

Inquiry into Children's Rights

Oral evidence: Inquiry into Children's Rights

Friday 18 November 2016

Jenny Jones [Green Party] (Chair), Tim Bateman [Office for the Children's Commissioner], Joanne McCartney, [Deputy Mayor, Education, Childcare and Youth], Alasdair Mackenzie [Houses of Parliament]

Witnesses

Alex Goforth [CYP IAPT], Chloe Grant [The Children's Society], Selena Grogan, [Rethink Mental Illness], Olly Pike, [Pop 'n' Olly], Tom Redfearn, [The Children's Society]

Sylvan Baker [Queen Mary University], Chloe Grant [The Children's Society], Maggie Inchley [Queen Mary University], Tom Redfearn, [The Children's Society], Vanessa Reid [The Children's Society], Francis Taylor [Who Cares Trust]



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Welcome to Parliament. My name is Jenny Jones. I am in the House of Lords for the Green party, so I am a very rare beast, and I am a ruthless chair. With me is Sophie Ulhaq, who is going to be a ruthless chair as well. Everyone has to keep to time, or we will not get through everything today. We have a hashtag, which is #UKPW16.

Alasdair Mackenzie: This is Parliament Week. This is the final event in Westminster for Parliament Week 2016, so you are very welcome.

Chair: It is my enormous pleasure to introduce first Joanne McCartney. We have been colleagues for many years on the London Assembly, and she is now Deputy Mayor of London, which is incredibly impressive. She specialises in education, childcare and youth.

Joanne McCartney: I am absolutely delighted to be here to welcome you all to the London children's rights inquiry. Isn't this a wonderful venue? Can I thank Parliament for allowing us to use this space? I just want to say a really big thank you to everyone involved and acknowledge all the hard work that has gone in to make this event possible. I want to say an especially big thank you to the peer outreach team at City Hall, particularly Merhawit and Mark, who have truly made this a youth-led event. Thank you for that. I also thank our parliamentary partner, Alasdair Mackenzie from the outreach team here at the House of Commons, and all the experts, chairs and, most importantly, young people who are taking part today.

We have a range of organisations helping with this event. We have panels from the Havering Children in Care Council, Rethink, Children's Rights Alliance for England, the GLA's Lynk Up Crew and the peer outreach team. That is Jason, Nishah, Derreem, Kismet, Saffron, Jesse, Rozita, Anmol, Ashley, Sophie and Sam. I hope you have a wonderful day—and good luck. I am sure you are going to be absolutely amazing.

You are going to hear shortly from Tim Bateman from the Office of the Children's Commissioner. He is going to outline the context in which this inquiry will take place and the importance of children's rights. This is a fact-finding mission. We want to find out what the current state of children's rights is in our city, London. I recognise there is huge time pressure on you all, so thank you for being here and taking time out of your busy schedules to help us.

Following the mayoral election in May, I was asked to be Sadiq's statutory Deputy Mayor, and I was thrilled to do that, but I was equally thrilled—if not more thrilled—when he asked me to take forward the portfolio on education and childcare, because that really is my passion. It has been my passion for many years. Sadiq and I believe that every child in the city should have the best possible chance of happiness and success. You all today play a critical role in making that a reality. You are at the forefront of improving outcomes for children and, hopefully, making our city a better place. Today's children will be our future key workers, business

leaders, entrepreneurs; we are going to be relying on their skills, their capabilities and their resilience to make this city grow and thrive in the future.

I am looking forward to reading the final report that is going to come out from today, to continuing discussions, because this is not just a one-off event—the work we do at City Hall and Parliament happens every day, every week, and so we will be looking forward to reading that report. If you make some recommendations, we can hopefully help you make them a reality too. So can I just thank you all and I hope you have a really illuminating and productive session today.

Chair: Thank you, Joanne. We are very lucky to have her with us, because there is huge pressure on her diary, I bet, because she probably does everything that Sadiq Khan doesn't want to do. Is that right?

Joanne McCartney: Not doesn't want to do—just hasn't had time to do.

Chair: Sorry, that is not what I meant at all; I meant that he doesn't have time to do. Now we are going to hear from Tim Bateman from the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

Tim Bateman: Thanks, Jenny. Well, like Joanne I am delighted to be at what I think is a very important and very timely event, and one which we at the Children's Commissioner are really keen to support. Some of you will know that the Children's Commissioner is a statutory function established by the Children Act 2004. The current incumbent is Anne Longfield and her powers were increased in 2014. The primary function of the role—and you will see why I am delighted to be here—as laid down in the legislation is to promote and protect the rights of children in England.

There are about 12 million children in England, 3 million of whom are in London, and we only have a very small, albeit perfectly formed, team, so luckily for us the legislation directs us to those children who we should focus on, and they are children living away from home, those in receipt of social care and those who are otherwise at particular vulnerability of having their rights infringed—in other words those populations of children and young people who are going to be the focus of today's discussion. So I think there is a very strong overlap in that perspective.

I would like to draw attention to one other important area of the legislation, which is that in carrying out our function we are obliged to have regard to the UN convention on the rights of the child, and I am pleased to see that you have got a summary of the convention in front of you. The convention sets down a set of minimum standards for the treatment of children, which should inform all social, economic and political decision making, and their treatment by all public authorities, so I think the convention provides a useful starting point for the deliberations today. Of particular importance are four general principles in the convention, and they form the framework, a lens through which all other children's rights should be interpreted. They are: non-discrimination; the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration in all



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decision making about them; the promotion of the survival and healthy development of the child; and respect for the child's views. I think that it would be helpful in the deliberations if you could have there in the back of your mind those four general principles.

Compliance with the convention is monitored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child which periodically has a look at what is going on in particular countries and determines the extent to which treatment of children is consistent with convention rights. The inquiry is really timely because the UN Committee reported on the UK in June this year and made almost 100 recommendations on how children's rights in the UK could be improved.

What I'd like to do, if this is okay: I have taken the liberty of pulling out some of the relevant recommendations to each of the subject areas which you have got on the agenda today. So, mental health—the Committee recommended that the Government regularly collect comprehensive data on children's mental health, develop therapeutic community-based services, and develop strategies for, and rigorously invest in, child and adolescent mental health services. The latter, I think, is particularly important. The Children's Commissioner conducted some research earlier this year, which found out that 28% of referrals to children's mental health services were turned down.

On children in care and care leavers, the Committee was concerned by the increase of children coming into care and the fact that they were often placed a long distance from home. London accounts for 15% of all children who are in care, with many of them placed outside their local authority area. The Committee recommended the provision of intensified support to families, in order to prevent children from coming into care unless it was in their best interests to do so, and an increased stability for children who are in care, with fewer placements and more consistency in terms of social workers.

On the youth justice system—raise the age of criminal responsibility. It's currently 10 in England and Wales, which is the lowest in Europe. Children should always be dealt with through the youth justice system. Currently, we have around 2,000 children every year appearing in the Crown courts, which are venues designed to deal with serious adult offending. And custody should be used as a last resort. That is a particular issue for London, which accounts for 22% of all custodial sentences imposed on children.

On young refugees and migrants, again the Committee recommended that the Government start to get their act together in terms of getting data; there is very little data in relation to young refugees and migrants. Age assessments of children should only be conducted in cases of serious doubt, and asylum policy should be reviewed to facilitate family reunion. Again, some research that we conducted earlier in the year found that 15,000 children in England were separated from one of their parents as a consequence of the financial requirements of immigration rules introduced in 2012.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

On housing and homelessness, the Committee recommended that the Government should re-establish concrete targets for the eradication of child poverty. If we reduce child poverty, one of the by-products of that would be a reduction in homelessness or in inadequate housing. Implement the legal prohibition on the prolonged placement of children in temporary accommodation. In London, one in 25 children lives in such accommodation. Finally, take necessary measures to reduce homelessness and to progressively guarantee all children stable access to adequate housing.

So, that is what the UN Committee thinks needs improving in terms of children's rights in relation to those particular topics, and those may be some of the issues that you may want to bear in mind when we get there.

Chair: We are here today to answer a question, and the question is this: are we as a city upholding children's rights, or not? We are going to hear from a selection of speakers.

Mental Health

Members present: Jenny Jones (Chair), Sophie Ulhaq, Nishah Xeni, Jason Xeni, Anmol Kaur Singh, Jesse Panda.

Examination of Witnesses

Alex Goforth, Chloe Grant, Selena Grogan, Olly Pike and Tom Redfearn.

Sophie Ulhaq: Our first speaker is Selena Grogan from Rethink Mental Illness.

Selena Grogan: Thank you very much for the invitation today. As Sophie mentioned, I'm here representing Rethink Mental Illness. We are the mental health charity with the largest membership in the UK.

Our young people's work is relatively new, but it is growing and rapidly developing. The main work streams that I wanted to draw upon today are our "Time to Change" children and young people's work stream; our co-production work stream; and our "Step Up: Transitions" project. Three issues that I wanted to highlight, which I think are very relevant today, are stigma, transitions and crisis support for young people, particularly out of hours.

As we know, the statistics say that one in 10 young people will experience a mental health problem; 90% of those young people will experience stigma and discrimination. Stigma stops young people seeking help. It stops them living normal lives, and sometimes it makes them give up on their hopes and dreams. "Time to Change" surveyed over 500 young people in 2013; 60% of those young people reported experiencing stigma from friends; 50% felt stigma from parents; 45% from partners such as boyfriends and girlfriends; and 43% from teachers. Particularly concerning is that 28% said that negative reactions from others made them want to give up on their own life.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We believe that the involvement of young people in addressing the issue of stigma is key to eradicating it. We believe that people need to hear the personal experiences of young people themselves to understand the impact, so we train and equip young people to be able to do this. We run social marketing activity and over the next five years we will be rolling out further campaigns and also involving parents, which we feel is really key.

By March 2015 we reached 1.27 million students through schools. We believe that engaging schools, creating schools leaders networks and delivering opportunities and initiatives such as the Time to Talk day are absolutely key to eradicating stigma. However, there is still a very long way to go to eradicating stigma and discrimination on the grounds of mental health.

Another issue I want to draw attention to is that of transitions. There are many transitions for children and young people during their journey to adulthood. We found that many young people who experience mental health difficulties do not feel sufficiently prepared for transitions such as moving from child mental health services to adult mental health services; approaching adult mental health services for the first time; and balancing their mental health needs alongside other transitions in their lives such as moving countries, moving boroughs in London, and moving to higher education and so on. Again, by involving young people who have recently made these transitions, we can create powerful tools to make sure that young people are more prepared, resilient and resourceful.

We work with a group of young people with lived experience of both mental health difficulties and relevant transitions to create trainings, tools and information. We are also involving young people in the evaluation of such projects, and we think that this is really key.

There are a few key driving principles that I want to mention. Lived experience, we believe, is of equal value to professional experience. A full commitment to the co-production process is at the heart of our transitions projects. Opportunities need to be made for young people with lived experience to hold leadership positions, and our trainings need to be catalysts for wider change.

We deliver various pilots around co-production and commissioning. We believe young people need to be operating on an equal level with decision makers, and that is absolutely key to maintaining that children's rights are upheld. We deliver many projects supporting young people in this way, but I want to draw attention to our out-of-hours crisis support service. We trained and supported a group of young people in 2014 who surveyed another group across the country of 300 young people—mainly in London, actually—to ask them what the state of our crisis care support was for young people in need of mental health support, particularly out of hours. Where do young people go when they need support late at night and at weekends? We wanted to know what was working and what could be improved.

Around a third of participants that we spoke to said that they did not know where to go for help in a mental health crisis. Another third said that they were not sure. Of those that sought help, 44% went to A&E; about one in seven people didn't try to get professional help or support at all; one in five tried but were not able to get help; and of those who tried to get help only 9% got the help they needed immediately.

Sixty per cent of participants rated their experience of out-of-hours crisis support poor or very poor. A&E was the worst rated source of support. Young people said that the important aspects of crisis support were being able to see a specialist mental health professional; having a place that is quiet and calm—not something that our A&E departments are at the moment—and knowing the confidentiality procedure was really important to them also. The most common suggestions for improvement were better awareness among hospital staff; improving practitioner skills such as empathy; increasing service capacity; improved publicity of crisis support—all those young people did not know where to go in a crisis—and allowing access to help through things like text messages, email and other digital tools.

So what did we do with this information? We supported a group of young people to actually redesign the service specification for an out-of-hours CAMHS service in eight boroughs in west London. Those young people are now evaluating a one-year pilot of that service.

The UNCRC states: "Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times". We believe that stigma is stopping young people getting the help that they need and having the right to access the support that they need. The inevitable transitions in their lives need support. We need to adopt the co-production model, which reflects policies such as the recent five-year forward policy, and we must improve the support provided to young people in crisis because our current system is letting young people down.

To reiterate, we must all involve young people and their families in the design, review and monitoring of mental health services, so that they reflect the needs of the young people in our city.

Sophie Ulhaq: Next we have Alex Goforth.

Alex Goforth: I am here representing the children and young people's improving access to psychological therapies programme—CYP IAPT—and particularly the London and south-east learning collaborative, so I am going to talk about mental health from the point of view of transforming mental health services for children and young people across London through the programme. We work with more than 60 organisations across London, and our role is to accelerate their transformation. I am also going to talk about the recent interface in "Future in Mind" policy document, which has particularly been implemented through the local transformation plans. The way I have structured my talk is against each article. I chose articles that are particularly relevant to the work that we have been doing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The first article I will speak to is article 4, which states that Governments should make these rights available to children “to the maximum extent of their available resources”, so I will talk about funding. Over the past two years, the Government have responded to inadequate funding of children and young people’s mental health services, but still more needs to be done. In terms of NHS funding, mental health services receive—for adults and children—13% of the overall NHS budget. Children and young people’s mental health services receive only 8% or 9% of that. That means that, for 2016-17, during which the NHS budget is projected to be £118 billion, mental health will receive £15 billion, and children and young people’s mental health services will receive £1.23 billion.

Given that children and young people between the ages of 5 and 19 account for about 17% of the population—not including children aged 0 to 5 or young adults, both of which are now being supported by those mental health services—something needs to change. On top of that, mental health contributes 20% of the overall burden of disease, so funding clearly needs to be increased commensurately and a strategy needs to be in place to pick up from where the local transformation plans conclude in 2020.

The next article I will speak to is the third sub-clause of article 3, which is about the services conforming to standards established by competent authorities. The programme I work for, CYP IAPT, supports services to embed best evidence-based interventions and approaches to delivery and organisation, especially where the recommendations of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence are available, and in-line with Care Quality Commission standards.

During the course of the programme, around 300 therapists, and 90 supervisors and 60 service leads, have been trained in London in evidence-based intervention, which means that they have been trained in something that has been demonstrated to work for the majority of children and young people. The scale of the clinical workforce in London is in the region of 1,500, or about 0.7 clinicians per 1,000 children and young people. That number is significantly lower than the majority of European countries. It means that far fewer children and young people than all of those who need expert treatment can access it.

All services need to be supported to grow the capacity and capability of their workforce across the system. There is currently no consensus around safe staffing levels—how many staff might be necessary in such services—for generic mental health services. Instead, those services are being incentivised to reduce the times that young people have to wait and the extent of the waiting lists. However, recent cuts to council budgets, particularly, are passed on to neighbouring NHS services and the voluntary sector, meaning that services are overstretched and unable to respond to demand on top of all of that.

Next, I would like to speak to article 12. The simplified version is that children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account. A central principle of the children and young people’s IAPT

programme is authentic participation and co-production by the children and young people who use the services, and their involvement in collaborative practice and shared decision making in the services' strategic transformation, as well as the direction of their clinical work.

Services for children and young people should be designed according to what they know will help. Services across London's NHS, voluntary sector and local authorities are being co-produced to varying degrees. For example, the local transformation plans that emerged from "Future in Mind" lacked the full engagement of children and young people, according to the Education Policy Institute's report from August of this year, but the majority, which have recently been refreshed, identified that as a priority for future work, and early indications are that it is improving.

A number of the services we work with have consultative groups of young people with expertise and experience in mental health, to which clinicians and service leads can go for guidance, for example in CNWL and in voluntary sector organisations such as Bromley Y, Croydon Drop In and Off The Record. Young people have made short films and performed plays to broaden awareness of the experience of mental ill health and how better to help, such as those through Community Barnet and the video made by Greenwich CAMHS.

At more strategic levels, young people have places at board level in large mental health trusts such as SLAM and are involved in specifying and commissioning services such as The Hive in Camden and through what was the children's active involvement service in Islington. Rethink and Mind the Gap also innovate in this area.

The national CYP IAPT programme supported young people to engage in programme-level task and finish groups that have strategically guided the programme. Young people are often involved in recruitment processes, but can be engaged as an afterthought rather than as a priority. More needs to be done to enshrine young people in these strategic processes and to ensure that their views are given the respect that they deserve.

In our learning collaborative, a group of young people with experience are employed to co-produce teaching sessions to ensure that developing clinicians hear from young people what will help them during therapy. During a summer event that those young people hosted, other young people told us that involvement in such initiatives has improved their self-confidence and self-esteem around others, helped them to develop new skills, and enabled a peer network to develop that has supported them post-treatment.

Being able to talk about their experiences with others who have had similar experiences can be less stigmatising than the context of treatment and intervention. Some young people have told us that the participation work has helped them as much as the clinical treatment. It plays a crucial role in recognising the importance and value of what can be felt to be a shameful experience that is to be forgotten. In that way, stigma is eroded, but that kind of co-production needs to be widened and made relevant and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accessible to more young people. These experiences will support young people to develop their skills for the future, and if we are fortunate, some of them will choose to swell the ranks of the mental health workforce.

In the clinical space, more therapists are learning how to practise collaboratively, with shared decision making—approaches that are embedded in the CYP IAPT training and more recently through Open Talk, a model for open decision making developed with young people and clinicians, in which 200 clinicians will be trained by the end of the financial year. Such initiatives need to be made more widely available and have the potential to impact on the wider services.

How much more time do I have?

Sophie Ulhaq: Two minutes.

Alex Goforth: Next, I would like to speak to article 25, which is about the need for regular review. There is increasing recognition in research, such as that by Lambert, Bickman and Miller, that regular review of the progress of clinical work, done in a collaborative way, using reliable measures, can both improve outcomes and reduce the duration of treatment. That approach to treatment is being embedded in services through training clinicians and commissioning incentives, but the data available and systems to support its use still lag behind.

Services need robust IT infrastructure to support the use of these tools in ways that are convenient and accessible to young people and the clinicians. We have come a long way from tools like the SDQ being completed and then filed without scoring or any conversation, but this valuable data, which can act like a GPS signal during a complex clinical journey, is often still inaccessible. I have more to say, but I will stop there.

Sophie Ulhaq: Thank you very much. Next we have Chloe Grant and Tom Redfearn from The Children's Society.

Tom Redfearn: Thank you very much. I am Tom, and this is my colleague Chloe. My job is to work at a national level, seeking to influence change. So I work in policy—working with politicians and things like that—and Chloe's job is working directly with young people. The Children's Society is an organisation that has been around for 135 years—around about when you were a child, Becs, I think.

Rebecca Palmer: Ooh. Can we strike that please?

Chair: You know this goes in the report.

Tom Redfearn: Oh really. Oh gosh, sorry Becs.

We do a whole load of services across the country. Within London, we support and promote mental health during childhood and adolescence through our services and policy work. I know it is Birmingham, and I am sorry about that, but in Birmingham we have the very first 0 to 25



HOUSE OF COMMONS

CAMHS—child and adolescent mental health service—in the country, which launched in April this year.

We know that 50% of lifetime mental health problems are in place by the age of 14, and 75% are in place by the age of 18. We know that tackling mental health in youth is really important so that when you hit crisis point later on, you know how to deal with it and you can look after yourself. The Children's Society supports children who face various complex needs and disadvantages—whether that is because of neglect and abuse, domestic violence or child sexual exploitation—and mental health is a real strategic focus for us. Chloe will launch into the more interesting things.

Chloe Grant: Thanks, Tom. In London, we offer a range of services that support young people's emotional wellbeing and their access to specialist mental health support and interventions, whether those are offered within The Children's Society or externally in their communities. There is a range of services through which we are doing those things, from independent advocacy for looked-after children and care leavers, to our intensive support for young people who have been trafficked into the UK, young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation and those who go missing from home and from care, as well as support for young people who are unaccompanied and arriving here, who may not have been trafficked but are nevertheless separated from family.

The first issue that we would like to acknowledge—it has been mentioned before, but ought to be reiterated—is that we are concerned that insufficient funds are being spent on child and adolescent mental health. Regarding clinical commissioning groups—groups of GPs who make decisions about what health services to fund in local areas—we feel that not enough money is being directed to this group of young people. There has been a report recently of as little as £2.01 per child being spent in some areas on child and adolescent mental health. This is a concern to us at a point when child and adolescent self-harm and suicide are on the increase. Those two simply do not tally for us and that is a real concern.

The impact of that insufficient funding is that we have very high thresholds—young people having to be at a real crisis point before they are able to be referred and access that specialist support—and in addition, very long waiting times when they do meet those very high thresholds.

The focus for us in our presentation, based on our service delivery experience in London, is around the particular vulnerabilities of a couple of groups of young people that we work with repeatedly and consistently across the borough. The first thing I want to say is that through our experience, when we see young people coming through the door and seeking support from us in all our services, we are very aware that the issues and needs they present with—whether they are being exploited, experiencing grooming or running away and going missing from care or home—are often symptoms of underlying issues and traumatic experiences. That is important to bear in mind when we are talking about two vulnerable groups that we are particularly concerned about.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We are aware that there are some groups that are particularly vulnerable to poor mental health and are not getting the support that they need. The first of those, and our primary concern here, is the lack of access to specialist mental health support and therapeutic interventions for young people who have experienced sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation.

We know that abuse is a considerable risk factor for mental health issues. There was some research in 2005 that suggested that up to 90% of children who experience abuse will develop a mental illness by the age of 18, and that is an incredible statistic for us. But, perhaps surprisingly, this group of young people are not currently receiving the mental health support that they need. That mental health support and intervention is not readily available to them.

On a national level, with London included, we have seen a severe shortage in therapeutic support for this group. Less than half of mental health trusts, for example, identify abuse and sexual abuse within their referral and assessment processes. That is to us a missed opportunity to identify when abuse is playing a part in young people presenting with mental health problems.

We also have a concern that, for this group, perhaps the mental health support available is not always accessible. For whatever reason, often young people do not feel that the environment or the location is a comfortable environment in which to access the services, even if they meet those thresholds. For us, there is a concern here about a right to health and health services under article 24 of the convention on the rights of the child. Health should be considered in its broadest sense and mental health is a critical part of that in that it impacts young peoples' development and well-being, and their lives.

Through our child sexual exploitation services, of which there are many in and outside London, we work with young people who have experienced abuse and exploitation over time, and through our wider services for looked-after children, we are often working with young people who have experienced sexual abuse. What we see through those services is that even when young people have experienced complex trauma—multiple experiences of trauma of different forms over time, perpetrated by different people in their lives—very often they cannot get the specialist mental health support they need because they must reach a clinical threshold that means they are actually at crisis point. For us, that is not sufficient to prevent further suffering for young people who have already suffered considerably.

It is not all doom and gloom. We have seen some promising steps and developments and I want to note one of those here. MOPAC—the Mayor's Office—and NHS England have been involved in some really exciting developments of a pilot based on a Scandinavian model of what are being called child safe houses. The idea is integrating health, mental health, children's services, police and other statutory and voluntary and community sector services for young people who have been sexually abused. We think this is a really exciting development. It won't happen



HOUSE OF COMMONS

automatically, but there is potential for those to become really child-centred and child-friendly environments that might promote accessibility and reduce stigma, which our colleagues here have already talked about.

The key question for us in relation to the child safe house development is what mental health support will be available specifically for young people who have been sexually abused. Talking to experts in the field, as we do, suggests that cognitive behavioural therapy approaches, which often tend to be shorter term, may be insufficient to support young people who have experienced complex trauma. We are concerned if, within those plans, we don't see alternative longer term, more intensive therapeutic interventions, where those are necessary to meet young people's mental health needs. For us, there are no quick solutions in this area and for this group of young people.

So we have some recommendations.

Tom Redfearn: I didn't realise that I was doing this bit, but I will.

Chair: Two minutes?

Tom Redfearn: Yes; that is absolutely fine. The recommendations are broadly around wanting to understand young people who have experienced sexual abuse as recovering from trauma; they should be offered the appropriate therapeutic support. The key words there are "appropriate therapeutic support".

This is a specific recommendation for the Mayor, so it is a shame that the Deputy Mayor has already left, but she will get the report. We recommend that through the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, the information on CSE is shared with the local child and adolescent mental health services' commissioners so that they can enable mental health services to be offered that way. As a commissioner of victim support services, the Mayor should also ensure that all victims of sexual abuse receive age-appropriate support.

Chloe Grant: I am going to fast-track very quickly because there is another group that I want to touch on briefly, which is young people who arrive unaccompanied in the UK who are separated from their primary caregivers and parents. We know through research and our experience that they are particularly at risk of poor mental health, because of the experiences of war, persecution, torture, traumatic journeys to the UK and then isolation and a lack of support networks when they arrive. Our service data through our trafficking services and youth support services for young, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people show that 45% of those young people we work with require specialist mental health support. We are providing interventions internally and referring to external support, but these are too limited. What we do not see is trauma-informed specialist support for young people with those specific experiences.

A couple of things can be done. We think that local authorities providing packages of support for unaccompanied young people as looked-after



HOUSE OF COMMONS

children should be planning for and supporting access to specialist mental health support for them as part of the wider package of support that they offer. Finally, clinical commissioning groups—groups of GPs making key decisions about health services—need to fund targeted support for this particularly vulnerable group.

Sophie Ulhaq: We now have Olly Pike from Pop'n'Olly.

Olly Pike: Today I am going to be talking about children's rights in regard to LGBT+ issues. I have Paul with me and together we produce Pop'n'Olly, which is an LGBT+ and equality educational resource for children, parents and teachers.

I will start with the Equality Act 2010, which was created to prevent discrimination in the workplace and in society. It lists a number of protected characteristics: age, disability, race, religion or belief, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, sex or gender, sexual orientation and gender reassignment. We know that it is unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of any of these protected characteristics, and we know that these people should be protected in society, in the workplace and, of course, in our schools, because some of these people are children and they deserve to feel protected in their space—in their school—and they should in no way be afraid to be treated as who they are.

The Ofsted handbook talks about promoting fundamental British values and how it is considered best practice to enable students to distinguish right from wrong and to allow them to understand the importance of identifying and combating discrimination. Our schools are responsible for combating discrimination, whether it is direct, indirect, perceptive, association, harassment or victimisation. Failure to do so can have detrimental results for children's mental health that can stay with them into adulthood.

Looking at Stonewall's "The Teachers' Report 2014", we learn: "Almost half of primary school teachers...say that pupils at their school have experienced homophobic bullying or name-calling"; and "Seven in ten primary school teachers...hear pupils use expressions like 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' in school". Seetal, a primary school teacher from an academy in London says, "I work in a primary school so the bullying that occurs is using the word gay as something derogatory, rather than for something specific. However, children become very upset if they are called gay."

It also seems that children whose behaviours do not conform to gender expectations are being bullied or excluded from friendship groups. The report says, "Among those primary school teachers who are aware of homophobic bullying in their schools, half...say boys who 'behave or act like girls' and 15 per cent say girls who 'behave or act like boys' are bullied." Or, for other reasons, children are "being teased and questioned for having same-sex parents."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Pop'n'Oilly is a YouTube channel that produces fun videos and animations for children, but we are also an LGBT+ resource for parents and teachers. Our videos, books and lesson plans are being used in classrooms across the UK to teach about equality and diversity. Let's take a little look.

[A video clip was shown.]

Olly Pike: That was a taster of what our channel, Pop'n'Oilly has to offer. We started creating child-friendly LGBT+ stories for a number of reasons: to prevent homophobia, to be inclusive and to encourage a more accepting society. I mentioned earlier that failing to educate and combat homo, bi and transphobia at primary age can have disastrous long-term effects. It means bullying can continue right up into junior school and secondary school. Homophobic bullying is commonplace in Britain's secondary schools and colleges. More than half of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people experience homophobic bullying at school.

This is what 17-year-old David had to say about his experience: "I have been bullied since I was in year 6. I have been called numerous names in the corridor. I have been hit. A lot of people have argued with me about how being gay is wrong. I have had a death threat sent to me." "I hear 'dyke' and 'homo'"—*[Interruption.]* Sorry. Does anyone want to continue for me? I think I'm going to lose my voice. You just have to read it. I was battling this last night.

Paul Turner: "I hear 'dyke' and 'homo' nearly every lesson." That is from 16-year-old Em from Greater London. And 15-year-old Sophie says, 'It is not what they say to me individually that gets me; it is the constant stream of anti-gay remarks that people don't even know they make. I feel awful all the time. It eats away inside you, and sometimes knowing what they'd do to me if they knew makes me lose the ability to breathe.'

'Studies show that lesbian, gay and bisexual people show higher levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal feelings than heterosexual men and women'—that quote is taken from the NHS website. It goes on to further list some of the causes: 'hostility or rejection from family, parents and friends; bullying and name calling at school...danger of violence in public places...casual homophobic comments on an everyday basis...negative portrayal of gay people in the media.' That is just a handful. What we aim to do is to combat these causes by preventing the seeds of homophobia and discrimination before they have the chance to grow.

You can see here that these children are reading out one of our books, "Prince Henry," which is a gay fairy tale romance about a prince who is in love with his servant, Thomas. The story actually focuses on class being a discriminating factor, rather than sexuality, with Henry's father, the king, being more concerned that his son's choice of partner is not of equal status than the fact that he is another boy. One thing I have noticed from visiting classrooms like this and seeing our books and videos being used is that kids do not necessarily innately discriminate. It is something that they perhaps learn or pick up on. We aim to educate children about different



HOUSE OF COMMONS

types of people, but we also aim to reflect those children who may feel a little different to their peers and show them that they are represented.

I actually had a young boy come up to me who said, 'Thank you for writing your book "Jamie" because this book is about me.' For those of you who are not familiar, "Jamie" is our transgender Cinderella story. We are adamant that London's schools need more books like "Prince Henry" and "Jamie" in their libraries and classrooms. The teachers are inclusive of this type of material, not just in specified classes but in everyday classes, as this will help to usualise LGBT+ characters in a positive light.

We are going to continue making more videos, more books, more online content. We aim to develop a live schools show in the hope that we can actually go into schools and provide a fun, educational production, with additional workshops. We are now looking for partnerships that can unlock resources to ensure that we can do this and that we can also get our books into as many classrooms, libraries and homes as possible. You can take a look at our website, popnolly.com, and see how we are hoping to ensure the wellbeing, both physical and mental, of both the current and future LGBT+ community, because today's children are tomorrow's young people and the adults of the future. It is vital that we end homophobia now by starting with them."

Chair: Thank you very much. That is an incredibly useful spectrum of views and information. On a day when the historical child sex abuse inquiry looks as if it is collapsing, we have to make it clear to the Government and to all politicians that our children have to be protected, because that is about protecting our own future. We are now going to have a Q and A with the youth panel. I ask all our guests to be as fast as possible so that we get through the questions. If we can get through five questions, there might be more, but we have to stop on time. I am going to start with Sophie. Could you give us your question please?

Q1 **Sophie Ulhaq:** How do your respective organisations intend to engage with hard-to-reach young children and adolescents, in order for their rights to be upheld?

Tom Redfearn: For everything that we do at The Children's Society, we always make sure that the children and young people's voices are integral. For every piece of work that we produce at a policy level we speak to children and young people to find out what their experiences are. Any recommendation that we include in there, we always test with a child or young person. Chloe can talk about our work directly with young people.

Chloe Grant: In our direct work, we go to where young people are. That is one of the most important things we do to engage young people. We speak to them in language that they recognise, we don't judge, we are open and transparent, and we're trustworthy and deliver what we say we will. For us, that seems to have results, and we have young people coming through the door.



Selena Grogan: We recently delivered a youth mental health conference in Kensington, in west London, and we invited young people to come. We realised afterwards, in our co-production process—we work with commissioners, health professionals, young people; we all get in a room together to design how these conferences look—someone said, “Why didn’t we Facebook Live the workshops or the talks?” So, one thing that we’re doing at the moment is talking to our commissioners, with young people involved, about how we might use digital tools to engage young people that might not be able to appear face-to-face. So, yes, we can go out into communities and meet young people there, but often resources are very limited. People are throwing the word “digital” around, so I think, for us, it is about thinking about how we can do that in a smart way. We have to think about what is out there already and how young people can design, with us and the commissioners, among the resource that we have to use digital to engage young people who might not be able to actually leave their bed, for example, to come and engage in activities that we deliver.

Alex Goforth: I completely agree with the point about digital. We see that many services have started using more innovative digital platforms, like Big White Wall, Kooth, Silent Secret and Off the Record, which is offering something it calls Skyline, which is online support and workshops across Croydon and Sutton, but more definitely needs to be done. We try to help services to think about how to increase their accessibility. We have seen, across London, probably about 3% of the referrals that services receive are self-referrals, and we wonder why that is and why that percentage is so low. Predominantly, those services are used by white, middle-class young people. That in no way reflects the diversity of the local communities, which is a real problem. We need to do something to redesign services so that they are much more accessible to other groups of young people. The model that MAC-UK has developed is a good example of that. It reaches into the community and makes itself available, and it is led by young people.

Chair: Do you want to speak, Olly, or is it your substitute—?

Olly Pike: I’ll be all right, as long as it’s not for too long. All of our resources are available for free on our website. They are also on YouTube as well, and lots of them have been added to YouTube Kids, which is a new app in the UK that is directed specifically at a younger age group. Lots of our books are used by various charities. They take them to schools and use them in their lessons, and they do lesson plans with them as well. We are also looking at developing an app, as you guys have been talking about, and moving forward into the digital age. That is the next step for us—making it more successful in that way.

Chair: Thank you very much. We have a class joining us from William Bank primary school, which is fantastic. Today is all about young people. Welcome. Our next question is from Jesse.

Q2 **Jesse Panda:** A way to make something better is to make a service. Pop’n’Olly do it. They give mental health help through something that is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not direct—like through that book. You did not say, “We are going to do mental health today”, you said, “We’re reading a book today.” You weren’t showing that; it wasn’t direct. You can try to implement it from the start so it doesn’t affect them in future.

Chair: Do you have any comments on that?

Tom Redfearn: Absolutely. One of the big things that we’re pushing for nationally is for making sure PSHE—I always forget what it stands for; personal, social and health education, there we go—is compulsory. I entirely agree with the point that you are making. It should not be just one lesson in your day—it should not be, “We’re doing PSHE now.” The work that you are doing through PSHE, including mental health awareness and things like that, should be integral to other parts of the curriculum. When you are doing biology, perhaps, or English, you can feed it into that. It is about sitting down and saying not just, “We’re doing PSHE today” but “We’re doing English, and we’re doing English about what it might be like to be LGBT. Let’s write a story about that.”

Chloe Grant: Also, there is the power of group-based discussions and issue-based group work. You don’t come in and say, “Today we’re going to talk about what grooming looks like and involves and what the impact on your emotional wellbeing and mental health is of being sexually abused,” but in a group setting with experienced group workers and a group that is supported to trust each other, those issues can actually be explored in really creative ways that are therapeutic. I totally agree with the point.

Selena Grogan: I think it is a really important point as well. You mentioned Pop’n’Olly’s videos. When I was talking about stigma, I was talking specifically about stigma around mental health, but there are lots of layers of stigma. You guys were talking about class as well as homophobic stigma. I think there is something about the way that projects like all of ours are funded and commissioned that we are really working in partnership. We are not all able to talk about every single issue that is going to affect a young person, but we could present something like a video and then tell young people, “If this brings up issues for you, these are the other organisations that are doing work that could help you with other things, such as mental health or homophobic stigma.” I think that kind of thing is really important around commissioning and funding.

Alex Goforth: I completely agree with your point. The presence of mental health services in itself is in some ways stigmatising, which is something that is really difficult to manage and deal with.

The kind of events that we put on are to give young people who have had an experience of using services and their own mental ill health a platform to explore other skills and sort of transcend all those problems. We have put on hackathons with clinicians and software developers for young people to bring their ideas and develop their own apps, and in that way learn new skills about developing digital technology. These are the things we want to be doing more.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Olly Pike: As we said earlier, it is about usualising, and I think it is important, especially with our work, to let teachers know that it is okay to talk about these things in classrooms but also give them the resources to do that. It can be a bit scary, and I guess they feel that it is a bit of a minefield with what they can and cannot say. We have resources—work sheets and lesson plans—that guide them through and make sure they are getting the positive messages across.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are going to go to Nishah for our third question.

Q3 **Nishah Xenii:** What more can be done to make mental health services more accessible to young people?

Chair: I was wondering about this, because someone talked about publicity, and that is part of accessibility. I was wondering where you do that.

Selena Grogan: Is the question about what publicity we are doing at the moment, or—

Chair: It is really about accessibility—making them more accessible.

Selena Grogan: One thing that we are looking at doing at the moment is culturally appropriate projects. The co-production model really comes into play there. We are looking at doing some pilots with co-production, again with professionals but also, for example, with faith groups, young people, families and teachers—getting everyone in a room together. I think the model needs to be right from the beginning. We need to start to think about what a culturally appropriate project could actually look like. People talk about BME projects, for example, but that is a huge, all-encompassing group. I think some work needs to be done on piloting ways of engaging people to start looking at what identity and culture actually mean for young people. So I think using the model around co-production really makes projects more accessible, because you start to kind of evolve and reflect on projects as you go along, and then importantly evidencing them and building on that, so doing pilots, pulling some evidence together and then getting more funding to do wider programmes of work; and I think that is a really kind of important model in thinking about accessibility.

Alex Goforth: I completely agree about publicity. I think often the problem is that young people and their families have absolutely no awareness of the services. I think the services hide themselves away, and I think part of this is caused by the lack of capacity. We have heard a number of times today that services simply don't have the workforce to deal with the demand, and I think that is one of the reasons self-referral is so low. A lot of services don't actually accept self-referrals because they are scared of being overburdened.

I would agree about the need for services to think more about how they meet the diverse needs of their local communities, and how they enable and train up clinicians who have the right languages to support those communities. Again I think digital platforms will play a big part of this, just



to echo the point already made, for young people who might not want to actually attend a service in person. These things are happening. I also think that there is a lot of scope to collaborate with social media enterprises like Pop'n'Olly to make all of this more understandable and accessible.

Olly Pike: Yes, I think it is important to be more inclusive in terms of the resources that we are showing to children. I think that we need to teach children as young as possible that we are all different but we are all equal, because that's the way that you're going to combat people feeling different about people and stop things like prejudice and discrimination happening. I've been into schools as well where I've seen they've got more of a stance on equality and it's such a welcoming place and so much more open and friendly. I know that when I was a child I would have felt a lot happier being at a school like that, knowing that I was accepted for who I am.

Chloe Grant: I would say there are a few things that feel really important to supporting young people to access mental health support in their community, and that is trust, relationships and understanding about what that support will involve and look like, what it might feel like, where they will access it, and how long it will go on for. So things that we do to support that is: for example, a trafficked young person or an unaccompanied young person who has experienced torture—we have built a really strong relationship with a specialist counselling service that specialises in just that, so we have through that partnership working been able to really understand the way that they work, what that first assessment session and ongoing looks like, so that we can demystify it. There are fewer surprises, there's less fear about what it might involve. So that has been very effective for us in that way.

Tom Redfearn: I think as I mentioned at the beginning we've got the new Pause centre in Birmingham city centre, which is a drop-in place, so you don't need to make an appointment, you don't need to arrange to go, or anything like that. You can just drop in and you can speak to somebody straight away, and it doesn't look like a clinical setting, or anything like that. It's not all white coats and white walls, and things like that. There's scope for anyone and everyone who works with children and young people to use the resources that are already out there, such as MindEd, which is an online resource for anyone and everyone who works with children and young people, from doctors down to scout leaders, to whatever, and what that does is it helps you to identify and mitigate mental health problems.

Q4 **Jason Xenii:** What more can be done to facilitate aftercare for sufferers of mental illness who have already had treatment?

Alex Goforth: Often services, once they have discharged someone, allow that person to kind of re-refer themselves, within six months after their discharge, which I think is quite a good way—so they are kind of fast-tracked back into the service; but ideally the service would have done enough to ensure that a young person wouldn't need the service again. I think it comes back to something like earlier intervention and prevention,



so that the problems that turn into more serious problems in adulthood are nipped in the bud. I think that's very important.

Selena Grogan: The role of the third sector—the voluntary sector—is really important. I think it was something that Alex mentioned earlier about outcomes for young people. If you have clinical interventions and outcomes for young people who participate in projects in the community, outcomes can be really high for young people who participate. Improving confidence and challenging stigma is really important. How young people know about what is happening in their community and what is funded is important. We need longer-term interventions, so maybe not just a drop-in one-off training, but young people being able to build relationships like the Children's Society mentioned, with practitioners in the community. Being able to work not just in a one-off session but with longer-term interventions and being able to build relationships with the third sector, the voluntary sector, is really important.

Chloe Grant: It is an excellent question that we think about and worry about quite a bit. There is a really important role for everyone working in the sector to be thinking about the step-down support that they are making available, and that might involve opportunities for young people to become involved in participation activities. Having experienced directly mental health support, can they maintain a touch point with that organisation and give something back? That is an incredibly empowering way to recognise their progress and help them to sustain it.

There is an important role during and after a specialist mental health intervention for building social support networks—peer networks and friendship networks—among young people who maybe have experienced similar trauma. Of course, some of those can endure beyond the delivery of the mental health support and act as a real ongoing support for that young person.

Alex Goforth: It may be worth underlining again what lots of people have said about the importance of reducing stigma in the community. If everyone was more comfortable talking about their emotional problems, being back in the community would be less of a problem.

Q5 **Anmol Kaur Singh:** My question is whether there are follow-up services. If there are, how can they be improved? If there aren't, how can they be created? I know you have addressed that already, so you can answer the other question, which is what more can be done to reduce the stigma around mental health? I know you addressed it quite a lot, but obviously the stigma is still there. What can be done to properly reduce it?

Alex Goforth: We are aware of services that support the young people who have used their services to go into places in the community such as schools to do presentations about mental health, the treatment they received and what it was like, but doing that kind of thing is incredibly challenging and requires a tremendous amount of bravery. I think maybe we need to think again about the models that we use to support that. I

have also seen young people going into shopping centres and doing the same thing and being very approachable. Again, it is not so sustainable.

Chloe Grant: There have been some exciting examples of London boroughs specifically commissioning awareness-raising activities with young people, and with parents and carers in schools, in youth settings, all over the place, and this has been around trying to deliver and land some really important messages and reduce stigma. We haven't really touched on the role of parents and carers in helping young people to understand and recognise their mental health needs when their emotional wellbeing has been negatively impacted. That is something that would be really valuable if it could be expanded across other areas in London, because parents and carers are the primary carers for their children. If they can't help young people to understand and if they can't help to reduce the stigma of asking for help when they feel they need it, then we have missed an opportunity.

Tom Redfearn: A key thing around stigma is how many resources we actually allocate to mental health. The most recent figures available from 2012 said that we only spend 6% of the NHS budget on CAMHS, which is a tiny figure. On the figures that Chloe mentioned earlier, in some areas of the country only £2 per child is spent on mental health. Granted it is quite difficult to code some of those figures in terms of budget spend—sometimes a bit more than that might actually be spent—but it is still very, very low. We saw this morning the last nine Secretaries of State for Health saying that they had not done enough on mental health and making sure that there was parity of esteem there. It is great for them to say that when they are out of office, but it would be nice if they said it when they were in office.

Selena Grogan: Over the past two years, we have been delivering something called Collective Voices. It is a co-produced training for non-health professionals and we specifically piloted it in west London, funded by a north-west London collaboration of CCGs. It is currently training for teachers, developed with teachers, CAMHS professionals and young people. That is fantastic. We have piloted it and we are getting continuation funding for it. But our young people and the people who are receiving the training are saying, "This is all great—young people are coming in and teachers are more equipped to challenge stigma—but what about when they go home?" I think there is something about more holistic tackling, which is what I was saying before about more joined-up funding and thinking about training for teachers but also for parents, carers and the young people themselves. I think that would be a really important part of doing that.

Olly Pike: It is important to talk about it in classrooms and with teachers and to let them know, again, that it is okay to talk about these things. Also, identifying and understanding the causes of mental health is important, like what we are doing here; it is the bullying and name-calling at school that is leading to problems in mental health. It is really important to identify that as early as possible and combat it.



Q6 **Chair:** Is there anything you feel we have not covered that you think would bear some follow-up?

Alex Goforth: I would like to underline the points made about the need for better-quality data. I know the question about improving children and young people's mental health is broader than just how well the services operate, but currently we really don't have very good data to determine how good the outcomes are for children and young people who use the services. The challenge of having an IT infrastructure that has sufficient interoperability so that information can be shared across the system and with young people and parents, carers and families in a way that makes their journey through services more sensible and understandable is absolutely crucial.

Selena Grogan: There is nothing I want to add apart from that forums such as this are really important—having you guys here asking us questions and giving evidence, and the follow-up that you are going to do, feeding into reports. I really appreciate us being able to have this space to talk about things like this. I hope that we do more and more of them to really affect policy around children's mental health.

Chloe Grant: Just the point around the potential for discrimination in practice if the mental health support that we make available to particularly vulnerable groups is inadequate and insufficient, and I am particularly concerned about the rising numbers of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum, from awful experiences in different parts of the world, whose mental health needs are going unmet. That is a huge concern for me.

Tom Redfearn: I would reiterate the point—I don't think it is said often enough—that 50% of lifetime mental health illnesses are in place by the age of 15 and 75% by the age of 18. If we can tackle them early on and help people to deal with their mental health problems, it will save the public purse and it will save the individual in the long term, because they won't hit crisis point or if they do, they will know how to deal with it once they are older, into adulthood or further into their life.

Chair: In the House of Lords, we have pushed very hard for unaccompanied children to come from the Calais camp, for example. A lot of us have visited at different times. It is obvious the Government have got to put a lot of money into supporting those children. For the final word, I would like to hand over to my co-Chair, Sophie.

Sophie Ulhaq: I would like to thank you all for taking time to be here and for putting your thoughts forward. I think we can all agree that it was very insightful. It was wonderful to hear about the different projects you are all working on. Thank you so much for being here.

Children in Care and Care Leavers

Members present: Kathy Evans [CEO Children England] (Chair), Jason Xenj, Nishah Xenj, Derreem Huggins, Kismet Meyon, Saffron Violet Hartman.



Witnesses

Sylvan Baker, Chloe Grant, Maggie Inchley, Tom Redfearn, Vanessa Reid and Francis Taylor.

Chair: Hello, everyone. My name is Kathy Evans and I am chief executive of Children England. I consider it a privilege to have been invited to chair this session. It is on an area of children's services and children's rights that is particularly close to Children England's heart and history. Children England is the membership body for children's charities, some of which have already given evidence and some of which will give evidence during the day. We were started back in 1942 because our members were all involved in providing care for children who were looked after, and wanted to be part of working with Government to make the whole system better for all children in the country. This is an incredibly important opportunity to find out how we are doing for children in care and young people who are leaving care in London today.

I will move on quickly to ask for our first witness, who is Francis Taylor from Become. Yesterday evening I was at the great launch of the new identity for The Who Cares? Trust, which is now Become, to reflect all the aspiration and positivity that we hope for for young people in care and care leavers.

Francis Taylor: Thank you for saving me from having to explain that. It was really helpful—I was worried about that rather than what I was going to talk about.

The UN convention on the rights of the child states that we as a city have a shared responsibility to uphold the rights of children in care and those leaving care. I am going to address articles 3, 12 and 39, starting with article 3, which states that "the best interests of the child" must be a top priority in all decision making.

First, we need to clarify what a decision may look like for a child in care. To highlight that, I am going to talk about placements and moving, but before I go on, I want to point out that a care leaver said that I should not use language like "placements" and "service user", because we are talking about people in their homes. According to the findings of Ofsted's annual social care questionnaires last year, children and young people said that feeling like part of a foster family was important to them. That was one of the top five themes that emerged. Social care jargon does not reinforce that. We need to think about the language that we use, and we need to evolve.

Children are at times living in what I can only describe as the wrong type of care for them. A care leaver told me that she was moved more than 20 times from foster homes because she kept on running away. When a decision was made and action taken for her to move to a residential care home, the absconding suddenly stopped. That highlights the importance of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

children and young people being cared for in the right type of setting. In the care system, one size does not fit all. I do ask myself whether her best interests were a top priority during the decision-making processes around those 20-plus moves. Something clearly was not working.

Residential care generally costs more than foster care. Another care leaver I spoke to in preparation for this asked me a really good question. He said, "Why is it that my residential care costed the local authority more than it would have costed to send me to Eton?" If he did go to Eton, he would be statistically likely to go on to Oxford or Cambridge; but as a young man leaving residential care, he is statistically more likely to go to prison.

In 2015 the National Audit Office told us, in its Report on care leavers' transitions to adulthood, that only 6% of care leavers progress to higher education. Lord Laming's review of the representation of children in care in the criminal justice system, tells us that children in care are six times more likely to be cautioned or convicted of an offence than other children. Taking those examples into account, we must ask ourselves whether the best interests of children in care are really being taken into account in decision making.

I am going to move on to article 12, which is quite big in the social care world of participation. We must look at how we are giving London's children in care and care leavers a voice to express their views, wishes and feelings in all matters that affect their lives. It is all about taking those views seriously.

Local authorities provide many opportunities to uphold this right. Since 2007, we have seen the development of children in care councils that were later, in 2010, backed by the previous Children's Minister, Tim Loughton. The Minister actually made recommendations to the directors of children's services on how to effectively implement and support these groups. The children in care councils should have a direct channel of communication with both the DCS and the elected member for children and young people. This does provide a mechanism for children in care and those leaving care to directly influence local policy and decisions.

However, it has been reported that there is a shared difficulty among London's children in care councils. The struggle is engaging with and representing those children that have been moved away from the city, or those that are disabled. These voices must be heard as well. These children have the same rights as all children. It may require additional efforts to ensure that they are listened to, but we must do all in our power to make sure that happens. No child should be unheard or invisible. What could change to help our children in care councils overcome that difficulty?

On an individual level, children and young people in care have access to a variety of professionals who hold the responsibility of ensuring that their voices are heard. A child in care will have an independent reviewing officer; it is that person's job to chair the review meetings and meet with the child before and after, to ascertain that their wishes and feelings are being listened to and acted on, if it is safe and appropriate to do so. Local



HOUSE OF COMMONS

authorities also have a duty to provide or commission an advocacy service. However, young people talk a lot about rights and entitlements information being given to them at the wrong time, in the wrong format or not at all. We need to think about how we can creatively and effectively give this information to children.

I want the members of the inquiry to close their eyes—please, do. I want you to imagine that you are an eight-year-old child. You are coming into care, losing all the people around you. You are losing your bedroom; you are losing your friends at school; you are going to have to leave behind all your toys and favourite things, and you have been given a big stack of paper with loads of information on it. Is that really the best way to get this information to children at this traumatic time? You can open your eyes again.

In a previous role as a local authority participation worker, I used to work alongside a lady who was solely employed to meet with children before their review meetings. Her job was to ascertain and follow up on their views, wishes and feelings. That was done in a creative way, using software that would personalise the experience and interact with the child alongside the worker. The laptop would literally talk to the child via an avatar that the child had previously created, using the child's name and the names of their social workers, foster parents or residential care workers. Those meetings would take place away from any other professionals involved with that child's life. The worker was employed by a different council department outside of children's social care.

That is a fantastic example of good practice, but we must remember that not all our local authorities have this luxury. It is the responsibility of everyone involved in a child's life to keep the child's wishes, feelings and best interests at the centre of their work. We hear that social care professionals are stretched and often find it difficult to find the time to build good relationships.

What can Sadiq Khan do to help us solve this problem? To quote from our 2015 publication, "Principles of Care," I would like us to consider that only "Flourishing relationships will enable young people to feel confident that they are being listened to and encourage them to share their views, wishes and feelings. But it is not as simple as just listening to young people; it means laying the groundwork that enables that to happen. Relationships are key, but properly listening to children and young people requires other things to be put in place. Adults have to value the voice of the child, and change their work to ensure that they can put that at the centre of everything they do. It can require a whole shift in the way people work, but those changes are worth it. The changes don't need to happen before people stop to listen to children in care; listening will go hand in hand with cultural change".

I will round up by talking to you about article 39 of the convention. Article 39 talks about recovery from trauma: "Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must

receive special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect and social life.”

Children in care in London, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are offered services to support them with their mental health through CAMHS, which we heard a lot about earlier. Unfortunately, it has been long documented that these services are not fit for purpose and are still in need of improvement today.

“Children and young people in mind: the final report of the National CAMHS Review” was published in 2008. This report detailed numerous areas where service had been found to be lacking in its provision of care for looked-after children. Those areas included failures to be as “accessible, responsive or child-centred as they should be.”

Four years later, in 2012, Patrick Weir of Community Care reported, after talking to young people, that very little appeared to have changed. Another four years later, bringing us to 2016, the Office of the Children's Commissioner told us in their lightning review of access to CAMHS that: “Large numbers of children and young people—some with apparently serious conditions—are being turned away...upon referral and/or are having to wait long periods of time for treatment”. Things can only get worse during that time.

The lightning review continues: “Many children are waiting a long time to be seen by mental health services; Many children are falling out of the system because they miss appointments and then have to be re-referred; There are large variations in practice across the country, suggesting that access to CAMHS”—like the care system—“is a postcode lottery.” That leaves us knowing that there are children out there who are not able to access the support they need to recover from pre-care trauma.

I close by reminding us all that children in care are our children. We need to uphold their rights as we would want our own children's rights upheld. There are great things happening across the city, and we must share those ideas and implement them so that all children in care can benefit. There are also areas that we could improve on, but change takes time and effort. We must persist to get the best for London's children in care and care leavers.

Chair: Thank you, Francis. Well done. I now ask Sylvan Baker and Maggie Inchley, who are both from Queen Mary University, to give their evidence.

Maggie Inchley: Hello everybody. I am Maggie Inchley, a lecturer in drama and performance at Queen Mary University. This is Sylvan, who lectures at Queen Mary University and at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Together we collaborate with the peer outreach team and another partner, the People's Palace Projects, which is an arts and social justice charity based at Queen Mary.

We have been doing a research project at the university with groups of looked-after children, and we have been putting on workshops—some



HOUSE OF COMMONS

residential and some working with local authorities—for groups of looked-after children. We have been using verbatim theatre techniques, as our research is all about how we can use drama and performance to find out about people's lived experience.

We talk to children, social workers and foster carers, we make recordings of what they're saying and then we perform those testimonies in different contexts, or in front of important adults in those children's lives, to create dialogue. We have heard much of what I have heard today first hand from the people that we've been talking to—the children and the adults. Rather than just me talking, we would love to be able to perform some short snatches of three testimonies that we've taken, if that's okay? I will ask Sylvan to start with a testimony that we gathered from a young woman who had been through care. Here she is remembering how difficult it was when she was moved from place to place, from family to family, and she didn't feel as if she was properly involved in those decisions.

Sylvan Baker: What I am doing is finding the recording that we have and then I am listening to it. As I hear it, I am going to speak it. These words were spoken to us, and now I'm speaking them to you—if they work.

"There was an incident, where I came back to one of my foster carer's houses, and I got there and I saw this big, black taxi-kind of cabbie thing, and I thought nothing of it. I went upstairs, and I remember my social worker was there, and my foster carer and her social worker and, like, I think, like, there was a police officer or something there. They had literally packed up my stuff and it was already in the van. Like, I walked into my room and it was already in the car, which I didn't know had my stuff in it as I walked past. They were like, "Well, you're going; you're leaving." I was like, "Well, where am I going?" They said, "Well—". They moved me outside of London at that point, and, like, looking back on it now, it was probably the best thing, because I was doing things, I was absconding, I was getting people worried, I was doing things that weren't right, but it would have been nice for them to speak to me about it. Like, it was just happening, and I was kind of like "Yo, like, what's going on?" And so I can't even believe it. It's like, even my dirty laundry was packed up, and I was like, "What is going on?" You know, maybe if they'd spoken to me, I might have effed and blinded a little bit, but I might have understood. You know, give me the chance to, like, feel like I am helping you make the decision—you know what I mean?—beforehand. We could've had a discussion. They didn't say anything. They just came and I moved, and like, obviously, there was, like, cows and horses and motorways. Obviously, I'm a city girl, and that's all I knew, so it's a very strange feeling for me. I remember, the day I got there, because of the way that they went on, I rebelled. I ran away. I ran away back to London, back from the middle of nowhere. Don't ask me how I did. Don't ask me how 12 or 13-year-old me managed to get back to London—but I did."

Maggie Inchley: I think that testimony shows many, many things, but obviously one of the things it shows is that that young person didn't feel as if she was being listened to, and that had the absolutely huge



HOUSE OF COMMONS

consequence of a 12-year-old girl running away back to London from the country. I am going to do another short one now. We've got two more short ones, and mine is from a 14-year-old girl. She's—incredibly wisely, I think—reflecting on how the system has made her feel. We had a lot of young people talking about the bureaucracy in the system, and the regulations, and writing everything down in files. This is how this 14-year-old girl felt about that.

“I have literally become a catalogue of statistics, and just irrelevant facts and info. It's dehumanising, to be honest, and if others don't really view you as a human—well, not really others, more adults. If adults don't really view you as a human, how can you view yourself, to be honest? Right now, according to the system kids have become just another number—another statistic. It is not whether a child is being cared for; it is whether they are being dealt with and that is not the same. It is not about whether a child has an unconditionally loving home; it is how the Government places a child with minimal effort, minimal paperwork and minimal expenditure. At the moment the system does children like us a great disservice. Every child deserves the unconditional love of a family or the warmth of a home—not a house, a home. That is what the focus should be on.”

Sylvan Baker: That testimony was taken from a simple question—how can we improve the system?—and was the 14-year-old girl's response. The last testimony we will share—voiced by me, but it is not mine—is from a young foster carer, who is talking about what her role as a foster carer is.

She says: “I do work with young people; I am a foster carer. We can't afford for this thing not to be a part of what we do. Listening is a very important part of what I do on a daily basis, because more often than not, the young people that I care for don't really feel like they are listened to by the system.”

The testimony has dropped—so, in essence, she talks about the fact that as a foster carer, she has a multiple role in what she does, and that she is listening to the things that possibly the other professional adults that are in the lives of the young people who have experience of the care system are not listening to, because they are locked into the procedures that they have to carry out for their jobs. In essence, she says to us that she is listening for the things that other people are not listening for, and one of those is to listen to the young person in her care.

Maggie Inchley: To sum up, like Francis we can't emphasise enough how important we think it is not only to listen but then to change, having heard the young person, and to act, and for adults to take what young people are saying very seriously. We think that what we have been doing sometimes helps some of the young people who might not come forward and are not confident enough to say what they think and feel in the first place. We hope it is something that enables all the young people in care, rather than the already confident handful, to speak.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Like some of the other people who have already spoken, we very much agree with the idea that there should be a co-production of services that involves the voices of children and the co-evaluation of services. Sylvan and I want to take this work back to the university itself, so that it can get its own house in order and see what it can do about this terrible lack of care leavers going into higher education and how our own services can listen to care leavers better.

Sylvan Baker: The inspiration for the research was the statistics that Francis referred to earlier—the massive over-representation of young people with experience of care in the criminal justice system a propos their massive under-representation in higher education compared with their more settled peers. The work is on multiple levels. There is a massive impact when a young person’s testimony is performed in their presence and they see how important what they know, as experts from within the system, is and how it is received by the adult professionals who support them. But more importantly than that, the work happens in and around universities. So we are implicitly putting universities on the map for young people with experience of care who may not have had access to them because of the journey they have had through their life so far.

We want them to be co-researchers with us. They are not the subject of this inquiry; they are the co-researchers.

Chair: I am going to turn to The Children’s Society, which has three people to contribute in 10 minutes: Vanessa, Chloe and Tom.

Vanessa Reid: My name is Vanessa Reid. I am the child sexual exploitation service manager at the Children’s Society. We work with young people who are at high risk of child sexual exploitation. We have lots of different services, including “return home” interviews for those who run away from home and care; intensive support for those at risk of child sexual exploitation; advocacy and support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people; and, of course, independent advocacy services for looked-after children and care leavers.

Chloe Grant: It is on that last point that I want to raise a concern that has implications for the rights of children in care and care leavers in the capital: there is a trend towards advocacy services being brought in-house.

I first want to mention a UNCRC right. Article 12, as has been mentioned earlier today, gives young people the right to express their wishes and feelings in decisions made about their lives. I cannot think of a more important context in which that right needs to be respected and upheld than when a young person is in care, and decisions are made about small things but also about huge things like where a young person lives, contact with birth parents and siblings, where they go to school and all sorts of other things.

An independent advocate really has a critical role in enabling children in care to enjoy that right fully. They do that through supporting young



HOUSE OF COMMONS

people to say what they would like to happen, whether that is in meetings, in reviews or in discussions with and about them. They also have an important role in supporting young people to understand their rights when they are in care and to help them to claim those rights when they feel that they are not being offered to them. Finally, a really important role for independent advocates is in supporting young people to make complaints. There is a really important role there for us in safeguarding children and young people and in supporting their protection while they are in care.

For me, there is a question about whether young people's voices are being heard to the extent that they should be if advocacy services are being delivered in-house. Are local authorities being challenged in a healthy way about trends and issues coming up across advocacy cases, if internal staff are performing those advocacy roles?

Secondly, I want to introduce to the inquiry and to esteemed panel members here the issue of priority housing outside the home borough. Care leavers are only eligible for priority housing in their home borough—the borough that is responsible for their care while they are looked after. We know that many young people are placed out of borough; that has been noted before now and no doubt will be again in the future. Certainly, through our advocacy services, we have seen in excess of 50% of the young people we have worked with being placed out of borough at some point during the time we have supported them—huge numbers. The issue really arises where, due to safety or other issues a young person is not willing or able to return to their home borough, where they would have priority housing as a care leaver. They do not have priority housing in the out-of-borough area, where they may have been placed for many years.

I want to bring this to life a little with a story about a young man called Zahir. That is not his real name and, to protect his identity, the places we will talk about are not related to him. Zahir is a 23-year-old care leaver from a London local authority. He came into care as a teenager and converted from Islam to Christianity shortly afterwards. As a result of his religious conversion, he felt at risk of harm in the borough he grew up in, so he always lived in foster placements outside that borough. He went to university in Kent, settled there as a student, made links with his church and built significant relationships there. When he graduated, he wanted to remain in that town, where he felt safe and happy, and to make his life as an adult there.

Unfortunately, Zahir had priority housing status as a care leaver only in his home London borough. He tried to get housed as a care leaver in Kent, but they did not recognise him as a care leaver, as he was not in care or a care leaver in that borough. He had no other reason to be a priority for housing in that out-of-borough area, and his leaving care team in London tried to negotiate with that out-of-borough area to get him housing priority, but they didn't agree. Legal advice upheld that decision. Kent could not be compelled to treat him as a priority as a care leaver for housing in their area.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

So now Zahir faces two housing options. He can return to his home borough in London to be housed as a care leaver; but he feels it is still unsafe for him to be there. Secondly, alternatively, he could rent privately in Kent. Indeed, if he goes with this option the leaving care team in London have offered to pay his deposit; but he needs a guarantor. No landlord will accept someone on benefits or a low income without such a guarantor, and his leaving care team in London are unwilling to act as a guarantor because they will soon be closing his case. Zahir feels trapped and as a result is currently receiving treatment for depression. He is not sure whether he might, ironically, become eligible for housing in the future as a result of his deteriorating mental health. He is not sure what the future holds and there seems to be no solution in sight. So my question and something for us to ponder for the rest of my presentation is: is this situation in the best interest of Zahir? Surely not, is my short answer.

Is there a solution? We wonder about whether there is potential for a formal network to be established between leaving care teams in London that allow for reciprocal swaps. This is coming up fairly frequently. With a concerted effort and attention on this we feel that a solution could be found—and some role for housing providers, Home Connections and choice-based lettings within this process.

Vanessa Reid: We now want to raise the issue of housing priority status to 21 years only. If care leavers are not nominated for housing by the age of 21, they lose their priority housing status as a care leaver; but many care leavers are not ready to live independently by 21. They tend not to be in employment, and sometimes not in education. Twenty-one is often too early for some care leavers, who need a little longer to be ready for independent living. It is not surprising, then, that between 25% and 30% of homeless people have been in the care system.

The enhanced housing benefit stops at 22 years old, which affects those who are not yet settled in employment or housing. Their housing benefit is reduced to shared room allowance, which is a huge obstacle to paying rent, and we have seen this regularly in our services. So we are thinking about solutions, here, as well—not just about raising the issues. We are thinking that perhaps the local authority could put extra support systems in place for care leavers, to help them to maintain their benefits. They could perhaps come to an agreement with the Department for Work and Pensions to contact the personal adviser, for example, if a care leaver misses an appointment to help them to resolve the issue without delay. All benefits of being a care leaver—enhanced housing benefit, priority need of housing, access to leaving care support—should be extended to age 25.

Tom Redfearn: We know that care leavers are eligible for a range of benefits ranging from housing benefit, jobseeker's allowance and universal credit when that comes in. However, if care leavers fail to meet the terms of the benefit regulations, say by being late for a meeting at the jobcentre or not updating their CV on time, they can be sanctioned and have their vital benefits stopped. That means that they have no access to funds whatsoever for the duration of that sanction.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A recent report that we published, called “The Cost of Being Care-Free”: we found that 4,000 benefit sanctions had been applied to care leavers in the last two years, which means that they are three times more likely to have benefit sanctions applied to them than the general population. This is perhaps, arguably, a more vulnerable group, so it is leaving them in a really desperate situation, where they do not even have money for food.

Many care leavers don’t know that they can appeal these sanctions. However, we have found that when they do appeal they are more likely to be successful than the general population. So not only are there more likely to be sanctions, it turns out it is more likely to be the case that they weren’t sanctioned appropriately, and therefore they can rightly appeal it. So we think that provision should be put in place to ensure that care leavers do not have their benefit sanctioned.

Vanessa Reid: Financial education training is a really big issue. Young people are expected to manage housing tenancies successfully without being shown how to manage money effectively. The Children’s Society report that Tom referred to showed that 4,000 young people who left care missed out on crucial financial education, as almost half the local authorities in England are failing to offer care leavers financial education and debt advice. We are talking about advice on paying bills, money management and how to open an account and plan financially for the long term. Not having those financial skills leaves young people unprepared to participate in adult life on an equal footing with their peers who have not been in care, or to become parents themselves or explore their own aspirations.

What are the solutions? As Francis said, young people need time to be given this information, and training is needed on money, budgeting, debts and savings. Care leavers should be provided with financial education and training to help them to manage their money and tenancies.

Tom Redfearn: Finally and crucially, one of the big bills that care leavers face is council tax. We all know that that is a pretty big bill, and if you do not pay your council tax, you could ultimately go to prison. If you don’t pay for your Netflix, Netflix is just cut off. Given that councils are the corporate parent for children leaving care, we are saying that all care leavers up to the age of 25 should be exempt from council tax.

A number of local authorities around the country have already made that the case. None in London has so far, but we expect an announcement from a London borough soon. It is actually really cheap to do. For example, Cheshire East Council, up in the north-west, has exempted care leavers up to the age of 25 and that is costing it £17,000 per annum, which basically equates to an accounting error. Doing that would have a really positive impact on care leavers and would not cost us much to do.

Vanessa Reid: On the back of that, I want to raise one more issue—savings. Savings are really important. Children and young people have an individual savings account. Usually, that is managed by foster carers and should move with the young person, but that can get really confusing,



especially if the young person has several placements. Then, at the end of their care, young people are expected to go and find out how much money they have. Let's have these conversations in review meetings where savings statements are presented and young people can fully understand what they are entitled to.

Chair: I have already run out of paper for the list of things raised, but we have 30-odd minutes for questions to be answered. Everyone on this esteemed panel is going to ask questions. I understand that there are also some questions from children and young people among the observers, which we will try to make time for. I will ask each panel member to ask a question. Can I ask panel members to volunteer if you have something particularly pertinent to say? I am not going to ask everyone to say something about every question, so just indicate to me if you have something that you want to contribute. The first panel question is going to come from Saffron.

Q7 **Saffron Violet Hartman:** How can we make support for young people in care and care leavers more consistent?

Francis Taylor: Can I jump in with something? The audience for the report is the GLA—a body that covers the whole of the city of London. You almost have someone there in a position to have an influence on all 32 boroughs and maybe do an audit of where the inconsistencies are and what things we can bring into line with each other. So Sadiq Khan, you heard it here first!

Sylvan Baker: One of the things that we discovered doing the research was that an awful lot of good practice is going on out there, but one of the challenges is communicating that good practice, because of politics between local authorities and other bodies that look after children with experience of care. So one of the first steps is to improve cross-party, cross-body, communication and to come back to the young person, who, with support, is an expert in their own care.

Maggie Inchley: It is, first, a question of joining up the different support mechanisms that are available, so that people talk to one another, but it is also a wider question of awareness of the special difficulties or conditions that care leavers have. If I think of our experience in the university; I do not think some of our university staff are really aware of the extra difficulties that care leavers might have with finance, accommodation, having a safe and stable place to study, and so on. So I think it is partly awareness, actually.

Chloe Grant: I would just add that I think there may be an opportunity for organisations that work with children in care and care leavers across boroughs in London to take time to reflect on what is coming up. You can get busy delivering the work, delivering the activities and delivering the support to young people, but it is very important—this is something we are focusing on a lot—to take time to step back and say, "What are we seeing?". We should compare across boroughs and then take and create opportunities to communicate what we are seeing and identify, share and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

disseminate those differences when we see them happening. On the back of those, we sometimes find there are issues arising that are common and that we can campaign on as a national charity.

Tom Redfearn: Just to add another slight spanner in the works, the current Government's focus is on what is called localism, which means that they believe more decisions should be taken in local council areas than directly by the Government. That means that sometimes you have a bit of—I hate to use the phrase, because it is such a cliché— a postcode lottery. If you are in Cheshire East, you get council tax exemption, but if you live in Newham, you do not. It is quite unfair in that respect. The Government would argue that it allows for more creative thinking on the part of councils, which is positive, but it is about making sure that there is consistent support across the piece, as you said, Saffron. As Francis said, I think there is scope for the GLA but also London Councils, which is the representative body for London local authorities, to play a role in this as well.

Q8 **Chair:** I was struck by the evidence you gave about care leaver status not actually being binding on councils that are not the caring authority. Would making care leaver status consistently binding on all councils address inconsistency, or is that impossible?

Chloe Grant: Absolutely. At the moment, those kinds of situations generally do not work out for young people like Zahir. If they do, it is pot luck. Two authorities may negotiate—there may be a young person in each that they can do a swap for—but that is pot luck, and it is not consistent. That is not something that 10 other Zahirs could rely upon in a similar situation.

Tom Redfearn: I think that would be the ideal situation, but the local authorities where a lot of care leavers live or a lot of care leavers gravitate to—we know that an awful lot of people move to London when they become adults—will turn around and say, “We’re getting the extra responsibility but we’re not getting the extra funding.” Unfortunately, it always comes down to funding. It would be a case of having to make sure that the funding that is attached to that young person travels with them as well, and that creates another whole load of bureaucracy.

Chair: Okay. We are going to move on to the next question. Which of my panellists would like to go next? I am going to ask Jason, my co-chair.

Q9 **Jason Xenii:** In reference to article 9, why is more not being done to support parents to care for their own children?

Francis Taylor: I think there is work going on. Within local authorities, before you get to the point of child protection and coming into care, there are child in need services. Although we have been looking at an influx of young people coming into care, there is an assumption that people do not want to make bad decisions, so they go to court proceedings without properly looking at family and friends care and other options first, maybe—this is not an opinion in my organisation—to protect themselves.



Tom Redfearn: I think there is an increasing appetite in local authorities for children and young people to stay put in the family home and to provide family mediation support, or whatever kind of support is required around it. Sometimes, it is just not feasible; sometimes, mum or dad just cannot take care of the young person and therefore they have to go into care. As Francis said, ideally it would be about going to stay with aunts, uncles, family friends or whatever, but you need to have the appropriate checks in place for that to happen. I think a few local authorities are a bit scared. For them it is a bit easier to put children and young people in care, because if something happens to that child or young person, it is on their head. Sometimes they are a bit too hesitant about leaving the child or young person in the parents' care. We saw that happen after baby Peter Connelly died. We saw a huge increase in the number of children being taken into care just as a preventive measure—we call that a bit of a bulge—who are now coming through, and out of, care at the moment.

Chair: Does that address your question?

Q10 **Jason Xenii:** To a degree. I asked it more for—parents are not always ready, but there does come a time when they are more ready than they were before. It seems that once the children have been taken away from their parents, it is not revisited. It is just done—the kids are gone and the parents are just out of the picture now, regardless of whatever they do.

Vanessa Reid: I think that, where you have your child in need plan or the child protection plan, the plan, if it is safe enough, should be for the young person—the child—to be back in the family home, if that is safe enough to do. That needs to be really holistic and the parents need to want to be involved in that, as should the young person as well. They should have their views stated—what they would want—and know clearly what that plan is and how to get there.

Chloe Grant: I think it relies slightly on the assumption that when young people see and feel their birth parents moving on and being in a place where they can care for them, they are in a position to say that out loud in quite daunting meetings and settings. Again, it is about recognising that young people in care need to be supported to say, "Actually, I think the situation may have changed, and I would like you to review whether I can return home." Again, that is the importance of advocacy.

Q11 **Kismet Meyon:** What can be done for the young people who slip through the care system because they do not meet the legal requirement criteria? Those young people still need support. What can be done for the young people who want to go to university but cannot access the care leaver benefits and face issues with housing, for example? I had a question to do with sanctions and, again, it is about care leavers. It relates to that, because obviously if they are not down as the legal requirement of a care leaver, being exempt would be unfair. They still need the support, even though they are not legally a care leaver because they were not up to that 13 weeks in care before they were 16. Those are my questions to you all.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Maggie Inchley: If a young person found themselves in that position and was going into university, I would hope that there would be somebody there for that young person to go to, in order to explain that situation and to apply for the funds or extra support, in any case. That depends on the young person feeling able, strong and confident enough to do that, but I would very much hope—I know that there are mechanisms in universities to help support care leavers, and that some of these mechanisms can be more flexible if there is a dialogue going on between the care leaver and the university.

Q12 **Kismet Meyon:** This person is not legally down as a care leaver—that is what I’m saying—so even the university can say, “You don’t meet the legal requirements.” It is for those people who fall through the system.

Maggie Inchley: It is very difficult. I would very much hope that universities—I hope that our research will help to support this situation—would be more prepared to be a little bit more flexible about that legal status and listen to those young people who desperately need that help.

Sylvan Baker: One thing we are discovering from the universities that we are speaking to is that the staff in their teams that are looking to be responsible for people who have care experience getting into higher education, are becoming increasingly aware of this situation. As you may know, a lot of them only get that data from a young student—someone about to be a student—ticking a box on their UCAS form. Now universities are trying to be more creative and look around at how they can extend support in terms of enrolment, and take account of those challenging trajectories that Maggie was talking about. They are also becoming aware of when their responsibility to help recruit young people with experience of care starts. It may not start at A-level results time. It may start a lot earlier than that; so how they can have relationships with primary and secondary education so that they can set themselves up, and they have resources in some cases to do that, to make a clearer pathway through education and into higher education. The difficulty over how people are delineated is sometimes out of their hands, but there is more freedom around how a university wants to set up its widening participation and access system.

Maggie Inchley: I couldn’t agree more with the sentiment of your question that the law is a very blunt instrument and I would hope that people in universities are going to get better at being flexible about understanding the real contexts that lie behind those awful statistics that say that one person is eligible and the next person isn’t, because there is a difference in a day, or something, in how long they have been in care. I think you have brought up a really important point.

Chair: Anything from the Children’s Society?

Tom Redfearn: I completely understand the problem. I guess the Government would respond and say, well, you have to have a cut-off point at some stage; but there is an argument for a kind of sliding scale of support—so if you were in care for one week or if you were in care for 52



weeks: if you were in care for one week then you might get a little bit of support; 52 weeks you get the kind of full-throated support. I think also you need to look at, when you hit 18 so often people think you either get a job, get an apprenticeship or go to university; but I think there are other options available as well, which might be beneficial for not just care leavers but for everybody—the wider population. Things like that would be higher apprenticeships. A lot of people think that apprenticeships are something that you do where you are good with your hands and do a bit of woodwork, or something like that; but a higher apprenticeship scheme is something that you might do through Barclays.

- Q13 **Kismet Meyon:** The only thing with that is the employer has to agree to pay for the funding for the higher apprenticeships—you are talking about level 4; that's not easily accessible. There's no employer ready to pay that for you, so you are stuck in a predicament where, "What do I do? Do I go and get grants that are no longer there for the people who are care leavers?" That is just a response to the higher apprenticeships.

Tom Redfearn: Sure. As I understand it, some of the higher apprenticeship schemes will; I don't know all of them. It is essentially like a graduate scheme, so you learn and you also do a job and are paid through the course of that. Also you have your higher education qualification to pay for.

- Q14 **Kismet Meyon:** So what could be done to make that information more accessible for these people?

Tom Redfearn: Yes, I agree; I think perhaps through things like UCAS. Apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships—you should apply for them through UCAS so that they are seen on the same level as university.

Chair: I understand that there are some questions that children and young people who are in the group of observers here might have. If anyone does, could you just make yourself known, so that I know who has got a question?

- Q15 **Newisrael:** Can a child in care develop mental health problems as a result of stress?

Vanessa Reid: That is such a great question. There is one thing that in my service in particular we are really keen on drawing adults' and professionals' attention to: trauma and the understanding of how trauma affects children and young people. Sometimes, I don't know if you have heard, when children and young people are in care or leaving care, and some that are in our services, you'll hear things like "Oh, they're just naughty"; or "They're just always angry"; and "They're always aggressive." Actually that's a sign of the trauma that they've experienced; and this is the only way that they can get it out. So instead of labelling them so negatively with such a horrible term actually we should understand that it is an issue. Trauma is the issue and they need support and understanding around that and around what's happened to them. So, short answer: yes.



Sylvan Baker: We were able to see some of the impact of that potential trauma when we worked with some of the young people with experience of care. One of the additional challenges they had, with everything else that was going on in their lives, was dealing with that label of being “in care”, and therefore choosing to cover it up and conceal it so that they didn’t get into big, long conversations about why they were in care: what happened, was there a judgment, was it their own fault? There was an additional burden because of that covering up or that passing as not being in care, which some of the young people told us became second nature. Yes, there are definitely impacts. Things happen because of an entrance into care. If we take it back to the statement that Francis made when we had our eyes closed, or to the testimony that we gave, we are hearing some of that, so there is evidence out there.

Chair: I am going to ask Derreem to ask a panel question, and if we get time I will come back and ask another one.

Q16 **Derreem Huggins:** My question is: why isn’t there out-of-hours support for children in care and care leavers? For example, over the weekend.

Francis Taylor: There is an out-of-hours service for children in care. I think the assumption is that it should be accessed by the professionals and the people around those children—the word, which I hate, is gatekeepers. I know this is a personal question around out-of-hours support for you as a care leaver, Derreem. I’ve got two assumptions for the answer to this question. The first assumption is that the care system works, so when a child gets to the point of leaving care they shouldn’t need an out-of-hours service. If we are bringing that up and having a discussion about it, the second assumption is that those services aren’t working, and there is a need for them. I think we possibly need to look at the services and how needs are being met during that care journey, and why children aren’t able to deal with emergencies out of hours on their own when they leave care.

Chair: Any other thoughts on out-of-hours provision from the panel? No? Okay. Nishah, did you have a question that you particularly wanted to ask?

Q17 **Nishah Xenii:** Yeah, but I’m not 100% sure that it’s totally relevant—but I’m going to ask it anyway. The issue I have is with the people who have the responsibility of handling all of the cases and making decisions, like social services, social workers, their managers and YPAs. They have got such a big responsibility. To be honest, in my experience of the people who are employed, as a young person leaving care, I think anyone could get employed. To get a good social worker or a good YPA—a young person’s adviser, for anyone who doesn’t know—is very rare, and I want to know why. What we can do to make the rarities become common?

Francis Taylor: Social work is voted the most stressful job in the United Kingdom, but I don’t think people go into it because they want to be stressed out. I think people go into that profession because they care and they want to help people. Maybe we need to look at the stresses in the system that are sucking the life out of them.



Maggie Inchley: I agree. We know that social working, as a profession, has been increasingly under-resourced over the past few years, with austerity, and that social workers are taking on bigger and bigger caseloads. I think that is a big part of the problem. I also think another big part of the problem is the stigma of social working and the narratives that dominate our society—that social working is worthless and that they are bad at their jobs and so on. I think that means that good people, who could make an enormously valuable contribution to the profession, are not going into it enough. We need to find narratives and counter-narratives that show the positivity and the wonderful things that social workers can do to inspire a whole new generation of people who want to do that profession, and do it really well, because they have love in them. Again, it is a question of awareness and of telling the right stories, and that is a long-term strategy. It is not an overnight solution to it but it is important.

Sylvan Baker: I think we also have to make a case, not because we don't know this, but because we have to prove this. We have already heard about red tape and other issues; a lot of the time resources get in the way. The opportunity cost—what doesn't happen if there is a good person in place—needs to be costed. The cost and resource starts to then tell its own story—this social worker or YPA has these kinds of outcomes. We need to be careful about that, because that means that it might become a performance-managed situation for that YPA, who might think, "If I don't get the right numbers, I am in trouble," but it also tells us a story about what happens out-of-hours; when do most of these issues happen and therefore where can we put the resource? As we are hearing, the people are out there—they do exist—but other factors are stopping them being loving and caring—stopping them doing their jobs.

Q18 **Chair:** Okay. We have a maximum of four minutes left and I want to get the maximum squeeze out of the expertise in the room. Chloe, do you have a very quick comment?

Chloe Grant: It is very quick. It is about the importance of all of the professionals working with and for young people who are in care being brave about challenging inappropriate behaviours and language, like Vanessa talked about a moment ago, where they see it. Where practice is not up to the mark, where it is not good enough, colleagues who are seeing and witnessing that should be speaking up with and for young people and raising the bar, as well as noting where practice is really strong and effective.

Q19 **Kismet Meyon:** Do you think it is a good idea for social workers and key workers to work part time, because really they are only partly in that person's life and are only partially helping and caring? Do you think that extra training and consistent training should be implemented so that it is refreshed in their brain for every case that they get?

Francis Taylor: Unless we change all of the other demands on a social worker, going part time would mean that they would only spend less time with children.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q20 **Kismet Meyon:** That is what I am saying. Do you think we should get rid of part-time workers because they are only partially there and helping?

Francis Taylor: I think you are making a mistake if you get rid of anybody who wants to do the job.

Kismet Meyon: Make them full time.

Francis Taylor: It is a question of money. It all boils down to money.

Kismet Meyon: It goes back to funding.

Francis Taylor: If we had more money to offer all these full-time jobs, it would be grand.

With regard to training, I was thinking about what you said about how we can make these people more young person-friendly and approachable. There needs to be more of an emphasis put on young people leading training to professionals. It is very powerful.

Chair: We have one last, quick question from the children and young people behind. If you are able to come and speak to the microphone, that would be great.

Q21 **Ellis:** When children in care have mental health problems, how do you deal with it? There are many different ways of dealing with it.

Chloe Grant: We talked in the last presentation about the lack of specialist mental health support for young people who have been abused, whether that is sexually abused or abused in other ways. We think that there is not enough support. There was a headline this week that said that any young person coming into care should be offered specialist mental health support. That feels like a massive ambition, but it could be privatised, couldn't it? It is all about decisions on how much money you spend on addressing a need that comes up all of the time among the population and young people in care.

Q22 **Chair:** Okay. I am going to call a close to what has been a very rich and passionate session. I want to thank everyone who has given evidence. I thank all of my fellow panel members and our additional special panel member at the end. I am still struck by the importance of the phrase that when we take any child into care, that is everyone's responsibility; we are all parents of children in care. This could not have been a more important topic. Thank you for your expertise and time.



Inquiry into Children's Rights

Oral evidence: Inquiry into Children's Rights

Friday 18 November 2016 (Afternoon)

Witnesses

Laurelle Brown [The Children's Society], Jenny Chambers [The Howard League], Anna Edmundson [Children's Rights Alliance for England], Tom Redfearn [The Children's Society] and Rhiannon Sawyer [The Children's Society]

Egle Banelyte [Community Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers], Christine Bonney [The Children's Society], Eleanor Brown [CARAS], Jo Cobley [Young Roots], Stewart MacLachlan [Coram Children's Legal Centre], James Simmonds-Read [The Children's Society], Tom Redfearn [The Children's Society] and Despina Tsiakalou [Young Roots]

Deborah Halling [City Hall], Paul Noblet [Centrepoin] and Steven Templeman [New Horizons Youth Centre]

Caroline Boswell [City Hall] and Anna Edmundson [CRAE]



Youth Justice System

Members present: Andy Slaughter (Chair), Jason Xenic, Derreem Huggins, Jesse Panda, Rozita Leetham, Ashley Watts.

Examination of witnesses

Laurelle Brown, Jenny Chambers, Anna Edmundson, Tom Redfearn and Rhiannon Sawyer.

[Applause]

Chair: You may want to take that applause back because, first of all, I have virtually lost my voice, as you can hear. Secondly, unusually on a Friday, I have to go and vote, so, as a chair, I am about as useful as a chocolate teapot. However, do not despair, because Rozita is here and will, I suspect, end up doing most of the talking and will take over when I disappear. When you hear the bell and I run out of the room, that is democracy in action.

The reason why I am here is because I was for five years the shadow Justice Minister. I am not any more, but this is a hangover from those times. I am now the shadow London and Housing Minister, but hopefully I remember enough about justice matters to at least retain some interest. All I have been told is that we are going to call the four speakers and they have to stick to 10 minutes. The Children's Society has made that difficult by having three people to speak in 10 minutes, but that's their lookout.

We will start with a presentation from Nicky Hill, who is from the Youth Violence Commission and is a reform consultant. I am told she is not here. Fine. We will go first to Jenny Chambers of the Howard League.

Jenny Chambers: I am the policy and public affairs manager at the Howard League. If you have not heard of us before, we are the oldest prison reform charity in the world. It is our 150th birthday this year and one of our areas has always been children and young people in the youth justice system. We are the only dedicated legal service for children and young people in prison in England and Wales as well, so youth justice is very much central to everything that we do.

I will try not be too dreary as I talk about child imprisonment. There is some good news for children in London in terms of prison. The number of children going to prison has reduced substantially in the last few years. There are now only 276 children from London in custody, which is great news, but there is still a lot further to go to bring that number down.

Some bad news is that London lags behind the rest of the country in terms of those reductions. The proportion of children from London going into custody is higher than in any other region in England and Wales. In terms of where those children go, 140 of those 276 children from London in prison are not held in prisons in London. The main child prison for London



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and the south-east is Feltham in west London. For the ones who don't go to Feltham, where are they? Feltham only takes boys aged 15 to 17. That basically means that if you are a girl, if you are aged under 15, or if you are assessed as particularly vulnerable, which means you need a particular care in a specialised secure unit rather than in a normal prison like Feltham, you will be held in the midlands or the north of England if you are from London. We are putting some of our most vulnerable children the furthest away from their families and communities, which we know undermines rehabilitation.

Feltham holds up to 240 children at any one time. I am sure you have seen in the papers, particularly this week, that prisons are in crisis across England and Wales. That includes the children's prisons. Feltham prison is one of the most violent in the country and is even more violent than prisons like Wandsworth and Pentonville, which have been in the news. When the inspectors came in, they found there had been 209 violent incidents in the six months before the inspectors had gone into Feltham prison. We also know that the level of violence is escalating and becoming more serious. We know from a report that came out two days ago that 46% of boys held in prisons like Feltham are now saying that they feel unsafe in those prisons. Because that is done via a survey, it depends on boys being prepared to admit that they feel unsafe, and put it down in a survey, and have the ability to read and write to be able to complete that survey. So, even though that 46% is really shocking, it is probably an underestimate of how unsafe children feel in prisons like Feltham.

There are a couple of key child rights violations that go on in Feltham and other prisons like them. One is the use of restraint, which is when staff can use physical force on children. I could talk about restraint and how awful it is for days, but there are two particular aspects that I will draw your attention to. One is that restraint can be used on children to get them to do as they're told; they can be restrained back to their rooms. The other point is that they are also allowed to use deliberate infliction of severe pain on children in order to restrain them as well—that is legally sanctioned. The Howard League is very clear that that is systemic physical abuse of children, which is illegal, and we are looking to take a case to court to try to outlaw that in prisons like Feltham.

The other thing that we are seeing in Feltham and elsewhere is the increasing use of segregation and solitary confinement. In terms of segregation, there are traditional segregation units, and there's one at Feltham that is the only segregation unit in the country where children are still mixed with adults. The Prisons Inspectorate said it was "grim and featureless", remained unsuitable for children, and that there was not even any electricity in the cells. They don't even have things like radio. They are locked in that segregation unit for 23 and a half hours a day.

The other thing we are seeing a rise in, with all of the violence in prisons, is the use of what is known as solitary confinement on wings, which is when children are being kept in their own cell—not in the segregation unit; in their own cell on the wing—for, again, anything between 23 and 23 and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

a half hours a day. When the prison inspectors went in there were 180 children in Feltham, and 38% of those boys were locked in their cells during the working day. The impact of solitary confinement is really serious. Children obviously develop differently, but the evidence for adults is that, after 15 days of solitary confinement, people suffer irreversible mental health damage. We have represented children who have been kept in solitary confinement for four months, or up to six months of being repeatedly put in there. It is being used as a kind of behaviour management technique, the prison service would argue, because they can't keep those children safe on the wings, or because the children are so scared of coming out of their cells on to the wings that they are choosing to put themselves into situations of solitary confinement, as a child. That is obviously extremely worrying, and it is on the rise at Feltham and across the estate as well.

That is the bleak bit. I think a positive that has come out of how badly the child prisons are now operating and how unsafe that they are is that, for the first time, we have recognition from the Ministry of Justice and across Government that the prisons are unsuitable and unsafe, and that warehousing children in those large prisons, which were designed for adults, with low staff ratios, where they are only out of their cells for a few hours a day, are not going to help toward rehabilitation. We are waiting for announcements from the Government about some quite radical, different ideas of what we do for children in custody. We don't know which way those announcements are going to go, but there is hope that something will be done. What will be done we don't know, but there is an opportunity for change. I have worked in youth justice for 10 years and I have never known a Government to admit that those prisons are failing. That is an opportunity in itself.

The other thing is that there are still nearly 900 children in prison. As analysis has said, nearly 300 of those in England and Wales are from London. There are real opportunities to bring that number down to an irreducible minimum. We know that, while the numbers have gone down, it has only really benefited white children. Some 47% of children now in custody are from a BME background, which is the highest rate ever, and to be quite frank, is absolutely inexcusable. There are real questions to be asked of the people who are choosing to send BME children to custody disproportionately over white children. People really need to start taking responsibility for where those decisions are being made.

The other thing is the number of children held on remand. We know that 20% of children in custody are there on remand. Only two thirds will go on to get a custodial sentence, so we are locking up kids who don't need to be in these very traumatising institutions.

The other issue is the number of children being held on short-term sentences. If you go into a prison like Feltham for a few weeks, you could lose your home, education placement or job. You are exposed to this absolute torrent of violence and fear and then you are released with very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

little support. That doesn't do anything for that child, their victim or the communities that they return to. That is really bleak—

Rozita Leetham: You have a minute left.

Jenny Chambers: I have about a minute's-worth of things left to say, because I have only a minute of cheery things.

The good news is that the Howard League also does work around the policing of children, and the number of children being arrested by the police has fallen by 59% in the last five years. In London, the number of kids being arrested has reduced by 51%. It is not as great as the national average, but reducing child arrests by half is fantastic. The number has come down to just over 22,000 arrests by police of children aged under 18. For the Howard League, that is absolutely key, because for the majority of children, the best thing that can be done for them is to keep them entirely out of and away from the very damaging and corrosive youth justice system.

Rozita Leetham: Thank you very much; that was great. One thing that we did not mention before you guys started was about using jargon—even stuff like “BME”. It would be great if you guys could explain it while you are talking for people who do not understand what the acronyms and so on mean. Could we now have the Children's Society talk?

Rhiannon Sawyer: I'll start. We run loads of services across London and across the country, but there are two services that we run and that evidence is being taken on today. Safe Choices works with young women who are leaving prison or leaving care, who have experienced violence, maybe at the hands of gangs or maybe at the hands of older, adult gangs, and who are violent offenders themselves or have a sentence for violent offences. And our Boys and Young Men Service is for boys who have experienced sexual exploitation. It is one of the only services of its kind in the whole country, because a lot of people would not provide a service for boys who have experienced child sexual exploitation.

All our services aim to increase safety, to increase young people's support networks—the people they are in contact with who are going to help them—and to help them to raise their self-esteem and be able to feel better about themselves.

Laurelle Brown: We are going to talk about the three key issues that we think are probably the most important ones to talk about today. The first is that there is a lack of planning before a child goes into custody or prison and after or leading up to their release. We have seen a lot of examples of that. Just recently, I was at a meeting on the day a boy was due to come out of prison and the police and social workers were saying, “Where's he going to go?”, and were calling the prison from the meeting to find out what time he was coming out. That was a 16-year-old child, who would potentially be coming out to go into a last-minute placement in a bed-and-breakfast, which would be really dangerous and not appropriate for him, or to go somewhere else where he might also be at risk.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are a lot of cases where we are seeing a lack of planning. Meetings or conversations are not taking place about the young people being educated while they are still in prison. Things like their LAC reviews—meetings where we talk about their health and family and how they feel—are basically being disrupted or stopped when the young person enters prison.

We are also seeing young people being released from prison into dangerous accommodation settings. We are seeing that in particular for young people who are 17, turning 18. For example, we are seeing young women who have been sexually abused and exploited being put into a hostel with grown, adult men who are quite dangerous and who might groom them and then sexually abuse them and put them into situations from which they might go back to prison even though they are actually a victim, not an offender. That is happening a lot across the services that we work within.

We think that there are a lot of opportunities for us to work with the police and local authorities to write policies and to train them in how they can plan properly and follow the laws that are in place and the things that they should be doing. The Children Act does actually talk about LAC reviews and how we need to support the children who go into prison, but the way that these things are being followed in each borough is completely different. There is a lot of opportunity but there is not a duty on those local authorities to consult experts such as us. We think that that is something that needs to happen in order for them to work with us and make things better.

The second area that we want to talk about is sexual exploitation and gangs. We work a lot with young people who are either at risk of offending, at risk of being involved in gangs or at risk of being exploited by gangs. They might be sexually abused. They might be forced to do things like sell drugs. A lot of things might happen to them which it might seem that they are in control of, but actually they have been brainwashed by older people or people with more power and they are not necessarily in control.

We receive referral forms about these children, where professionals talk about them as if they are big criminals. You would think that they are describing a big 35-year-old man, when really it is just a little 14 or 15-year-old. The language used is very victim-blaming. It is like, "He is doing this; he is doing that," rather than thinking about all the things that might have happened to him as a victim in a gang. He might have been beaten; he might have been raped; he could have had loads of stuff happen to him. Yes, he might have committed a crime, but he is still a victim too. These services just see them as criminals and forget that they are children who have been abused by these people using them.

As you mentioned, we also see that boys in particular, especially boys who are black or from other backgrounds, basically non-white boys, are treated differently. They are also sent to places from London—I don't know—places such as Margate, to sell drugs, which we would call internal



HOUSE OF COMMONS

trafficking, but then they are only seen as drug dealers. They are not recognised as trafficking victims and the social workers aren't following the policies that they need to in order to support that.

Rhiannon Sawyer: I have got a referral here, which I am going to read loudly over the ringing of the Division bell. When you hear the word "subject", that is the name of the child in the police referral:

"Missing since Monday, when last seen by elderly uncle in the early afternoon. Family do not want [subject] living at their address and were reluctant to report to the police. On Wednesday, PC Joe Bloggs received a call from [subject's] aunt stating that from Thursday, subject will no longer be allowed back into the home and they don't want to act as appropriate adults for him. [Subject] is 15 years old. He is a gang nominal, well known to police with bail conditions in place to attend various stations across London. His last bail attendance was supposed to be June. [Subject] has been living with elderly uncle and older brother. Social worker stated that [subject] had previously been abused by his uncles and has financially abused them as well. They are scared of him and they don't want further connection to [subject]. Since last year, [subject] has been managed by social services. [Subject] was taken abroad by parents, who wanted to take him out of London and away from bad influences and criminality. [Subject] was resourceful enough to make his own way back to London, albeit with his family member's credit card details. As such, his parents have little to do with him and it is thought that [subject] is sofa-surfing at friends' addresses since and has not been living at his uncle's. [Subject] does not have keys to uncle's. Social services are encouraging [subject's] parents to return to London and then take him away back abroad. Vulnerable due to age and circumstances. Not a risk of CSE or exploitation or radicalisation. Social services have stated that [subject] is not at risk and their only concerns are that he is a danger to others—he has targeted younger victims in the past—and his welfare and safety, although social services admit he is streetwise and likely to have funds through his endeavours of suspected drug dealing and other crime-related activities. [Subject] does not have any mental health issues or is known to be on any medication."

That is obviously not unique. We come across descriptions of young people in that way across the board—male, female, age 12, age 15, age 18. This young person is clearly at risk of exploitation, criminally and sexually. He has been internally trafficked as well. The police description doesn't give an idea of his victimhood at all. It is victim-blaming. Basically, this child has experienced loads of abuse, has been exploited, and it just puts the blame completely on the child and doesn't look at any external factors that might be in place for a 15-year-old boy.

Boys especially get taught in a certain way. Society makes them feel to a certain extent that they have to be kind of hyper-masculine, like this "big man" sort of thing. That means workers are looking at a 15-year-old boy, a child, and thinking that he is resourceful enough to make his way back from whatever country it was. If that is a child coming all the way from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sudan, or wherever it was, I am really concerned about that child. In the services that we are commissioned for, about 87% of our referrals are for females and only about 9% are for boys. That means that people just aren't seeing boys as at risk. What we would like is for social services, the police and other organisations to challenge victim-blaming language and not use language such as "they're putting themselves at risk," "they're a little gang member," "they're a gang nominal," "she's a prostitute" or anything like that. That is what we have to challenge day in, day out. If it were challenged from the top down, we would get a lot more work done and people would see the young people as victims.

Finally, the sort of youth offending team you are at is a bit of a postcode lottery. Some youth offending teams are holistic, which means they really help the young person to develop and get back into mainstream education or to move forward with their work, or whatever it is. Other youth offending teams will breach you and give you further sentences for the smallest things. That means that where you are in London or in the country affects your criminal record. We have already talked specifically about young males from black and ethnic minorities, but young people who are looked after by local authorities are also particularly criminalised—meaning that they are given criminal records. Cuts to the structure of youth offending teams means there is less support for these young people.

As a quick example, in an east London borough and a south London borough we have two young women with the same story: both exploited by gangs, both hold criminal records and both have been trafficked for criminal and sexual exploitation. Whereas in east London the young person gets seen as a criminal and the team refuses to discuss her at a violence against women and girls forum because she is more of a perpetrator than a victim, in south London the professionals, including a judge, will look at the situation and say, "This young woman is at the bottom of the food chain. She has been exploited by the gang, and therefore I am not giving her a sentence." Again, it is a postcode lottery. Based on where you grow up, you are looking at either a potential life sentence or people understanding that you have been exploited and looking to support you. We have solutions for that, too, but we should wrap it up, shouldn't we?

Laurelle Brown: In those kinds of cases we think that local authorities and the police should be consulting more with, say, the voluntary sector and organisations like us—we are quite child-focused and child-led—when writing their policies and training their staff. We can say, "This is not child-focused" or "You need this, and you are missing that." That doesn't happen at the moment. We deal with traumatised children who have been criminalised or abused and try to help them out of what is often a really bad situation.

Overall, in London we are seeing that children's rights are being abused in the youth justice system, and we think that is systemic. What that means is that we think the organisations responsible for youth justice—children's



HOUSE OF COMMONS

social care, the youth offending teams and the police—are lacking input from other sectors, like ours, that can help them to be more child-focused.

Rozita Leetham: Thank you so much. Could we move on to Anna, please?

Anna Edmundson: I have some sympathy with Andy because earlier this week I didn't have a voice at all, so apologies if I have to stop to cough and have some water.

I am Anna, and I am from the Children's Rights Alliance for England. We are one charity, and we are based in London, but we work with more than 150 organisations—big names, from UNICEF to Barnardo's, all the way through to individual children and young people. We believe that human rights, and children's rights in particular, are a powerful tool for making life better for children.

I lead CRAE's work in London on policing and youth justice. Thanks to Trust for London, we are in the middle of a two-year project in which we are trying to improve the police's treatment of children and make sure that it is much closer to the standards in the convention on the rights of the child.

As we have only 10 minutes, I will give you a few highlights of the work we are doing. I have put on the panel members' desks—and there are also some spare copies in the room—examples of a report that we wrote two years ago about the state of children's rights in London, and a briefing that we published just last month called "Children speak out", which is based on children's experiences across the country, but also from London, of policing and youth justice. I really urge you to read that, because it has some very powerful testimony direct from children and young people themselves about what they think about policing and youth justice.

Today I am going to talk very briefly about what children's rights mean in relation to policing, and then share some of the statistics and research from our work on policing. In particular, I am going to focus on the use of Tasers by police and then the treatment of children in custody—so overnight detention, strip searching—and if I have time, I'd like to say a quick word about the use of spit hoods on children.

First of all, there are a number of children's rights principles that are really important when you are thinking about policing. First of all, rights are universal; they are not conditional. That means that every child is entitled to children's rights, and they do not lose them because they have broken the law or they have come to the police station. As a result, all decisions taken by public bodies, including the police, must take into account children's best interests. That, as I am sure you have heard this morning, is a really core part of children's rights.

The CRC itself says that when children who are accused of offending are in contact with the police, they should be treated in a way that upholds their



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sense of dignity and worth, and that their wellbeing and their safety is absolutely central to what the police are doing.

Finally, the convention on the rights of the child is really clear that children should only be detained as a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted, and they must be detained for only the shortest period of time. The reasons for that, as Jenny from the Howard League has set out, are because we want to make sure that children aren't inappropriately criminalised. The best way to look after children's rights in this area is to make sure that they are not in contact with police or the youth justice system.

What I would like to do before I go on to the less cheery stuff, as it has been termed, is just to celebrate a bit of progress—and Jen has highlighted this—which is the fall in child arrests. You cannot really underestimate the impact that that has, and how central it is. However, on other areas, how well are we doing in London, in particular, in ensuring that children who are in contact with the police are having their rights respected? Well, in the areas that we have been looking at, I am afraid the picture is pretty bleak.

The first issue is Tasers. I suspect most people know what Tasers are. They are an electrical gun that doesn't fire bullets, but that shoots out probes with electricity that go into somebody's body. We are really concerned about them, because they inflict really intolerable pain. A victim of a Taser has said it is "like someone reached into my body to rip my muscles apart with a fork." You can imagine just how horrific it must be to be on the receiving end of that, particularly if you are a child.

There is really limited medical research into what is the impact of using Tasers on children in physical terms. But in a way, whether or not Tasers are fired, we mustn't forget that the threat of a police officer even drawing a weapon and aiming it at a child can be extremely disturbing, not least because of the backgrounds and experiences of the children who are likely to be in contact with the police, as my colleagues from the Children's Society have so ably pointed out.

It is possibly not a surprise to you that both the UN committee against torture and the UN committee on the rights of the child have said that the use of Tasers in the UK needs to be banned. However, we have seen nationally that there has actually been a 25% increase in the use of Tasers on children between 2013 and 2015. In London, that problem is even more marked. In 2008 when we did freedom of information requests, there were only nine uses of Tasers on children in London, but in 2016—and that is just to the end of September, so not even a full year yet—there have been 108 uses on children, including Tasers being fired four times. The youngest person on whom a Taser was used was only 11 years old. In just eight years, we have seen a twelvefold increase in the use of Tasers on children in London.

We really urge this inquiry to get the Metropolitan police to look at that massive increase to understand what is going on, because at the heart of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

our concern is the fact that we are not convinced that police are only using Tasers on children when it is absolutely necessary. That is what child rights require and we do not think it is happening.

The London Assembly has looked at this. I know you heard from Jenny Jones earlier this morning; in 2013 she warned the Metropolitan police of her fear that the more Tasers we have on our streets, the more chances there are of mistakes being made and of making people less safe. That was Baroness Jones's prediction in 2013, and I am sorry to say that we are worried it is actually happening now.

The second area that I want to touch on briefly is the treatment of children in police custody. For all the reasons that you have heard, it is not a good idea to hold some of these uniquely vulnerable children in police cells overnight. The cells are not equipped to hold them; they are scary and noisy places and the services that are best able to support children are not there. However, from the age of 10, any child can be held in a police cell.

Although the law is really clear that a child should not be held overnight—indeed, when our new Prime Minister, Theresa May, was Home Secretary, she wrote to all local authorities to remind them of that law and to say that it must be followed—we have a huge number of children who are detained overnight. In 2014-15, the latest year for which figures are available, over 7,000 children in London were detained in police custody overnight by the Met, including three 11-year-old girls.

There are a number of reasons why children might be held overnight in custody, but one of the reasons that worries us most is that local authorities are failing in their duty to provide secure accommodation so that, instead of spending nights in police cells, children are transferred to much more welfare-focused accommodation where they are looked after.

We have been so concerned about that that our sister charity, Just for Kids Law—which many of you may have heard of because it provides direct services, advocacy and representation for children, particularly in London—is taking a test case on behalf of a 14-year-old boy from Islington, to challenge the fact that he has been held overnight in police accommodation on multiple occasions, purely because the local authority has not provided any accommodation. This is a uniquely vulnerable 14-year-old who has a history of abuse and some quite complex mental health problems, but this year alone he has been in police custody on four occasions, and on not one of those occasions was Islington able to provide him with accommodation.

That is not unique. Our freedom of information request to Islington revealed that of the 94 requests that police made for it to provide secure accommodation for children in police cells, it did not meet a single one. Not a single one of those 94 children was helped. It is welcome that, as a result of that legal action, Islington Council is now conducting a review and looking into this problem, but it is not just a problem in Islington—that is just one example. We really urge the inquiry to look at whether police,

local authorities and politicians across London are working together properly to end this problem.

Our third area of concern is strip searching. I was going to talk about stop and search, because it is a big issue and children we work with talk about it a lot, but I wanted to highlight the particular emerging problem in London of the strip searching of children. There are a couple of types of strip searching. One is where you take off your outer coat, gloves, hat and so on, but basically you still have your clothes on, but there is also a more intimate strip search, which involves the removal of clothes and the exposure of what are called intimate parts.

We think that strip searching is a humiliating, degrading and often traumatic experience for children, particularly for those vulnerable children who may well have been subjected to abuse or violence. We are extremely worried that, at the moment, the strip searching of children in custody across England, but in particular in London, is not happening in accordance with the proper safeguarding procedures, which are laid down in law to try to minimise that kind of distress and harm to children.

The watchdog that inspects what happens in police custody looked at this in 2015 and found that, worryingly, no official records are kept in many police forces across the country on this issue. On that score, the Metropolitan police are doing well in that they do at least know what is going on and what the scale of the problem is. The bad news is that it is massively increasing. In London, in 2016—again, this is just so far, until the end of September—414 children have been subjected to these more thorough searches. Of those, 52 were intimate strip searches where intimate parts were exposed. The youngest child who was subjected to this kind of search was 13 years old. In just under half of those cases, where children were strip searched and their intimate parts exposed, were there appropriate adults or carers present to support them during that traumatic process. Even more worryingly, those emerging figures suggest that in just one year—from 2015 to date—the strip searching of children in police custody in London has more than doubled.

Finally, on spit hoods, this is perhaps a bit of good news at the moment, in that the Metropolitan police do not use spit hoods on people in custody. They talked about doing it earlier this year. They had a plan to roll it out across custody suites throughout London, but in September this year, they changed their mind because, with the new Mayor and the new Deputy Mayor for Policing coming into post, they reviewed this decision, and I am delighted to say that it was reversed. But I do not think the problem has gone away, and that is why I wanted to flag it up to you.

A spit hood is a bag made of very fine mesh-like material, with a drawstring to tighten it around the neck, and it is put over somebody's head. The Independent Police Complaints Commission has investigated the deaths of two adults following the use of spit hoods. We think that they should never be used on children—not just in London, but across the country. As I said, the Metropolitan police do not use them, and we would like them to keep that situation.



We say that because of a case that we have been made aware of that happened in Sussex, not London, involving an 11-year-old girl, who I am going to call Sophie, who has a really rare neurological disability. It is a bit similar to autism, but it means that she becomes upset when she is over-stimulated. As part of that, she can occasionally spit. In Sussex, she was detained in police stations by Sussex Police on four separate occasions: once under the Mental Health Act, because she was so unwell, and three other times for minor offences that she had committed after she had become really distressed, including running away from home one time. She was kept in custody for a total of more than 60 hours, she was restrained and she was also hooded. Her mum told us: "It was very traumatic for Sophie to be hooded by police officers. Due to her disability she finds it very upsetting to have someone even touch her head. Having strangers put a bag over her head when she was already extremely distressed was profoundly shocking for her."

I am glad to say that in June this year, the Independent Police Complaints Commission completed a report into this incident. They are pursuing action against a number of police officers, but one thing they said really resonated with us: "Using force on a person so young and vulnerable is a grave occurrence." We totally agree, and it is for exactly those kinds of reasons that we would urge this inquiry to put down a marker and say that this kind of equipment should not be used on children in custody in London. Unfortunately, from our experience of the use of Taser and the use of strip searching on children, when these things are introduced, the floodgates open. We urge the authorities in London, particularly the police and politicians, to heed that warning.

Chair: Thank you. Having heard from the speakers, we will now go to the panel. Everyone will get chance to ask one question each, then we will see if we have any time left; we only have about 15 minutes for this. Ashley, do you want to start?

Q23 **Ashley Watts:** While prisoners are in prison, why are they not coached or mentored on their mental health state in the long run?

Chair: Unless the question is specifically directed at somebody, I will just ask for volunteers to answer it. You don't all have to answer every question.

Rhiannon Sawyer: There are a couple of reasons that I can think of—other people can jump in. First, it takes a young person a lot to be able to say, "I am struggling with my mental health." We have had young people being referred to CAMHS, for example, who don't like the stigma of being known to go to CAMHS. Secondly, there are massive cuts to a lot of services. You will get drug and alcohol services that look at mental health, because addiction is obviously interlinked with mental health, but again, it takes someone to come forward and say, "I've got a cannabis problem." In prison, it takes something big within young people for them to be able to come forward and say that. You need professionals in place to be able to get them to a point where they want to talk about their feelings.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Laurelle Brown: Just to say, CAMHS is child and adolescent mental health services—so it is basically a place where professionals help you with mental health problems.

I want to add that if you are a looked-after child, your wellbeing should be considered by your social worker, irrespective of where you are located, whether that is in prison or not. A child's mental health should be considered within their care plan and as their parents—let's say—the social worker should be looking to put things in place to help them. A part of that is the failure of social services to support that child, when often it is just not being considered as part of their care plan, basically.

Jenny Chambers: There are two fundamental problems. One is that a lot of mental health conditions are not recognised and calmly diagnosed in young people until they are aged 18. Often we will see young people being told that they have a conduct disorder and then their 18th birthday present is a very serious mental health diagnosis. That means that they can't get help under the age of 18 because their mental health problems are not recognised.

The second point is that prisons are fundamentally unable to provide a therapeutic rehabilitative environment. The majority of children's prisons very much focused on detention rather than care. They are focused on control and coercion rather than care and rehabilitation, and that is very much the ethos of the prisons.

Anna Edmundson: I totally agree with what my colleagues have said. I would just point out that services in prison are really struggling, particularly in children's settings. We know that because the levels of self-harm have skyrocketed in prisons for children and young adults over the last few years. That self-harming is often a sign, or should be a sign, to those who are running these places that children need help and support, but we find time and again that they do not then get the follow-up and support to address what is happening—the reason why they are self-harming. There is a real problem with the lack of services and resources and, as Jen says, prisons just aren't the place for children to get mental health support. They are much better off in places such as secure children's homes, which are focused on welfare, rehabilitation and therapy. That is what children need.

Tom Redfearn: Just to link to what Laurelle was saying, the reason why she mentioned the social worker is that, even if a child or a young person lived with mum and/or dad before they were in prison, as soon as they go into prison they automatically become what is called a looked-after child. That means that they are automatically in the care system. That is why they have a linked social worker and why they should be able to access the same kind of support and resources as children in care do.

Q24 **Derreem Huggins:** After a young person has been sentenced, what is done to prevent them from being sent far away from their home and family?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jenny Chambers: The answer to that is: very, very little. As I said earlier, there are different types of child custody. Most children are in young offender institutions such as Feltham or, as Anna just mentioned, secure children's homes, which hold around a 10th of children who are currently in the prison system in England and Wales. There used to be quite a lot more secure children's homes than there are now. The problem is that the Youth Justice Board has chosen to close those secure children's homes down, so there are no secure children's homes at all in London, the south-east or the east of England. That was purely motivated by saving money, because it is a lot cheaper to keep children in Feltham. If you are a girl, if you are young or if you are assessed as particularly vulnerable, we would argue, as I am sure all of the panellists would, that you should be going to a secure children's home. No child should be going to a young offenders institution. If you are being sent to Feltham you are probably being sent much further away from home.

It really has been a missed opportunity by the Government. When the numbers have been coming down, rather than closing down the unsafe provision—large, unsafe children's prisons such as Feltham—they have instead chosen to save money and close down the safe provision. That means that a child goes to either an unsafe YOI, if they are from London, or they are sent very far away from home. We are expecting more announcements of more cuts to the secure children's home sector, which is going to exacerbate the problem. Children are going to be held even further away from home than they are at the moment.

Anna Edmundson: Can I just say that this is a really big children's rights issue? As I said right at the beginning, children don't lose their rights when they go into custody. Children have the right to contact with their family, they have a right to education and so on. Earlier this year, Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons, which is the prisons watchdog that monitors what's happening in prisons and how well we are doing in keeping children and adults safe, released a report on the distance from home and the impact that has on children in custody. One of the key things they flagged up was that—as Jen says, children from London are being sent hundreds of miles from home because there are no places—it has a really negative impact on them, their contact with their family, the amount of visits that they receive and the amount of contact that they can have with the services that are supposed to support them when they come out of custody. If your social worker who is planning for your release is in London, but you are in prison hundreds of miles away, it is very difficult for them to visit and organise the sort of support that you need. This is a really core children's rights issue about distance from home, contact with families and also the chance to have proper rehabilitation and resettlement. It is something that is very acute in London and needs urgent attention.

Laurelle Brown: To add on to that, I manage sexual exploitation services and a number of young people who have been sexually exploited are on the cusp of offending, or may have committed minor offences, but the sexual exploitation is the focus rather than the offending and they are



seen as a victim. Sometimes, secure settings are used to protect them and they are sent far away on purpose, because the professionals involved think that getting them away from the people who are abusing them is the best option. Sometimes the young person is saying to perhaps their advocate or to people from our organisation that they don't want to go that far away, but the legislation is used to justify moving them hundreds of miles away from the very network that could actually help their mental health not to get worse and stuff like that. It is also sometimes described as a measure to protect that child, but it mainly increases the risk of them offending, because it is quite traumatic for them not to have contact with their family and to be miles away from the people they perceive to be their friends.

Jenny Chambers: Can I just give one example? I was on a prison visit recently to a prison quite far away from London. One of the things the Government are doing is introducing Skype, because so many children don't get visits because of how far away they're held from home, which particularly affects London children. There could be a Skype room in a prison. I was being shown around this children's prison and they proudly took me into this little cupboard with a TV screen, which was the Skype room. I was told a tale of a boy's mother who was in a hospice and was dying, and because he was held so far away from home he was not able to go and visit her. They managed to do a Skype call, so he said goodbye to his mum in a hospice, via Skype, from a prison hundreds of miles away from his home with a prison officer sat next to him. That was told to me as a story of good practice. I was absolutely appalled that that had happened to that child and that this is seen to be an answer to the problems of holding children far away from home.

Q25 **Jesse Panda:** Although your aims are to stop police violence and youth justice unfairness, do you think showing young people what would happen to them if they committed a criminal offence would help them not to commit it? We see how some people commit a crime because they think they are going to get away with it, but showing them what is going to happen might change their minds.

Rhiannon Sawyer: I visited a place in Brooklyn near New York called the Red Hook Community Justice Centre. That was a youth justice centre, and it was designed as a one-stop shop, so it had the equivalent of somewhere you could do your GCSEs, somewhere you could sort out your housing and somewhere you could sort out your NHS doctors, dentists or whatever, and it also had a youth jury of young people. What they do with what they call delinquents in the US—young offenders, basically—is give them a sentence that is a package of support. The most they ever sentence someone to prison is one day, just to show them what it is like. I think that they had a model of good practice—they were doing good work.

What you say about showing them what it is like is kind of a good idea. Another way of doing it, which does work successfully, is getting adult ex-prisoners to come and speak to young people in youth offending teams about their experiences of prison, or getting workers from prisons to come and talk. That is successful as well.



Eleanor Brown: I worked in education previously, and there are some services that deliver that as an option to schools. A group of young people can go into a vehicle that is like a makeshift police station and custody suite, and there are programmes where they actually get taken to a real prison, which the young people really liked and enjoyed. It was something that—they were like, “Nah, nah, nah, don’t wanna go to prison.”

However, I work with a lot of young people who are often blamed for crimes that they committed because people in more powerful positions than them convinced them, “This is all right. You won’t get in trouble” or said, “You need to do this for us.” It can sometimes be dangerous, because they are scared of a situation that actually isn’t their fault; they’re being abused. We need to be careful what message we give young people when we do those things so we are not blaming them for ending up in a situation that they are actually in because people have taken advantage of them and they just didn’t realise that at the time. But when I worked in education, the young people used to love it when that happened.

Anna Edmundson: This is a really important issue, and it is a great question. When we spoke to children and young people around the country—this is in the briefing that you have—one of the key things that they flagged up to us was safety and their own sense of safety. When children are misbehaving, you need to make sure that there is a way of stopping them doing this thing that is a crime, but that does not mean that police and youth justice interventions are the best way to go. We should look at what works in the long term, both for the children who might be on the receiving end of some of this behaviour and, most importantly, for the children who are doing that. We are not saying that there should not be any intervention, but we should look at what interventions work. Is what we have heard today about police and youth justice the right way forward, or is it actually thinking about things like mental health support, substance abuse support, education and understanding the other things that are going on in that child’s life and helping them to turn it around? In the longer term, that is better for that individual child, but it is also much better for the community as a whole and other children in that community.

Q26 **Jason Xenii:** Why is the main focus on incarceration of the criminal instead of justice for the victim and punishment that fits the crime—for example, compensating the victim of a robbery or a burglary? Why shouldn’t the focus be on the criminal fixing whatever damage they have done to the victim instead of just sending them to jail?

Jenny Chambers: We would agree. Restorative justice is used when the court sentences a child or even an adult—it is used for adults as well—to do something with the victim, whether that be something direct in terms of paying compensation or sitting down and speaking to them; it can work in a lot of different ways. At the Howard League we are very much for restorative approaches. It is one of the things that we have seen the police using. For example, if somebody’s car has been damaged, they want something done about it. Rather than taking the child who might have done that damage down the criminal justice route, they will use

restorative justice in the community. They will speak to the victim of the crime, see if they are happy for the person to come over, apologise, speak to them, and sort out some sort of compensation, whether it's financial or not. That is done outside of the criminal justice system. The evidence shows that that massively reduces reoffending because of the immediacy of something happening to that child, rather than waiting for months to go to court. It is pointless sending them to prison where more harm is done to them. If something immediately happens to them, they understand the ramifications of what they have done to the victim. Evidence shows that victim satisfaction around those processes is very high. So I agree with you that doing something different and not being as focused on incarceration as we are as a country, and being a bit more clever in terms of what works for everybody, is definitely the way to go. I completely agree.

Tom Redfearn: I think we would all agree on this panel that the difficulty for us is the politics of it—the small p politics. I am not blaming Andy and his colleagues, but it is basically public opinion. Public opinion wants to lock 'em up. Whoever it is, they want to lock 'em up. Whatever crime they commit, they wanna lock 'em up. It is our job to frame the arguments that we are talking about more articulately and more clearly so that people understand where we are coming from and why we want to do that. Hopefully that will help shift public opinion. I would say that all of us in this room have a responsibility for doing that and spreading that message around.

Laurelle Brown: Just to give you a good example, in Newham the safer schools police officers have been trained in restorative justice, so when incidents happen in school, instead of trying to criminalise a young person, they can be dealt with by means of restorative justice. They actively try to do that so that not so many young people are being cautioned or given out-of-court disposals or something along those lines. They are trying other techniques, so that is an example of good practice in London that I know of.

Chair: We can go till 2.30. We don't have to, but if anyone wants to ask a question or follow up, they can. No? Good. That means we are now back on time. We will have a 10-minute break. I thank you very much. I am sitting here in awe because this does not need any chairing. Everybody comes in at the right time, speaks for the right amount of time, and the panel asks the right questions. I am used to chairing MPs who all speak at the same time and have to be kept under control. It is a good example that has been set. Thank you very much indeed. We will have a 10-minute break and then come back.

Young Refugees and Migrants

Members present: Siân Berry (Chair), Anmol Kaur Singh, Jason Xenii, Saym Miah, Sophie Ulhaq and Rozita Leetham.

Examination of witnesses



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Egle Banelyte, Christine Bonney, Eleanor Brown, Jo Cobley, Stewart MacLachlan, James Simmonds-Read, Tom Redfearn and Despina Tsiakalou.

Chair: Thank you for inviting me to come and do this. I just sat through the last session and it was incredibly interesting, and all the witnesses were really good and they all kept to time, so I hope you will carry on doing so this time. We have got a surfeit of witnesses, as mentioned. Each group has 10 minutes between them to make presentations. That is so that we have time for the young people to ask questions at the end, so please try and stick to time. We will warn you when you have got one minute left, to get you to wrap up then. The first group we have to present is Young Roots. I think we have two people from there, who are seated around: Despina and Jo. Carry on.

Jo Cobley: We are representing Young Roots, a charity that helps young refugees realise their potential. I am the director of the charity and my colleague Despina is the project co-ordinator, with much experience of working directly with young refugees and asylum seekers. We work in London and we also work in partnership with community projects in Lebanon and Nepal. Our mission is to improve the wellbeing and life chances of young refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and overseas.

Just a little bit of background on the young people that we work with. The most common places that young people we work with come from, in the UK, are Afghanistan, Syria, the Kurdish areas of Iran and Iraq, Eritrea and Sudan. We also see young people from Albania, Yemen, Kuwait and Vietnam. A large proportion of the young people we work with are unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers. In Croydon alone there are more than 400 unaccompanied child asylum seekers and refugees, and that is just those living in care. There are many more who have come with their family.

As is well documented, young people have fled serious abuses of their human rights in war. Many have post-traumatic stress syndrome when they arrive. Nearly all need to learn English, and we see many young people who have had very difficult journeys to the UK, travelling on boats and overland, and we see people who have suffered in the camp that was in Calais. So far this year we have worked with approximately 300 young refugees and asylum seekers in London. Our evidence comes directly from working with these young people that we know in Croydon and north-west London.

Despina Tsiakalou: So in answer to your question on what is being done to ensure children that are refugees are integrated into British society, we think there are two articles that are particularly relevant here. Article 28 states that children have the right to education, no matter who they are, and article 31 states that children have the right to relax and play, and to join in cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

The importance of learning English for refugees and asylum seekers is increasingly recognised. A three-year study published this week, from Sussex University, found that learning English was absolutely vital to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

integration. The study found that teenagers who had missed core education because of turmoil in their home country faced the biggest barriers to education. It is our experience that young refugees and asylum seekers are desperate to learn English. Many attend ESOL classes at college and in school, and we work closely with colleges to ensure ESOL provision is there for them. We aim to support young people in their learning as much as possible.

We run study support groups through colleges using peer support where refugees and asylum seekers with more advanced English support those with lower levels of English. These are very popular sessions and both those coaching and those being coached benefit from it. At the end of each session, the college tutor and the language staff record observations, and we note the improved levels of English, how seriously both the mentors and the mentees take their work and the improved confidence among their coaches. We also provide structured English language activities in our youth clubs. Sometimes that is through actual English language sessions, and other times it is through language-based games, and we ensure that volunteers engage participants in conversation. All activities encourage English learning.

In the external evaluation of our work, 81% of the young people we work with reported improved English thanks to our work. In parallel, we run activities that introduce young people to British culture. We run music sessions on how to play the guitar and on beatboxing. We run sessions on cooking, in which young people can get familiar with shopping in England and with ingredients so that they can get confident in their kitchen.

Our health education sessions have included sessions with doctors of the world, and we recently had a session on sexual health with our girls group. Next month, we are planning to run sessions on English folk music, more English, more arts and crafts and more cooking, which we do each week. We also run term-time Saturday trips to places in and around London, and we run trips in the holidays. We take people bowling, to the theatre and kayaking, and we take them to Brighton and many more places.

We would like more funding so that we are able to offer more support to help more young people to enjoy their rights under articles 28 and 31.

Jo Cobley: The second area we were asked to test was how to ensure that young asylum seekers and refugees in London live a carefree and safe childhood, and we think that relates to article 3 of the UNCRC, which says that “adults should think about the best interests of children and young people when making choices that affect them”, and article 19, which makes it clear that “children and young people have the basic human right to dignity”—that means they should be protected from being badly treated.

The vast majority of the young people we work with are very far from having a carefree childhood, and we think that is an infringement of their rights. They have faced serious abuses of their human rights that have forced them to leave their home. They have had dangerous journeys, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

many are now living alone in the UK without their family. We are aware of negative stereotypes and systemic barriers that affect young refugees' and asylum seekers' enjoyment of their right to protection from being badly treated.

An example of the complexity that some of the young people we work with face is illustrated in the following case of a young person who approached us this year. This is a young person who has been in the care of social services for a year but who has not accessed education or started the process of claiming asylum. He has been recently age-assessed as 18, but he disputes that assessed age and finds it very stressful. Young Roots has worked to ensure that he is able to stay in his accommodation and has supported him in accessing the legal process to claim asylum while the age assessment review takes place. We have also found a college for him to learn English and have arranged for counselling, as we have concerns about his mental health. We are concerned that, despite being in statutory care for a year, this young person has not had the correct support.

That case illustrates problems that often occur with age assessments. In many countries and cultures exact birthdates are not recorded, or young asylum seekers have not carried the correct documentation here from their home country. When that happens, young people become age disputed by the Home Office or social services, which sometimes leads to their being wrongly age assessed as over 18. The process to determine age is controversial, and it is very stressful for the young person as it can lead to their having to leave foster care or school.

Only this week it was ruled in court that there is not sufficient evidence that a new method of analysing dental X-rays is a reliable way of determining a child's age and that it should not be used. Although the young person in our case study was not in foster care, there can be issues with foster care, too. For many, foster care provides a stable, helpful environment that is more appropriate than being in semi-independent care for over-18s.

There was recently another case in an area where we work in which a young person had to leave foster care when an age assessment said they were over 18. The young person was supported to find a community care solicitor to challenge the decision of the age assessment, which was subsequently overturned, but the young person had already left foster care.

On the other hand, a regular problem that comes up with the young people we work with is the breakdown of relations with their foster carers. Sometimes there are serious issues and concerns with foster families. For example, one foster family recently would not let our caseworker take a young person to a reputable solicitor. A further problem is that asylum seekers go missing. A report this week from ECPAT found that, nationally, 30% of unaccompanied children, including refugees and asylum seekers, go missing from care in the UK. Those young people are so vulnerable to abuse that the head of policy and campaigns at ECPAT described it as a "national disgrace".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Young Roots is addressing some of those problems through its new casework service for young refugees and asylum seekers who are experiencing a range of issues for which they require one-to-one help from us. Some 90% of our stakeholders and partners wanted us to develop that service. We help to resolve issues on housing, access to healthcare—including mental health—access to quality legal advice and representation, accessing education and advocating on issues with social workers and foster carers. The caseworkers also provide trusted emotional support.

The other activities that we run, such as our youth groups and trips, provide a welcoming and safe space where those young people can make friends, have fun and meet others who they can relate to. We run a weekly football club in Brent, in collaboration with other local organisations, and we see 20 people each week coming who love the physical exertion and camaraderie. We very often play with a local team, which encourages English language integration. The external evaluation of our work showed that 97% reported making friends and expanding their social networks through Young Roots.

Despina Tsiakalou: The next question asked how we will improve information to be passed on to child refugees, for example, on application processing for citizenship and the language barrier. Article 22 says a child has the right to special protection and help if they are a refugee. The young refugees and asylum seekers who we work with would like to see the following: first, they would like social workers to receive better direction, training and support to enable them to address the needs of young asylum seekers. They are very influential in the life and—

Chair: Can you fit what you're going to say in one more minute?

Despina Tsiakalou: Oh wow. Yes. They are very influential in the life of unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers, but some lack the skills and training to match the requirements of the role. We think a responsible adult should always accompany a young person to see a solicitor, no matter if there is an interpreter present or not, because the system is very complex. There is a big issue with the quality of decision making, meaning that the process is often very long and stressful for the young person. In 2015, 64% of asylum applications were refused, and 35% of appeals were allowed. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: The bell isn't for you. If it had gone off in about 10 more seconds that would've been great.

Despina Tsiakalou: This matches the experience of the young people we work with. The lengthy process is very time consuming and very stressful, and it is not uncommon for people to wait for over a year for the initial decision. We would really like to see the processes become better, faster and fairer for the young people we work with.

Chair: Our next group is the Coram Children's Legal Centre. I think we have Stewart? You've got 10 minutes to tell us about your work.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Stewart Maclachlan: My name is Stewart and I work for Coram Children's Legal Centre, where I am the legal and policy officer. I am a Scottish qualified lawyer. What we largely do is to look more at ensuring the legal rights of children and young people, and raising awareness about those rights in the UK. I would say we do less work on integration on a day-to-day basis. It is more about seeking to change the law to ensure that it is easier or more helpful or friendlier towards migrant and refugee children and young people, to ensure that they are able to access services and to ensure that their rights are met in the UK. We do some work around integration.

We do a lot of partnership work with, for instance, Young Roots and CARAS. We go out and do outreach work, where we give legal advice to young people who are maybe in a difficult situation, they may not have leave or they may have limited leave, they may be refugees and be facing issues like not being able to get a travel document or they might have got into trouble with the police and need some signposting and advice. There are various issues on which can advise.

As well as doing outreach work, we have an advice line from 10 am to 4 pm on Tuesday to Thursday. It is a free legal advice line for anyone working with children and young people, and children and young people can also phone themselves. That is free legal advice from a solicitor called Alison who runs the advice line service. She provides that to anyone, whether in London or anywhere in the UK.

We also publish online guidance in relation to various legal rights, such as access to primary and secondary healthcare, access to further and higher education, making further leave to remain applications, rights of separated children when they are taken into care, finding legal representation—pretty much everything that a separated, unaccompanied or migrant child in a family could run into while they are in the UK.

Obviously, we also do some policy work. In the last few years, we have done quite a lot of work, either through strategic litigation or through direct policy work in Westminster, to try to change the law to have a more positive impact on the rights of children and young people. We have on a number of occasions tried to promote the use of guardians for all separated and unaccompanied children in England and Wales, so that they have someone who is there to support them throughout their time in the UK, much like the Scottish Guardianship Service and the Nidos project in the Netherlands, because it has been shown that having that extra level of support improves the rights of children and young people when they come into the UK and are claiming asylum and trying to navigate the process that they are going through.

As I said, we do some outreach work with certain organisations. We also do workshops directly with young people. In the last year, we have done some with Young Roots. We have also done some with Let Us Learn, which works towards ensuring that migrants who cannot access further and higher education do have the right to do so, and promoting that right. Maybe someone came to the UK when they were three years old, never



HOUSE OF COMMONS

had any immigration status in the UK and is now coming to the age of 16 or 17. Only at that point do they start to realise that they do not have the status that they need to get student finance. We work with them to provide them with legal advice. We have also gone out to the R'n'B project at the British Red Cross, and again we have done some work directly with the young people.

One thing we have done strictly in relation to integration is set up a project for promoting young people as trainers. I am talking about bringing them into the organisation and training them to become trainers, and then they come out with us to various training sessions. The idea is that they will train other young people on their rights in the UK, so it is almost like peer support whereby someone who has already gone through the process is able to help others who are then going through the process.

We have a Seeking Support guide, which we provide to all social workers—as long as they pay the postage and packaging. We also provide it within our training and we go out to train in a number of areas. It's not just London, but we have done a lot of work in London. For example, we were, for the last two days, at the West London Alliance, providing training on asylum and trafficking.

Young Roots talked about one of the important things that can be found for an unaccompanied or separated young person or someone who has been taken into care who has unresolved immigration status. Actually, the social worker is going to be their first point of contact and the person who can push for the young person's rights, for example by asking the local authority to pay for a nationality application if they have citizenship rights, helping them to get legal advice or helping them through the age-assessment process—knowing what that is and how it can affect a young person's asylum claim. We do a lot of training on that to raise awareness and promote the rights and the ways in which support workers and professionals can assist.

Chair: Can you explain what the West London Alliance is? You said you went to the West London Alliance to do training.

Stewart MacLachlan: It is a group of local authorities in west London. I was training social workers, personal advisers and IROs from various borough councils—I always get the local authorities mixed up down in England. I was working with borough councils, so Hounslow and others, on those rights.

There are some places where we fall down. It is sometimes quite difficult to provide information directly to young people. One of the biggest barriers is definitely the language barrier. We have worked on ways of doing workshops in which we can make things maybe a little clearer. As lawyers, we tend to go directly into legal jargon, but we try to make things a bit clearer and use plain English. We use interpreters in some instances to be able to advise children and young people directly. Because they are going through so many processes at the same time, it is sometimes difficult to flag who is your social worker, who is your legal adviser, who is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

your community care lawyer or who is your criminal lawyer. There can be so many different people involved. We work with them to create an outline, knowing that there are these great organisations like Young Roots, British Red Cross and CARAS that can continue to work with them as they go through the process.

I guess what we do as the first part is try to teach them about their rights. It is the organisations that are working with them on a day-to-day basis that can then help them through that. We can provide the legal advice, if necessary, and legal representation in the future in some of the cases.

Chair: May I ask one more thing? You said you were doing strategic litigation. We are against jargon in this room. Are those test cases?

Stewart MacLachlan: Yes, they are essentially test cases: either intervening in cases, for instance, a couple of years ago there was the Tigere case, which related to education rights for children who had limited leave to remain but could not have settled status because they were not British citizens. Let Us Learn and Just for Kids Law were the principals and we intervened. It changed the law so that those with limited leave to remain could access student finance as long as they met the “long residence” rules. It meant that some who had been unable to access student finance and home fees were then able to.

We are looking at other cases for the future. I know that the Children’s Society are looking at LASPO, the Legal Aid Bill that took away legal aid in a number of cases. We would like to see legal aid reintroduced in cases involving children, and we will be working towards that in the future as well.

Chair: Thank you. Our next group is the Children’s Society, which is giving evidence on another topic. We have Christine, James and Tom—is that all of you? Right: you have 10 minutes between you. Tell us what you think.

James Simmonds-Read: Hi, I am James. I work for the Children’s Society on our trafficked boys and young men project, supporting boys and young men between the ages of 11 and 25 who are victims of human trafficking brought to the UK from abroad. I provide intensive one-to-one support and group work—I co-run a trafficked boys group in partnership with ECPAT UK.

Christine Bonney: Hi, I am Christine. I work in the refugee and migrant team at the Children’s Society. We have different projects that work with families and with young people who are here unaccompanied—without their parents. I work with teenagers. Some of them are newly arrived and seeking protection, safety and asylum in the UK; some are here for different reasons and a lot of them have been here for many years. We are here to address the more general question whether the rights of young refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are being met in the UK. We have a slightly different style. We are going to do a presentation with some beautiful handmade signs and bring in some quotes from young people that relate to the topics we are talking about.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

James Simmonds-Read: It is late in the afternoon, so a visual aid might be helpful to pick us up.

“I told the police that I had nowhere to go and that I was a child. They told me that I’d be okay and that I’d be safe but instead they put me in a cell. After a day there, I was moved to a house where a man and a woman came to meet me from social services. They didn’t listen to me. They just asked lots of questions. I felt scared and I couldn’t tell them what I’d been through.”

Christine Bonney: We feel that disbelief and discrimination are present throughout the systems of immigration, social care and criminal justice in the UK, as well as in professionals’ attitudes and language towards young people. As has been mentioned briefly, sometimes young people from different parts of the world come to the UK and their age is not believed by authorities, either because a professional thinks that they look a lot older than they say they are or because they do not have any ID—maybe they had to leave their country in a rush for the sake of their safety, or maybe they had to use false ID in order to come to the UK. Young people are asked different questions to determine their age and are often given a date of birth that would make them a lot older than they say they are. This happens to around 50% of the young people that I have been working with. If a young person’s age is not believed, that can affect many things: for example, where they are able to live; whether they can get support from social services; whether they can go to college; and how much help they can get from the authorities.

“I felt so let down and disappointed. The authorities need to do more to listen to us and to build trust with us. They think that everyone is lying. They should try to help us first and not threaten us like criminals.”

James Simmonds-Read: Less than 10% of the young people that we work with are believed by the Home Office and are told that they can stay here. Instead, they are refused and they have to go to court to challenge this refusal, where they are asked to recount everything that has happened to them, from difficult memories and the reasons why they left their country to being cross-examined in an intimidating courtroom by a barrister who tries to prove that they are lying about what has happened to them. With help, many of these decisions are overturned by the courts—we see that time and again—which means that the entire procedure was pointless.

Christine Bonney: “I didn’t do anything. I never committed any crime but that’s how I was treated. If they had taken me to a safe place and taken time with me I would have talked. I would have been able to explain what had been done to me, but this never happened—they detained me instead.”

James Simmonds-Read: Children we work with are often held in immigration detention, which is when immigration doesn’t believe their age and treats them as an adult. I have worked with dozens of children who have been detained as adults. Some of them were later found to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

as young as 14. There is no legal time limit to detention here. I have worked with people detained for years—one as long as eight years—and no one in detention knows when they will be released, or worse, sent back to the country that they fled from in the first place. These children have committed no crime and are held in prison conditions only because they aren't British. They have to share rooms with much older adults, without any understanding of why they are there and with no access to appropriate support. Often they will have experienced trauma and abuse and this is their first experience when they arrive in the UK. Many of those I have worked with cannot believe that the UK does this to people. They have told me that they came here because they believed that the UK upheld human rights, but instead, this is what we do to them. Things are so desperate in detention that children I have worked with tell me that they have seen people slash their wrists in front of them or hang themselves from railings. "I thought my life was over. I just gave up."

Christine Bonney: Almost all of the young people that we work with at some point disclosed to us that they have thought about self-harm or suicide in the past or recently since being in the UK. As has been mentioned in all the presentations today, mental health is a really big issue for this group. Again, our immigration system, criminal justice system and social care system can really traumatise young people by making them go through their whole history again and again. Young people have to give their history to immigration officials, social workers, solicitors, judges, to us, to therapists and to anybody else who is involved with them. Sometimes there doesn't even seem to be a logical reason. One person I work with was required to give the reasons why he came to the UK by a housing provider when he wanted to move to that place, even though that housing provider could have asked his social worker who was there at the meeting to give him that information without him going through it again, but they wanted it directly from him. Because he did not feel comfortable giving it, he wasn't able to move to that house.

Young people's accounts of their past and the trauma they have been through get picked over by professionals who are looking for mistakes or inconsistencies in what they are saying. They get cross-examined in court or in age assessments, as we have mentioned, about really traumatic events and are often told that they are lying about the event, the date or key things that have happened. I have heard many professionals asking young people about really traumatic things like, "When did your mum die?" and then just moving on to the next question without even acknowledging it and saying, "I'm really sorry to hear that. That must be really difficult for you." Is this how British young people would be treated if they had experienced war, torture, separation from their families, the death of parents and traumatic journeys to another country?

As we have touched on again and again, there really is a lack of specialised mental health support services for young people in general, but also for young people who have had particular types of traumatic experience. There are also issues with interpreters in the specialist



HOUSE OF COMMONS

provision that exists. Again, those services are being cut as the years go by.

James Simmonds-Read: Most of the young people we work with wait for years for a final decision on whether they can stay in the UK. Some even wait for a year just to have their first interview, as some of my colleagues referenced earlier. That can be the first point at which they experience a lengthy delay, and then they are going to experience another delay and another delay. All this uncertainty continues to affect their mental health and does not allow them to move on. So many of those we work with say they just want for things to be finished and to be able to be a normal young person, like everyone else. We need the Government to offer long-term safety and security and to do so quickly after people arrive, so that young people can begin to move on and recover from the trauma they have been through.

Christine Bonney: “When we come here, we want a safer life, and we want someone to take care of us. That’s it. I hope the Government can help and support us more.”

Chair: Thank you so much. That was really compelling. Our final group giving evidence is Community Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and we have Eleanor and Egle.

Eleanor Brown: I will give a quick introduction to CARAS, who we are and what we do. We are a refugee and asylum seeker charity based in Tooting in south-west London. We support refugees and asylum seekers from across a wide area of south London, and we predominantly work with young people. About 85% of those we see are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Most of them are aged 14 to 17. A lot have age disputes ongoing, and the majority of them are in foster care or semi-supported accommodation.

We provide all sorts of social and educational support for them throughout the week. We run various projects, very similar to what Young Roots were describing earlier—youth clubs, study groups and casework—where we can pick up on particular issues that young people bring. It is from that work that this evidence is taken. We want to talk about particular reasons why children’s rights are not upheld—not to look at exactly which rights, because those have been incredibly well explored already, but to think through what means those rights are not upheld for these children.

We thought long and hard about all the issues that we see and that are brought to us week in, week out. We feel very strongly that it is linked to the support children get from their social workers. Broadly, their rights are incredibly clear within the law. We have a really robust system for protecting children’s rights, which makes it clear what they are, but it all hinges on who the adults are working in support of these children, whether or not relationships are strong with those adults, and whether those professionals have the support and knowledge themselves to access these rights.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The one thing that all these children have in common is that they have a social worker. What we see is that where there are delays in being allocated a social worker or where the relationship is not particularly strong, all of the rights that they should have access to are delayed or not upheld at all. That is not to say that social services and social workers are bad; I want that to be really clear. The majority that we work with are great, but the systems are not particularly good. We know that people have huge caseloads. We know that there are structural difficulties within social care at the moment. I want that to be clear.

The majority of unaccompanied children we work with have a delay in being allocated a named social worker. There shouldn't be a delay. They should have someone immediately whose name they know, who they have met, who they can meet with, who will take into account their best interests, who will explain their rights and who will ensure that those rights are met. But the majority of children that we work with do not have a social worker for at least the first few weeks of arriving in the UK.

We meet children within a few days of arrival, because word of mouth networks are great. People come to us and they do not know who their social worker is. They do not know which local authority they are looked after by. That means that they have no one who they can say to, "I really want to go to school. This is what I want to study. These are the issues in my care at the moment. I don't think my solicitor is listening to me." None of these things get said to people who have any power or influence to change it.

So what we see are children who are not in school and who perhaps believe that that is not their right, or who are told, "You don't have a right to certain things." We have worked with young people who have said, "I haven't made an asylum claim yet because my foster carer has said maybe I shouldn't; maybe I'm not allowed. Because there isn't an allocated social worker, they have not had someone they can check that with, so there are children who are not accessing any of the right support.

We have significant concerns about the ways in which unaccompanied children are able to access their rights and how they are able to understand them, because in many cases there isn't someone explaining to them what they should have, let alone being able to listen to where these things could be tweaked in their best interests.

We are also particularly concerned about the delays in place at the moment because of the transfers for unaccompanied children. Previously young people were the responsibility of the borough where they first lived. Because of the difficulties in funding, primarily, in lots of local authorities, there is now the possibility of transferring unaccompanied young people out to different areas of the country. In principle, that is so that they do have access to all the provision they should and that social care in their area isn't struggling to meet their needs, but what we are seeing is an exacerbation of these delays.

We have young people who are in this transfer system. They have arrived.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

They should be the responsibility of one local authority. That local authority has said, "We would like you to move somewhere else; there is no clear time limit as to when that will happen." That means these young people do not have a social worker. They do not have appropriate accommodation. They are often in semi-independent accommodation for older children. No one has assessed their age, because that would be the duty of the receiving area, rather than where they are now, so there are no checks on whether provisions are appropriate for them. There isn't anyone that they can talk to or that we can talk to easily. It is generally under a team manager rather than a named social worker, because it is all temporary and these children, in theory, should be moving any day. That also means they are not in school. There is no interim education provided and they are not able to access mental health services because nobody will take on a case that could be interrupted at any minute and potentially be more dangerous. We are incredibly concerned about these gaps in care for children and the impacts these delays have.

However, we do have some really great examples of young people who have been incredibly well supported by their social workers. We wanted to bring a young person with us today who was really keen to speak, but could not get out of college. He wanted his story to be shared. He has talked about the successes he has had. He has been here nearly two years. He did not speak English when he arrived. He was very afraid. He didn't know anybody and he didn't know what would be possible for him. He had a social worker who he met on the very first day and who he formed an incredibly strong attachment to and who listened to all of his needs.

What he talks about is not particularly his success at living independently or his success in college, but about this relationship and how it gave him stability and structure. He said, "She let me think that good things were meant to happen to me." I think that is really crucial. It is not just about what are your rights in the abstract. It is also about having your feelings taken into account, how does someone listen to you, and how do you build the relationship that allows you to access these things?

Egle Banelyte: I would like to share the case study of Abdul to show the lack of communication within the care system. Abdul was living in Wandsworth, although he was looked after by a different borough. His foster carer met the social worker once in the looked-after child review meeting and was not able to get in touch with her afterwards. When I asked Abdul, he did not know the name or number of his social worker; neither did he know in which borough he was looked after.

Abdul's foster carer asked for help to find a school place and an age assessment. Abdul was age-assessed at 16, although his age is 13 and a half, and he was very upset about the outcome of the age assessment. After calling the council in which he was looked after, we were unable to contact his social worker and were referred to the team manager. The school place was not sought after by the council. That was left for the foster carer to do, but she was not aware of that. The written report of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

age assessment was not provided to the child, and he was not able to challenge it. It took another two weeks to get a written report from social services. The social worker provided little guidance to the foster carer, and the division of tasks was not clear.

That example illustrates the lack of information about the application passed to the child and the foster carer. We think a very good example, which Stewart has already shared, is the guardianship example, which is carried out in Scotland. There is one person who is responsible for seeing whether everyone in the care system is doing their job appropriately and ensuring the child is getting their rights and entitlements.

Chair: Thank you. That is a wealth of evidence and lots of information. The young panel members have some questions, which have been sent in by young people, and they may have some of their own.

Q27 Anmol Kaur Singh: What is being done to ensure that children who are refugees and migrants are integrated into British society? Article 31 of the UN convention on the rights of the child suggests that “children have the right to relax, play and join in a wide range of leisure activities”. What is being done to make sure that right is being met for the especially vulnerable, like young refugees and migrants?

Christine Bonney: That is something we were chatting about earlier. A lot of the expert witnesses have talked about the great things they are doing as a charity to ensure that these rights are being met and that people have a space to learn, play, integrate and become members of British society. We run similar schemes.

In our presentation we talked particularly about age assessments. If a young person is not believed to be a child, those rights are automatically taken away from them, because they can't have the same level of support and care, and they can't access the same services that young people do. That makes it harder for them to integrate into these other aspects of society. Equally, on immigration detention, young people who are detained are clearly not able to access those rights at all. I think more needs to be done to address the issues that we mentioned, as well as all the other great things that are going on. For these young people, those things may not be accessible either.

James Simmonds-Read: I think in social services, it is often about making sure the essential needs are met, rather than thinking out a holistic picture of the young person. It is just about meeting those goals. To be honest with you, I don't think those things are being provided, and I don't think it is thought about enough. Therefore, it sadly falls on the voluntary sector to provide such services. Much more should be done to provide them at a statutory level.

Tom Redfearn: As James mentioned in the presentation, there is the kind of day-to-day integration—cultural integration with friends, family and school—and there is also the more long-term integration, and thinking about how that can happen. It is about talking to the young person and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

finding out what they want to happen to them when they hit 18. It often happens that they have temporary immigration status as a child. The social worker will look at it and say, "Oh, that's fine. That lasts until they're 18. Therefore, I can wash my hands of them." Suddenly, they hit 18 and they are not a British citizen, and they don't have any kind of immigration rights. They don't necessarily have the right to get their leaving care package or anything like that.

It is about working with the young person when they are still in care and still a child and saying, "What do you want to do? Do you want us to support you to become a British citizen? Do you want us to support you to go back to wherever it was that you came from when you're old enough to do so, or reunite with friends and family, wherever they may be in the world?" There has been some history of local authorities not doing that. Earlier this year, a local authority in south-east London was actually taken to court by a care leaver with an irregular immigration status, and the local authority actually lost the case. They have had to pay compensation and change the way that they do those kinds of things.

Stewart MacLachlan: I would echo a couple of things, particularly around reuniting with family. That is a big issue, because even though refugee parents are allowed to have family reunions with their children if the children are in another country, the children do not have the same right to bring family members—parents or siblings, for instance—over to this country. It is quite unfair on the child who has been separated from their family over a period of time for them not to be able to reunify with their family, which would help support them in the UK and help them integrate into the UK in the long term.

The other thing is about a child getting legal advice and getting the right advice about their rights when they are a child, because there are routes that are open to them that are not open to adults—for instance, on some occasions, making a British citizenship application in time, or making a limited leave to remain application or a right to remain application. It does make a difference.

Q28 **Jason Xenii:** Given that many of the refugees who come or try to come to the UK are made refugees directly or indirectly by Britain's foreign policy—wars in the middle east and so on—why are the Government denying so many of them asylum?

James Simmonds-Read: I imagine the whole panel is going to say we're right there with you. Yes, it is outrageous. Fundamentally, we do contribute to these situations. I worked with a huge number of people from Iraq and Afghanistan at the height of the time that we were in those conflict situations who arrived here—some of them directly having been displaced by the wars that we were fighting—and were not given status. Things have changed slightly for Syrians, in terms of there being at least some empathy towards them here, and I think a lot of that has come from civil society pushing for more of them to be taken in. I do not think it came from the Government initially.



Tom Redfearn: To play—I was going to say “to play devil’s advocate”. To give the Government’s side of things—not that I am representing the Government at all—they would probably argue that you are meant to claim asylum in the first safe country that you arrive in, and if people are travelling through Europe to get to the UK, they must be travelling through a series of countries. We are literally on the edge of Europe, so they must be travelling through some safe countries to get to us, and therefore the Government will argue, “Why didn’t they claim asylum in the first country that they went to?”

Q29 **Jason Xenii:** Many of them did. There are actually a lot in Germany at the moment.

Christine Bonney: Exactly. There are a lot of different reasons why people come to the UK. For example, they might know people here or there might be a language connection.

James Simmonds-Read: The vast majority of people who claim asylum do so in neighbouring states. There is a real misunderstanding about the number of people who come to the UK.

Jo Cobley: One of the things that we are really concerned about is the unpredictability of the whole system for the young people we work on behalf of. For so many people whose claim fails the first time, it is accepted the second time. That just shows that it is an unpredictable and very stressful system for the people who are applying for status here. It just feels like it doesn’t work well for young people, particularly when they are suffering all the things we have heard about—dealing with mental health problems, living in unstable situations, worrying about their accommodation or being age assessed. It is a complicated scenario for them. Sometimes, they have to go through the whole trauma of going through the story on their first application, and then that fails and they have to go through a second application, which can take years. It is a very, very difficult process.

Despina Tsiakalou: On decision making, I should also say that we have many people who come from the same country or the same area and are the same age—they might even be represented by the same very good, reputable solicitor. Then three get status and the other two or three do not, and we do not understand why, when they have such similar stories. It seems to us that there is a numbers game there; they are not really listening to the stories of the actual people. That is really important—to see them as people, not as cases.

Chair: Five minutes to go, and I think there are three questions to try to rattle through, so keep your answers very brief.

Q30 **Saym Miah:** Knowing that social workers are the most difficult people to get hold of at any time of the day, why not give the key workers or the foster carers the training and the details of the help they need to give to the people they look after? I live with 17 other boys, and the key workers are the only ones who do their job properly. My social worker is a handful



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to get hold of as well. Why not just give the key workers and foster carers the training they should get for this?

Eleanor Brown: We do try to do that. There is huge turnover of staff across the whole sector, so it is very difficult to have a systematic approach where you are part of people's training programmes. Everybody struggles with funding. We have approached foster care agencies to see whether we can offer something, and so far the response has been, "We provide that in-house. We don't have the budget to buy it in, but if you want to come and talk to us for free at the weekend, you're very welcome." There are all these funding difficulties that make it incredibly hard.

I think it matters what people's interests are. Lots of foster carers are not specialists—they open up their homes and they do the best they can, but they do not particularly have time to go to additional training. I think the same is true for key workers, in our experience. Lots of them are really good and really approachable, but they are only contracted for an hour and a half or two hours a week per young person and they do not have time within that to access additional training, so what happens is that they phone us up and we do the best we can over the phone. At the moment we have not found a way of having a more structured response, but we would love to. Are you working on those kinds of things in Young Roots?

Despina Tsiakalou: I think our experience is the same as yours. Some key workers can be good. Sometimes we see a conflict of interest. It is really hard to work for the local authority and go against the local authority at the same time. I think it would be good if there were more funding to support those people. That is really important. If you have one hour of key working per week, you are not even able to write your reports.

Christine Bonney: May I quickly add to that? We do training for professionals sometimes, and I did a training session for key workers. They were great—really interested in the topic, really keen to support young people—but they told me that they are not able to use interpreters at all. I don't know if that is always true for all key workers, but this group were saying that it is really hard. They have a couple of hours with the young people and a newly arrived young person isn't very likely to speak much English, so they were really limited in what they could do with them. That obviously affects how the young person sees them and how they understand the support that they can access. It is a massive thing. Some key workers will probably try to go the extra mile, go on Google Translate and do what they can, but others will be like, "It's too hard—I can't do it."

Chair: We've got five minutes' reprieve, as long as everyone can stay that long. Anmol, you had a question.

- Q31 **Anmol Kaur Singh:** Article 42 states: "The Government should make the Convention known to all parents and children." Personally, before volunteering and working with the Children's Rights Alliance for England, I did not know my rights myself. What is currently being done to ensure that young refugee and migrant children are educated about their rights?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If a child feels that their rights are not being met, what mechanisms or processes are available to them to rectify that, and how are they made aware of them?

Eleanor Brown: It is really ad hoc. It depends on how good your foster carer, keyworker or social worker is. It depends on whether you are in school or college and how that education provider runs their rights programmes. And it depends on what challenges you encounter. As you said, you did not know your rights. I don't remember knowing mine when I was a child. It is when you have a problem that you need to know those things, and it is incredibly difficult to make people aware of what their rights are.

Something that we would love to see is better and greater use of independent visitors, which we are not seeing. That would be a way of supporting children to access their rights.

Jo Cobley: Our experience at Young Roots is very much that young people that we see, particularly when they first arrive here, are not knowledgeable about their rights and entitlements. One reason for that is that a lot of young people that we see have missed large chunks of their secondary education because they have been in very difficult circumstances in their home country, so they are lacking even basic education; educating them about their rights has not been on the agenda at all.

I think that including human rights in school for everybody is really important. It is a crucial thing for everybody in the UK and in London, not just refugees and asylum seekers. At Young Roots, we very much try to have a rights-based approach to our work, so even with casework, the way we do that is to talk about it in terms of your right to access education, health and shelter. We have a rights-based approach to our work in that way. We run sessions on rights in youth clubs. But it is a challenge. I think that, collectively, we need to do more in London to make it a reality that young people and, in particular, vulnerable young people understand their rights and what they are entitled to.

James Simmonds-Read: To pick up the point about education, it is a real lottery depending on exactly what age you are when you arrive. Basically, if you arrive when you are younger than 16, you might be lucky and get into an actual school, and you might learn a bit more than just ESOL, which is just being taught English and not much more. If you come here after 16, that is all you are going to get. So trying to expand what is offered to young people is something that is really needed, right up to the age of 18 and, ideally, beyond. But yes, all of us probably do this kind of rights and entitlements work ourselves. We do training for young people specifically on their rights and entitlements. In the boys group that I run, it is something that we look at in a lot of depth over long periods of time. I think there needs to be funding for group work like that, because it is in groups that young people own themselves, where they do not have someone instructing them but can discuss and debate and say what topics



they need to learn about and which areas of law they don't understand, that these things can best be discussed.

Q32 **Sophie Ulhaq:** How would you improve information being passed to young refugees—for example, explaining the application process or getting over language barriers—specifically in reference to articles 12 and 13?

Tom Redfearn: There are an awful lot of things that you need to do when someone is newly arrived in this country. There is your initial assessment to see whether they are safe and to prevent them from going missing again or being re-trafficked if they have been trafficked before. So there is all of that, but there are also the softer things that you need to do with a young person, such as orienting them around the area that they are in. Where do you go for shops? What kind of shops can you go to get food or whatever? How do you catch a bus? What is an Oyster card? It's basic things like that, but also how school works. You need to keep checking in with the young person as well. If they have come from a war zone or something like that, they might have some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, which might not present itself until further down the line, when they are a bit more settled. When they first arrive, their head is going to be all over the place and they will not really know what is going on, but in time, once they have started to settle, some of these things might come to the fore, so it's about keeping a watching brief on those young people and making sure that they are supported all the way through.

Stewart MacLachlan: I think it is also important to go into schools and places where it is not necessarily particularly obvious in the first place that someone does not have permission to stay in the UK or is not aware of their rights. Organisations going into schools and talking to young people who have never had status in the UK about their rights can highlight that to schools. I know that Let Us Learn do a lot of work around that. Compass estimated that there were about 120,000 undocumented children in the UK, over half of whom were born in the UK and may have the right to make an immigration or citizenship application but don't know it. It's a question of picking up those instances where otherwise there would be no awareness of it until maybe the young person turns 18 and loses a lot of the rights that they may have to be able to make an application.

Chair: I am really sorry, but we have to wrap this up now. We have gone five minutes over and there needs to be a break before the finish. Thank you all so much for your evidence and for the questions, and thanks to everyone who came.

Housing and Homelessness

Members present: Andrew Boff (Chair), Jesse Panda, Saffron Violet Hartman, Ashley Watts, Kismet Meyon, Jason Xenii, Rozita Leetham and Anmol Kaur Singh.

Examination of witnesses

Deborah Halling, Paul Noblet and Steven Templeman.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thank you to my co-chairs for getting you to order—it is always the most difficult part. This is the housing and homelessness session of this inquiry. My name is Andrew Boff. I am a Member of the London Assembly, and I am chairman of the Housing Committee. Because we are running a bit late, excuse me if I do not do any courtesies in introducing people. Can we launch straight into evidence, if that is possible? I would like to hear for 10 minutes—and no more, if possible—from Steven Templeman from the New Horizon Youth Centre.

Steven Templeman: My name is Steven Templeman and I am from New Horizon Youth Centre. We are based in between King's Cross and Euston. We are a day centre working with homeless young people. We work with 60 people a day, offering basic needs, such as showers, laundry and food, but we also offer a huge life skills programme, education and employment training, sports and a big arts programme. The thing that we work on first, or try to do first, is housing. We try to home young homeless people.

New Horizon has been around for 50 years. We are also part of the London Youth Partnership, so we also work with Depaul, Stonewall, London borough councils and Alone in London to try to tackle homelessness. Last year we worked with more than 1,000 young people who were homeless, in housing crisis and vulnerable. I am going to talk today about why we are not upholding the rights of children aged 16 to 17, in terms of accommodation. That is under article 27 of the convention on children's rights, which says, "Every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development." I view that as a loving home, really—that is what that means, in my view.

A proportion of the young people that we see at the centre are 16 to 17-year-olds, who are still children in the eyes of the law. I am going to talk about that, but I would also like to draw your attention to the hundreds of 18 to 25-year-olds that we see every year, who we also recognise are an extremely vulnerable group whose needs are not being met. That is an issue that has been compounded by the current housing crisis.

If we talk about 16 to 17-year-olds, local authorities have a duty to safeguard and accommodate 16 to 17-year-olds, who are still considered children by law. That accommodation must be safe and appropriate. I am going to give some examples of where that often isn't the case. We increasingly see young people—children, in this case—being placed in unsafe environments, hostels with no support or hostels with older people. There is a stark difference between a 16 or 17-year-old and a 25-year-old, in terms of life experience, where they have been and what they are doing. It is kind of inappropriate. They may also be left in bed and breakfasts with virtually no support at all.

We are not upholding the rights of children if they are not appropriately assessed by local authorities and housed in suitable accommodation—or not housed at all—or being asked to return to unsafe environments. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

see many cases at the centre where there are discrepancies in the way that children and young people are treated. It seems to be a lottery dependent on the worker they see, in whatever borough they are in, so it is really unpredictable. It kind of echoes what Coram Voice said before about the services that people are receiving. I can only ascertain that that is to do with funding and the incredible stress that people are under in local authorities, including social workers. I think social workers have been mentioned quite a lot, and it is kind of like they are getting a bit of a bashing. The social workers that I know are absolutely amazing, brilliant, well-trained people, but they seem to be under a hell of a lot of stress due to funding and the absolute lack of housing that is available. What that is doing is putting children at risk.

I mentioned 18 to 25-year-olds. For us, there is no difference between a vulnerable 17-and-a-half-year-old and a vulnerable 18-year-old, so that kind of numbers game around ages—around what a child is and what a young person is—is really ambiguous and is really putting 18 to 25-year-olds at risk, which doesn't seem fair. That is why we believe that 18 to 25-year-olds who are homeless should be entitled to support and found appropriate accommodation that meets their needs—social, physical and developmental.

Most young people that come from stable homes and backgrounds may stay at home well into adulthood, which is arguably right or wrong, depending on where you sit on it, but it can be a bit of a luxury to stay in the family home. Where it is not right is to expect the vulnerable people with complex needs who I work with to live in unsafe situations with little or no support, or with little opportunity of a positive move-on. These young people don't have the option of staying at home, so there is a stark difference here with young people who have stability.

I am going to give you some statistics, which I don't often like to do. These statistics are from Homeless Link, which is an umbrella organisation that works across homelessness across London and the UK. They are quite solid statistics and are not based on borough or local authority statistics, which can often be wrong. What does it look like for a homeless young person today? On average, a young person will spend 16 months in a homeless organisation before moving on. That figure has actually doubled from 2014, which gives you an idea of what that looks like. Some 65% of homeless young people are actually in education, employment or training, and 22% of those are actually in employment.

At the centre that I work at, we sadly work with people who are sleeping in cars while working or sleeping in stairwells of blocks of flats while trying to go to college to better themselves. There is an element of hidden homelessness here that is not picked up in Government figures, with people sleeping in different inappropriate friends' houses and exchanging sex and other stuff to try to stay in inappropriate, unsafe accommodation. Also, as a centre—we use this as a last resort—we give people tickets to go and stay on buses because we can't find appropriate accommodation for them. There aren't many shelters any more. The very few hostels that

are left are over-subscribed. There isn't accommodation to put young people into.

Some 56% of young people in homeless services are care leavers, but 44% are not and therefore are not entitled to the support under the Children's Act. Young people are adversely affected by changes to welfare too and are directly discriminated against with housing benefit and the living wage. This adds a further dimension to not being able to access affordable accommodation or hostel accommodation even, in many cases.

In summary, I would like you to take away from this that we are not upholding the rights of children in finding them an appropriate home, which is a safe place that nurtures development under article 27. Eighteen to 25-year-olds are also a distinct vulnerable group when it comes to rights and their entitlement to accommodation and support. Youth homelessness is a key issue when we are talking about the rights of children in London. How long do I have left?

Jesse Panda: Two and a half minutes.

Steven Templeman: I will finish on this. It's a personal thing, really. I opened the centre this morning at 8 o'clock. We don't open until 10.30 am for young people, as we have to do little debriefs and stuff with staff. I was presented this morning with a young person I have been working with for quite some time; he was in bare feet, without a jacket, stood on our forecourt. He is 18—not long into 18, actually. He has a really serious drug habit and has just been failed by our system. I met with him, and I remember being shocked that it had become a norm that I bump into this young man.

I'll end with that. It is an incredibly sad state we are in when that has become somehow a normality in central London in 2016. I am disgusted by that. It is not a world that I particularly want to live in. It would be really lovely to see the Government look at a strategy that deals with this housing situation and actually nails it. This homelessness issue has clearly been going on for 50 years, because New Horizon has been dealing with it for 50 years and there's been no change, in my view. In fact, in the last five years, I think it has got worse.

Jesse Panda: You have one minute left.

Steven Templeman: Well, I am done now.

Saffron Violet Hartman: Can we have the housing team from City Hall?

Deborah Halling: My name is Deborah Halling. I am part of the housing policy team at City Hall, so I help the Mayor with developing strategy for housing in London. Thanks for inviting me along today. Steven has focused mainly on young people who are not able to stay at home. I'm going to focus a bit more on those who are able to, so those for whom that is a safe option.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

With housing, there is a really interesting angle. Whereas some of the issues you have been reflecting on today are things that children have direct rights to, such as healthcare or education, for children who are staying at home the key issue is whether the rights of their parents or guardians to adequate housing—a right that is codified in the universal declaration of human rights—are being met. That is something children benefit from. But I certainly do not think we are moving out of the territory of children's rights, because if parents' or guardians' rights to adequate housing aren't being met, there are lots of other direct children's rights that suffer—for example, the right to health, to a standard of living for adequate development, which Steven mentioned, to education and to rest and leisure.

Having done that little caveat, I am going to look briefly at a few of the issues around housing in London that affect children and their rights: the supply and cost of housing, homelessness, overcrowding and poor housing conditions. I will also briefly highlight a few of the steps the mayor is taking in those areas.

The basic situation we see with housing in London is that the number of people, which is shown in the middle column on the chart on my slide, has gone up quite a bit. In the left-hand column you can see the number of jobs, which attracts people and has gone up massively. The number of homes, shown in the third column, has not gone up so much. The result is that homes are really expensive, so there is a lot of pressure on homes and a lot of pressure on the help available for people to secure housing, which can take the form of council housing and accommodation and homes that are cheaper, as well as the benefits available to help people to pay rent.

I shall just whizz through a few facts and figures. The average house price in London, shown in column 1 on the slide, is 10 times the average household income, shown in column 2. As if that did not make it hard enough for people to buy a home with the kind of security that brings, people generally need a really big deposit if they are buying a home for the first time—typically, it is around £100,000 for a first-time buyer in London, as shown in column 3. However, average savings for households who are renting are only £75. I put that on the graph, but the line in the fourth column is so small that you cannot really see it. That is the problem summed up in a few figures.

We are seeing more and more people moving into private rented accommodation—the green line that you can see going up on the graph—and they are maybe only guaranteed that they can stay there for six months or a year. Rents are really high in London—around twice as much on average as in the rest of the country—which makes it even harder for people to save up a deposit for a home. Two thirds of the people in London who do buy a home for the first time get help from relatives, which is more than any other area of the UK. That situation obviously favours people who come from better-off families.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In addition to all that, the help available from the Government for people who need help to pay the really high private sector rents, including a lot of people who are working, has been going down over the past few years. At the same time as that, rents have been going up much more sharply in London than anywhere else in the country, so it is harder and harder to afford homes. The map on the slide shows in red the areas where the number of people getting housing benefit to help with their rent has gone down, and the number of areas where it has gone up is in blue. You can see the shift to the areas of London that I was going to say are cheaper but are probably just a bit less unaffordable.

The overall picture is that a lot of Londoners, including those who are earning really quite decent wages, are struggling to get the housing they need. They are having to stretch their incomes further and further and to live in more insecure accommodation, from which they might have to move. None of that is good for London's children.

Jesse Panda: Just a halfway warning.

Deborah Halling: Thank you, that is helpful.

I wish to flag up a few specific issues. One thing we are seeing happening with the rising rents and the squeeze on benefits is that the number of families who are becoming homeless has been going up in recent years, as shown by the blue line in the graph at the top left of the slide. As a result, more families are ending up in temporary accommodation. Although for quite small numbers, that is sometimes a very bad experience for those people in bed and breakfast accommodation, as shown by the purple line in the graph at the bottom left. Some of those families are staying in bed and breakfast accommodation for more than the six weeks that the law permits councils to do that—the green line shows that number. More and more families are being moved away from their local areas, and sometimes outside London altogether, as shown by the orange line in the graph at the bottom right.

All that represents a lot of disruption for families. In terms of children's rights, that makes it a lot harder to pursue an education because children might have to move schools. If they are living in a B&B, it might be really hard to do homework, and it can affect standards of health. It is also difficult just to have a space to be able to play.

A similar issue, overcrowding, including for families who rent homes—that is the pink and green lines—has gone up in recent years. We are seeing—a bit like for people who are homeless and living in bed and breakfasts, often for years on end—that can make it really hard for children to do homework, to play and to sleep. There is a higher incidence of health problems where families are living in overcrowded situations, and it also puts a lot of strain on non-family relationships.

The final issue to flag is poor housing conditions. They are not exclusive to private rented accommodation, by any means, but they are most common there. The green column shows that 16% of homes in the private rented



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sector, where more and more families are living, have a serious hazard—that may be really severe cold or damp, a gas or electrical safety problem or dangerous stairs. Those sorts of things can pose a real risk to the health and safety of people living in the home—particularly, perhaps, younger children who are less able to adapt around those problems.

Jesse Panda: You have a minute left.

Deborah Halling: So, in that final minute, I will flag a few things that the Mayor has done so far. It is important to mention that he is only one of a number of players that need to help to tackle the housing crisis in London. They are not problems that can be fixed overnight, and the Mayor has only been in power for six months, but so far he has made housing his No. 1 priority and is seeking to increase the number of homes that are available—particularly, genuinely affordable homes. When homes are developed they need to have planning permission from the local council, and there is usually a condition that a certain number of them have to be council or housing association homes. The Mayor is about to publish some new guidance on how local authorities can get more of those homes.

He has also announced a new form of rented housing: London living rents. The rents there will be about a third of average local wages. That is for people who maybe cannot get the declining number of council or housing association homes, but are really struggling to pay rent in the private sector, particularly if they want to save for a deposit. He has moved into new territory for the Mayor by working with councils on helping them to get accommodation for homeless households, so that not as many people have to live in bed and breakfasts or be moved out of London. He is also working with councils on improving the private rented sector and helping them to use their legal powers to tackle the worst conditions where those hazards are.

In summary, there are lots of things about housing in London that are restricting children's rights and there are some really serious problems to tackle.

Jesse Panda: Next we have Paul Noblet from Centrepoin.

Paul Noblet: Thank you very much to the co-Chairs and to the panel for inviting someone from Centrepoin to come along today. I should start with apologies from a young woman who is a member of our Centrepoin Parliament of young people, who was going to lead giving their thoughts and evidence to you this afternoon. She had the opportunity to do some further study at college, so I am afraid you will have to put up with me for a little less than 10 minutes, I hope, this afternoon.

A little bit about Centrepoin—we work not only in London, but across the rest of England as well. Within London we work in about half of the London council areas, and we have 32 hostels across the capital. We take referrals from local councils. The process is that young people go to their council and if the council decides that they are eligible—unfortunately that is not everyone—they are then referred into one of our services.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We see homelessness as an issue that is not just about putting a roof over someone's head. It is also very much about making sure that when they move on from Centrepoin after six months, a year or two years, they are in a position where they can go out and live independently. So they have got all those budgeting skills and cooking skills—all those things we try to impart to them—but we help them with any mental or physical health problems that they have, and we also make sure that they have basic literacy and numeracy by the time they leave us. What we do not want to do is duplicate what is already in communities across the city. So we work very closely with Jobcentre Plus, with further education colleges and with GPs and mental health services to make sure that we are all making the best use of taxpayers' money.

A bit on the Centrepoin Parliament—our ethos at Centrepoin is very much to make sure that all our services are driven by young people and what they need and want. In every one of our 32 hostels in London, every three months there are what we call speak-outs, where we kind of put the staff to one side and we go in from the engagement team and talk to young people and say, "How do you think your hostel is being run? What can be improved? Is the budget for young people's activities being spent? Is it being spent on what you want?" So, everything is driven by that, and that process is overseen by the Centrepoin Parliament, which is a group of 15 young people who represent clusters of those services and they are all elected by their peers in those services.

Regarding the convention on the rights of the child, I agree entirely with all the points that Steven made, which will certainly make my evidence faster. Certainly, there are some things that we are doing well in London. I think the "No Second Night Out" campaign, which City Hall administers, is good. It has improved; it gets people off the streets quickly. But obviously we can always do more.

We have seen the number of young people sleeping rough who are under the age of 25 increase over the last 10 years, but some of that is down to the fact that those outreach teams that go out night after night regardless of the weather are finding more young people and helping them into emergency accommodation. So, there are probably more young people sleeping on the streets, but the good news is that they are being put into somewhere temporarily safe more quickly, and the work of colleagues at New Horizon is also a really useful part of that work.

I wanted to touch on article 26, which is the social security element; I will probably stretch it a little bit to include housing, if I can take that liberty. We have a concern. We work primarily with 16, 17, 18 and 19-year-olds. Technically we work up to 25, but that is not most of the young people we work with any more; it tends to be much more that younger age group.

We're concerned that the way the law is at the moment is that if you are 16 or 17 and you become homeless, you can be seen to be what is called "intentionally homeless"—that you chose to make that move to be homeless, which obviously—I can see a few people nodding around the room—is complete madness. Actually, as Steven was saying, in an ideal



HOUSE OF COMMONS

world we would actually like to see anyone aged 16 to 25 not fall under that category of being made “intentionally homeless”. There are so few people generally, but certainly among the under-25s, who deliberately go out and rough-sleep just to get to live somewhere better. That is certainly something we think could be improved, and it would make a big difference and put us more in line with being able to access that social support.

As has been touched on by Deborah in her slides, the cost of renting anywhere in London is obviously sky high; it has gone up much quicker than the rates of housing benefit. So a young person living in one of our hostels who wants to move out will find it hugely difficult to move out, and that obviously causes a huge problem for that young person. If they have come through a two-year journey at Centrepoin, where they have put behind them any mental or physical health problems, they have worked really hard to improve their literacy and numeracy, they can put a great CV together and all the rest of those things, then to be felled at the final hurdle because they cannot move on from hostel life is a really big issue.

It is a big problem for us and for the city as a whole, because we also cannot make available those bed spaces in our hostels—those rooms—to young people who are then coming in afresh and who are in real housing need. That is a big issue.

Jesse Panda: Just a few minutes left.

Paul Noblet: Thank you very much. So, I think that is a really crucial issue and that we need to look again at whether or not the Government—again, as Deborah said, a lot of this is driven by the national Government. So, we really need the Mayor—I think he is fully inclined to do this and previous Mayors have been the same—really to get the best deal for the city that we can. However, we have got to look again at housing benefit being frozen for the rest of this decade, up until 2020. That is a real problem, when rents might be going up by 3%, 4% or more a year and housing benefit is not going up at all. That is a real issue, too.

One of the things that the Parliament wanted to convey to you this afternoon was around access to mental health services, which I guess comes under article 24. At Centrepoin, we try to plug gaps in local services. We have clinically trained psychotherapists, who will try to work with young people to diagnose and support young people with mental health problems.

The reason we have to fill that gap is that there are far too many places in London, and indeed outside of London, where waiting times to see a mental health professional if you are under 18 or indeed under 25 can be two, three, four, five, six months and that is very dangerous and very bad for them, and it can completely stop their progress. We would like to see some sort of work by the Government, with input from London, to say what minimum waiting times should be, not just for people with mental health crisis but for the lower level mental health support that is crucial as well.



I thought article 18 was quite interesting; it is about parental responsibilities and state assistance. We would much rather young people never got to the point of being homeless, or never got to the point of crisis. We absolutely need to do more to prevent young people from becoming homeless. That means more mediation services to go between and iron out the often pretty big arguments between young people and their parents. It also means things on the level of parenting classes, which are often offered to parents with younger children, but a parent with children who are 13, 14, 15 or 16 may not get priority access to those, even though teenagers—if I can remember that far back—can be a little bit stropky, but so can parents. Having those services would be really important, too.

This young man is a star. Is he your co-chair, Mr Boff? He is absolutely brilliant at telling me I need to wind up. Thank you very much for your time.

Jesse Panda: When you are answering these questions, try to do it a bit faster, because we are running out of time.

Saffron Violet Hartman: Can we have some questions from the youth panel? The first one is from Anmol.

Q33 **Anmol Kaur Singh:** Basically, I moved around a lot with a single parent. I had to call a cramped room in a bed and breakfast home for two months, and I even had to celebrate my 14th birthday in one. What support is provided for young people who are going through this, in terms of when they are in temporary accommodation, and possibly aftercare as well? What support is provided for them, if any?

Steven Templeman: We would not work with 14-year-olds, because they would be dealt with by someone else. We work with people from 16 onwards. At that stage, we would help people with education, employment and training. I think that is a really important thing. We help people with learning life skills. There is some stuff that you just might not get to learn, especially if you are living in really cramped conditions: things about washing machines, a decent place to cook and that kind of thing, budgeting and money management and loads of stuff to help you move on and live independently. That is the biggest key thing—living independently and being happy. That is what most people need, so that is what we work towards at New Horizon.

Deborah Halling: I am sorry to hear about that experience, which is too common in London. I think the blunt answer to your question is that often, families living in those sorts of setting—temporary accommodation, often bed and breakfasts—for longer than six weeks get very little support. Often and increasingly, because of the cost of rent, they are moved away from their local area. They may then have to go to different schools—you mentioned moving around a lot—and may be taken away from their support networks, such as wider family and community networks, which can be very helpful in those sorts of crisis situation. The reality is that often, there is not much support, because local authority budgets are very



limited and they are struggling to afford accommodation. More and more are resorting to unsuitable bed and breakfasts.

Paul Noblet: One thing that I would say very quickly is that you often see the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will write to councils and say, "You've all got to stop putting people in bed and breakfast accommodation. It's not good enough." They all turn around, and we in the charitable sector all turn around and say—I am sure City Hall would say exactly the same thing—"It's all very well for you to say that, Minister, but are you actually going to pay the local councils to put them in more appropriate accommodation?" Unfortunately, that has happened under a Labour Government, a coalition Government and the current Government. We just need to get a bit more of "If you tell councils to do something, you've got to give them some money to help."

- Q34 **Biniam Haile:** I just want to make a point about single homelessness. It is really hard to prove vulnerability. I used to work in housing, and a lot of people there who were 16 and 17 could not be housed because they were single, but it was really hard to prove vulnerability. What is being done to address single vulnerability?

Paul Noblet: As far as I am aware, the Department for Work and Pensions is trying to sort out how you might prove estrangement from your family. At the moment, the crazy system is that you have to get a letter from your family to say that you cannot live with them, and most families are not necessarily prepared to accept the situation or write that sort of letter. I know that the Government are trying to sort it out more clearly, but 16 and 17-year-olds are still more likely than those aged 18+ to be single homeless. Again, that is a major concern for us. We feel that anyone under 25 needs to be more of a priority than they currently are—16 and 17-year-olds generally are, but there are issues about proving estrangement. All I know is that the Government are trying to improve the system because there are many other people who are making exactly that point.

Steven Templeman: For 16 and 17-year-olds, the council has a duty to assess your case and house you while your case is being assessed, but that does not always happen. As soon as you turn 18, even if you are street homeless and walking around in bare feet without a jacket, the council has no duty to house you—you are not classed as a priority need. I go back to the argument about the difference. If it is just a month's difference between being 17 and being 18, I don't think that is right. It needs to be dealt with.

- Q35 **Jesse Panda:** Do you think we should educate young people of secondary school age so that they can start to get a saving mind-set, rather than teaching them from primary school, when they do not really care? When most young people first get a Saturday job, they are so happy that they are getting money, and it is good for them because they do not have to pay rent or bills. They get a bit excited and spend a lot, so perhaps teaching them about saving in secondary school could help them in the future.



Steven Templeman: That is totally right. Teaching young people about money is really important. Unfortunately, money makes the world go round, however you look at it, doesn't it? So teaching young people is a good thing. We do that at New Horizon, and part of homelessness prevention is about money. But it should be said that in London you really cannot save enough money to get a mortgage or, often, even to get private-rented accommodation. If you are a young person, private landlords sometimes want six months' deposit—they do not trust you, and they discriminate against you, because you are a young person. There is profiteering going on here that needs to be addressed, including the highness of rents. Yes, it is lovely that you can learn how to save, but only if that saving will get you something at the end. If it doesn't, that is disappointing.

Chair: Although that is not in and of itself an argument for not saving.

Steven Templeman: No, saving is good. I am not saying that it isn't.

Deborah Halling: There is valuable work going on in some schools and in other places where there are lots of young people that will look at some of those money management skills and issues around housing in order to help young people understand their rights and options and how to access help if they need it. Those sorts of initiatives can be really helpful in preventing young people from becoming homeless and in encouraging them to get help early. That is a good thing to do, and there are some wider activities that are also useful.

Paul Noblet: One thing I would add is that a lot of that advice can be available in school, and the amount of advice is increasing, but one of the problems we have in supporting young people is that they have not always been in school. Truancy is one of the biggest indicators for whether a young person will become homeless. If they were not around to have access to budgeting lessons, cooking lessons and careers advice, there isn't really anywhere else they can now go to, outside of school, to get all that advice. That is a bit of an issue for younger people and for those who have already left school at 17 or 18. You are right that budgeting is very important.

Saffron Violet Hartman: Does anyone else from the panel have a question?

Q36 **Kismet Meyon:** When a young person faces homelessness and goes to the housing section of their local authority to say, "I'm homeless," what could be done so that the housing people make a correct referral, rather than just giving them a list of numbers for all the available services? What can be done? Do you think we can do something better for them so that we can say, "Actually, you are within the 16 to 25 range, so you are a priority" and can give them a proper referral, rather than just a printed piece of paper with numbers on it?

Steven Templeman: Yes, that would be nice, wouldn't it? I think people are time-bound. That is the reality of a lot of people that present. I think



HOUSE OF COMMONS

16 to 17-year-olds are a priority and would be treated as a priority. When you are 18 or above, they will give you a list. It is usually voluntary sector stuff such as New Horizon that you would end up going to.

Kismet Meyon: I have been there.

Steven Templeman: Yes, I know.

Kismet Meyon: It was from Richmond, and Richmond is nowhere close to King's Cross.

Steven Templeman: New Horizon is unique. There are not many services like New Horizon around. It is in central London, and I cannot think of another holistic service like New Horizon, so there aren't any others in London. That's the answer. The council will hand that list over because they have nothing to offer. They have no duty to offer something to someone who is 18 or above, unless they fall under the priority need thing, and that is the reality.

Q37 **Kismet Meyon:** Do you think more could be done outside of London? Going into Surrey, things are quite bad there, as well. Young people are facing issues that people face here in London. I found more opportunity in London than in Staines or Surbiton.

Paul Noblet: There is a little bit of good news—it is not going to change who is a priority for housing, but it will improve the level of information. Information has to be meaningful—it cannot just be a potentially out-of-date list of hostels that you have to ring, if you have some credit on your phone, or go and visit.

The Homelessness Reduction Bill is currently being debated in Parliament, and it has been a cross-party effort. It is led by a really good Conservative MP, Bob Blackman, who is the MP for Harrow in north-west London. It has had support from all the different political parties and the Government have now said that they think it is a good idea. It is about supporting people when they go to the housing options teams to say, "Okay. Is the problem you cannot stay in your own flat? Are you claiming housing benefit? How can we help you claim housing benefit?" It could be, "Do you know about this? Do you need some budgeting help?" It is those sorts of things.

It is going to cost quite a lot of money, and some east London MPs stood up and said, "Our councils say this will cost £17 million for four local councils to give this advice", but the Government said in response that they would be willing to fund that. I think that everyone recognises that it is a problem, but the Bill will not create more houses or increase young people's priority access to that housing.

Steven Templeman: I do think that is a problem with that. There is no point in handing out all this advice if there is no home for someone to go to. It is stupid. It is just not going to work.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kismet Meyon: Can I just say that the one thing that annoys me the most is that, like we said, you would refer them to put them on to benefits, but obviously now they are cutting everything and putting universal credit in place? It baffles me that if someone is socially housed, your housing element is not paid because you are socially housed. Surely that makes no sense. If you are claiming benefits, it means that you need to be supported and you are probably in social housing, not in a hostel. I do not understand how that works. I do not understand why it is like that. Surely if universal credit is meant to be there as a benefit system, it needs to pay the housing element for social housing.

Steven Templeman: I think that is quite a big argument with universal credit, and maybe we have not got the time to go into it. I do think with housing benefit, young people generally are discriminated against. They are cutting housing benefit for young people. That seems the target group for me for homelessness—they need housing benefit. Instead, it is like, “Young people are lazy. They need to get jobs.” If you are coming from a background where you have got no family support, no home, you are isolated and you are on your own—even if you come from a difficult family background where you have got family, it is difficult to try to maintain housing, a job and other stuff. Young people like that need that benefit. It is a benefit for them. I am quite happy to give young people that benefit. I would be. It is needed.

Kismet Meyon: If you were the Prime Minister—

Rebecca Palmer: Form an orderly queue!

Steven Templeman: I know. If I ran the country, but I don't.

Q38 **Ashley Watts:** I have one more question. Basically, loads of young people have jobs, go to university and do what they love, but you said that Sadiq will be aiming for affordable prices or houses. What is the definition of affordable?

Deborah Halling: That is a really good question. It is something that has become a bit of a contentious issue in recent years.

In terms of what is generally looked at as affordable, historically that has been rents for council or housing association properties where usually the rent is around half of market value. The new London living rent that I mentioned and which the Mayor has introduced is looking at linking rents to local income levels. So the rents will be around a third of incomes in a borough. That is based on an understanding of housing need that says that people shouldn't be spending more than about a third of their income on housing costs; and a lot of Londoners are spending a lot more than that.

I think it is really helpful to have a range of different solutions, because some people have no income at all; some people, like you mentioned, go to university, and they are working but still struggling to afford housing. So I think having those different options is really useful.



- Q39 **Saffron Violet Hartman:** Article 13 states that children should have information relevant to them. This includes information about homelessness. What would you do to give homeless young people the best information they need to make the best of the resources available to them in their current situation?

Steven Templeman: If you are going through a housing crisis I think it is really important that you have a really thorough assessment. I think that assessment has to be holistic, so you are not just looking at fixing the problem of the housing; you look at the whole picture, really. I think you start with that, with individual cases; but I think there is also some preventive stuff you can do. We go into schools and stuff, and we do homelessness prevention workshops. It is borough-specific, so we talk to each borough school about what services they can access in their local community, or what service they receive if they go to their local boroughs— housing options. I think that is important. That is not something that is taught in schools, and it actually is a problem in schools. Young people are leaving school with nowhere to go.

Paul Noblet: One of the things I would add—and I would agree, certainly, with everything Steven says, and we do a bit of that work ourselves, too—is lots of young people, if they become homeless, spend time sleeping on night buses, because you get the one ticket and at least it can be somewhere that is dry. Equally with the night tube there may be possibilities there; and that is to use lots of unsold Transport for London advertising spaces. So rather than replicating 15 times the same advert, let's use it to have a helpline number—somewhere that there can be practical support. It is going to have to be a London-wide one, unless you kind of try to do it between different bus routes going through different boroughs; but just doing something practical like that, because if the advertising is being filled with just other Transport for London advertising that seems crazy, so let's stick a couple of bits of the GLA together and say, "Hey, how do we just make better use of this space?"

- Q40 **Rozita Leetham:** We have touched a bit on the six-week legal limit that a family can be housed in bed and breakfast. I was wondering how from your point of view is the best way to actually tackle it; because everyone agrees it is a problem, but the Government has turned around and said "We don't have places to put people, etc." But there has to be a solution.

Deborah Halling: I think getting to the root cause is the best solution. That obviously isn't of benefit to people who are in bed and breakfast right now; and so I think sometimes shorter-term interventions to get people out of bed and breakfast are necessary. The Government did make some funding available about three years ago now, to help London boroughs with that, and that seemed to have the right effect, because numbers of families in bed and breakfast went down; but the effect was relatively short lived. So I think those kind of short-term interventions are necessary, but the root issue is around the supply of affordable housing; and then on preventing homelessness. That again comes back to the supply of affordable housing; so I think that any approach to that issue



HOUSE OF COMMONS

needs to have both a short-term benefit for the people in bed and breakfast, and a long-term focus of getting to the root of the problem.

- Q41 **Jason Xenii:** Why isn't there Government legislation regarding the cost of rent—for example, a rent cap, or possibly incentives for landlords to lower rent?

Paul Noblet: That's a really good question.

Steven Templeman: In all honesty, a lot of people own a property and for some people who own property—a lot of people in government own property—it is not in their interest to look at a strategy for capping rent, because people profit from that rent. A lot of MPs have second homes. People are profiting from it, so when you are profiting from something, you don't really want to think about it—"Oh God, no, I'm not going to change that, because I'm getting that money to go on my holidays to Barbados every year." People do not really want to invest that time, because it will affect their pockets. Obviously, that has a detrimental effect on young people, on their futures and on what they are going to be able to get when they are my age. That is a general problem when looking at this and in finding proper solutions to it. People seem to be afraid of rent caps, but that seems like a really great solution to me—cap the rent and put some kind of legislation in place so there is enough social housing with the same kind of rents. Why can't that happen? I don't understand really.

Paul Noblet: The other side of the problem is that it is a supply and demand question, so landlords will charge what the market will bear. The way you drive down prices is to have a greater amount of supply. The one thing that the Government could do, if it wasn't willing to legislate in terms of privately rented landlords, is to increase social housing grants and bring them back to the levels we had pre-recession—10 years ago almost. That was money that the Government used to make available to councils, housing associations and developers to subsidise new developments. So if you are building 300 new homes—let us say 100, because it is a nice percentage thing. If you build 100 new homes, most councils say you have got to have at least 35%, ideally 50%, of the units as affordable. Developers will say, "Well, we have got to borrow money and we have got shareholders. I'm afraid we can only do any housing if we have 80% private." Then councils say, "Well, I'd rather have 20% than nothing", so we end up with 20. That creates lots of jobs, because lots of people work in the construction industry who could also be homeless if they were not working. But we could get a level by just creating more homes. It will tackle the problem you describe, but if it is unpalatable politically it is better to make that investment and put people to work as well as into affordable housing.

Jesse Panda: Any more quick questions?

- Q42 **Chair:** If we have no other questions, may I just ask one? There was one point made earlier, by Mr Templeman—Steven, you commented about the stats of the local authorities being wrong. I would be very grateful if you could let us know those stats that are wrong. One of the problems is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that if you cannot count things accurately, you cannot resource them accurately. It would be really helpful if you could contact the inquiry with some examples of those stats. Funnily enough, I had a conversation this morning about the same thing on overcrowding figures, for example, and whether they count them differently in different local authorities, which means you cannot really account for them on a London-wide basis.

Steven Templeman: It is not also a criticism of local authorities, because in many senses—

Chair: If they are doing it differently, you cannot have a London-wide figure, yes.

Steven Templeman: Yes. I can get them.

Chair: If we have no other questions, because I have the benefit of being the Chair and have had to do no work whatever, I will just mention something about rent caps. Everywhere rent control has been tried in the past, it has had the effect of increasing rents and reducing the supply. If we can come up with a way of control that did not have those symptoms, I think more people would seize on the idea than there are at the moment. So we really need to get some intelligent minds on how we could get such rent control without actually destroying the number of houses.

I express my thanks to everyone in this particular session. I happen to think that housing is the most important issue—I would, I am Chair of the Housing Committee. It is one of the most critical issues. We have got to build, and in building the most appropriate properties, we have got to ensure that young people's voices are heard when we come to assess the priorities of how to resolve this particularly urgent matter.

I thank my co-chairs, Jesse Panda and Saffron Violet Hartman, who has the nicest name on the planet. I thank them for making sure that this session was well run. You now have a 10-minute break. Be back punctually, please.

Summation

Merhawit Ghebre (Chair), Caroline Boswell and Anna Edmundson.

Chair: Thank you everyone for staying this long. I am going to hand over to Anna first.

Anna Edmundson: It has been a long day, so I will keep it brief. I am delighted to have been here today, to listen to some of the evidence and, in particular, to see the youth panels in action, which I think everyone will agree has been fantastic. I am going to speak to you briefly about some work that the Children's Rights Alliance for England did on investigating the state of children's rights in London and about a report that we published two years ago. There are summaries of that research around the room, so do help yourselves. I am not going to go through it in detail you will be pleased to hear, but I just wanted to flag up a few things that I felt were appropriate after such a good day on children's rights. Before I do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that though, I just wanted to make an observation and talk a little about what exactly children's rights are and why they are important.

The first thing to say is that children's rights are about more than just participation. Although participation and taking children's views and experiences into account is crucial, and today has really showcased that in a fantastic way, it is about more than that. As you have heard today, children's rights set out a minimum standard for the treatment of children. They say that public bodies should make sure that children have safe, secure and appropriate housing, enough to eat and warm clothes, and that children should not be inappropriately criminalised. They say that children should have an equal chance at school. The most important thing about all of those is that almost every decision that a public body makes, including those of local authorities in London, will affect children's rights. And it is not just in things like education and children's services but also in everything else, including planning, transport and regeneration, which have implications for children's rights.

The reason it is really important to stress that these are legal standards, and that it is not just about participation, is that these are rights that are legal obligations, which means that when the UK signed up to the convention on the rights of the child they were making a promise to take on these obligations and make sure that these things were real for children in England. That matters, because when those local authorities do not live up to those obligations, we can do something about it because the law has teeth. We can use children's rights in negotiations with decision makers, or in the courts if necessary, to hold people to account for the decisions they make. And we see that happening a lot. You have heard examples of the kind of strategic litigation that some of the experts who talked to you today have taken to make sure that children's rights are made real, particularly on immigration and asylum.

We also know from our work at CRAE that human rights and children's rights have been able to make a massive difference in children's everyday lives. I will give just one example from last year. There was a court case; before it, if you were a family member who was fostering a child, you weren't entitled to the same payment as somebody who wasn't a family member and was fostering the same child—that sounds ridiculous, but that was the way that it worked—but human rights and children's rights meant that they had to change that law.

Before I talk about one or two of the findings in our report, I want to deal briefly with what we think about the possibility of change for children and why we think London can serve as a model for the rest of the country. As you probably know, there are lots of real success stories here. Education in London is really good news story. Not only did children generally do better at school in London than in England as a whole, but disadvantaged children—those on free school meals or who have a statement of special educational needs—also do better in London. Education in London has not improved by chance but because a lot of children were being left behind and policy makers, decision makers and education professionals came



HOUSE OF COMMONS

together to do something about it, and to make sure that everybody did have an equal chance at school and that we got the best possible educational outcomes. Children's rights are really all about looking at where things are going wrong—we have heard a lot about that today—and then putting the resources and determination into making a change.

Change can be made in other areas of children's lives as well. We think that if policy makers put children's rights at the heart of all their decision making, they can transform the lives of children across the capital. I will just highlight that in practice from our research, which did paint a somewhat depressing picture of the state of children's rights across London, but what we took away from it is the message that change is possible.

For example, our freedom of information request showed that the use of Tasers on children in London had increased massively over the last year, but when you break down those figures and look at what is happening on a borough-by-borough level, you find what the real picture is. Croydon, for example, had the highest use of Tasers in the whole of London, but funnily enough, they did not have the highest crime or youth crime rate in London. Instead, Ealing had a higher crime rate than Croydon, but they did not use Tasers on children at all. That suggests to us that there are ways for the police to do their job effectively without using Tasers.

Likewise, when we looked at looked-after children in London, we did a lot of work around children in care councils. We found that the good impetus behind many of these children in care councils was to try and make sure that children could influence the way that services are run. However, although all boroughs did have a children in care council, in some places there were no meetings at all of that children in care council in a whole year. In others—I really have to give a shout-out to Harrow and Haringey here—not only did they have lots of meetings, but they had really active participation, and children had a real impact on the decisions that were being made by councillors about their own futures. So again, just because something looks bleak across the board, when you really analyse and drill down there is the possibility of change.

What do we think needs to happen now? Like I said, there are some challenges—there is no doubt about that—and the evidence we heard today on mental health, housing particularly, and youth justice shows us just how much there is to do. But—and I would say this—I think that children's rights are a way that we can start to tackle some of these problems and that if public bodies put them at the heart of all they are doing, it could have a huge difference. There is a real opportunity to do that at the moment.

The Children and Social Work Bill is being debated by parliamentarians at the moment—not today, but it has been over the last few weeks. Just across the road there, MPs and peers have been talking about how to structure children's social services in the future. We, with our colleagues at UNICEF, have put down an amendment that would put a new duty on public authorities to put children's rights at the heart of all the things they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are doing. We are not the only ones who think that is a good idea and have been pushing MPs to do it. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, when it examined the UK's record on child rights earlier this year, said it is something the Government should do. It is also something that the Joint Committee on Human Rights said it would like to see.

We know it could work. Scotland and Wales have taken a different approach to delivering children's rights. Ministers there are under a legal duty to give due regard to children's rights. In Scotland, public authorities have to report on the steps they have taken to secure children's rights. Unfortunately, England is lagging behind the rest of the UK at the moment, in terms of the protections around children's rights. That is where London comes in. In the same way that London led on improving education, and a lot of the ideas that came out of that were adopted throughout the country, we would love to see—and we hope you will work with us on this—London leading the development of child rights across England. It is not just about individual councils, but the Mayor's office, the GLA, London MPs and everybody else—most crucially, children and young people themselves. We must all back the call to make sure children's rights really are at the heart of all the services that children receive.

We know that children's rights can make a difference to children's day-to-day lives, and we have learned today that some areas of London and some councils are doing it much better than others. We also know that change is possible, and we have got a real opportunity to make change and improvements so children's rights are made a reality for children in London. I would love to work with you, as a result of this inquiry, on taking forward some of the great work that has happened today to ensure that all children in London get the best start in life and that their children's rights are a reality.

Chair: Thank you for that. I am going to pass it on to Caroline.

Caroline Boswell: Thanks, Merhawit. I have been here since lunchtime—I know some of you have been here since 8 o'clock this morning—and I seriously want to congratulate all the young people who have worked so hard, with support from Rebecca and Alasdair, to make today possible. I have been attending events in Parliament for many decades, and I can genuinely say it has been a real joy to see so many young people look at home in Parliament, to be asking really pertinent questions and to have organised in a very professional way this very, very full day—a fact-finding fest, it says here; a mammoth marathon of a day. Well done, all of you. I feel it is a credit to the talent, drive and commitment that we see in our young Londoners. I want people to stay involved and stay organised to ensure young Londoners' voices get heard.

What we have heard today has been sobering. We have heard detailed evidence of where children's rights to protection, provision and participation are not being consistently upheld. The point that Anna made is that children's rights are important principles and standards. They are central to a realisation of our human potential. In not helping children realise them, we are just wasting our talent, which we could otherwise



HOUSE OF COMMONS

see. For me, this is about the kind of city that we want our children to grow up in and the kind of society that we would like to support and help to work towards.

On the positive side, we have also heard examples of good practice. We have heard of where improvement is possible, where people come together and work together for change. We have also heard about some distressing examples and some concerning areas, where particularly the most vulnerable children are having the kind of treatment that we would not want for any of our own children, so we need to work to see how we can improve things. For me, that demonstrates again the fact that, although London can be a really great city to grow up in, that is not consistently the case for all our young people. The principles of the best interests of children and young people, and of equality, which is at the very centre of the UN convention, are critical.

I will pick up the report that comes out of today with Joanne McCartney, the statutory deputy Mayor, to make sure it goes back to Sadiq. As we have heard today, a lot of the policies, legislation and funding lie with national Government—the UK Government—and the local authorities. We will certainly want to have some kind of feedback, in terms of our thinking on how we might progress some of the ideas. I will certainly feed Anna's thoughts into that.

The only other thing I want to say is to reiterate my point about staying involved, staying organised and ensuring young people's voices continue to get heard. I just want to thank again Merhawit, Mark, Rebecca, all members of the peer outreach team, and Alasdair for hosting the GLA's team here today.

Chair: This is where we say goodbye. Thank you for coming and for supporting us. Hopefully, this will continue on. Thank you for staying for so long.

Alasdair Mackenzie: Can I say a final word? I echo the thanks to the GLA peer outreach team, with which I have worked for six years. I have consistently had extremely positive experiences with them, and I have really loved working with them all that time. I thank the GLA more generally for their support for this event, and the parliamentarians and members of the GLA who turned up. Finally, I thank the unsung heroes, the parliamentary reporters. Thank you very much. I hope they hear this on the tape. Thank you for all your hard work. We look forward to reading the full transcript of everything that's been said. Have a fantastic weekend, everybody. Thank you so much for coming.