APPGs on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery;
Runaway and Missing Adults and Children; and
Children
Meeting of 14th March 2016, 5pm, House of Lords Committee Room 1

MINUTES

1. Introduction by the Chair, Rt Hon Fiona Mactaggart MP

Fiona Mactaggart welcomed all in attendance to the meeting and introduced the speakers, Professor Ravi Kohli and Philip Segurola.

2. Philip Segurola, Director of Specialist Children’s Services, Kent County Council

Philip Segurola provided an overview of the response from Kent County Council to the issue of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).

He provided statistics to highlight the scale and nature of the problem. In 2015, hundreds of UASC new arrival referrals were made. October was the month with the highest number of referrals: 212. The majority of UASC referrals are male, aged 15-17, however Mr Segurola explained that there is an increasing number of younger children. The most common countries of origin are Eritrea and Afghanistan, although it is increasingly common for UASC to come from Syria and Egypt.

Mr Segurola explained that there has traditionally been a high number of children’s homes in Kent, with children being placed there from other local authorities. There is therefore a high concentration of vulnerable children in particular areas in Kent, even if one does not consider UASC.

As regards the number of children who go missing, Mr Segurola provided statistics for ‘UASC missing episodes’ 2015. This showed that most children went missing in October (77) and that Vietnamese children were most susceptible to going missing.

Mr Segurola then provided information about Kent County Council’s response to the problem, and their attempts to prevent children suffering exploitation. This includes a multi-language leaflet which is provided to any child believed to be at risk of trafficking. He also explained the Safeguarding Board response, which includes detailed guidance for practitioners and a toolkit to assist in making an assessment as to the risk of trafficking.

Where there is concern about a child, the police and other relevant parties are consulted and a fostering placement is arranged, involving a high level of scrutiny. Legal advice is provided to meet the specific needs of the child and a risk assessment is made regarding repatriation. Where it is appropriate, referrals are made to the National Referral Mechanism.
3. Professor Ravi Kohli, Professor of Child Welfare, University of Bedfordshire

Professor Kohli provided an overview of the Evaluation of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates trial: Final Report, published in December 2015. He explained that the trial had lasted 1 year and involved 158 children distributed unevenly across 23 local authorities. The children had been divided into two groups: 86 children were allocated an advocate (‘advocacy group’), and 72 children received services as usual, based on the local authorities practices and policies (‘comparator group’).

Professor Kohli argued persuasively in favour of the merits of the Independent Child Trafficking Advocate scheme, and stated that he believed it brought clarity and stability both for children and local authorities and assisted in filling in the gaps in the current system of care. Those who were allocated an advocate reported feeling secure, knowing that there was someone to whom they could turn and on their side.

There were certain limitations to the trial. For example, as it lasted only 1 year it was difficult to measure certain outcomes, in particular in relation to immigration and criminal justice. The focus was therefore upon social care issues. Professor Kohli highlighted a number of benefits, notably the role played by Advocates in making children feel safe, building a trusting relationship whereby children are able to share their experiences, and helping the child through complex systems and processes. Advocates were able to speak up for the child, leading to improved decision-making.

Regarding missing children, Professor Kohli explained that 15 children went missing from the advocacy group. Of those 15, 8 went missing before they met their advocates. Reflecting Mr Segurola’s findings, the majority of those children who went missing were from Vietnam.

Professor Kohli outlined the UK Government’s response to his Evaluation and highlighted:

- No evidence of reduction of children going missing
  Professor Kohli questioned the Government’s understanding, stating that there is no direct correlation between advocacy and missing children, that it is a complex issue, and that many of those who went missing did so before even meeting their advocates

- Limited benefits in relation to immigration and criminal justice outcomes
  Professor Kohli agreed with this finding, but stated that this was due to the short length of the trial period

- The evidence was equivocal
  Professor Kohli stated that he had no doubt advocacy had made a difference to children and was satisfied that the evidence was compelling.

4. Q&A

Baroness Butler-Sloss (EBS) explained that she had recently met with Karen Bradley MP, Minister for Preventing Abuse, Exploitation and Crime, on two occasions with Fiona Mactaggart and Lord McColl. EBS stated that at the meetings Karen Bradley had emphasised the negative aspects of the trial, such as local authorities not co-operating, and implied that there was a problem of cost. Overall, Karen Bradley conveyed a more negative assessment of the trial, in contrast to the opinions offered by Professor Kohli. She explained the Government’s intention to run a new trial of the advocate service.

Baroness Howarth asked for information regarding the children in the comparator group.
Professor Ravi explained that the circumstances of children in both groups were largely similar. There is lack of a coherent approach across local authorities and therefore there are variations in the care provided. There were reports of feelings of loneliness and bewilderment amongst those who did not have regular contact with a carer or social worker. It was noted that local authorities have far greater caseloads than advocates. Philip Segurola explained the difficulties facing local authorities as regards staff and resources. It is very difficult to predict demand and ensure the right resources and expertise are in place.

Baroness Butler-Sloss stated that Karen Bradley had been critical of Barnardo’s.

Professor Kohli said that such criticism was unreasonable as Barnardo’s had quickly developed a system of care which made a real difference to the children.

Lord Hylton asked if Kent is overwhelmed by its caseload and whether it receives cooperation from other local authorities.

Philip Segurola said that the caseload has felt overwhelming. They have attempted a scheme of voluntary dispersal with varying degrees of success. Not nearly enough local authorities have agreed to take care of children who are identified in Kent.

Lord McColl asked how often advocates failed to accompany a child to an important meeting or tribunal hearing.

Professor Kohli said that based on the interviews carried out in the evaluation advocates never failed to accompany children to such meetings. Baroness Buter-Sloss said that she had been told that children were often not accompanied at meetings. Professor Kohli stated that is not supported by the evidence of the trial.

Baroness Hamwee asked whether the new trial will be a continuation of the previous arrangement or a completely new scheme.

Professor Ravi explained that there will be a trial of a new service and that the Government intends to invite bids from organisations wishing to operate the trial. He stated his belief that Barnardo’s are well placed to operate the service due to its national reach. They have also demonstrated their ability to develop a good service whereby advocates worked together effectively.

Sheila Melzak (Baobab) stated her belief in the important role advocates have to play in children’s lives to assist them in recovery from traumatising experiences.

Baroness Pinnock asked about the relationship between advocates and local authorities and the cost of the advocate scheme.

Professor Ravi explained that local authorities have a statutory responsibility for children. He estimated the cost during the trial was approximately £3,000 per child per year. Philip Segurola stressed his belief that advocates have added value where there is a real need to build expertise and capacity.

Chloe Setter (ECPAT) spoke of the number of British children who are trafficked, highlighting that this is not simply an issue effecting unaccompanied minors entering the UK. She also explained that
it had been anticipated prior to the trial that it was too short a time frame to measure criminal justice and immigration outcomes. Judging from the testimony of the children involved, the Advocate scheme had been overwhelmingly positive. She expressed concern that for the foreseeable future trafficked children will be deprived an independent advocate, which is proven to be best practice.

Ann Coffey asked for details of intervention measures would be most effective.

Philip Segurola explained that it is a challenge of proportionality. Where a child is absent, but not formally missing, steps taken need to be thorough.

Ann Coffey asked about data gathering – should we have more clarity of what we want to achieve?

Philip Segurola explained the work done by a multi-agency team, including the police, to identify patterns within data. There is a need to build expertise in order ensure a consistent response to the problem.

Fiona Mactaggart stated her belief in gathering information, including collecting fingerprints, about the child at the first point of contact, in order to make it easier to track their progress.

Alison Harvey (ILPA) raised the issue of children not wishing to engage with state authorities as they often fear the consequences of doing so, particularly if they are compelled to give a lot of personal data such as fingerprints.

Chloe Setter described the lack of a consistent approach across local authorities and even huge disparities between neighbouring London boroughs

Professor Kohli said there needs to be a method of quickly providing a close and reliable relationship with children.

Ann Coffey stated the importance of a child having a trusted adult and feeling that the system connects with them.

Baroness Howarth expressed her support for the independent child trafficking advocate scheme as a key means of ensuring children have the individual relationship that matter.

Rhiannon Sawyer (The Children’s Society) stated that advocacy works well where children don’t have other trusted adults. She spoke of the problem of British national boys who are trafficked for criminal activities, and explained that lots of work remains to be done to have these children recognised as victims of trafficking.

Fiona Mactaggart brought the meeting to a close by thanking Professor Kohli and Philip Segurola, as well as the APPGs for Children and Runaway and Missing Adults and Children for their assistance in arranging the meeting.

**ACTION**: Co-Chairs of the APPG on human trafficking and modern slavery to write to Karen Bradley expressing dismay at the further delays to protecting trafficked children in spite of the trial appearing to have produced results which are as clear as possible as to the benefits of advocates given the constraints. If the proposed second trial of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates goes ahead they
will recommend that there should be continuity of the existing scheme in order to collect data over time, allowing immigration and criminal justice outcomes to be measures, and ensuring that the individual children within the pilot scheme continue to receive support.

Meeting closes 6.30