



Minutes of the APPG on Domestic Violence and Abuse Meeting

Children and Young People

Monday 22nd March 2021, 4:30-6pm

Virtual meeting

Chair: Apsana Begum MP

The Domestic Abuse Bill will see children and young people as victims of domestic abuse in their own right for the first time. It is widely known the devastating impact domestic abuse can have on children and their mental health and wellbeing well into adulthood, however currently children and young people are experiencing a postcode lottery of specialist support.

Early prevention and education around healthy relationships is important for children and young people, as well as commissioning consistent specialist support for all children survivors of domestic abuse. This meeting enabled the APPG and Officers to hear from an expert by experience – and young survivor- and experts in supporting children and young people, experiencing domestic abuse. The meeting was chaired by Apsana Begum MP, and the other parliamentarians in attendance included:

- Baroness Lister
 - Baroness Bertin
 - Mark Fletcher MP
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Apsana Begum MP opened the meeting

Apsana welcomed the speakers and attendees and thanked them all for sharing their expertise today. Apsana discussed the new definition in the Domestic Abuse Bill (DA Bill) recognising children and victims, however shared the APPG's concerns around the lack of dedicated funding for specialist services for children and young people.

Ben, Expert by Experience

Ben described his experiences growing up as a child survivor of domestic abuse, and the impact this has had and still has on him now, aged 17. Ben explained that home is meant to be a place of safety for children, but this is not always the case. Ben described the abuse he experienced from his dad growing up, having no escape from the pain of his actions and words, making him feel numb as he felt that nothing was going to

change. Enduring this pain meant Ben started to accept it, which has impacted his recovery later on.

Ben highlighted how contact centres are a place where abusers can still hurt, control and manipulate children, and emphasised the need for regulation and someone present who is an expert in body language, as well as staff training to spot experiences of domestic abuse and coercive control. Ben described how whilst at the contact centre he would 'look happy' to not anger his dad, but his body language said he was really uncomfortable – however staff never noticed. Ben shared that many people don't realise you can be removed from an abusive home but still suffer for years after this – he experienced domestic abuse for 6 years in his home and 7 then years in contact centres.

Ben explained statutory services failed him as a child; he was not taken seriously and forced to continue seeing his father after he had inappropriately touched him at a contact centre, even after being interviewed by social services and. Ben described how this experience made him lose faith and trust in everyone, and shows how children and young people must be listened to and services need to be directly informed by people with lived experience. Ben highlighted that the DA Bill is a start, but there still needs to be imperative change to make sure all children do not have their experiences questioned and dismissed. Ben said there needs to be more training and dedicated long-term support and mental health services for children who have experienced abuse. Ben also called on MPs to ensure that the amendment to need accreditation for child contact centres is included in the Bill.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana echoed the importance of hearing lived experiences and the concerns of power imbalances for children, who are often overlooked. Apsana agreed that children and young people must be listened to and trusted when making policy decisions that impact them.

Amna Abdullatif, Children and Young People's Officer, Women's Aid

Amna highlighted the impact that domestic abuse has on children and young people, sharing that one in seven children under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse in their lives, it is the most common factor of children experiencing serious harm and girls aged 16 – 24 are the highest risk age group for experiencing abuse. Amna explained that the step to make relationships and sex education mandatory was an important commitment from the government, and the recent discussions on women's safety shows the need for a layered approach that has education and prevention at its core.

However funding prevention work, including for specialist children's workers and support staff to engage with schools remained an urgent concern. Amna explained this would ensure specialist services can provide guidance, therapeutic or emergency support for children and their families and ultimately educate children and young people around domestic abuse. Amna called for government commitment to funding support for children and young people in specialist services such as refuge provision - over half of people in refuge are children, yet often they are not getting the support needed due to a lack of funding for child support workers.

Amna explained that the DA Bill is a start to seeing children and young people as survivors, but Amna is concerned that there remains a postcode lottery of access to specialist support. Amna also highlighted that the No Woman Turned Away project by Women's Aid showed the additional barriers that 'by and for' specialist services supporting Black and minoritised women and children face, including discrimination and greater funding challenges impacting access to support. Amna concluded that funding for children's specialist services must be embedded into funding plans and the voices of children and young people should be seen, heard and shape policy and decisions.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana reflected that preventative work and getting to the root of abuse is essential, as well as the need for specialist services for children to be funded.

Priya Chopra, Chief Executive, Saheli Asian Women's Project

Priya explained that Saheli receive over 3000 calls for advice and support every year from women and children experiencing multiple complex issues such as fear for their lives, after effects of abuse, language barriers, cultural barriers, isolation, self-harming, depression and mental health needs. Priya explains how Saheli is raising issues surrounding forced marriage and so-called 'honour-based' abuse, and last year they knew 20 young women killed by family members due to so-called 'honour-based' abuse. Priya explained that women and children are still being controlled through child contact orders, and many women fear their children will be abducted and taken abroad, as well as facing further post-separation abuse from fathers.

Priya explained how minoritised women and children experiencing abuse often have different corresponding support needs, being more complex and born out of lived experience. Priya described how Saheli's not only provides emotional and practical support, but also provide food parcels, nappies and work with social services to provide the support for families and ensure children can access education whilst they are moving into safe spaces. However, Priya highlighted that despite providing all of this, Saheli still struggle with funding and with many Black and minoritised services

struggling to survive. Without dedicated funding for a child specialist workers, Priya questioned how services can sustain the work to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children who have experienced domestic abuse.

Priya highlighted concerns that the government's decision to separate the domestic abuse strategy from the violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy, will mean local authorities choose to focus on either a VAWG or domestic abuse strategy, and children's needs will have less focus. Priya also shared that 'by and for' services need to be valued and protected, and Saheli are seeing many frontline grassroots organisations having to compete with bigger organisations. Priya explained that, without clear embedded strategy and funding we will lose the progress that has been made towards protecting children and young people.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana reflected on the barriers in recognising abusive relationships for young people and how often they are let down by the services meant to support them.

Gabriella Kyriacou, Business and Fundraising Manager, Free Your Mind

Gabriella explained how Free Your Mind is a non-profit that provide therapeutic support to children and young people who experienced abuse. Gabriella highlighted how this support includes a range of therapies that are specific to each child's experience, including CBT, behaviour mentoring, trauma play therapy, as well as providing wellbeing packs with toys, books and essential items. Gabriella described how it is important that children are given the tools to thrive.

Gabriella highlighted how damaging abuse can be to a child and the long-term effects it can have. Gabriella explained that the founder of Free Your Mind had their own experience of abuse, as well as many of the staff and practitioners working at the charity and reinforced the importance of lived experience guiding work. Gabriella described how trauma-intervention therapies allow children to flourish, as well as providing them with the tools so they can manage and cope in later life.

Gabriella explained how referrals during COVID 19 have increased dramatically, having 50-60 referrals in 2019, compared to 219 from March 2020–21. Gabriella also highlighted how when lockdown lifts they will most likely see an increase in referrals, and they are aware of the challenges they will have sustaining their work, and keeping waiting lists down.

Apsana Begum MP

Apsana echoed how recognising even if child survivor may not have experienced direct abuse themselves it is still an experience of abuse that makes them a survivor, and that's where the conversation around this in the public domain needs to happen.

Discussion

- It was queried what the panel thought of parental alienation and it was explained that parental alienation is often part of the coercive control by perpetrators. It was also explained that the notion of children needing two parents to progress is very damaging when one parent is causing harm, when really children need a safe home and for their views to be listened to be the courts. It was also explained that court guardians don't always guarantee children will have their voice heard and information will be fed to the courts, therefore the structures around the family courts need to be re-examined.
- There was a discussion about the challenges facing services led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women. Saheli noted that they receive referrals from statutory services, but their funding is insufficient to meet this demand and insecure. Services have to spend disproportionate amounts of time on applications for tenders and grants which takes away from the life-saving support on the ground.
- A question was raised on what the biggest change government could make to improve responses to children and young people survivors. The need to reform the family court model, put children's voices at the centre of discussion, improve education and awareness, as well as improving funding for specialist support services for children were all highlighted.
- There was also a question about narratives around domestic abuse and what is needed to empower young survivors. It was highlighted that more campaigns and training led by young people is needed, as well as setting up platforms for young people to share their experiences which will have a big impact on other young survivors. Centring the voices of young people in all decision making was seen as vital.