". How I interpret that quote is that sense of normality, it wasn't reaching out to a service because you need help, but that continuation of normality really helps. And, young people wanting to feel support is an equal relationship with the worker and the professional aspect of it is important.

Witness 2: It can be brilliant when young people are actually able to develop a relationship with the professional that's helping them. For example one of my favourite quotes is "a teacher came up to me ad wrote me a card and it said you're the reason that I stayed in teaching", this is something memorable and special and shows you that the relationship was important to the teacher personally and professionally, which shows when you go beyond the absolute minimum as a teacher, a dentist or a doctor for example, you can actually have a really positive effect for everyone in the service. When you stop reducing it to the bare minimum and think if it as a relationship or a community that is interacting over a specific need, it can blossom where both the child and the adult can benefit from it. Linking back to this idea of support being normal and not waiting for a crisis, its really important that support feels like part of life and the fact that everyone needs support, a child in care or an adult that's been fit all their life, and its not an exception. This is important when we look at the culture around benefits and when you compare that to the culture we've created around people that use the NHS and how different that is. We've talked about this idea about developing relationships and the opposite of that is when services are overly specialised. So nursing is really focused on specialisms – so one nurse will take your temperature, another nurse will take your blood pressure, another something else – if you've just got people coming and going and no one looking at you as an individual, this can add to the distress. With, for example my grandpa, because there wasn't a specific nurse to turn him to stop him getting bedsores they developed, and it had knock on effects on his health and made other people's job worse. One of the positive examples of services we found was when doctors set up surgeries in youth centres, which meant the services were available where the young people were. The services entered the young people's life rather than them having to go into an alien environment. One of the things were looking at are community health care workers who are reaching what you might call 'hard to reach groups' but they're not hard to reach it's just the people that are reaching them. It's important to thin about public services as giving people the tools they need to live, it's not about the people meeting the criteria of service, its about the service helping the person to

blossom. So, if we think about education its not about getting the right grades to stay in education, if we think about what comprehensive means it means its for everyone, its things outside the curriculum like school trips. Businesses have team building days and we know adults need these days, but we're cutting them out of children's lives, like a young person from a city school going hiking, we're worried they'll miss an extra bit of the curriculum that might be their first experience of the countryside and could be a memory that they take on with them for the rest of their lives. So, you need to think of services going beyond their original specialisation to allow young people to live the best lives they can.

Witness 3: I just wanted to add two more points and we saw that when services were operating at their best they allowed communication between all parts of that society, so allowing young people to bring their ideas and voice their frustrations, and what they think will be improvements, actually does help to solve a lot more problems than just getting professionals together, ad them discussing the issue and coming up with their own conclusions, so having that communication between the generations actually can have a big impact on making services better. The other point is that services such as youth centres are very empowering for young people and where they can learn things they otherwise might have not. One young person said they had a law session in their youth centre, and they taught them about LGBTQ+ rights which they wouldn't have known otherwise and that helped them advocate for themselves. Having these spaces were young people can develop socially and personally is really important.

Chloe: The young leaders have three overarching points they'd like to make, partly to reflect on what they've told you and partly on the inquiry itself and the terms and the scope of it.

Witness 1: Although children can be vulnerable because of their age, and all children are different and many are made vulnerable by the way services consist as well, they have less control over themselves and their lives and anyone in a vulnerable time they should be in control and have power over themselves. As well as the adults because of course they're young and they're children and adults should support them, in that vulnerable time support needs to be available to everyone the way they need it, the way the child needs it, not just the adult in control. The child needs some control to help build trust and give them dignity and respect.

Witness 3: These are the values that we think should be in all services and we came up with equality, universality, dignity, and a holistic approach to each individual. Once you take a holistic approach to an individual it helps all aspects of the welfare state because one issue can create a knock-on effect for everything else. So once that issue is addressed you might find that you might not need to have all these specialities to address all these issues. It's also a better service for the young person in general as long as they get to build that relationship between the service provider. And with equality, one thing about the welfare system that applies to all the young people we spoke about, is that there weren't any barriers to getting the support needed and that was a live saving situation in all aspects, and tats part of the welfare state that we have to make sure we keep at the core.

Witness 2: So, interdependence is my favourite word, because it sums up how we exist as individuals within a community but also by extension how we exist within public services. It's not only better for the person if we have a holistic approach its better for the services themselves. If you have a physical health problem that isn't addressed, it can often impact your employment, which can lead an individual to engage with the benefits system, which can then put pressure on the mental heath system, which can then put more pressure on the physical health side, and then the benefit system in turn. You're saving yourself a problem, by allowing public services to interconnect effectively. As they move away from silos and embrace the interdependence of human nature you can work to reduce pressure on services. It can also help to build trust because if you're a young person and you're just moving between different professional all the time, you're not able to build up that relationship. But also, you know that it doesn't work, right? If you're there and no one is taking into account the interdependence of your needs and you know that you're in seven more meetings than you need to be, then that leads to early disillusionment with a system that you know could work better for you. People are individuals within a community, its what makes us special, we created a community to help us meet everyone's needs in the best way possible and at the moment we're failing to do this. We've built the apparatus that at least tries, and that's really positive, but what would be even more positive is if we could change the apparatus to meet our needs as individuals and a community, and I think what we need in order to be able to do that is to embrace the interconnected nature of our needs and human beings, just like that teacher and student I mentioned earlier, to help create a great support network.

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