

**‘No Good Options: one year on’**

**Minutes of Evidence session 2: Social care thresholds – perspectives of academics and sector representatives**

**Wednesday 7th February, 5.30 – 7pm**

**Committee Room 13, Palace of Westminster**

**Chair**: Tim Loughton MP

**Co-Chair:** Baroness Howarth of Breckland

**Secretary**: Baroness Massey of Darwen

**Treasurer**: Earl of Listowel

**Vice-Chairs**: Baroness Walmsley, Alex Burghart MP, Sarah Champion MP

**Clerk**: Robyn Ellison

**Welcome and introduction**

Tim Loughton MP as chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPG) welcomed everyone to this second evidence session outlined the format. During today’s session, we will hear from two panels: the first panel is made up of leading academics researching children’s social care, and the second panel features senior representatives from the children’s social care sector. There will time for Q&A following the presentations

**Panel 1: Presentation and perspectives from leading academics in the field of children’s social care**

The four academics introduced themselves:

* Paul Bywaters, Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield University and Emeritus Professor at Coventry
* Kate Morris, Professor of Social Work and Head of the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield
* Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work and Head of Department at the University of Huddersfield
* Nina Biehal, Professor of Social Work at the University of York

**Professor Paul Bywaters** outlined the key findings of his research. The major disparities in levels of children’s social care interventions can be attributed to three factors:

* Deprivation – we can attribute almost 50% of difference between local authorities to deprivation levels
* Ethnicity – this is an almost forgotten subject by policymakers but there are huge variations by ethnicity
* Expenditure. Professor Bywaters highlighted three considerations in relation to expenditure:
  + Since 2010/11, there has been a reduction in spending of 16% per child. This is despite a 750,000 increase in the number of children in the population.
  + Reductions are greater in the most deprived local authorities. In the most deprived local authorities, cuts average 27% per child whereas in the least deprived they were 4% per child.
  + For all local authorities, the combination of rising demand and expenditure constraints has led to a shift in the balance of service from family support and prevention to protection services. In 2010, expenditure was split approximately 50-50 between these areas whereas now it is closer to 70-30. This is not an intentional policy shift; the Government have highlighted the importance of preventative services but expenditure decisions have not reflected this.

**Professor Kate Morris** outlined her work on the case study element of the research. The research found that variations in intervention rate between local authorities are not just a function of local decision making; in fact there is far more in common between local authorities. Similarly there is little difference between social workers’ approaches, all social workers felt a burden of need and spent their time preoccupied with the resource challenge they face. The research identified a mismatch between families’ concerns with basic needs such as income, heating and food and social workers’ focus on identifying child abuse. Families appreciate the efforts of individual social workers but there is a profound distrust of children’s services as a community narrative as a whole. Professor Morris emphasised that the key finding of her research is that differences in practice and leadership are not sufficient to explain variations in interventions.

**Professor Brid Featherstone** led on the impact aspect of the work. She highlighted a shift in how social services are dealing with families. Families now have to translate their story of need for help into a story of risk in order to be heard by social services which leads to an environment of suspicion. There has also been a shift in terms of expenditure towards very time-limited support, for example in terms of the support that children with learning difficulties receive. Family support services have been “hollowed out.” For example, mothers experiencing domestic abuse receive an immediate risk-oriented response. The overall effect of this means that social services’ work is being funnelled in a very narrow way.

**Professor Nina Biehal** discussed two recent studies which considered the question of whether thresholds are too high or too low. The studies looked at the severity of different types of abuse and neglect for over 600 children and gave these a standardised rating measure. The first study was part of a wider comparative European study comparing child protection systems. It looked at 400 children subject to section 47 enquiries across four local authorities and was able to use the standardised measure for 266 children. Of these, 11% became looked after, and of those who became looked after 85% were rated very high in the severity of abuse or neglect. If thresholds were high, this is what we would expect to be happening. Across the four local authorities studied there was significant variation.

The second study looked at over 300 children in one local authority. It found that 88% of looked after children had experienced most severe level of maltreatment and that the threshold for becoming looked after was very high. The study did not look at change over time, but it does enable us to conclude that for these five local authorities thresholds seem to be extremely high. This finding makes sense in the context of poverty, homelessness, funding pressures, rising demand and reduced services.

**Tim Loughton MP** asked about the figure of 750,000 more children in this country since 2010 which are disproportionately more in poorer areas and presumable more from BME families in some of those poorer areas as well where, from findings, they are more likely to need to have some form of support earlier or later on. So, trebly putting pressure on those authorities.

**Professor Paul Bywaters** said that the findings of the research challenge the view that BME children are over-represented in the care system. Once we control for deprivation this is no longer the case.

More broadly, there are huge inequalities between ethnic groups of children which are scarcely focused on at all in public policy. These have consequences for the economy and for children and families. There are a lot of things we don’t know in relation to inequalities between ethnic groups – are some families better at looking after children, are services not reaching them or are they resisting them. There is a need for more research to be done in this area before we draw conclusions.

**Professor Biehal** highlighted an example from her research of the need to better understand the relationship between ethnicity and risk, in relation to a local authority which had a high south Asian population, the majority of whom were Muslim and therefore experience lower rates of alcohol abuse which is a significant factor in child mistreatment.

The Question and Answer session moved on to consider the relationship between austerity and the quality of services. The Government, National Audit Office and Ofsted have all said that poverty and quality of services are not linked. **Professor Bywaters** stated that this flies in the face of evidence such as Ofsted ratings. Policy makers are reluctant to talk about the relationship between deprivation, expenditure and the quality of services.

In relation to family factors in BME families, particularly the reported high rates of absence of Afro-Caribbean fathers, **Professor Bywaters** expressed reluctance to discuss this in the absence of evidence to confirm whether assumptions about the behaviour of families in particular ethnic groups are correct.

**The Earl of Listowel** asked about the value of a potential direct consultation mechanism between social workers and decision makers, as there are with children and young people. The response from the panel was that this is worth considering, however **Professor Morris’s** findings highlighted that social workers’ priorities can be mismatched to those of families, who were mainly focused on socio-economic concerns. **Professor Featherstone** gave an example however of the recent adoption enquiry in which social workers were able to be reflective about the influence of the austerity context in which they are working (in contrast to their everyday practice in which this did not feature).

**Baroness Tyler** picked up on the point about emphasising risk to access services and asked whether this is to do with the rationing of services available or is it linked to the way social workers are being trained and managed. **Professor Morris** responded that all social workers studied engaged in rationing of services and that is social workers have become risk-preoccupied this would not necessarily be their choice.

**Panel 2: Perspectives from Senior Sector Representatives**

**Jane Pickethall,** Chair of the National Association for Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) outlined the role of a Virtual School Head a having oversight of education of looked after children. NAVSH was set up to conduct research and ensure that the support network is in place around the child.

The Association is seeing increased pressure, with very few members coming into the role now just as Virtual School Heads, they usually have other roles as well which leads to a watering down of the role. NAVSH also manages the Pupil Premium Plus. Increasingly this funding is being used to prop up virtual school heads which NAVSH doesn’t want to see. School funding pressures are leading to support staff being cut, yet these staff often make the difference for looked after children. NAVSH is also seeing a lot more generic support for families prior to coming into care rather than the specialist services which they can access once in care. There is also significant variation between virtual schools.

**David Ashcroft**,Chair of the Association of Independent LSCB Chairs, reflected on the need for the sector to get better at using insights from academics. We need to talk about the whole system, not social care. From the perspective of the Association, there is a squeeze in how services are working for children in need. The application of thresholds is shifting. The experience of safeguarding boards is that they are increasingly required to look at issues like domestic violence, Prevent, Missing etc and need to respond to these challenges but not allow them to define how we approach safeguarding. We know that abuse is complex, intergeneration and crosses boundaries and jurisdictions. One source of optimism is that some local authorities are moving away from thresholds as gatekeeping for social care and use them as a vantage point to approach a whole system approach. One example of this type of innovative goo practice is Norfolk’s [Signs of Safety](https://www.norfolklscb.org/people-working-with-children/signs-safety/) programme.

We need to revisit the concept of multi-agency safeguarding hubs as these are implemented differently in different areas, as with thresholds.

**Richard Cooke, Commercial Director, Outcomes First Group and representative of the Children’s Services Development Group:** CSDG came together as a collaboration in 2006. We have been working on outcomes framework and outcomes models for the young people in care. I can, from my own experience at Outcomes First Group see that the young people coming through the system are far more complex than they have been for a long time. That has continually been the case. And also the thresholds are not just necessarily for young people coming into care but also the thresholds at the top end of care who may be previously accessed forensic services. That threshold also seems to be fluctuating as well. A lot of our focus has been on placement stability. Again, some of the statistics on placement stability for these young people are 90% is less than 12 months. Anyone who has been through the fractious times that we are discussing to then have a stable place to live or be cared for is only going to further damage these young people. I think it was welcoming to see that. With residential care, fostering and education boroughs working with all the local authorities across the country at the moment, so we are drawing on various pieces of good practice in collaboration with providers and local authorities as to how we can support them during this period.

Tim Loughton MP thanked all of the speakers for their contributions. During the remainder of the session, Parliamentarians and voluntary sector attendees had the opportunity to ask the panellists questions.

Points made during the **Q&A session** included:

**Tim Loughton MP** asked whether the Pupil Premium Plus is going to the children in should be. Jane Pickethall advised that NAVSH has carried out analysis of where the premium goes and found that it is being spent on what it should ie on looked after children. Children might receive different amounts due to different needs but Virtual School Heads are in a good position to direct these funds to where they are most needed.

**Baroness Tyler** asked about a specific example of a local authority which has moved away from using thresholds. **David Ashcroft** said that Leeds have stopped using the term “threshold” in their practice, and reiterated the example of Norfolk’s ‘Signs of Safety’ programme which uses a whole system approach.

**Baroness Walmsley** asked whether LSCBs require additional powers. **David Ashcroft** stated that he would have chosen to clarify their ability to hold all partners to account.

**The Earl of Listowel** asked about the challenges for children’s homes and how they are rising to this challenge. **Richard Cooke** observed that there is a marked difference in the changing levels of need, with cases becoming increasingly complex.

**Lucy Peake from Grandparents Plus** asked where does community care fit? These children might have gone into care but took a different journey and community members are very scared to ask for help. There are different rates of kinship care in different ethnic groups.

**Professor Kate Morris** said that current conditions have created a perfect storm for kinship carers. They are likely to be experiencing deprivation and poverty and although the majority of families want to do right by the children they are caring for and make personal sacrifices to do this they are set up to fail and face a hugely challenging task. Professor Paul Bywaters made the point that when children go onto special guardianship orders they disappear from the data meaning there is an absence of data in this area.

**John Metcalfe from BASW** made the point that social workers don’t want to have to focus on child protection but are having to do this, disparate services within LA whereas used to be central, need for comprehensive service covering an area.

**Wrap up**

**Tim Loughton** thanked all speakers for their contributions. The next session will be held in March.