

We are Agenda – abridged transcript submitted as written evidence (PSC0067)

Transcription of House of Lords Public Services Committee event with We Are Agenda, Tuesday 8th June 1-2:30pm

Intro

Maggie Bridge (We Are Agenda staff): *What were the biggest challenges you faced growing up, and how did this impact you?*

Participants: Dani, Charlotte Emma and Kayla

P1 (Dani): For me the biggest challenges I faced growing up was the difficulties involved with the chaos that my home life was. I had many, many services involved with me, probably every sort of service you could have involved as a young person, from social services, to the young person's mental health services to...a lot, at one point I must have had 15 people working with me. One of the challenges I faced I was really let down by all these services and that's why I come to these things and say things like this, so that was difficult. Even though they were supposed to be there to help me, I didn't feel like they did and they caused me a lot of unnecessary stress rather than just helping me. I've got a lot more to say about that but I'll start with that for now.

Maggie: Does anyone else have any thoughts about that or any specific experiences they'd like to speak to?

P2 (Charlotte): Mines similar. I had a bad upbringing and financial difficulties we had social services involved for other family members around me and the mental health got bad where no services would actually listen so it was like trying to reach out but they weren't taking your opinions seriously and would just label you as bad child or a bad influence or something like that and it was escalated to where it is now, and obviously I'm an adult now, but it wasn't acknowledged.

P3 (Emma) A big impact on me was becoming homeless while I was pregnant and having to go into supported accommodation, which was quite scary, and I also faced domestic abuse. I went through so many services, like family and children services and I felt like no one was listening to what I had to say. With the domestic abuse I feel like I did get better help with that. They showed me the signs; how to see the signs of domestic abuse, it shows you a lot of stuff that I didn't know about. Because it was actually my mid-wife that told me that I was in a toxic relationship before I even knew. And I think there's other services out there that could do that. Like Midwives. I had quite a positive...like with my mid-wife, and I think other services didn't do their job but my mid-wife did. Family services didn't listen to me, and supported accommodation and the house workers there didn't listen to me but my mid-wife was the only person that did.

Maggie: I can see that P4 (Kayla) has mentioned in the chat that struggling with mental health from quite a young age is an issue that she faced. She also mentioned struggling when she became pregnant with her son when she was quite young at 14. In terms of thinking about the impact of dealing with those

things like difficulties with home life, struggling with mental health, domestic abuse, early parenthood- in terms of the impact of those things, did you see those things have an impact on your physical health, the way you experience school, or relationships with other people?

P2 (Charlotte): Just physical health and mental health. Obviously mine deteriorated a lot, when I went to the doctors especially. To even just speak to my GP, I had my son quite young but he was really, really poorly, but they just said "oh it's just baby blues, you're quite young". You don't understand, if he really listened, like genuinely listened and gave me advice and help then it wouldn't be as bad as where I am now. And school; If we had those signs or that support from schooling to help acknowledge what was going on at home, or abuse, that would help a lot because it's not taught enough to know what the signs are, or for them to listen or help, it just makes it a lot worse for you to be seen as a child who is struggling, not as a child that has issues.

Maggie: You've mentioned to me before, particularly at school, the impact of the things that were going on at home and how that made it difficult for you.

P2 (Charlotte): We had the police involved all the time with my sister. Social workers involved constantly. That had a big impact because we were moved from family, to family, to family; it was never solved to where we had the police involved. We had financial difficulties, we couldn't live the way we were...for them to acknowledge that we needed help, for them to actually help us, that was a big struggle in my home life. It's changed now. I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't have that experience. It's kind of like a benefit for me.

P3 (Emma): I had really bad mental health, I was on tablets, and I feel like I didn't need to get to that stage to the impact of having tablets and medication. I felt like they just kept fobbing us off and telling me to go to these counselling groups and then they just end. And I felt like no matter who I spoke to they just kept fobbing me off because I was young. They were saying "oh, you'll get over it". And that impacted me because I didn't want to talk to other people about it.

Maggie: Kayla's picked up on that in the chat. She's said it made her quite closed off now and makes it difficult to trust people and services.

P1 (Dani): I think for children or young people if they try and explain...I never thought when I was younger I had mental health problems or anything like that, but I was always pushed aside by my first school as being a trouble causer, even though they knew everything I was going through in my home life which was most likely causing me to behave how I did, but there was no early intervention that could prevent these mental health issues from going any further. If I had had the help I needed when I was younger then maybe as I got older into my late adolescence, I wouldn't have become really unwell and unable to function, or do things with my life because of how it just got brushed under the carpet when I was younger. I had mental health services working with me from when I was 13 but they never actually did anything appropriate to help me. My CAMHS worker was really good but she wasn't working on my mental health, she was doing things that other workers should be doing instead. She was doing social

services' job should because they weren't doing it properly. Like, at one point she was buying me food because there wasn't food at the family home. That wasn't her job that was social services. So because she was doing things like that she couldn't concentrate on why she was there. This wasn't her job and I feel like if the services did do their job properly then other people could concentrate on their jobs.

Maggie: *Which services did you approach for support and how difficult was this?*

P1 (Dani): I feel like all together, I mean the Government say there's a massive crisis in mental health and people committing crimes and stuff but if they really went back before and help people, all of this could be prevented. It wasn't until I was 19 that I actually got decent support that actually helped me. All the support I did have was short term and I knew it could disappear at any moment. Like social services, I was on a child protection plan one minute and then the next minute they said I didn't need one and it was gone from my life. But when I was 19 I got a worker and she always emphasised that she was there for as long as I needed her. I think long term support is really important, but she wasn't from a public service she was from a charity, so public services need to start offering long term support because that's one of the better ways that people can be helped. It's always worrying thinking "I've got this person that can help me but only for six months". There's not really much point in doing that. If things are offered for as long as they're needed until the young person says "I don't need you anymore" a lot more change is going to be made. Because now the worker I got when I was 19 isn't my worker anymore because I don't need her. She's not my worker but she is my colleague because we work at the same place because that's how much she helped me, which is amazing.

P3 (Emma): I think definitely in the short term...when you phone a doctor saying you feel down all they do is say you can do a phone appointment or you can see someone once a week to talk but after so long you're finished, and then you phone back up and I'm still the same and they say "well you've done the therapy, there's nothing more we can do". That way you are getting fobbed off and I think especially for young women, or young people, they blame hormones a lot and tell you you'll get over it.

Maggie: Kayla has put in the chat that sometimes because you're a child, professionals think that you can't articulate how you feel, or they maybe underestimate what's happening. And we've spoken before about how when certain things happen that girls experience, they're not taken seriously.

P1 (Dani): I think it's important to add that sometimes as a young person you can't articulate too well. Sometimes you can but even if you do you aren't taken seriously because you're looked at as a child. I'm looking back to when I was 14 and trying to explain how I felt and I wasn't being taken seriously even though everything I was saying was right. I think its important to have an advocate sometimes on your behalf. Someone that really does listen to you. I did have someone who did that for me and they sat and really did listen to what I said. And then they went and conveyed it at a meeting better than I was able to say it, because it was tough what I was saying, and then explained it to the adult services better than I could at the time and that was helpful for me.

P3 (Emma): They say it's not serious if you're in a young relationship but you don't know what's happening behind closed doors, young or not. There's a lot of signs I didn't know about until after I went through it. I think signs of domestic abuse should be learnt before entering a relationship and I didn't get taught any of that in school. That's important for education because I was going through so much domestic abuse and I feel like I was blinded by it, I didn't know anything about it, because it wasn't physical it was mental, which then turned to physical. It never should have been allowed to get to that point so I think a lot of it needs to be educated in school.

Maggie: We've previously talked about just not knowing where to go for help in the first place. Is that something that still rings true for people?

P2 (Charlotte): Yeah it's a circle because you don't have the services you don't have the signs to say you're struggling you can call this number, or if you need help you can go here. And I think its trying to work out how, especially if you do have those support services involved, for them to refer you to the right people. Trying to figure out the balance between who you can trust; because of you cant trust one of those services then there's no point speaking to them, because that's going to make the situation worse in the sense that you're not going to be listened to by yet another service. Growing up when I had my child that was difficult to be told that even though he was very poorly that he'll be fine and I'll be fine and there's no one to talk to about that, and how much you're struggling to deal with it all, there's no one to talk to because they don't give you advice on who you can talk to.

P3 (Emma): I think services need to be known better because when I was homeless when I was pregnant I had nowhere to go and didn't know who to ask for help. When I became homeless I went to the council for help but they said they couldn't give me a house because I was too young. They just gave me a bunch of numbers and it was only when I told my mid-wife "I need help, I don't know where to go" and she helped me go into supported accommodation. Even after supported accommodation I didn't get any help afterwards making sure I was alright, or managing with bills and stuff because when you're in supported accommodation it's kind of all done for you, you're just living there. When I moved, due to the pandemic, I didn't get any help making sure I was alright, making sure I was settled and I feel like it should be known for a young person where to go if you go homeless, so they don't have to panic and worry they're going to be on the streets.

P1 (Dani): I think services aren't accessible to young people, they just get thrown in your face. I wanted support when I was younger, I couldn't get my own support but had the compulsory support – social services and stuff which I didn't find helpful – it should be made better known where young people can get help. I just had to present myself at the council when I was 16 and say I didn't have anywhere to live and they said I was too young to get put anywhere, although I did end up in a hostel eventually. But I think young people should be made to know that...there should be places they can approach for help themselves not just places that will approach them when they want to help them.

P4 (Kayla): You get health posters in doctors and stuff and they should have things like that in places like schools and colleges. It should be mandatory education to know about these services. You shouldn't have to be struggling before you know about them. You should know they're there even if you're not struggling. Even though you might not need them, you might know somebody that does need them and you might be able to help someone just by having that poster up in college or that lesson in school just so you know that its there should you ever fall into the situation that you need it.

Maggie: You've talked about barriers to feeling comfortable in mental health services when you were younger.

P4 (Kayla): I was sent to CAMHS, well I had no choice. I had to go to CAMHS because I'd had multiple self-harming incidents where my mam had rung the police or rang the hospital and I was told it was mandatory to have a referral and it was CAMHS or nothing, but I didn't have the choice to say nothing. I remember I was only 12 or 13 and I was being bullied in school which wasn't being addressed, so my mental health started taking a toll on my physical health, and I started getting things like eating disorders and I still deal with that today because I didn't have help when I was younger. I didn't have counselling or CBT. I got told to suck it up and get over it. It was blamed a lot on hormones because a year later I was pregnant and they said that I should be feeling fine because I was pregnant, but I was still going through mental health problems and then being pregnant on top...I had multiple self-harm episodes while I was pregnant and it wasn't addressed. When I did eventually go the CAMHS they did nothing and in their words exactly "there is nothing we can do for you here." They saw me, well it feels like from my perspective, they saw me as too far gone, too damaged, too broken that they couldn't fix me. That's how they made me feel, and I was always going to be like that. Because I was so young, I was sat in the waiting room for my first or second session, and I was the only girl in the waiting room, and I was self-conscious and had self-esteem issues because of bullying, I was the only girl...and I don't mean to stereotype but the kind of people in that room didn't look like troubled teens they looked like they'd been kicked out of school for causing bother. The stereotypical person getting into bother, but I wasn't like that. I wasn't getting in trouble I genuinely was broken and I was told that I couldn't be fixed because my mental health problems went undiagnosed until the age of 18. By that time my son was already 2 or 3, a toddler, and then we had added pressures of my son being diagnosed disabled when he was 2 and all I was told is there's therapy and counselling there if you want it, but I didn't get any helpful numbers, I didn't get told if you're in dire emergency need ring this number. They did the bare minimum for it to be passable, for it to be ok, that they did their job. It did me a disservice because I was pushed away when I needed it most and now at the age of 20 I'm at the point where I don't want help. I've learnt to do it on my own so I'd rather do it on my own and struggle by myself, then be made to feel like I'm a burden again.

Mark (Committee staff): Thanks for how open you've been. I was wondering if there was any support your parents or guardians could have received that could have had a positive impact on your lives?

P1 (Dani): It was just me and my dad who lived together and my dad was a drug addict and an alcoholic and he had mental health issues, all the services who were helping me they kept givin him the promise of rehab so he could get better and I could stay with him, and things would be better because most of the issues came from his behaviour. But that never happened. They kept saying they'll put him on a waiting list but its six months, its 12 months, and it never happened. He did work with the drug and alcohol places but I think he got disheartened because they weren't really doing much and if they did, if they'd helped my dad a bit then maybe things would have been different and that would have helped me as well.

P2 (Charlotte): I think we had Social Services involved with us and they could have helped my mam by giving her more advice on how to deal with the situation with my sister because she was the main problem of the family, but they didn't give advice on how to deal with her they were just trying to fob the whole family off and it was causing arguments and frictions because there was no dealing with it. The police got involved but they just said it's a bad family and they couldn't do anything about it. We were trying to figure out if the Social Services had said try this or we will refer you to this...my mams mental health struggled as well and that affected the whole family because we got moved to different family members constantly because it was so bad of a situation because no one was helping my mam.

P4 (Kayla): I was deemed as a trouble child because I gave my mam lots of trouble because I didn't want to go to school because I was being bullied and my mam rang Social Services on me and they said to her "she's just naughty and being difficult. Ride it out and you'll be alright" and it got to the point where, and I don't like to admit it, but I was physically threatening my mam because she was making me go to school. My mam would have to force me to school and then I'd cause an issue there because of the bullying. I was home schooled and my mam eventually bit the bullet and pulled me out of school and was told by the council "as long as she does four hours a week we don't really care" sort of thing. And I don't like to admit it and don't want to get my mam in bother but my mam wasn't home schooling me. I got pulled out from the beginning of year 9 and never went back because I fell pregnant and had my son and then I got in a relationship, and then I moved out – all I the space of 14 to 16 years old – so I wasn't home schooled at all. My mam regrets it now but I wasn't schooled I was put in front of a text book. My mam had to do reports once a year and she looked back on them now and they had no validity at all. In hindsight I can look back at them now and think why would anyone believe that? I don't think there are tight enough controls for children that are home schooled. I think they're sort of thrown into it and told "as long as you do the bare minimum of four hours a week and have some sort of evidence of what you're child is doing, go at it on your own, you'll be alright." But its not checked or looked at of is this child being home schooled. From 17 to now, 20, I'm still struggling because of the lack of qualifications and support. I couldn't go to school to do my GCSEs, even if I wanted to that option wasn't open to me because I wasn't in a school. Then I wasn't in the position to because I'd done no revision and my mam wasn't in the financial position to afford a tutor or help me. She says now she did what was best at the time but maybe if she'd persisted a bit longer it might have turned out a bit differently, but because I was pregnant my mam knew it would be stress on me and the baby. My partner was living with us and we were moving

between mine and his and we were told that because you're pregnant now we're not going to make you do any sort of education.

P3 (Emma): I haven't spoken about this but my mam has got really bad mental health and actually went into a mental health hospital and I was in care for a bit. A lot of people get support as a care leaver but I didn't. I then looked after my mam for a bit and was classed as a young carer. We had social services help for a year but no help after and I think I picked up what went on with my mam and that triggered my mental health. And she didn't get any help even being in the hospital and after the hospital. Maybe if she had got help I would have asked for help.

BREAK

Maggie: How were you able to access support and how did it change things?

P2 (Charlotte): I moved to a new area and was basically by myself and there was a charity went to for women, young mans, for under 25 and I was nervous at the time because I'd just turned 17 or 18 and I went in and loved it and I'm still a part of that charity after five years. It helped so much because it gives you that confidence because its just there for young mams, its called Young Mams Network and they help you build your confidence so you're not getting judged by older women, because I did go to somewhere else and I got looked at a bit funny because I was really young and that was off putting and I felt like I couldn't go there. They helped with my mental health too and gave me a leaflet to go to talking therapy which really helped as well and I still go when I do struggle and have been going there for four or five years, so that's one thing that's really good for me. It helps a lot with when I just need to talk to someone and get things off my chest. I also made a lot of good mam friends from the group so it was a bonus to help me when I was struggling.

Maggie: Thank you and thanks for explaining what Bright Futures does too.

P1 (Dani): Sometimes I feel charities do the work that public services should be doing and they pick up the pieces of the mess that some of the public services have left. Like, Get Away Girls Rye, where I used to go, work with so many different young girls with any issue, and they just provide them with support. I should mention its all women based as well, so you get a worker who is a women, and they provide them with support for as long as they need for a vast range of issues and that helped me. They did the job of doing things other services failed to do. I had them for about two years and my worker did so much for me including getting help with my mental health, which now I finally am after years of working with services. She helped me get a really good job, she helped me defer from uni and start university again. All sorts of things, and it didn't bother her sometimes I'd miss appointments, or I wasn't very good; she didn't give up on me. That's what helped me the most out of everything.

P3 (Emma): Bright Futures for the young mams group, that helped me a lot. The worker really helps support us, she listens to us a lot, and it's nice to be able to talk to someone and she actually listens. Because you know when you feel like you're not being listened to and that they're just doing their job and you're just

there...she goes above and beyond. She doesn't need to do what she does but she'll come and see me if I need moral support. Whereas, especially the doctor, if you tell them how you're feeling they're looking at the time for the next appointment. So bright futures and my mid-wife were positives for me. And the domestic abuse course I did called the Freedom programme, that helped a lot for signs and stuff. It lets you know its not all physical and that you can reach out for help. Then they tell you at the end what you can do for help and that was really important to learn because I didn't know what was classed as domestic abuse but it actually is. It's a whole list of sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse – its loads that I learnt about. That rally helped.

P4 (Kayla): I agree with Bright Futures and social services as well. I had a really negative experience when I was younger but a really positive experience a couple of years ago when they got involved and at first I didn't want them. I was very resistant and hesitant. I thought I didn't need a social worker and I was fine and could do it all on my own and now I've had a social worker for a year or two I think and she's gone above and beyond for us, and helped in more ways than most people ever have. She's still involved with us now and she says "I'm on your side and I'm there for you". And she makes a point to let us know that. She's not there to be a bad person, she's not there to be nasty, she's there strictly for us and to help us. I think because I had such a bad experience that was why I was so resistant. She got involved because she had to because I wasn't going to appointments for mental health reasons so our health visitor said we had to have one. She got involved without us having a say but we let her get involved and she has been, if not the best health professional that we have dealt with, especially with my son being disabled, she specifically deals with kids that are disabled in physical and mental ways so she understands how I feel about it. She provides support with getting to appointments and talking to health professionals but also if I need to ring her just to shout and scream at someone, she's happy to be that. She says everything will be ok and as someone that never had that, as someone that was never told I'm proud of you, it will be ok, it was hard for me to accept someone being nice to me. I also had a good experience with the police. When I was younger I ran away constantly and ignore my mam and she rang the police and they made a point to say "she's clearly going through something, so be mindful, be kind to her" because my mam was frustrated and didn't know how to help and that was reflected on to me which made me frustrated. But each time the health professional said to her "just try to understand from her perspective". But the police would always say to me if you need anything like being removed from the situation, or if you need help, we're not here to be nasty, we're here to help. And now to his day I have faith and admiration for the police because of how thy helped when I was younger.

Maggie: It's good to hear the mixed and different experiences people have had. The final question is what could changes would you like to see happen to improve things for girls facing similar challenges in the future?

P4 (Kayla): The key is more awareness and education. It all seems that from everything we've been through it could have...been made better just by more awareness and education and being more known that you're not weird for going through it. You're not strange for going through it. You shouldn't feel isolated for going through something that realistically, in terms of being an adult, its really

common and its talked about a lot, adults being in these situations, but not much when you're young. It's like because you're younger people think you're excluded from that and you won't experience it because you're young and a child. Or they call you naïve and if you don't see the warnings signs they make it seem like it's your fault. But you didn't see the signs because they weren't made known to you. Like the domestic violence hand signal, I had to find that out online. It's the same with social services. You've been accustomed to think social services are bad and have malicious intent and most of my friends still think like that, and it'd only by expressing to them that we have a social worker and its not bad but helps us. A lot of that could be broken if more of the positives of what social services do is talked about. They can help you communicate better with health professionals and get to appointments fine. Things I couldn't do because I didn't know how.

Maggie: I hear what you're saying there about professionals being more aware of the issues faced by girls and young women as well.

P4 (Kayla): Yeah and I mean awareness for everyone, young people and professionals. And everyone working together to solve the problems.

P1 (Dani): I feel like the all-round general lack of funding doesn't help, which results in people being in job roles they're not competent to do. These are complex roles, working with children and they're not doing the job properly because they haven't been given the correct training. Having decent people in these jobs is important. Maybe more monitoring of how they're doing their jobs – not just ticking boxes but proper monitoring of hat the situation is and what they're doing to improve it.

P2 (Charlotte): Yeah if you were poor at school you could get your free school meals but it was more them noticing you were struggling. But now, my son goes to a nursery and they always ask if you need a food parcel or the charity I'm with now always offer them. It should be standard to ask, especially if you're struggling and they can see the child is struggling and there should be funding for them to be able to do that. I know there is a bit more funding for that but it depends on the school, nursery or charity able to help you. GPs need to notice girls that need help, do their job, and give advice on where to go if you need help. Boys are seen as in trouble whereas girls are just told "its hormones, you'll be fine" but they are actually struggling and should be given more time and advice.

P3 (Emma): Education in school needs to happen. We need to learn real life information, so you don't have to go through things and prevent it from happening. I feel, with young families, they always go to the parents and ask if everything is alright and they just ignore the children's voices. When my mam was going through issues with her mental health, they asked her if she needed any services and she said we were fine but I felt like I needed help but no body listened to me. No one wanted to hear my voice.

Mark: Do you think charities are better placed to support you?

P1 (Dani): I'd think sometimes charities are better placed. They've been made because the public services aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing.

Maggie: Kayla's added in the chat that she agrees.

P2 (Charlotte): They're much better. Even if they volunteer, they don't get paid, but they are there to help but there should be other places trained to help you other than that charity. People are referred to charities by health workers, by social workers, but why a charity? Shouldn't the professionals be helping in the first place?

P3 (Emma): I mentioned Bright Futures and I thought that was a working service but it's a charity, and that really shocked me because they're the ones that have helped me the most.

Thanks and next steps.

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