



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru  
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc  
The Children and Young People Committee**

**Dydd Iau, 17 Ionawr 2008  
Thursday, 17 January 2008**

**Cynnwys**  
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynndi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal,  
cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.  
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

**Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol**  
**Committee members in attendance**

Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Angela Burns	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Christine Chapman	Llafur Labour
Helen Mary Jones	Plaid Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) The Party of Wales (Committee Chair)
Lynne Neagle	Llafur Labour

**Eraill yn bresennol**  
**Others in attendance**

Aisling Donovan	Voices from Care
Deborah Jones	Cyfarwyddwr, Voices from Care Director, Voices from Care
David Melding	Aelod Cynulliad, Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (cadeirydd y grŵp trawsbleidiol ar blant sy'n derbyn gofal) Assembly Member, Welsh Conservatives (chair of the cross- party group on looked-after children)
Felicity Waters	Voices from Care

**Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol**  
**Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance**

Claire Griffiths	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Tom Jackson	Clerc Clerk
Kathryn Potter	Gwasanaeth Ymchwil yr Aelodau Members' Research Service

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 10.03 a.m.*

*The meeting began at 10.03 a.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau**  
**Introduction, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

[1] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bore da, **Helen Mary Jones:** Good morning, friends. gyfeillion.

[2] Dechreuaf drwy groesawu'r tîm newydd o glercod, Tom Jackson a Claire Griffiths. Mae Tom a Claire wedi bod yn brysur iawn yn barod yn trefnu rhai o'r ymweliadau *rapporteur* yr ydym yn bwriadu'u cynnal. Felly, diolch i'r ddau ohonoch am y gwaith yr ydych eisoes wedi'i

I begin by welcoming the new team of clerks, Tom Jackson and Claire Griffiths. Tom and Claire have been very busy already organising some of the rapporteur visits that we intend to hold. Therefore, thank you for the work that you have already done and welcome to the Children and Young People

wneud a chroeso i' Bwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc y Cynulliad. Gobeithiaf y byddwch yn mwynhau'r gwaith.

Committee. I hope that you will enjoy the work.

[3] Mae croeso i bawb ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg a'r Saesneg. I'r sawl ohonoch sy'n eistedd yn oriel y cyhoedd, mae offer cyfieithu ac offer i'ch helpu i glywed ar gael.

Everyone is welcome to use Welsh and English. For those of you sitting in the public gallery, there is translation equipment and equipment to amplify the sound available.

[4] Atgoffaf bawb yn yr oriel, Aelodau, a gwsteion, i ddiffodd eu ffonau symudol, BlackBerrys ac ati. Nid yw'n ddigon da i'w tawelu'n unig oherwydd eu bod yn amharu ar y system sain a'r offer cyfieithu.

I remind everyone in the gallery, Members, and guests, to switch off any mobile phones, BlackBerrys and so on. It is not good enough to switch them to silent mode because they interfere with the sound and translation equipment.

[5] Os oes argyfwng, megis larwm tân, dilynwch gyfarwyddiadau'r tywyswyr, oherwydd maent yn gwybod ble i ymgynnull. Nid ydym yn disgwyl larwm heddiw, felly, os yw'n canu, mi fydd yn ein hysbysu o ddigwyddiad go iawn.

If there is an emergency, such as a fire alarm, please follow the ushers' instructions, because they know where to assemble. We are not expecting an alarm today, therefore if we hear one, it will be notifying us of a real incident.

[6] Yr ydym wedi cael ymddiheuriad gan Nicola Edwards, a oedd i fod i ddod gyda chynrychiolwyr Voices from Care. Yn anffodus, nid yw'n dda ac mae wedi gorfod mynd i'r ysbyty. Fodd bynnag, bydd Felicity Waters o Voices from Care yn darllen datganiad ar ei rhan, fel ein bod yn medru clywed ei thystiolaeth hi.

We have received an apology from Nicola Edwards, who was supposed to accompany the Voices from Care representatives. Unfortunately, she is not well and has had to go into hospital. However, Felicity Waters from Voices from Care will read a statement on her behalf, so that we can receive her evidence.

[7] Cyn croesawu ein hymwelwyr o Voices from Care, hoffwn groesawu David Melding fel cadeirydd y grŵp trawsbleidiol ar blant mewn gofal. Gofynnaf i David gyflwyno ei hun yn swyddogol ac i ddechrau'r drafodaeth drwy ddweud ychydig ynghylch safbwynt y grŵp trawsbleidiol ar y mater hwn, yn enwedig am fater annibyniaeth y gwasanaeth. Bydd cyfle wedyn i ni ofyn cwestiynau i chi. Croeso cynnes i chi, David.

Before I welcome our visitors from Voices from Care, I wish to welcome David Melding as chair of the cross-party group on looked-after children. I ask David to introduce himself officially and to begin the discussion by saying a few words about where the cross-party group stands on this issue, and the issue of the independence of the service in particular. There will then be an opportunity for us to ask you questions. I wish you a warm welcome, David.

[8] It is very nice to see you here, and thank you for making time in what I know is a very busy schedule to come to share the cross-party group's views with us.

[9] **David Melding:** As chair of the cross-party group on looked-after children, I welcome this opportunity to give evidence in a formal way to an Assembly committee. I hope that you will not spare me and that you will be as pointed as necessary in your questioning and treat me like any other witness. I hope that this will set something of a precedent when groups have been working on an issue for some time. The whole issue of advocacy has been with us at least since 2002, when it became a statutory obligation, but we all know that there have been difficulties in the delivery of these services, in terms of their patchwork nature and the fact that the Children's Society withdrew from Wales a few years ago. I think that it is fair to say that the group has focused on this issue of having effective services that are

independent. Obviously, if they are not effective, they will not be of much use in terms of the advocacy that they provide, and if they are not independent, they will not have the credibility to be able to act on behalf of children and young people who are in a vulnerable position and are often in some form of care. I am not quite sure what line of questioning you are going to take, but I can give you chapter and verse on the whole history of the Government's consultations and where we are. Perhaps you will want to explore that in your questions.

[10] It is fair to say that it is the view of the cross-party group that there has been a move towards a more robust and independent model since the initial consultation, which was held in April 2007. However, we still have a system that falls short of being fully robust and independent. Our view is that we could really set a standard for others to follow and have something that is, without question, at arm's length from the Government and service providers. We would suggest the setting up of an independent all-Wales commissioning body. That would probably require a change in the law, because the statutory duty would presumably be shifted away from local authorities to the body. However, that could be done under the legislative competence Order on vulnerable children, which is currently being considered by the Assembly: the issue of whether the Government could bring in a Measure to set up such an independent and fully robust advocacy service has been explored. That is what we are trying to push the Government towards, and we welcome this opportunity to explore these issues with you this morning.

[11] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, David. You have set out fairly clearly the position of the cross-party group. Can you give us a bit more background to why you reached that conclusion and what evidence that was based on? From whom did the cross-party group take evidence, for example?

[12] **David Melding:** We invited people to come to speak to the group—principally representatives from Voices from Care, but also other experts. Members have spoken informally to those who have responded to the consultation as part of their day-to-day work in the Assembly, particularly about what people felt about the Government's proposal, the consultation for which was launched in 2007. Our view is that there was a lot of disquiet about the regional commissioning model, which is the only model on which the Government has chosen to consult. The response to the consultation was that it is good that we are moving towards some form of national advocacy service, as that will mean that there will be provision.

10.10 a.m.

[13] That would be an improvement on the current position, as would making the right to advocacy a universal right, although that introduces other questions about the most vulnerable, because we do not want them to be sidelined in order for the universal commitment to be met quickly. There is a growing body of evidence—and I will go through some of it if you want me to give you a very long answer—that there is disquiet. I urge you to read the short section on looked-after children in the voluntary sector's report on the UN Convention's monitoring report, which was published very recently. It says there is a very cautious welcome of the Government's proposals. That is interesting language. If this model was really gaining confidence, you would expect the language to be much more affirmative. The Government got into difficulty initially with this consultation document, and I wish to highlight my concerns with two key quotations, which are from page 32.

[14] 'In developing the New Service Model, the Assembly Government has sought to achieve sufficient distance to promote a degree of independence.'

[15] I think that the words 'degree of independence' set alarm bells ringing. Most people think that the whole basis of credibility for an advocacy service is that it is independent. To

qualify that does not take us in the direction in which we want to go. It goes on to state that,

[16] ‘Placing the responsibility for local/regional planning and commissioning of services with the Children and Young People Partnerships will ensure that advocacy services remain integrated...with service delivery structures so that as much informal resolution can take place as is currently the case and so that the principles of child advocacy can support service delivery structures’.

[17] I am all for effective complaints procedures informing how to improve services, but it seems to me that it is a principal aim of good advocacy that service providers can develop their service structures. That seemed to be the wrong way round; we need a robust system to deal with allegations of sometimes quite serious, alarming abuse. A great deal of the work that we have done has followed on from the consultation because we thought that it was quite confused in places, if I may be so direct. The concern that people have is that regional commissioning is commissioning by local authorities, albeit through these new children and young people’s partnerships. However, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for Wales said that that is probably not a robust system; it remains concerned about it. Children in Wales has made similar comments, and I know that you will be hearing from Voices from Care, which has serious concerns about this approach.

[18] Initially, the Government said in the consultation that it would not establish a national advocacy unit. Thankfully, it has shifted on that, and in a statement that we received in December, the Government has moved to make the system more robust. I could go into detail on that, but perhaps that is best drawn out in a further question—if you want that detail. The essential problem remains that we have before us a regional model, even given that the Minister is advancing some of the concerns in trying to address them. That basically means that those that commission advocacy are the people who will be inspected by that advocacy service usually. That is the conflict of interest that we see.

[19] **Helen Mary Jones:** Eleanor, I believe that you have a supplementary question to this.

[20] **Eleanor Burnham:** It is a supplementary to the previous question, if that is okay.

[21] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is fine. Chris, you wanted to explore this problem a little more.

[22] **Christine Chapman:** My question regards your group’s views on regional commissioning. Obviously, you have answered quite a bit of that, but will you take the opportunity to provide some evidence of this now? There are other parts to this. We have noted that there is some concern about regional commissioning. Do you want to add to that?

[23] **David Melding:** You would want regional structures and local structures in a national commissioning process. It is nothing against the concept of local authorities coming together—that is important. We can see in the Government’s attempt to get an element of it to be arm’s length by using these partnerships. However, I believe that the concern is that those partnerships would not necessarily have the expertise to develop a high level of commissioning. There still remains a difficulty. Regional commissioning has been used previously, and we often encourage local authorities to do it. However, it is still the case that the actual commissioning is done by local authorities, albeit a group of them.

[24] The worry is that if there is regional commissioning in a part of Wales and there are some difficult cases, and the advocacy that has been commissioned is effective and gains the confidence of the children and young people—let us say that they were looked-after children—and then some of the local authorities get concerned about the nature of the

advocacy, because it is a pretty robust system and they may be found wanting, there could be real issues there, as authorities might then commission a different service in the future. There are examples of this having happened—this is not an abstract possibility. It seems that that is just not robust. The people you inspect will have to renew the service from you at some point, and that is where there is potential conflict, which will often be sublimated by great professionalism. However, there could be cases where it would not be, and that is our worry.

[25] **Christine Chapman:** You mentioned the children and young people’s partnerships and their need to draw on expertise. However, there are experts on those partnerships—they are relatively new, anyway, are they not? Could you say some more about the partnerships?

[26] **David Melding:** I was quoting what the office of the children’s commissioner said in raising serious concerns about that model. It is concerned not only about the level of expertise, but about the fact that it is new, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is not an existing, trusted model. I believe that the office is also concerned that those partnerships will be dealing with a wide range of issues, and that advocacy will not be a high enough priority; that is the central concern. However, it has been raised by the children’s commissioner, and you may want to pursue that point with his office.

[27] **Angela Burns:** Thank you for coming to committee, David. I am sorry that I missed the beginning of your discussion, and, if you have already answered this question, please forgive me. I understand how strongly you feel about the advocacy model proposed. If we were to accept it, what would be your view on the three-stage approach that the Government has suggested? Should it start small with just vulnerable children and then open out to universal advocacy for children?

[28] **David Melding:** It is important that it is held to account on that. There is a problem with providing universal service, in that it will aim for the larger number of cases that are moderate or slight; they are important to the people concerned, but they will not be issues of child safety, abuse, neglect, and so on. The volume will be greater in a universal service, which will, presumably, extend into education, for instance. Therefore, you can imagine some of the cases that could come forward. If that overwhelms the tougher end, when we are talking about potentially damaged children and young people in dangerous situations, it would ring alarm bells for me. In fairness, the Government seems to recognise the challenge in implementing this model and the three-stage approach to which you referred. Therefore, it is important that it has that at the front of its mind when it develops this.

10.20 a.m.

[29] It is fair to ask that if we do not think that the Government is going to budge on the fundamental issue of it being a regional model, then what do we need? It is important to respond fairly to what the Minister said on 11 December because there was a fairly significant shift without quite getting to the fundamental point. I do not want to damn with faint praise because I welcome some of the things that the Minister said. However, the language that the Minister used in the statement was very much ‘could’, ‘might’ and ‘minded’. I would want to nail those down to commitments. If I could just go through what the Minister said. She said that she was,

[30] ‘...minded to establish, within the Assembly, a new advocacy development and performance unit’.

[31] That is not as good as having an arm’s-length independent body, but it is something. She also said that the unit would establish an independent scrutiny board. So that is what I would look at. The Minister then said that,

[32] ‘advocacy services should be regulated and inspected by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales’.

[33] That is essential in whatever model we have, and I was pleased to hear the Minister’s words in this regard. She then went on to say,

[34] ‘I am also considering establishing an independent board of non-executive members, including children and young people, to have a strong scrutiny and quality assurance role. The board could’—so it is qualified—‘report annually to the Assembly Government, and might be called to account by the Assembly’s Children and Young People Committee’.

[35] I am not quite sure what is meant by an ‘independent board of non-executive members, including children and young people’, but that could be quite an exciting development. So, I would look at that and draw the Minister out on what is going to be done. There were intimations of some quite interesting developments, but the ‘might’, ‘could’ and ‘minded’ need to be turned into clear commitments.

[36] So, I am not giving you a council of perfection. I think that we could miss a huge opportunity and it is a bit like when we looked at the position of children’s commissioner. For example, we could have gone for a civil servant tasked with reviewing the general issues and so on and then drafting an annual report. There were other models with some form of watchdog, but we said, ‘No, we want a gold standard; we want a commissioner’. At that time—and Angela, you are in the same party as me—I remember internal discussions in our party on the fact that this was like the nanny state and so on. There were such issues, but we thought that we needed to make a clear commitment. Now, I do not think that you would find anyone in the UK who did not agree with the children’s commissioner model. It has been emulated in other parts of the UK, but it is not always as strong elsewhere as it is here unfortunately.

[37] So, it seems to me that what the Minister did on 11 December was hint at certain bells and whistles going on the regional model. If those bells and whistles were robust, they would strengthen that model and there is no question about that. It is very much a B- outcome, but that is better than a lower grade. However, these bells and whistles, in a sense, confirm that this model is in danger of not being independent and robust. You could take Occam’s razor to all of this and cut through it and say, ‘If we want independence, we need a clear national commissioning body that can implement that’. It is a fairly simple alternative model and it could work and set an example for others to follow. However, if you cannot shift the Government fundamentally, it would be right to at least consider what safeguards could be put in place.

[38] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. I should say for the record that the Minister’s statement was couched in ‘shoulds’ and ‘mights’ because she had indicated to me, as Chair of this committee, that she was mindful to wait until we had completed our deliberations.

[39] **David Melding:** That is important to say because the Minister’s statement can be read in a very constructive way, if it is moving in that direction. Indeed, I welcome the fact that she made a clear commitment to wait for your deliberations. That certainly is a good sign. So, I want to be fair to the Minister because there may be evidence of quite a fundamental change in thinking going on, and I would hope that that is the case.

[40] **Helen Mary Jones:** It is also worth mentioning for the record that there has been a change of Government since this went out to consultation.

[41] **Eleanor Burnham:** It is good to have you here, David, because you have considerable experience in these important matters. While I agree with you, as I agreed with



Lynne, on the issue of the most vulnerable children, I have one particular constituency case where, on the face of it, the parents were more competent—and the whole family seemed to be more competent—but they had to deal with the important issue of dyslexia, which completely ruined the whole family's health because it was such a serious case and was ongoing for so many years. If you do not think that we should bring this into universal advocacy mode, how should we help people who, on the surface, look more capable of resolving long-term problems that may not be life-threatening, as in the case you referred to, but which are very difficult?

[42] **David Melding:** The concept of universal advocacy is a good one, and I am not against it at all, but any universal system has to give weight to particular cases, possibly involving sexual abuse, or a physical threat to the life and limb of a child. Wherever those issues arise, an advocacy service must be able to respond and take them forward. Sometimes that could lead to a court case, so you need a model that can withstand some fairly formidable pressures from a variety of other interested parties—

[43] **Eleanor Burnham:** Think about the Waterhouse report into child abuse in children's homes in north Wales.

[44] **David Melding:** Let us just remember that the most chilling part of Waterhouse was not that the children and young people were not complaining about the horrible abuse that was happening but that they were trying to complain and were not believed. It was when these people became adults, and many of them were middle-aged and in positions of authority, that they were believed—because they were adults rather than children or young people in the system. So, we have to aim at having a system where cases of great sensitivity, danger and difficulty can be taken forward. Some of them will be vexatious complaints that are groundless, and in the past we have seen that as the heart of the problem—children and young people making things up, and questioning authority. Sometimes that happens, but what we missed in the past was catastrophic in volume and in seriousness. So, that is why the system must initially be aimed at the most vulnerable, and then you develop a universal service around that later. Presumably, that is more at the level of giving people information, and using informal mechanisms to reach parents and inform them. It does not necessarily mean having an advocate for each and every child in the country, and taking forward every small concern—that would be the kind of comprehensive and universal service that I do not think we could possibly provide, and probably should not provide, because it would interfere with other networks that we would want to see involved.

[45] However, a commitment to a universal service is good, especially because it is a sign that we are taking what young people and children say to us seriously. If you look at education, how much feedback do we get from the pupils themselves? It is all external—well, not all, but it is largely external. We are now seeing mechanisms like school councils being developed, but still, we should consider asking pupils about the quality of teaching and the choices in the curriculum, and that sort of thing. We do so with the NHS, or try to, and pupils are the main consumers of education. There are lots of exciting possibilities for a universal service. However, that level of advocacy looks quite different from what you are doing at the weighty end on serious, grave issues.

10.30 a.m.

[46] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful, thank you. You mentioned two particular quotes from the Government's consultation, including a reference to keeping advocacy services close to service providers so that advocacy can inform changes in service provision. Does the cross-party group have a view on the dangers of conflating complaints procedures, which obviously sit within an organisation and ought to inform the organisation, and advocacy, which is often about allowing the child or young person to make use of those complaints procedures and

support and guide them through?

[47] **David Melding:** You have put your finger on a very important distinction. That is why we were concerned that emphasising the need to inform service development meant looking more at what an effective complaints procedure does, or the more informal end of complaining about an event. Do you complain about abuse? In a way, that is not a very good way of describing what is going on there, because abusive conduct is criminal. If it is tied up in public service delivery in some measure, as it has been in the past—and, presumably, alas, there are still cases going on—that needs a far more robust system; you cannot expect people to enter into an informal complaints procedure about something as fundamental as abuse. That is where you would get what we probably think of as the classic advocacy model coming out of what Waterhouse was urging and what the children’s commissioner has urged us to put into place, and they are very different things. They can sometimes be complementary, but I do not think that the advocacy end should focus on improving services. It assumes that services are fit for purpose and that people will behave legally when they have some charge and responsibility over children and young people. That is why it is so essential to have an independent and robust model.

[48] If you are being abused by an adult, would you go to another adult and talk about it if you thought that that person was provided and paid for by the service that employed the person who was abusing you? It is fair to say that we are still talking about a small number of cases, but they are not infrequent. We have to remember that, unfortunately, in any system, we will get wrongdoers. We have to reflect on that very harsh experience. I think that many of us who were Assembly Members at the time of the Waterhouse report and read it were emotionally affected. I know that I was. We do not yet have a system that means that we could say confidently, hand on heart, that we have responded to that recommendation of providing effective advocacy. The Government has good intentions, but I think that it still needs to be pushed a bit more on this fundamental question of independence. The Government does say that independence is important, but I am not quite sure that it realises the weight of it. Without an independent model, we do not have an effective service. It is quite simple.

[49] **Helen Mary Jones:** You are right, David, to remind us that the journey in the National Assembly started with our receiving the Waterhouse report, and our needing to respond to that. If any Members or those engaged in this process have not read it, I would urge them to look at it, because, as David has said, those of us who did were left permanently marked—and that is as it should be, because what happened was nothing short of catastrophic.

[50] **Christine Chapman:** I have a question on the definition of advocacy. I cannot remember who told us, but there was an indication that there was some confusion over what we mean by advocacy. Did you take any evidence from professionals, or did you feel that there was still some educating to be done there?

[51] **David Melding:** The all-body group is an informal meeting of Assembly Members with concerns and interest in the area of looked-after children. Most of us have experience of how those groups work. That is why we are so pleased that this committee is looking at this issue, and perhaps could take some evidence. I think that advocacy has to give a voice to people who may not be believed, or, even if they were to be believed, who may not be able to articulate the difficulties or the problems that they have experienced. That is why we talk of advocacy for older, frail people who are losing mental competence, or people who are mentally ill. It is a very important service, and these people are seriously vulnerable.

[52] What I envisage for effective advocacy is a service that allows vulnerable people to express themselves, and, where there is evidence of abuse, for that to be investigated

properly. It is very different from a complaints procedure, which really looks at how effective a service is, how responsive it is, and how people are treated. They are very important issues, but I would say that they are in a very different category from what we usually think about when talking about advocacy models.

[53] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, David; that was helpful. Do any other Members have any questions, comments or points that they would like to raise with the cross-party group? I see not. Thank you very much, David. While you are here, I should perhaps mention that Kath, who you will know from the Members' research service, is interested in attending the cross-party group and possibly in providing some support for it in acquiring information. David made the point that cross-party groups have not had the resources that committees have had to go out and take evidence, and so I was glad when the Members' research service made that offer. I am sure that, as the Chair, you will want to liaise with Kath and take her up on her offer.

[54] Although this committee is addressing the advocacy issues, I know that there is a wide range of other issues affecting looked-after children that the cross-party group will want to address in the coming years. I am sure that we will want to invite you in to see us on a number of other occasions, as a formal committee, given your expertise and that of the cross-party group on a number of other issues. If there are no further questions or comments from David, I will thank him again—diolch yn fawr iawn. I now invite our visitors from Voices from Care to join us at the table. Thank you, David. I should also say that, if you are able to, you are very welcome to stay with us, David.

[55] **David Melding:** I can stay until 11 a.m. but I was going to move to the public gallery.

[56] **Helen Mary Jones:** You would be welcome to stay. There is a spare chair next to the staff member from the Record, and so you would be very welcome to stay, if you can.

10.38 a.m.

### **Ymchwiliad i Wasanaethau Eiriolaeth Plant yng Nghymru: Voices from Care Inquiry into Advocacy Services for Children in Wales: Voices from Care**

[57] **Helen Mary Jones:** Hoffwn groesawu ein hymwelwyr o Voices from Care: Deborah Jones, y prif weithredwr; Felicity Waters, sy'n gwneud llawer o waith gwirfoddol o ran cyhoeddusrwydd a chyfathrebu; ac Aisling Donovan, sy'n berson ifanc sydd mewn gofal ar hyn o bryd, neu sydd wedi bod yn ddiweddar iawn. Gofynnaf i chi gyflwyno eich hunain, ac wedyn bydd Felicity yn dechrau drwy ddarllen datganiad gan Nicola, sy'n methu â bod gyda ni heddiw.

**Helen Mary Jones:** I welcome our visitors from Voices from Care: Deborah Jones, the chief executive; Felicity Waters, who undertakes a lot of voluntary publicity and communication work for Voices from Care; and Aisling Donovan who is a young person currently in care, or who has been until very recently. I ask you to introduce yourselves, and then I think that Felicity will start by reading a statement from Nicola, who cannot be with us today.

[58] I extend a very warm welcome to all three of you. We are very grateful to you for being here. If you would just like to briefly introduce yourselves for the Record, we will then move on to Felicity sharing Nicola's statement with us. Sorry, Deborah, did you want to start?

[59] **Ms Jones:** I will kick off, Helen, if that is okay. My name is Deborah Jones and I think that I have just about met everybody around the table, so I am probably a familiar face by now. Thank you for giving us this opportunity to give evidence to this very important

inquiry today. Voices from Care is an independent charity that represents children in the care system in Wales. We have been campaigning for independent advocacy for more than a decade. We believe that all looked-after children should have access to a wholly independent and centrally funded advocacy service that will provide them with a reliable voice to speak on their behalf—a voice that is not paid for by the local authority that they have a complaint about, but one that they can trust and have confidence in to help them through difficult times.

10.40 a.m.

[60] Of all children in care, 63 per cent leave school without a single qualification. A quarter of them are not even registered with a general practitioner and, in some areas, nearly a third of looked-after children have had to move schools more than once. Is it any wonder that they are at the bottom of all the league tables that rate achievement and positive outcomes? I believe that an independent and reliable voice, easily accessible in times of trouble or when making important decisions, could swing these outcomes. We believe that the only way to achieve that and to avoid any conflicts of interest is to have an advocacy service that is not funded, directly or indirectly, by local authorities. We believe that it is time for the Assembly Government to listen to the growing body of evidence that says that only a national independent advocacy service, funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, can serve the needs of Wales's most vulnerable children.

[61] Today, for the first time, you will hear from young people why independent representation is so important. You will also hear directly how inadequate advocacy has affected the life chances of two brave young women who now want to speak out to ensure that improvements are made for other vulnerable children.

[62] Our view is also supported by influential bodies, including the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, the British Medical Association, and our all-party group on looked-after children. Calls for a wholly independent advocacy service have also been made in a series of independent reports, including 'Lost in Care' by Sir Ronald Waterhouse, 'Too Serious a Thing' by Lord Carlile, and 'Telling Concerns' by the Children's Commissioner for Wales. Yet, despite the recommendations made over many years by many bodies, the only model put forward by the Assembly Government is one that is similar to the current arrangements, which fails to provide the independence that is so fundamental to upholding the rights of the child.

[63] Voices from Care has discovered that more than 20 organisations have also raised concerns about the Government's plans to allow local authorities to group together to fund their own advocacy services. An independent advocacy unit that is responsible for providing services to local authorities and is funded centrally by the Welsh Assembly Government is the only way to create equality for vulnerable young people. The National Assembly for Wales has a unique opportunity to create an advocacy service for children and young people that is the envy of the world. It should be wholly independent and centrally funded—two simple principles that the Assembly Government now has the power to achieve. I believe that this is an opportunity to act now on their behalf.

[64] That is me done, really. Before I hand over to Felicity, I want to add that I spoke to the new children's commissioner, who, I understand, is coming into post in March, to ask for a quote. He said that advocacy should be independent and independent today. So, I thought that I would offer that view.

[65] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, Deborah. In our next meeting, we will be taking evidence from the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and shortly after that we will be meeting the new children's commissioner.

[66] **Ms Walters:** I am Felicity Waters, and I am a freelance journalist specialising in health, education and social services. I have been working for Voices from Care for 18 months and have campaigned for a long time for independent advocacy for looked-after children.

[67] If I may, I will read out two short statements. One is from Nicola Edwards, who is a young person who has left care. She cannot be with us today, because she is in hospital. The other is from a young person who is just 15 and who is in care today, out of county, in a foster placement. She feels that she cannot speak for fear of the repercussions, but she wants her evidence to be heard. I will start by reading Nicola's statement.

[68] Nicola Edwards first entered the care system at the age of 12. She suffered abuse and the loss of a close member of her family, and yet she was placed in several different secure units that were located many hundreds of miles from her home, and in England in many cases. In one case, she was actually placed on an all-male ward in a psychiatric unit. She has asked me to read you her story. She has written it out and these are her words; I will do my best to reflect them.

[69] 'I have been in family placements and residential and secure units. I was placed in care because I was abused by my mother's boyfriend and was allegedly out of control. In one year, I was moved 25 times to various placements throughout England and Wales. When I went into care, I wasn't told about or informed of any advocacy services, but when I was 16 and left, it was then that I was told about an independent organisation that I could contact. When I got in touch with them, they were independent and very down to earth. There was a big difference about this organisation, and this was that it was independent—what was said remained confidential. I have also been in mental health institutions, and the number of people who have been in care and are admitted to psychiatrist units is on the increase. I believe that this is because the majority of young people leaving care are not prepared enough and do not have access to advocacy services—they are not informed of any services that they are able to contact.'

[70] 'Problems are expected only to arise between Monday and Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but life goes on 24/7. Who are we supposed to contact outside these hours? I have been informed that no-one works outside these hours. I believe that that is detrimental for young people in care. They should be able to access advocacy 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even if it is just someone on the other end of the phone to talk to who will listen to you.'

[71] 'Mental health advocacy wasn't accessible for the majority of the time either. You only got advocacy if you had a complaint. You were sent a copy of the complaint, but were not kept informed of the progress of that complaint. Complaints were kept on record, but it was your word against theirs and, at the end of the day, we have to live here. Making the complaint was very uncomfortable when using the service because the staff would sit closely enough to you to be able to hear conversations between you and the advocate. When it was heard, it would be documented in your notes for everyone to read. There were staff that would come and go and would be able to read your notes. You have to watch what you say and complain about as the staff could make your stay in hospital uncomfortable. When you left hospital, you weren't entitled to any support or advice and there was no entitlement to advocacy services.'

[72] 'The service should be entirely independent and not based in the hospital, where so many are, and should not be able to give feedback to local authority staff, and the complaint should be entirely confidential. I should have known about advocacy when I was first admitted and been informed of my rights. I should have been able to choose my own advocate, not have the one that the local authority just gives me and says, 'It is either this one or none'. We choose our own doctors, dentists and solicitors, so why can't we choose our

own advocate.’

[73] That is Nicola Edwards’s statement. I would now like to read a statement by a young person whom I will refer to as JR, who has asked not to be named as she is concerned about repercussions, particularly as she has an ongoing complaint. She is 15 years old and she also felt unable to attend in person today for fear of those repercussions. She is a vulnerable young person who is currently looked after in an out-of-county foster placement. She has been in care from a very young age and has experienced both residential and foster care. She feels very isolated at her current placement as it is miles from her friends, family and the city in which she has always lived. Although she feels unable to attend, she wants you to hear what she has to say about the advocacy that she has experienced. These are her words.

[74] ‘I first heard about advocacy when I was around 13 years old when I was in a children’s home. I didn’t want to go to school, but instead of trying to talk to me, they always got someone else to deal with it. I was given an advocate, and that was my first problem, because I wasn’t given a choice, and if I had, I definitely would not have chosen her. We had nothing in common, she dressed weirdly and I didn’t want to be seen out in public with her, but it gave me something to talk to the girls whom I lived with about.’

[75] This girl has a sense of humour.

[76] ‘I did try to talk to her, but it was obvious that she wasn’t interested and that she was only here for the same reason as a social worker: because she was being paid to. It makes me laugh, because I am told that I have a bad attitude, but at least I gave her a chance.’

[77] ‘Around six months after I met her, I had a big problem. A member of staff who worked at my home started acting in a way that a social worker would call ‘inappropriate’. I would tell it like it is; he was just pervy. I didn’t think that the staff would believe me, and, really, she was supposed to be there for me, so I thought that maybe this time she would listen and do something to help me. Well, she listened, but, just as I thought, it went straight to the manager without me being asked what I wanted. Isn’t that the whole point of an advocate? I thought that they were there for us, or at least that is the line she gave me. I guess I was wrong; I felt well let down. If I did not feel like an outsider before, I did now.’

10.50 a.m.

[78] ‘I expected that, after I made my complaint, she would help me through, but again, I was way off the mark; I did not hear from her at all. I’ve had loads of bad things happen in the past few months and I could have done with a proper advocate. The closest thing I have had is Carol; she is the only one who I didn’t feel was judging me. I think that you should be able to choose your advocate; it is no point expecting kids to talk about things that are bothering them, especially like the things that were bothering me, when you’ve got nothing in common—it’s like asking the blind to see. If you really want advocacy to be a good thing that young people really want, then don’t employ clones of social workers. I’ve been in care long enough to tell the difference between a social worker and a so-called independent person, and the woman I had wasn’t independent. Her wages were paid by the same people as social workers and that is not right.’

[79] ‘I hope what I’ve said helps a bit and I know I’m not the only kid that has had these problems, but I do have someone now who can make sure that you can hear me. Thank you.’

[80] Thank you for listening.

[81] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, Felicity, and please convey our thanks to Nicola and to JR. The fact that we are still in a situation where we have a young person who does not feel

that they can speak publicly about their experiences tells us, perhaps, how much we need to sort out independent advocacy. That is very sad; that is what this committee is here to try to change. However, there is one young person here who is ready to speak.

[82] **Ms Donovan:** I am the token young person of the day.

[83] **Helen Mary Jones:** You are the token young person of the day. I hope that you will not feel that you are tokenistic. We are really grateful to you for coming. These situations are always a bit weird, but I know that this is not the first committee meeting and so on that you have faced.

[84] **Ms Donovan:** No.

[85] **Helen Mary Jones:** I hand over to you and you can tell us what you think we need to know.

[86] **Ms Donovan:** All jokes aside, I am not the token young person today, but I am here as a member of staff of Voices from Care. I have also had previous experience of advocacy, so I will just read what I have written.

[87] Good morning, everyone. I have already been introduced as Aisling Donovan. This reads a bit like a police statement, so please bear with me. I am a 20-year-old professional and a mother of one. I am still a care leaver so my statement is very much recent. To give you some background, I first became a looked-after child at the age of 11, which was supposed to be for an initial one-month assessment period, as I was abducted and abused. My mother, who was my primary carer at the time, understandably found it very difficult to deal with it, so the time was also to be used to try to mediate with my mum to try to find some resolutions to the problems that we had with each other. Subsequently, I never returned to my family home and I spent the next seven years in the system. I spent most of my time as a looked-after child in a residential unit. At the age of 15, I was matched with a foster carer in an out-of-county foster placement, which, after five months, broke down. So, I began a milkman's round of some of the best and worst foster carers in my local authority area.

[88] Although I entered the care system at the age of 11, I was not introduced to any form of advocacy service until I was 13. The reason why I was offered the service at this age was my first suicide attempt. I had never had a mental health problem, illness or whatever you want to call it, before I became looked-after, but due to the stresses of living in a residential unit and trying desperately to come to terms with what had happened to me and the reason why I was in care, I fell apart. I was introduced to my advocate, who was a very nice woman; in this respect, my advocacy experience was a pleasant one. I also felt quite lucky, because, even though I never had any say in who my advocate would be, I got on with her very well.

[89] The advocacy service that I received was good, but this is because my advocate went above and beyond the call of duty. The other reasons that my advocacy experience was such a pleasant one was because my advocate personalised how she delivered her service, whereas other advocates that I have come across are very much like social workers. They allow you to get close enough so that you can talk to them about general day-to-day life, but not close enough that you feel you can trust them.

[90] As I have mentioned, the service that I received was good. However, it could have been better if advocates were in some way allowed to be more human, and the red tape that they are bound by was cut—or I will even compromise by saying just loosened slightly—to give them the opportunity to use their own initiative. Not everything in the care system is a child protection issue, so it does not need to go down on a file somewhere for someone else to read. Young people in care are not always victims—it is to do with circumstances.

[91] To give you an example of what I mean, I will use a personal experience of mine. A year after I started working with my advocate, I went through a dark period and attempted suicide for a second time, which resulted in my taking a six-month sabbatical at one of the finest mental health institutions in south Wales. I tried to make contact with my advocate—I just needed someone to talk to, because group therapy was not really my thing. I contacted her office and spoke with her manager, who informed me that my advocate would be unable to see me at that moment in time as the service could not provide the kind of specialised support that I clearly needed.

[92] To say that I was upset is an understatement. The service that promoted itself by saying that it was there to support me in times of need had abandoned me. I was furious. Although I only had contact with my advocate once every month for a few hours, I felt at ease with her. I was able to talk to her about things that I had not been able to disclose to anyone before. To add insult to injury, my local authority informed me that there was no specialist advocacy befriending or independent visiting service for young people suffering with mental health illness.

[93] I will move forward in time slightly to when I was released back into what we call 'normal society'. I was told, 'It is okay now, Ash, you can see her now after your six-month break'. It was like being kicked in the teeth. I thought, 'Oh, how thoughtful; I have worked so hard on getting myself well again, you now want to know'. I was insulted. After putting some real thought into it, I realised that this was not my advocate's fault—this was the whole advocacy model. I knew that she wanted nothing more than to support me, but the powers that be would neither fund nor support it. Therefore, I started seeing her again. We only had six months left on our contract, so, after all the time and effort, my funding ran out.

[94] I wonder now, as I look back, why the local authority found it so easy to take something that it considered so valuable away from what it called such a 'vulnerable young person', who so clearly needed it. In this day and age, to put a price on advocacy is ludicrous, and to put a price on its value to young people is ludicrous. That is why I am here today, sharing my personal experiences with you, to campaign for children and young people such as JR, who I work with. It is so that they can feel that they can sit here to tell you themselves, rather than through someone else—with no offence to Felicity, who said it beautifully. If we had a wholly independent advocacy service, we would find that many more young people would come out of the woodwork and be able to come forward to make statements such as these.

[95] Thank you for your time.

[96] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. I have one question, Aisling, before we move on to the general questions. You said that, first of all, at the end of this process, you could not see your advocate when you were in a mental health institution, because she was not regarded as qualified to deal with that.

[97] **Ms Donovan:** That is right.

11.00 a.m.

[98] **Helen Mary Jones:** Secondly, the funding for the service ran out. Was that funding for the whole service or funding for you to work with that particular advocate?

[99] **Ms Donovan:** I did not leave care until I was 18, but this happened about five or six years ago. I spoke with Debbie about this and she informed me that advocacy can now be offered throughout someone's time in care. However, while I was in care, the local authority



would fund an advocate for only two years. This was just after the NSPCC withdrew from Wales.

[100] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. Thank you for making time to come here. I know that it is not easy to speak about very personal matters, but it is helpful for us because it makes some of the general evidence real. You can hear the theory, but understanding how it feels for somebody is difficult for those of us who have never had such experiences.

[101] **Ms Donovan:** Yes. As I said at the start, it is not all doom and gloom. I am not sitting at home worrying about these problems any more. I am employed; I pay taxes. I work for an organisation that I love and I am here today because of people such as JR, who gave us the statement, and because this is something that we have wanted for so long. By 'we' I mean looked-after children, not Voices from Care as an organisation. It is such a simple thing, but it has taken 10 years of campaigning; it is a bit unreal to be sitting at this table today.

[102] **Helen Mary Jones:** It should not have taken that long.

[103] **Ms Donovan:** No, it should not have taken this long.

[104] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, Aisling. We have about nine formal questions that we wish to ask you all, but I think that Eleanor wishes to ask a question first.

[105] **Eleanor Burnham:** You are very brave and what you had to say was very moving. Did you mean that the NSPCC withdrew from Wales or was it National Children's Homes?

[106] **Helen Mary Jones:** It was the Children's Society.

[107] **Ms Donovan:** Sorry, yes it was the Children's Society.

[108] **Helen Mary Jones:** The NSPCC is still around.

[109] **Ms Donovan:** What I meant was that it was offering an advocacy service in my local authority area and then it withdrew, but I got a bit confused there.

[110] **Eleanor Burnham:** I see. Thank you very much.

[111] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. We shall start the more formal questions. You have all touched on some of these issues already, but I hope that the questions will give you the opportunity to add some detail. You have begun to tell us about this, particularly in the testimonies from young people and in what Aisling has said. What do you and the children and young people that Voices from Care works with want from an advocacy service? What makes a good advocate?

[112] **Ms Jones:** It is clear from the experience of the north Wales inquiry, on which I sat and was represented, that trust is a huge issue for young people, as is confidentiality. Sir Ronald has echoed that many times. Young people do not trust services provided by local authorities. It mainly comes down to confidentiality. I do not know how many times Aisling and I have heard social workers and advocates discuss young people in areas and arenas that completely breach confidentiality. Ultimately, young looked-after people are seeking a relationship with an advocacy service that they can trust and that is confidential. They also want a service that does not get swapped and changed every other year when the contract comes up for renewal. They need complete consistency in relationships.

[113] **Ms Donovan:** The young people I am working with at the moment keep asking why you need a social work degree to relate to a child. In the person specifications, social work

and teaching degrees are desirable. Many agencies ask for them. I do not think that they are necessary. Debbie said that 63 per cent of looked-after children leave care without qualifications, and you have to think that they might want to give something back. Many of them want to relate to looked-after children and to help them. If you make a mistake in life, you always want to go back in time. Many young people would like to go back in time, but they realise that they cannot, so they go back and help. However, how can you help when you did not go to school because there were so many changes, and you do not have a degree?

[114] To echo what Debbie said with regard to the young person whose case Felicity spoke about, it is like meeting with a social worker; it is not a relaxed environment. They sit as we are sitting today. They hear something that you say, and you see their hand move to take notes, because they want to remember what you have said. It is impersonal. It needs to be personal. Many advocates that I have spoken to would love to be able to be more personal and reveal a bit of themselves, in order for the young people to feel more comfortable. However, that is not allowed. It is ridiculous; how can you expect young people to relate to or communicate properly with someone whom they know nothing about? You can read all about me in public files, but how can I read anything about you?

[115] **Ms Waters:** These young people are vulnerable and do not have parents who can speak on their behalf or to go to parents' evenings in schools; they do not have people to push their case. I am a mother, and I would do anything for my son. They do not have those people; they have someone sitting at the other end of a table, who has their wages paid and ticks the box that he or she has done the job. These people need someone independent whom they can speak to, can trust and have confidence in, and know will fight their cause for them. Otherwise, what incentive is there to get a qualification or go to university? The aim is to survive; they just want to get through it. It is hard on them.

[116] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That point about consistency is also something that we need to bear in mind. Lynne, I think that you have a second question.

[117] **Lynne Neagle:** I thank you for your presentations this morning. In your evidence, you talked about one of the key barriers to accessing advocacy, which is that people are not informed about it, which is fairly fundamental. Can you talk more generally about what you think the main barriers and challenges are in accessing advocacy services in the first place?

[118] **Ms Jones:** There is inconsistency of service provision, which is a problem in terms of marketing and promoting advocacy to young people who are looked after. I am very worried. I have a long history—almost an ancient one—in terms of north Wales. There, a contributing factor to the high levels of abuse of young people was the number of out-of-county placements. There was a lack of independent people for young people to speak to. The young people, who are now adults, told our organisation that they would not speak to professionals about issues of abuse where there are, for example, county councillors involved in that strategic abuse, if that is what you want to call it. So, there are some issues there. From speaking with advocacy service providers, I know that, even today, there is an area of threat to advocates in representing the young person—in their words, if they go too far, they are shut down. I cannot give you a list of all of the barriers, but there is a lack of consistency. Different organisations operate in different areas. There is also competition between advocacy providers, which I do not think helps young people. Apparently, competition drives up standards, but I do not think that we have yet reached those standards. So, to say that a competitive market would raise standards is ludicrous when you are talking about advocacy.

[119] Voices from Care has come a long way from the north Wales days. We used to be seen as bashing social workers over the head, which really was not the case. We want to see positive outcomes for young people. On a micro level, Voices from Care achieves that. That is not a plug for our organisations, but we have young people going through our organisation

who are currently doing MBAs, PhDs, and so on. So, there is consistency; young people can rely upon and go back to these agencies to help them further in order to improve outcomes.

11.10 a.m.

[120] That is the key: the model on the table is inconsistent, and in my opinion it does not deliver, although I could be wrong. However, in terms of the good initiatives that the Assembly Government has produced, such as Rights into Action, and ‘Making the Connections’, I do not think that they could be delivered through a regional commissioning body; there would be problems. If we had a universal service we could ensure that those policies and initiatives could be delivered, and we could improve the outcomes. So, it is not just about supporting young people; it is about supporting their future and ensuring better outcomes through a national independent service. To answer your question, Lynne, the fundamental issue is trust. If children and young people do not trust the service, they will not use it. Today we have had a statement from a young person in the system who is finding it difficult to speak to anyone about the issues that concern her.

[121] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. Lynne, do you want to follow up on that?

[122] **Lynne Neagle:** I have a quick supplementary question on the issue of informing young people about the availability of advocacy services. Are you aware of any guidance issued to social workers on the entitlement to advocacy, so that, at an early stage, young people in the care system are informed of that entitlement—or is it variable?

[123] **Ms Jones:** I think that it is variable, but I will pass that on to Aisling.

[124] **Ms Donovan:** I know that one local authority in particular has a coming-into-care pack, which includes pamphlets on advocacy. Since I was in care the situation has changed considerably; advocacy was relatively new then, and no-one really knew what an advocate was. However, if you ask a lot of young people, they still do not know what an advocacy service is. I do not think that the services are promoted well, and when they go out to tender, they often change hands. The advocacy service in Newport has changed hands three times in four years—it was run by the NSPCC, then the National Youth Advocacy Service, and then Tros Gynnal, which is the current provider. As Debbie said, there is no consistency in the provision of advocacy, so how can you promote it properly? You could have a NYAS poster on the wall one week, and the week after you would have to put up a Tros Gynnal poster. There is constant competition between them—why can they not work in conjunction? Is it purely because the local authority will not pay for two advocacy service providers? They should not have to pay for any. The money should come straight from the Welsh Assembly Government.

[125] **Eleanor Burnham:** This is so confusing for me, because I worked in social services early in my career, and at that stage I felt that social workers were supposed to help people, full stop. Seriously, though, I will move on to my formal question. Peer advocacy does not seem to be mentioned in the Assembly Government’s proposals—you know what I am talking about because you have experience of peer advocacy. Sorry, you have experience of self-advocacy. Do you think that peer advocacy has a role?

[126] **Ms Jones:** Absolutely, and again, that is not in the commissioning model because it has not been thought through properly, and strategically. The participation of young people is where the peer-to-peer stuff comes in. Another important element that is not in the document, which was absolutely crucial to young people being looked after in the north Wales scenario, is that the person whom they trusted was the cook. They took almost all of their complaints to the cook, and she eventually raised the alarm, but, without that lay advocate, the young people would have been left with nothing. So there needs to be more consideration of lay advocacy,

and what the general public do on behalf of young people in their own communities—that could also be brought in to some kind of strategy.

[127] **Eleanor Burnham:** There is so much bureaucracy that it is difficult to get the balance right. That is the issue, is it not? I know that this is not one of my formal questions, but we could consider listening skills and, if it has to be certified, perhaps an introductory counselling qualification. Would you agree with that for instance?

[128] **Ms Jones:** That is essential. My background is in counselling to a degree. Time and again, young people say, 'We are not being listened to'. That goes back again to the north Wales inquiry. Young people still do not believe that they are being listened to and understood. They understand the jargon of social workers but it is ironic that professionals do not understand the young people's language, which is quite simple—no disrespect, Aisling. They put things in simple terms that do not seem to be understood. So, in terms of a job description and what is essential, it should not be essential for an advocate to have a social work degree; it should be more about—

[129] **Eleanor Burnham:** Listening and counselling.

[130] **Ms Jones:** Absolutely.

[131] **Helen Mary Jones:** Before I bring Christine in on the next question, I would like to say that we have heard some fairly negative things about social workers here today and, as an ex-social worker, I think that we need to be clear that when a young person is in care, social workers have to make objective decisions about what is best for that child or young person with regard to their safety and child protection and the stuff that Aisling was talking about. An advocate, as I see it, is somebody who helps the young person to speak for themselves. It is not the advocate's job to judge these things. Let us say that a young person wants to go home and live with their family. The social services department has child protection imperatives and it may have to say, 'No, you cannot', but the young person still needs somebody who will help him or her to express their view. So, we are not being horrible about social workers, Eleanor—

[132] **Eleanor Burnham:** Do you want me to apologise?

[133] **Helen Mary Jones:** No, no, but it is a different job and I think that what Aisling and others are saying is that if an advocate is just another person who goes away and discusses what the young person has said with the social worker, without talking it through with him or her, that becomes a problem. Is that right?

[134] **Ms Donovan:** Yes. Why pay for an advocate when he or she is just doing the job of a social worker? You might as well save yourself money and stick with the social worker. If you look at it in black and white, you see that you are effectively paying two social workers to be with the child. I got on all right with my social worker—actually, I did like my social worker; she was all right.

[135] **Eleanor Burnham:** Oh dear, I am being painted in a bad light now. I think that you understand what I was saying.

[136] **Ms Donovan:** Yes, I understand.

[137] **Eleanor Burnham:** The situation has moved on and we have to get it all right, otherwise, as you rightly say, we are wasting money but, more importantly, we are wasting people's lives.

[138] **Ms Donovan:** You are wasting young people's time. I used to talk to the cleaner in my old residential unit. I named my daughter after her, because I could talk to her about anything and she kept a lot of the young people's secrets, when she should not have had to. So, give Molly the money; she would have been a brilliant advocate. [*Laughter.*] And she cleans toilets too.

[139] **Ms Jones:** In fairness to social workers, they find themselves in an over-bureaucratic system and it is very difficult to speak up against the flow at times. So, if we are going to professionalise advocacy, which is what some people are talking about in some quarters, the question of which way we are going to professionalise them should be taken on board. I know that some agencies are asking for advocates to have social work degrees. That excludes the cook—as was explained earlier—and the community people who blow the whistle.

[140] **Helen Mary Jones:** We might want to consider these important distinctions.

[141] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am pleased that I have raised the matter because at least we have been able to air it.

[142] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is right.

[143] **Ms Jones:** Another interesting point to make is that a lot of the referrals that we get as an organisation come from social workers who cannot do anything within the system.

[144] **Christine Chapman:** I have a question on the consultation progress. I know that there are lots of concerns about the model that the Assembly Government has put forward. There was a consultation. I cannot remember exactly the scale of it now, but you fed your views into it. Could you outline the concerns that you had about the model? Did you feel that the young people's views were adequately taken on board at the time of the consultation?

[145] **Ms Jones:** Are you talking about the Andy Pithouse consultation?

[146] **Helen Mary Jones:** The Assembly Government consultation that went out.

11.20 a.m.

[147] **Ms Jones:** To my knowledge, that did not consult young people effectively. The one thing that I would say about Voices from Care is that we have been consistent in sitting on the advocacy steering groups and so on. I believe that our voice has been ignored, however, with preference going to a model that is, to a degree, easier to deliver, although I would not say that an independent advocacy service is hard to deliver if our thinking is right from the beginning. Felicity and I have been to meetings about advocacy at which anything we had to say was effectively steamrollered. In all honesty, that is the only way I could answer you.

[148] In terms of consultation with young people, it was very ad hoc, and not many young people from the looked-after system were consulted.

[149] **Ms Waters:** May I just add to that? One of our fundamental concerns about the consultation is that there was only the one model offered: regional commissioning. We were told that we were the only ones calling for independent advocacy and that we should, really, just go with the flow and accept the Government's regional commissioning model. We then put a request in under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to get everybody's responses, and, going through them, we found that about 26 other organisations—and not just children's organisations, but many of the children and young people's partnerships, which will be expected to deliver this model—expressed concern about the regional commissioning model. We found that quite worrying.

[150] We feel that, essentially, on reading the details of the model, it is overly bureaucratic, it has grave implications for accountability, and ease of access is an issue. One of the reasons for having an effective, robust advocacy service is that young people understand how to access it. It has to be robust for them; they need to know where to go and what to do, and they need to have a service that they can trust. It was so complicated to get through and, ultimately, it is not taking the service away from local authorities. Local authorities will still be paying for their own whistleblowers, which is a nonsense. We talk about the competition between providers, but providers are afraid to speak out on behalf of young people if they know that they have to apply for the next contract. They are creating the distance by having groups of local authorities commission the services, but ultimately, it is still local authorities that are providing the service. All that distance does is create more bureaucracy and more levels for young people to get through before they can access the advocacy.

[151] **Angela Burns:** Thank you for coming today, and thank you for your representations, which I read with great care and interest. I lost count of the number of times you have written the words ‘independent’, ‘independence’ or any variation thereof. I started highlighting them in pink and then thought that I would not be able to read anything in the document.

[152] You started to answer the question that I wanted to ask, but I am going to ask it anyway, because I would like you to expand further on the matter. Why do you think it would be so difficult for local authorities to offer independent advocacy? We could be in danger of setting up yet more bodies. Just look at the health service, which has many strands. It has one paymaster, one check, but many strands can, and do, operate independently. So, why do you feel that it would be so difficult to achieve with advocacy?

[153] **Ms Donovan:** I do not think that it would be difficult for them to give us a wholly independent advocacy service. I think that it is quite a simple thing that we are asking for.

[154] **Angela Burns:** Sorry, but the question was: why do you think would it be difficult for the local authority to be the provider of the independent advocacy service?

[155] **Ms Donovan:** How can you ask a child to go to an advocate who you know is paid for by the local authority? If you want to complain about your social worker, you might as well tell her to her face. That is how simple it is—you might as well put it to her directly. It is easy and simple. If you have a problem with her, you may as well go and shout it in the street or just tell her anyway.

[156] **Angela Burns:** I am going to be the difficult one here, obviously. I started by saying that my sympathies are entirely with you, so I understand and I can see the whole point of an independent advocate, but I must press you on this. If we are to consider this matter carefully, I need more than just, ‘Well, it would not work’. I really have to press you on this. If you have a business organisation of any sort, you will often have a compliance officer who reports totally independently. The officer is paid by the business, but that person’s job is to measure the business to ensure that it is being compliant. They could well be the most unpopular person in the business, but they have a statutory obligation within the business framework to provide an independent view of how that business will operate. You could argue that a local authority could also do that—the authority would do all that it does and have an independent advocacy service, which has the same paymaster but the statutory and governmental powers to be totally independent and pull that authority into line if there is an issue with advocacy.

[157] **Ms Waters:** I think that there is already evidence to show that the service is not independent, and, just from reading two statements and hearing about Aisling’s experience, I do not think that it is independent. It will only be independent if it is taken out of the hands of local authorities. Debbie will have something to say on the trade in information. What we are

talking about here is confidential information, and, a lot of the time, local authorities will not want very sensitive or information that is, often, damaging to their organisation to be made public. The model proposed by the Government suggests that groups of local authorities will be responsible for commissioning. Realistically, will one local authority want to reveal to another local authority something that is damaging about a member of its staff? They do not want that information to become public, and I think that that is what has not been talked about here. The Government says in the consultation document that it has a definition of advocacy, which says somewhere that conflicts of interest must be removed, because, otherwise, it is not a robust advocacy service.

[158] **Angela Burns:** So, you do not think that it is possible for local authorities to provide advocacy and remove conflicts of interests.

[159] **Ms Waters:** No, and as the Chair mentioned earlier, social workers and local authorities are there to protect and provide care to children. They mean well but, let us face it, if they have something damaging or not complimentary to the service that they provide, they will not want that information to be shared. That is why it is convenient for them to keep the service within their control or boundaries. They do not want that service to be removed from them.

[160] **Ms Jones:** Information is power, I guess. To use an old cliché, which is always useful at times like this, from our perspective, he who pays the piper calls the tune. In terms of local authorities, some are very good and some are not so good, for whatever reason. There could never be a strategic direction across the board on advocacy that protects the independence of young people's complaints and which supports young people through the process, particularly if it is against four members of staff, for example, which is quite often the case. We have noticed that when a young person raises a complaint, such as JR, they are instantly moved out of the county and it is very difficult to keep a consistent approach in the case of that young person. Even for Voices from Care, tracking young people is one of the hardest things that we have to do because they are constantly being moved. In the case of young people who make complaints, I have noticed that they are moved almost the same week and the complaint goes with them—the fight is taken out of them in some respects.

[161] I do not think that advocacy is high enough on the agenda of local authorities, given all the other competing priorities. For example, advocacy was slashed from the Vale of Glamorgan budget only last year, which meant that there was no advocacy provision. That decision was based on financial pressures. Local authorities face many complications to a degree, including budgetary complications and the fact that information is power, and so forth. Therefore, I do not think that local authorities are able to deliver a service that ultimately represents a young person and represents and delivers the Assembly's policy initiatives, and they should not be in a position to do that. Ultimately, independent advocacy should independently represent the client and not the service provider. I do not think that local authorities should be in the position of providing that service, to be fair to them and to the young people.

11.30 a.m.

[162] **Lynne Neagle:** I think that we have dealt with the general concerns about the regional model of commissioning, so I will ask some of the supplementary questions. The Deputy Minister told the committee that the model that she is proposing, which brings together the children and young people's partnerships, would add some distance and would bring more scrutiny and accountability to the process. Do you have any sympathy with that, and, if not, what do you feel are the flaws in the argument presented by the Deputy Minister?

[163] **Ms Waters:** We appreciate that things have moved forward since the outcome of the

consultation. She has taken on board our concerns and those of other organisations about the regional model. In the original document, there is talk of an advocacy unit of sorts. It lacks teeth, is very vague, and does not go into any detail, but she has acknowledged that it could be strengthened. However, it is still very woolly. She states here that the key function would be to develop the national service, establish an independent scrutiny board, provide a strategic framework and monitor the implementation of a specialist, integrated service. Frankly, that does not go anywhere near far enough.

[164] If we are to have an independent body and an independent advocacy unit, let us do it properly, for goodness' sake. There is no detail and it lacks meaningful powers. She talks about governance, but where is the governance? There is no explanation as to the regulatory powers that it would have over services that do not carry out their functions properly; it is just paying lip service to the concept of governance. While I appreciate that she has tried to move things forward a little, it does not go anywhere near far enough, in our view.

[165] **Helen Mary Jones:** Referring back to the issue of the children and young people's partnerships, the Minister's contention was that that would provide sufficient distance from the local authorities, as the providers of the service that a young person might want to advocate against. Can you tell us a bit more about Voices from Care's view on that? Before you do, I am conscious that we were planning to end the meeting by 11.30 a.m. even though it states 12 p.m. on the agenda. Are Members content for us to carry on for a little while longer? I know, Angela, that you have to leave—

[166] **Angela Burns:** I have to go in about five or 10 minutes' time.

[167] **Helen Mary Jones:** Fine.

[168] **An Assembly Member:** Will we be finished by 12 p.m.?

[169] **Helen Mary Jones:** We will certainly be finished before 12 p.m.. We may not reach certain questions, and there may be ones on which Members want further clarification. If so, are you happy for us to ask for a written note on anything that is not resolved? I know that you have already given us the written evidence, but these questions arise from wanting further detail on aspects of evidence. Is that okay? I see that it is. I will bring you back to the children and young people's partnerships. The Minister says that that gives you enough distance for 'a degree of independence', which I think is the term that was used.

[170] **Ms Waters:** David Melding criticised the term 'a degree of independence'. What does that mean? Either you have independence, or you do not. Creating distance is a nice concept, but all it does is create more bureaucracy and make the service less accountable and less easy to access and to understand. When we put our data request in under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, we found that a number of the children and young people's partnerships had concerns about how they would actually work. There has also been some concern about advocacy in health and education sectors. While we are all for everyone working together, those sectors have very little experience so far of providing advocacy, and there is very little strategic direction as to how it should be provided within the partnerships.

[171] **Lynne Neagle:** In reply to Angela, you said, effectively, that you felt that local authorities would not want to wash their dirty linen in public. Would that happen under this kind of arrangement? Is it not just a commissioning thing, and would there not be confidentiality between the advocate and the young person? Would that level of information come out at the commissioning level that you are worried about?

[172] **Ms Waters:** It is the same thing, because, at the end of the day, it is still the local authority that is commissioning the service. You can create the distance at as many different



levels as you want, but the children and young people's partnership, with its lead commissioner, is still accountable to his local authority and the other local authorities in that group. To whom is he accountable? To the local authority that pays him, and not to the National Assembly, the Assembly Government, or the young people. So, this concept of creating distance pays lip service to the concept of independence.

[173] **Helen Mary Jones:** To be clear on this point, would you prefer the regional commissioning model to that of local authorities carrying on commissioning on a one-off basis? I know that that is not your preferred model. That is a nationally commissioned, locally provided service. However, if that does not happen, is a regional model an improvement on what we have now?

[174] **Ms Waters:** I do not think that it is.

[175] **Ms Jones:** No, I think that it is more of a smokescreen. It is even more bureaucratic for young people to try to get through these services, coming back to what you said.

[176] **Ms Waters:** We see an independent, stand-alone advocacy unit as the only way forward. There is a huge opportunity here, and we will miss it if we are not careful.

[177] **Helen Mary Jones:** Lynne, do you want to come in on this point?

[178] **Lynne Neagle:** Yes, please. Do you have any concerns about the capacity of children and young people's partnerships to deliver this commissioning role?

[179] **Ms Waters:** I do not think that there is enough detail on that in the model. One of our other concerns is that much of it is vague and badly written, frankly. It is just not easily accessible, is it?

[180] **Ms Jones:** No. It is not at all transparent. This feels like back in the day when Voices from Care first came up with the campaign for establishing a children's commissioner. Many people had many concerns, but we forged ahead and managed to get a commissioner—the first one in Great Britain. Instead of advocacy being viewed as a complicated, bureaucratic system, it should be viewed independently and should be dynamic in delivering better outcomes—for looked-after children, in this instance.

[181] However, as much as local authorities provide advocacy to looked-after children, my concern is that that is not picked up, for example, for Nicola, or in mental health institutions; it is not holistic, and it is not delivered on the ground. The regional commissioning model takes it further away from young people, because it is almost a group out there in the mist for them; if young people understand that there is a central and independent advocacy service for them, the take-up would be far greater. As we stand today, advocacy is usually instigated, unfortunately, through a complaint, and that should not happen; advocacy should be part of a development process. Again, I cannot see that the commissioning body would be able to deliver that, because it is just so obscure.

[182] **Eleanor Burnham:** Everyone has trampled all over my questions, so I will go off on a tangent. I am interested in the mental health institution, because I have personal experience, as others do, of a particular case in which someone was trying to take information out of Wales. I think that the person was aged over 18. How can we improve advocacy? I am concerned about what you have been talking about, and I am conscious of what you say about out-of-county placements, and so on. You mentioned out-of-Wales placements, did you not, Felicity? Do we have the powers in Wales to do anything to ensure that we have advocacy that is meaningful and has teeth, to consider issues with young people who are out of Wales?

[183] **Ms Waters:** We do now.

[184] **Eleanor Burnham:** Fine.

[185] **Ms Waters:** One thing that the Deputy Minister said was a barrier to providing an independent, stand-alone unit was local authorities' statutory obligation to provide advocacy, which would require primary legislation to remove. However, as David Melding said, who firmly believes that it can be done, we can use the LCO on vulnerable children to push this forward.

11.40 a.m.

[186] **Eleanor Burnham:** Okay. Following my former question, I will go back and ask you to confirm that you are adamant that the existing Welsh Assembly Government proposals are completely inappropriate.

[187] **Ms Jones:** Completely.

[188] **Eleanor Burnham:** In a nutshell, what do you want us to do?

[189] **Ms Jones:** I mean, you have—

[190] **Ms Waters:** Shall I just state the case briefly and then you can add the detail, because you are more up on that? As we have said time and again, for the past 10 years, backed by the late Children's Commissioner for Wales, the current children's commissioner, many children's organisations and independent reports, we need a national stand-alone advocacy unit that provides services to local authorities. That advocacy unit needs to be funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and it needs to be accountable to the National Assembly for Wales. It would take the provision of advocacy out of the hands of local authorities, so that, when they need advocacy, they apply to the advocacy unit. It is as simple as that.

[191] **Eleanor Burnham:** What relationship would that unit have with the newly appointed children's commissioners?

[192] **Ms Waters:** We think that the children's commissioner could have a scrutinising role, as it does with all sorts of other children's services, but the unit needs to be accountable ultimately to the National Assembly for Wales. I think that a very important point is that young people must have trust in the system. If young people could have transparency and see that the service was accountable to the National Assembly, scrutinised by the children's commissioner, more people would use the service and have faith in it.

[193] **Eleanor Burnham:** In many respects, if we consider the brilliant way in which we have advanced in Wales over the past few years, we should be a beacon, showing that we are taking the situation and the voices of children and young people very seriously, and not just paying lip service to them.

[194] **Ms Waters:** Absolutely, and this would be a way to do it.

[195] **Christine Chapman:** May I just turn this on its head for a minute? We obviously heard that you are not at all keen on the proposed model and that you are talking about an independent service. I suppose that there could be some positives about a more local service—and I am thinking of services that are embedded in the community. Aisling talked about links with the health service and so on. Do you see any dangers in having a purely national model that is not embedded in the communities from where we need to get those services? I think that Aisling mentioned this.

[196] **Ms Waters:** We would like to see a co-ordinated model, which is what we put in our evidence. We are all for working together locally between health, education and social services, and that has to happen, but the commissioning needs to be done at a national level. I do not know whether you want to add any more detail to that.

[197] **Ms Jones:** A national model would probably enable communities to support young people better within those communities. At the moment, it is very bureaucratic; whereas, a national model could commission services to deliver in the local communities in the way that they do now. It is very similar to how local authorities commissioned Tros Gynnal, for example: it is meant to deliver within communities, but Tros Gynnal is a national advocacy organisation. Do you know what I mean? I do not see that there are too many difficulties with a national organisation delivering on a grass-roots level within local communities.

[198] **Christine Chapman:** Whatever happens, local authorities have a part to play here, do they not? We are talking about education. Aisling put it very well today when talking about her experiences in education and the importance of links. In some ways, you cannot cut out the local authorities, because they are a really important part of all of this.

[199] **Ms Jones:** I do not think that we would want to, either.

[200] **Ms Waters:** I think that a national unit would provide the strategic direction necessary and we have heard a lot about inconsistency today. I think that it could ensure that services are standardised across Wales and that everybody gets fair play.

[201] **Ms Jones:** Critically, Christine, I think that a big issue for Voices from Care has always been that you can measure what is going on in a local authority via complaints and concerns, to a degree, but there has never been a national approach to scrutinising those kinds of data. I think that, again, a national organisation would be in a much better position to do that and to deliver on peer-to-peer stuff and lay advocacy. I do not think, quite frankly, that local authorities would have the time to engage in those kinds of peer-to-peer strategies, for example.

[202] **Helen Mary Jones:** Aisling, I think that you wanted to come in on this.

[203] **Ms Donovan:** On provision at a national level, I was just going to say that a lot of local authorities throughout Wales actually employ an English company to provide us with an advocacy service. So, if we can accept the National Youth Advocacy Service that is based in England to provide a national service here, why can we not accept a totally new one? It would not be difficult. I think that Tros Gynnal has got it right—it is a national organisation with local bases with which young people can familiarise themselves and it can integrate into the community. However, NYAS does not always offer that. It is a national service with offices around the country, but it is not a familiar base to which young people can come and go and familiarise themselves with.

[204] **Helen Mary Jones:** I think that we need to be careful not to be seen to be speaking more favourably of one provider than the other.

[205] **Ms Donovan:** No, I am just saying that if you look at the two—

[206] **Eleanor Burnham:** I think that Aisling makes a very good point.

[207] **Ms Donovan:** Those are our two main providers.

[208] **Ms Jones:** There is also a completely different advocacy system going on in the

criminal justice system, where communication is required between services that are over the border, to feed into the criminal justice system. This might be down to non-devolved powers, but there is certainly no communication with Wales in relation to what is going on with looked-after young people in their services. There is a large percentage of young people from the care system in secure units and in prison. There is no joined-up thinking in the approach to the overall package that looked-after children are faced with. Often, from my experience with looked-after children, a value judgment is made of them by social workers. We need to remove that judgment and become effective in delivering an advocacy service on which they can rely, which is not about judgment, but about improving outcomes for young people who are looked after.

[209] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. We have one or two questions to finish up with. I wanted to ask you about the three-stage approach to the provision of advocacy in the Government's proposals as they went out to consultation; there has been some movement away from that approach in recent weeks. Starting with advocacy for the most vulnerable children and rolling it out, do you have a view on whether or not that is the right way to do it?

[210] **Ms Jones:** I would agree that you have to base your services with the most vulnerable children and young people, but, equally, I am mindful of the Clywch report; young people were calling out at that time for independent advocacy within an educational setting. They were also calling fundamentally for peer advocacy. Again, going back to Sir Ron, who is our patron—I do not know whether everyone knows that—he certainly thinks that it is dangerous to broaden out an agenda too quickly, because we could exclude the most vulnerable young people and children in Wales by doing so. So, I agree that such phases need to take place, but, again, it should be an independent process.

[211] **Helen Mary Jones:** I know that you were concerned about something that was not explored enough in the consultation document—the Government has added to it since—which was the issue of inspection and how advocacy services should be inspected. In the Minister's statement in December, she was clear that the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales would have a role in inspecting advocacy services, whether they are commissioned nationally, regionally or locally. Does Voices from Care have a view on that?

[212] **Ms Jones:** I am not convinced that the inspectorate is the best body to do that. I understand why people think that way, but I think that we could utilise the children's commissioner much more in scrutinising advocacy services. The children's commissioner's office would be much more informed about what is going on at a grass-roots level as opposed to the inspectorate.

[213] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful; thank you. Do Members have any additional questions or comments?

11.50 a.m.

[214] **Eleanor Burnham:** I presume, Chair, that we will take these views seriously, because these are not just their views; it is important to remember that they are only highlighting what others in similar scenarios would think. I am convinced, although we are not making our minds up now, that we should take this extremely seriously. They have made approaches that you would not expect them to have to make in trying to get to the bottom of the situation, by asking questions under freedom of information legislation. Those questions have unearthed concerns and the answers that they have been given have led them to believe that they were a lone voice. They are obviously not a lone voice; many other voices have perhaps not been properly heard.

[215] **Helen Mary Jones:** Part of the reason why the committee agreed that we would look

at this issue was that there were some concerns that not everyone who had an interest in this had been able to make their views known as clearly as they would have liked.

[216] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am sure that it is more than that.

[217] **Helen Mary Jones:** We will take the evidence of Voices from Care very seriously, as we will with that of

[218] all organisations and individuals. For me, it has been particularly valuable to hear the experiences of young people who have used advocacy services. It is one thing to ask young people in general what they might want if they ever needed it, but it has certainly helped me to hear directly from people who have good and less good experiences.

[219] **Lynne Neagle:** I apologise if I have missed something, but will we have access to the evidence that was referred to from the children and young people's partnerships? I think that that would be very useful. All of the evidence would be useful, but particularly the evidence of those partnerships, which raised concerns. They will be delivering this commissioning role, so we need to look at it.

[220] **Helen Mary Jones:** The Minister has said that she will make available to us all of the consultation responses that were received. If we have any doubts or concerns about any of that, I imagine that Voices from Care would be prepared to make it available to us. I realise that copying the information that it received under its freedom of information inquiry would be a major job, and so perhaps we could borrow it.

[221] **Ms Jones:** Yes.

[222] **Helen Mary Jones:** Either the Members' research service or the clerking team could then copy that—

[223] **Eleanor Burnham:** I think that we need to see all of that.

[224] **Helen Mary Jones:** We will then ensure that it is circulated to Members. Thank you, Lynne; that was a useful point.

[225] **Eleanor Burnham:** That is what I was trying to tease out before; perhaps I was not as eloquent as Lynne.

[226] **Helen Mary Jones:** Are there any final comments that you want to leave us with before I bring the meeting to a close? You have certainly said an awful lot.

[227] **Ms Jones:** The need for independence is my last comment, but you have heard that all of the way through.

[228] **Helen Mary Jones:** As Angela said, we have lost count of the number of times that that word has been used—not only by you, but by many others. I thank you again for coming. I appreciate it. It has been useful.

[229] When is our next meeting, Tom?

[230] **Mr Jackson:** It is on 31 January.

[231] **Helen Mary Jones:** When we will be hearing from—

[232] **Mr Jackson:** We will be hearing from the children's commissioner, in the form of Maria Battle, I believe, followed by the Welsh Local Government Association, the

Association of Directors of Social Services and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales.

[233] **Helen Mary Jones:** We look forward to hearing evidence from them. Some Members are also able to go out on some rapporteur visits to collect more information from children and young people who are using advocacy services. As Chair, I am grateful to Members who can do that, but, obviously, it is not possible for everyone. We look forward to bringing that information into the process with the formal evidence that we have also heard.

[234] The team will produce an issues paper for us when we have heard all of the evidence. I am not seeking a response today, but I would like you to consider whether, when we have the issues paper, we would want to discuss that in private initially or whether we would want to do it in open session. I will leave that with you, but I will also need to raise it with Angela and with Christine, who have had to leave.

[235] Thank you to the witnesses, the clerks, the Record of Proceedings and the Members' research service, and everyone else who make these meetings practically possible. Diolch yn fawr.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.54 a.m.  
The meeting ended at 11.54 a.m.*