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APPG on Social Integration minutes

'International and regional perspectives on intergenerational connection'

15th October 2018, 4:20PM – 5:20PM

Wilson Room, Portcullis House

Present (parliamentarians):

- Chuka Umunna MP, Chair (Lab)

Present (others):

- Gareth Siddorn, The Challenge
- Sam Dalton, The Challenge
- Amos Kimani, The Challenge
- Frankie Fallowes, The Challenge
- Justin Meadows, Office of Chuka Umunna MP
- Vicki Titterington, Manager of Linking Generations Northern Ireland
- Alex Smith, CEO and Founder of The Cares Family
- Lorraine George, Winston Churchill Fellow and Childminding Development Worker at Torbay Council
- Justin Shee, CEO and Founder of The Kohab

1. Introduction from the Chair

1.1 Chuka Umunna MP welcomed members of the audience to the APPG on Social Integration. He apologised for the change in timings of the event following Theresa May's statement on Brexit, which had clashed with the original start time, and thanked audience members and in particular the four speakers for their patience.

1.2 Chuka introduced the APPG's inquiry into intergenerational connection. He said an APPG was in a unique position to look into this issue, because unlike a select committee it is not locked into one department's siloed perspective. Generational divisions cut across policy areas including education, health and housing, so it is beneficial for one group to look at fostering stronger intergenerational connections in a cross-departmental way.

1.3 Chuka proceeded to introduce the four speakers who had come to share their experiences and thoughts on intergenerational connection, bringing international and regional perspectives: Alex Smith, CEO and Founder of The Cares Family; Lorraine George, an award-winning Winston Churchill Fellow who is also part of the Early Years

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team at Torbay Council; Justin Shee, CEO and Founder of the intergenerational co-living company The Kohab; and Vicki Titterington, Manager of Linking Generations Northern Ireland.

2. Presentation by Vicki Titterington, Linking Generations Northern Ireland

- 2.1 Vicki introduced Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI), part of the UK-wide Beth Johnson Foundation which aims to positively impact the lives of older people, and said it works closely with Generations Working Together Scotland. While LGNI does not deliver intergenerational projects itself, it enables others to do so and acts as a catalyst for social change. LGNI sees its main goal as challenging ageism and stereotypes about different age groups.
- 2.2 The aim of LGNI is to enhance intergenerational projects bringing younger and older people together – the two most polarised age groups. While it is in some ways natural for young people to attend school and older people to attend day centres and care homes, there does not need to be such stark compartmentalisation of different age demographics.
- 2.3 LGNI sees itself as a ‘positive disrupter’, seeking to bring about system-wide change. For example, if all care homes did intergenerational work then you would see widespread results. And the same is true for age-friendly alliances, and lots of other types of organisations. To achieve these results, LGNI has fostered a wide range of partnerships, including with universities, and offers training and advice to others seeking to do intergenerational work.
- 2.4 There are challenges associated with being neither a youth organisation or one which looks after older people, as funding is usually given out along these lines. LGNI have received no core funding, and so their work often operates on an uncertain project-by-project basis. Though LGNI can draw on lots of smaller funds, and act as a nationwide coordinator of the different projects that result from these funds, ideally there would be larger-scale, central funding too. Vicki said she was hopeful that further core funding would help propel LGNI’s work over the next three years.
- 2.5 Vicki concluded by going into detail about a particular project that LGNI had carried out recently, receiving funding from the Northern Ireland Department of Finance to work with Belfast Council on a digital inclusion project. This involved younger people helping older people to learn about technology. Vicki said this was an example of taking an ‘intergenerational approach’ to existing or planned activities, rather than putting on specific intergenerational activities. That is the best way to achieve system-wide change.

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3. Presentation by Alex Smith, The Cares Family

3.1 Alex began by drawing links between three important and overlapping topics in today's politics – loneliness, social integration and intergenerational division. He then introduced his presentation by reading a tweet he felt could articulate his thoughts: *“The nation's most discussed political problem is entangled with the nation's least understood public health problem – the political problem is furious partisanship; the public health problem is loneliness.”*

3.2 Alex then turned introduced the work of The Cares Family. So far, over, 5,000 young people and 5,000 older people have taken part in its clubs and activities to support one another. These take place in north London, south London, Manchester and Liverpool – places all with one thing in common – they are rapidly changing cities. But they are also massively different in other ways, for example Hampstead is massively different from Anfield, and therefore the way The Cares Family operates in these areas is tailored.

3.3 According to Alex, the reason The Cares Family has flourished in each of these cities is that it is not a service but a community hub, where people see each other as neighbours not clients.

3.4 In highlighting the commonality that young and older people share, Alex noted that it has been statistically shown that both groups aspire to good relationships, health, learning and independence, and that older and younger people feel equally overwhelmed by digital technology. This contrasts with the overriding media narrative which presents the two age groups as having very different priorities.

3.5 Drawing on Vicki's point about being an enabler, Alex said that The Cares Family also aimed to help others to help themselves, and to use their agency within communities to enact system change. Alex feels that The Cares Family are just starting to see their impact in enabling bottom-up, grassroots activity.

3.6 Alex stated that there is much more work to be done in terms of changing our culture. He suggested that through our political economy, we have come to prioritise what is efficient over what is important. In our daily lives, we see this through our increased interaction with self-service checkouts, oyster card readers and coffee machines, and the headphones we listen to music through.

3.7 To change our culture, we also need to change our political and media dialogue, and overcome the stereotypes which currently prevent intergenerational integration. Alex referenced a magazine article he had previously written on bringing generations

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together, for which the publication used a stereotypical picture of an older, isolated woman. It is portrayals like this that Alex said needed to change in order to achieve stronger connections between generations.

4. Presentation by Lorraine George, Winston Churchill Fellow and Torbay Council

4.1 Lorraine introduced herself by noting the “two hats” that she has worn when doing intergenerational work. Firstly, she was funded by the Winston Churchill Foundation to conduct research in the US on co-located intergenerational settings, focusing predominantly on early years children and older people in residential settings. She has drawn on these experiences back in Torbay, working for the council’s Early Years team.

4.2 According to Lorraine, the most important part of the intergenerational work she saw in the US is that it focuses on the two most vulnerable age groups – the residential elderly and early years children. Lorraine started her research in Seattle at Providence Mount, which has been at the forefront of intergenerational work in the US. Their facility is spread over five floors, and includes six classes of children alongside high-skilled nursing and residential housing for older residents. The strength of the interactions between the children and older people derives from their inclusivity.

4.3 After leaving Seattle, Lorraine drove around Oklahoma and Kansas visiting a range of different intergenerational projects, mainly in small towns of about 10,000 people. At many residential care homes there were satellite facilities for young children – not only for childcare, but for education. In some of the settings the children receive education for two years within the care home. Intergenerational initiatives of these kind enhance the wellbeing of the young children, and this improves educational outcomes.

4.4 Lorraine interviewed over 100 people as part of her research in the US, and found that intergenerational initiatives have a positive impact which runs far beyond the younger and older people involved – they benefit the entire community, and help to break down barriers between everybody.

4.5 Lorraine is trying to transfer her insights from the US to the UK setting. In Torbay, there are now 20 care homes that receive regular visits from nurseries, childminders or pre-schools. This has not been a result of hugely innovative policy decisions, and does not always require “re-inventing the wheel”.

4.6 There are so many similarities between the US and UK, however there are also notable differences in terms of how well-connected generations are. In the UK, older people are not regarded as role models or teachers, whereas in the US those children within

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intergenerational programmes see their elders as those they can gain knowledge from, and vice versa. Intergenerational activities have a really important role to play in improving soft skills and enhancing respect and understanding between age groups, with both young and old gaining a greater awareness of what they can learn from one another.

4.7 A major similarity between the US and UK is that people are living longer but enjoying less contact with one another. Families increasingly have less time to spend together, and children are less and less able to rely upon support from traditional role models, including grandparents.

4.8 The next step in Torbay will be to draw on funding from the Department for Education as part of the 30-hour delivery of free childcare to offer capital funding to a care home to renovate a space into an intergenerational area. The aim is for children to interact with the older residents every day, as occurs in intergenerational initiatives in the US.

4.9 Summing up, Lorraine said that intergenerational connection has health benefits for both the young and elderly, can enhance social mobility, and improves the language and communication skills of children. Intergenerational care provides a really positive way of supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

5. Presentation by Justin Shee, The Kohab

5.1 Before Justin set up The Kohab, he was working in the real estate sector, and observed that older people do not only want to live with other older people, despite the age ghettos that housing currently creates. From a personal perspective, Justin grew up living with his grandfather, so understands the benefits of intergenerational living.

5.2 The Kohab's model holds back a small number of units at discounted rents for young professionals, in return for them spending time with their older neighbours, including organising events and helping them with tasks.

5.3 The model in the Netherlands that The Kohab draws inspiration from involves students living in a care home for free in exchange for spending 30 hours per month with their older neighbours. The arrangement is mutually beneficial for both young and old. The students enjoy it because they receive quality accommodation at no cost and get to spend time learning from their older neighbours, which reduces ageist attitudes and gives them a bigger-picture view of life. Furthermore, the older residents say that the students keep them connected to changes in the outside world, in particular around technology.

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5.4 Justin had three main takeaways from intergenerational projects in the Netherlands: the initiatives were successful because they were mutually beneficial; they were much more meaningful than ‘helicopter’ visits which take place for a short amount of time; and they have to be organised through a bottom-up approach, which lets the community lead engagement, and means that interactions are not forced.

5.5 Models of intergenerational living could have a big role to play in the UK in tackling a range of current challenges. Firstly, they can help to reduce the problem of loneliness and social isolation, which is being experienced by people throughout the age spectrum, but in particular among young people. Secondly, the model can provide quality, affordable accommodation for young people, when their options may often be limited. From the perspective of older people, intergenerational living can stimulate the housing market by providing “positive, aspirational” retirement living options and a viable route to downsizing, which can in turn free-up family-sized homes for others.

6. Questions from the Chair

6.1 Chuka asked Vicki whether there was anything unique to the situation in Northern Ireland which might have an influence in bridging the generational divide. On a political level, Vicki said, the conflict in Northern Ireland tends to hold up decisions at a government level. On a more positive note, there are things that can be done to tailor intergenerational projects to the Northern Irish experience, and to the different regions within Northern Ireland. Each council area is going to have an age-friendly plan, and LGNI can support them with intergenerational work, based on their distinct priorities, to affect system-wide change.

6.2 Chuka followed up on Vicki’s response by asking whether the Northern Ireland Parliament not sitting has a positive or negative impact on LGNI’s work. Vicki said it can work both positively and negatively: positively in the sense that LGNI can engage more with civil servants who are often sympathetic to their work, and negatively in terms of continuity, personnel changes and the knock-on effects this can have.

6.3 Chuka then turned to Alex, and asked how we turn technology from a negative into a positive force when it comes to bridging divides, and overcoming the echo chambers that people often find themselves in through using it. We cannot control which echo chambers individuals choose to enter, so what can be done? Alex said people don’t decide to go into echo chambers, but that it gradually happens to them as a result of our individualistic culture and lack of connection. People are often attracted to live in big cities due to the economic and cultural opportunities there, but upon arrival tend to mix

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with other people like themselves. Alex cited a notable statistic to demonstrate the decreasing intergenerational connection taking place in our cities: in 1991, 15% of people over 65 were living in the same neighbourhood as someone under 18, decreasing to just 5% now.

6.4 Returning to the point on technology, Alex said that younger people in particular increasingly live their lives through filtered social media bubbles, posting only the positive things they have done, and making others feeling bad through the comparisons they end up making between their own lives and those they see on social media. Intergenerational programmes as offered by The Cares Family make younger people, as well as older people, feel better about their lives.

6.5 Chuka asked Justin whether there is a particular problem in our bigger cities in terms of disconnection and loneliness, making initiatives such as The Kohab more necessary. Justin agreed with this, saying that there were higher levels of loneliness in cities like London, and that cities often had the most limited range of retirement living options, too. While there are better housing options in places like the Home Counties and on the coast, many older people want to continue living in cities.

6.6 Turning to Lorraine, Chuka asked whether we have a structural problem which leads to greater generational division, or whether British culture plays a part. Referring to political structures, Lorraine pointed out that in the US intergenerational initiatives have arisen from the bottom-up, and have not been driven by either state or federal government. This relates to the UK, because local authorities can no longer do things on their own, as they don't have the resources to, but also because it works better when communities themselves drive change. Government and local authorities can facilitate partnerships, but communities need to want the change; it cannot be forced on them.

7. Points from the audience

7.1 A woman in the audience spoke of a successful project she had heard about, which supports younger mothers and has a strong intergenerational element. Chuka asked what the name of the project was, to which the woman replied that she couldn't remember, but would try to find out and let us know.

7.2 The communications manager at Apples and Honey Nightingale nursery pointed to the benefits that intergenerational initiatives have for care staff and early years teachers. Care staff face a lot of pressures in their job, working under difficult financial constraints

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and often being on the end of anger and frustration from residents, and as such it is nice to break up their day with care for younger children.

7.3 Ian Bennett, Headteacher at Downshall Primary School in east London, said that his school's intergenerational scheme draws inspiration from research in the US and Japan, and involves older care home residents coming into the school to spend time with the children. The project began with support from the North East London NHS Foundation Trust, which refers older people with conditions including dementia, or those who are isolated. If older people are told by these services that it would be good for them to go somewhere with other older people, their reaction is often a lot less positive than if they are told to spend time with children in a primary school. Ian said there was also a financial case for co-located intergenerational services, given that facilities and resources can be shared.

7.4 A woman from the charity Join, which connects older and younger people in Barnet at grassroots level, spoke about their work to match up a local nursery school with day centres and care homes. 10 children and 10 elderly spend regular time with one another, participating in a range of arts and crafts programmes. However, she spoke about the fact that there is no formal training for people wanting to facilitate intergenerational programmes, and this is something that needs to be introduced.

7.5 John, from the Young Foundation, mentioned the Reimagining Rent programme he is working on, and the importance of innovation in the private sector to solve the problems of the UK's housing market. As part of this, intergenerational living can help make more efficient use of existing housing stock. The 2011 census showed that there are 1.01 bedrooms per head of the population in London, so the problem is not with the amount of housing, but how it is utilised, with many homes having four or five empty rooms.

8. Final word from the Chair

8.1 Chuka thanked all of the audience members for their interesting and diverse contributions. He said the APPG's inquiry into intergenerational connection would produce an interim report in January detailing all of the findings to date, and that the APPG would then be reflecting on which issues it needed to explore in further detail ahead of its final report before the end of the current parliament. Following on from John's final point about the role of intergenerational housing in both fostering stronger connections between different age groups, and helping to solve the housing crisis, Chuka said this was likely to be one of the areas explored in further detail.