

Y Pwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc

The Children and Young People Committee

Dydd Mawrth, 7 Gorffennaf 2009

Tuesday, 7 July 2009

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
Nerys Evans	Plaid Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Helen Mary Jones) The Party of Wales (substitute for Helen Mary Jones)
Lynne Neagle	Llafur Labour

Eraill yn bresennol

Others in attendance

David Beard	Cyfarwyddwr Cynorthwyol Gwasanaethau Plant, Barnardo's Assistant Director Children's Services, Barnardo's
Anne Marie Browning	Rheolwr Gwasanaethau Plant, Barnardo's Children's Services Manager, Barnardo's
Pat Duke	Cyfarwyddwr Cynorthwyol Gwasanaethau Plant, Barnardo's Assistant Director Children's Services, Barnardo's
Sean O'Neill	Cyfarwyddwr Polisi, Plant yng Nghymru Policy Director, Children in Wales

Catriona Williams	Prif Weithredwr, Plant yng Nghymru Chief Executive, Children in Wales
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Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Steve Boyce	Gwasanaeth Ymchwil yr Aelodau Members' Research Service
Tom Jackson	Clerc Clerk
Rita Phillips	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Helen Roberts	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol Legal Adviser

"Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.34 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.34 a.m."

Ethol Cadeirydd Dros Dro, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Election of Temporary Chair, Apologies and Substitutions

Mr Jackson: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Children and Young People Committee. Unfortunately, Helen Mary Jones is unable to be here today. Therefore, under Standing Order No. 10.19, I call for nominations for a temporary Chair.
Eleanor Burnham: I nominate Nerys Evans.
Angela Burns: I second that nomination.
Mr Jackson: Thank you. Are there any further nominations? I see that there are not. Nerys Evans is therefore elected temporary Chair of the committee.

"Penodwyd Nerys Evans yn Gadeirydd dros dro.
Nerys Evans was appointed temporary Chair."

Nerys Evans: Diolch yn fawr, Aelodau, a chroeso i'r cyfarfod y bore yma. Fel sy'n arferol yn y Cynulliad, mae croeso i bobl siarad yn Gymraeg neu yn Saesneg, ac mae clustffonau ar gael ar gyfer y cyfieithiad. Atgoffaf Aelodau i droi eu ffonau symudol, BlackBerrys ac unrhyw ddyfais electronig arall, i ffwrdd. Nid oes angen cyffwrdd â'r meicroffonau, gan eu bod yn dod ymlaen yn awtomatig.	Nerys Evans: Thank you very much, Members, and welcome to this morning's meeting. As is usual here at the Assembly people are welcome to speak in Welsh or in English, and there are headphones available for the interpretation. I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones, BlackBerrys and any other electronic devices. There is no need to touch the microphones because they come on automatically.
Gofynnaf i Aelodau ddatgan unrhyw fuddiant. Gwelaf nad oes unrhyw beth i'w ddatgan.	I ask Members to declare any interests. I see that there are none to declare.

9.36 a.m.

Ymchwiliad i'r Trefniadau ar gyfer Rhoi Plant mewn Gofal yng Nghymru

Inquiry into Arrangements for the Placement of Children into Care in Wales

<p>Nerys Evans: Dyma drydedd sesiwn tystiolaeth lafar ar y pwnc hwn. Diolchaf i Catriona Williams a Sean O'Neill o Blant yng Nghymru am ddod i roi tystiolaeth i ni y bore yma. Diolch hefyd am eich tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig. Gan ein bod wedi cael tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig, a chan fod Aelodau wedi cael cyfle i'w darllen, trown yn syth at gwestiynau, os yw hynny'n iawn gennych.</p>	<p>Nerys Evans: This is the third oral evidence session on this subject. I thank Catriona Williams and Sean O'Neill from Children in Wales for coming along to give us evidence this morning. Thank you also for your written evidence. As we have received the written evidence and Members have had an opportunity to read it, we will go immediately to questions this morning, if that is okay with you.</p>
<p>Mae'r cwestiwn cyntaf oddi wrthyf fi. Yn eich tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig, tynnoch sylw at ganllawiau drafft y Cenhedloedd Unedig ar ofal amgen ar gyfer plant, a'r safonau rhyngwladol 'Quality 4 Children'. Yn gyffredinol, pa mor bell y mae gwasanaethau ar gyfer plant mewn gofal yn cydymffurfio â'r safonau hyn?</p>	<p>The first question is from me. In your written evidence, you drew attention to the draft guidelines of the United Nations on alternative arrangements for children and the 'Quality 4 Children' international standards. In general terms, how far do services for children in care conform to these standards?</p>
<p>Ms Williams: They only came out in June and have not gone to the UN General Assembly, so they may be altered. I am president of Eurochild, which is the umbrella body across Europe for child welfare and, in fact, Sean has just returned from a meeting in Prague with 80 representatives looking at the general standards.</p>	
<p>What is interesting in relation to the UK and these standards is the fact that UK legislation, guidance and policy is really very well developed. Our main problems are around implementation. What these guidelines show is the connection into the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is particularly interesting for Wales; it has not been so interesting for the UK Government. We do not know the details, but there has been a bit of a slowing down with these standards, we understand, by hesitation, perhaps, on the other side of the border. However, we are not party to exactly what that is about. I do not know whether Sean would like to comment.</p>	
<p>Mr O'Neill: Yes. This will become a really important international instrument to ensure that there is consistency in the experiences of looked-after children internationally and also in the placements of looked-after children. As Catriona has already mentioned, it is very much hoped that it will be adopted by the UN General Assembly on the twentieth anniversary of the UNCRC, which is this November.</p>	
<p>The standards also look at preventing family breakdown in the first place, so they not only talk about states' responsibilities in ensuring that children have a good-quality placement experience but also about ensuring that there is greater support to prevent children from ending up in care, and also to look at the reunification process so that when children are placed in care for whatever reason, they are able to go back into a safe and loving environment afterwards.</p>	
<p>9.40 a.m.</p>	
<p>The 'Quality 4 Children' standards are a European mechanism, which came out very recently, and 100 young people were involved in part of that process. They provide clear standards covering admissions, the decision-making process, and also arrangements in the leaving-care process. Catriona has just alluded to the fact that we have a raft of policies, procedures and legislation in Wales at the moment, and when we look at the standards and guidelines we can see that a lot of the stuff is in there, but there is an issue about the gap between that and implementation on the ground in many areas.</p>	
<p>Ms Williams: There is one point to add in relation to the standards. From our point of view, it is about how you prioritise this group of children. I have been around long enough to have been involved with looked-after children for years and years. Why we are not able to really grasp the nettle of these 3,500 children and get it sorted I fail to understand. One of the items in here is,</p>	
<p>'Measures to promote application: states should to the maximum extent of their available resources and where appropriate in the framework of development co-operation allocate human and financial resources to ensure the optimal and progressive implementation of these guidelines throughout their respective territories'.</p>	

I think that we are looking within Wales, particularly given the demography of an ageing population, to have some sort of standard that says, 'You must prioritise looking after these children properly'.

Nerys Evans: Thank you. We will move on now to planning and commissioning placements.

Angela Burns: Thank you very much for your paper. I appreciate it. As Nerys has just said, I have a whole series of questions that I want to ask around this, so we might bob around because this is an area in which I am particularly interested.

In your paper, you say consistently that there is little, if any, choice of placement when a child enters the care system. You put that down to not having spare capacity among foster carers, but you also say that keeping a bank of foster carers on tap would be a very costly exercise. What do you think we could do to ensure that that range of placements is available, if we cannot do the other thing?

Ms Williams: Going back to my quotation from the standards, it is about predicting that you need a bank and need to retain vacancies. This has been a long debate in relation to how you have choice.

For my sins, I was a fostering officer many years ago and have dealt with foster families. People come forward, and they want to foster. They have their own families, and have children of different ages within their family, perhaps, so they have an idea of what sort of fostering they want to offer. What seems to happen is that we try to put children who do not necessarily fit into what they want into their homes and then we are surprised that the placements break down. It does not always happen. There are some really wonderful people who foster, but it is problematic if they are asked to take children who they have not come forward for or do not have the skills to deal with. That does not work out.

So, it is a resourcing issue. It is about keeping within the system an understanding that a level of vacancies must be carried in order to give choice. Our evidence is primarily about quality issues for the child, because, ultimately, resources are spent on breakdowns and then provision becomes more and more expensive for society. It would be better to frontload and carry vacancies. How you keep people interested if they want to foster but there are no children available within their category is another matter, but there must be ways of occupying them with, perhaps, temporary fostering arrangements or respite care.

Angela Burns: Going on from that, with the new method of councils going out and putting placements out to tender, as it were, they are giving information to fostering agencies. They say, 'Here is child A', and give them a very sketchy background, from what we have been hearing. I am not trying to put words in your mouth—if you were to tell me that I am wrong, I would be quite delighted—but, from what we have been hearing, the council might say, 'Child A has this issue and this issue' or 'needs this, this and this'. The council puts the placement out to tender. The agency looks at it and may have two or three foster carers. It seems to be price driven. It goes back to the council or to the commissioning agent and then it is only when that child is in the placement that it is discovered that, in fact, only half the story was given, that there is so much more to it, and that that placement is unsuitable. Does that carry through from what you were saying about the fact that there is not a bank of people, and also not a bank of knowledge about the child?

Ms Williams: Yes. I think that there are two aspects to what you have just said. The first aspect is the quality of the information about the child and his or her situation. That is an issue of resourcing and quality and space for social workers. The level of experience of social workers, because of other pressures, has perhaps gone down in relation to the assessment process, but there are plenty of tools and plenty of documents for workers to work to. What they do not have is the time, and the children themselves occasionally say, 'My social worker is really good, but I feel so sorry for her. She is so busy, she cannot see me very often'. There are issues; they are separate.

So, the quality of the information that is noted needs to be accurate. There is nothing more dangerous than inaccurate information—that is a problem. Moving on to the bank of foster carers or residential places, it is price driven. I think that it is short-termism. There used to just be two players. There used to be local authorities and the people who were placing children had their own resource. Now it is primarily externally provided, so there is another party involved. Say you are talking about a large voluntary organisation, for instance. That organisation needs to be able to plan what sort of people to recruit and what sort of homes to develop, but if it is about a quick, 'This is one child, we want a place for this one child' approach, that is not planning. That is knee-jerk reaction, in my opinion.

Mr O'Neill: I want to pick up two points on that. We know there is a huge shortage in the supply of foster carers across the UK. The latest figures show that we need about an additional 10,000 places. There are also other issues about the age of the current foster care workforce as well. There is an ageing population within the workforce, so there needs to be a greater emphasis on attracting new people to foster care. We can only do that by making it more of an attractive career for people to go into. Part of that is about having retainers in place, so we have quality placements available as and when we need to access them.

We also need to financially support foster carers better so that there is an incentive to become a foster carer and to remain a foster carer. Some of our members' organisations have been campaigning for a minimum allowance for foster carers to give them an incentive to stay, and so that there is consistency across Wales and the UK.

We have had the national minimum standards for fostering services in place since 2003. It is an excellent document, and it very clearly states that places need to be subsidised fully to the full cost of caring. We know that that is not happening. We know that some foster carers are not getting sufficient money to enable the young people or children who are with them to carry on with the activities with which they were previously involved. For example, some young people have had to stop going to after-school clubs or doing outside activities or other leisure pursuits because the caring allowance in some areas does not carry that.

So, there is an issue about some foster carers being left out of pocket: carers have to subsidise some of these activities, or children have to go without, and I think that that is a huge concern.

My other point is that when we are talking about placements we cannot move away from an understanding of the current context and the situations that social workers are in. I will not use the phrase 'crisis in social work'—it has been used lots of times—but there are some huge challenges. We have overstretched staff, and we do not have enough staff. We often have massive caseloads and low morale, with many staff feeling undervalued, who have no support and are under pressure. We are losing quality professionals every day in Wales and the UK: staff are just being driven away.

9.50 a.m.

There are also inconsistencies in the quality of support and supervision that is offered. We carry out training with social workers as part of our work. Many of them are extremely frustrated by the lack of time and capacity to do their job properly and effectively and to spend quality time with children and families, which is the reason why they went into the profession in the first place. Finally, on top of that, the media at the moment is very negative about the service, so it does not seem to be an attractive profession for people to want to go into. If people do go into it, there is an issue about how we retain them and support them so that they do not burn out.

Angela Burns: Thank you for that. That is very interesting. The social worker element of it is not really for us to comment on, although I take on board some of those comments about how this affects the children that we are looking to place.

I just want to clarify that we are looking at how we make a suitable placement and what factors you think determine that outcome. To distil what you have said, I have noted the following: time for both the child and planning; better information; a bank of people; and that you do not want this to be so price driven, because people inappropriate for the child are being used just to maintain a price. Is there anything that we as a committee have overlooked in terms of key areas?

Ms Williams: I think that it is about the preventive side: investment in quality assessments and time at the beginning. Cost is an issue within Wales, obviously. Public money is very stretched. However, it is important to prioritise quality assessments in terms of a child's health and their education, and to try to stick within the remits of what people have put themselves forward for. If you have put yourself forward for short-term placements, they are what you want. You probably do not want to drift into medium or long-term care, although you might. It is about quality and clarity. The Data Protection Act 1998, and access to information, will probably help with regard to the quality of what goes into files in due course, but what is needed is accurate information. The people responsible for making the placement need to know about the foster parents or the residential home, and they need to know about the child and the family and what is going to be expected.

That is so that, at the beginning, a family knows whether the child is going to have regular contact with the parents, what the parents are like, what the child is like, and whether the child has had sexualised experiences that would make him or her behave in a sexualised way within the family, if the family already has children. There are many issues that need to be driven down. Time to do quality assessment on all sides is essential.

Following on from Sean's point about social workers, it is almost about getting a bit of professional autonomy back for the people who are making judgments. There are checklists and there are documents. That is great, but we also need people to have the confidence to say, 'Hang on, this is not good enough; this is not the right move for this child' and the support to be able to say that. Quite often, we hear that people are absolutely stuck at the placement decision point—I think that I put this in the written evidence—as to whether they leave the child in a difficult home situation or move him or her into a less than appropriate alternative. That is very difficult. I do not want to give the impression that it is all like that, but that homes in on some of the key issues that we would like to improve. It is about that early assessment.

Angela Burns: I will just very briefly wrap up my questions. I hear what you say, but the whole reason why we are doing this inquiry is because of lobbying from some committee members—and I am one of those who have lobbied hardest, because of what I have seen in my constituency. I put it on record that children being put out for placement on contracts that would be suitable for tarmacking a road is totally inappropriate.

You talked about the lack of qualitative information about the child. I can speak with some degree of authority in this regard in that I have had to refer a couple of cases to the children's commissioner and a couple of cases to the police. This is first hand, empirical evidence that has come here. We have had instances where there has been a lot of qualitative information on the child but the attitude of the commissioning authority is, 'This is a tender process; everybody has to have the same information'. Mrs Jones might have come back and said, 'Something does not chime. Can I please have more information? Can I know this, this and this?', but the answer that she has had is, 'No, because nobody else who is tendering for this has asked for this information, so we cannot give any more out'. That is completely absurd. We have to stop treating children as if they were lumps of tarmac; they are individuals.

So, I do agree with what you are saying, but I think that a lot of it is there. I think that a lot of the qualitative stuff is there; it is just that nobody ever gets the chance to access it or the time to go through it in any detail because providers of fostering services are working in a competitive environment. Whether it is the local authority foster carer, a private foster carer, or a children's home, they are all competing for these children, because they have people on their books. It is madness.

Ms Williams: We could not agree more. As we are not active service deliverers, we have not experienced that directly ourselves, but the whole concept of tendering for individual children is a cost exercise. In fairness, I think that the whole debate around looked-after children over the years has always been to do with money, because out-of-county placements cost a huge amount, and authorities worry about that. That was an impetus for the supporting resource.

There are other positive elements such as how we keep Welsh children within Wales. There are a lot of really big issues for the children, but there was a financial driver behind placements. Going back to the international standards, we have to accept that, to get quality provision for those most vulnerable in our society, we have to pay for it. We have to invest sufficiently and share.

You have raised another point there about who has what information. There are worries about who has all the information. To go back to what I said at the beginning about its being the right information, quality information, that is much easier to share than if it is a bit dubious.

Eleanor Burnham: Dyna yn union yr hoffwn symud ymlaen i edrych arno, sef rhannu gwybodaeth. Mae gennyf enghreifftiau, nid yn unig o ddiffyg rhannu gwybodaeth briodol ond hefyd, fel y dywedwch, o bryderon am ansawdd yr wybodaeth yn flaenorol. Mae gennyf enghreifftiau anodd.

Eleanor Burnham: That is precisely what I would like to move on to look at, namely information sharing. I have examples not only of a lack of sharing appropriate information but also, as you say, of concerns about the quality of the information previously. I have difficult examples.

<p>Hoffwn ofyn am yr hyn yr ydych wedi sôn amdano yn eich tystiolaeth lafar ac ysgrifenedig, sef yr egwyddorion sylfaenol y dylai plant, pobl ifanc neu rieni roi caniatâd i wybodaeth gael ei rhannu, ac y dylid ei rhannu wedyn gyda'r bobl briodol. Byddai hynny'n gofyn am agwedd ystyriol a digon o amser i weithwyr cymdeithasol roi sylw digonol i'r peth. Yr ydych yn canolbwyntio yn benodol ar rannu gwybodaeth ac yn dweud bod angen dawn arbenigol i gasglu a dosbarthu gwybodaeth yn briodol. I ba raddau yr ydych yn meddwl bod y gwasanaethau iechyd, cyfiawnder ieuenctid, ac addysg yn bwrpasol wrth gydlyn—neu efallai nad ydych yn meddwl hynny? Pa mor effeithiol yw'r rheolau cyfoes o ran rhannu'r wybodaeth honno?</p>	<p>I want to ask about exactly what you have talked about so far in your written and oral evidence, namely the fundamental principles that children, young people, and families should give their consent to information being shared, and that it should then be shared with the appropriate people. That would require taking a considerate approach and giving social workers plenty of time to give it adequate attention. You concentrate specifically on information sharing and state that specialist expertise is required in ascertaining and transmitting information appropriately. To what extent do you think the health, youth justice and education services co-ordinate appropriately—or perhaps you do not think that? How effective are the current rules on sharing that information?</p>
<p>10.00 a.m.</p>	

Ms Williams: I think that the information sharing on all children's work is an issue. I remember being on the Carlile review years ago when it was established that there is no real blockage to sharing information, and the Queen's Counsel was adamant that that was the case. I think that there is a lot of good guidance, but the issue is more the implementation and interpretation of it. I will hand over to Sean in a moment to give his views from his networks within Children in Wales.

The processes and how they are implemented are variable across Wales. There are times when there is information and it depends on permissions. If children do not want school to know a lot about a certain aspect of their life, they should be able to decide which information about them is given. That is a different concept from the concept that existed when some of these regulations started out, but I think that the principle is one of permissions, and of actively engaging people to give permission by explaining why information is important. There are different levels of information. For instance, the person placing the child and the person working with the foster parents may have more information than the foster parents or the residential home. There may be reasons for that or there may be no justification for it at all. It is done on a case-by-case basis.

I am a trustee of Voices from Care and some young people going through our organisation will say, 'Guess what? When I was in care, I was labelled a psychopathic personality' and those people will be in university studying something now. So, there are problems with what is placed on the file. There are some very important issues that people on a day-to-day basis caring for children need to know, between agencies. Health issues spring to mind. I mentioned epilepsy in the report. You do need to know about that, for the child's safety and welfare.

Eleanor Burnham: We have discussed the negative impact of the media, but if what one read over the weekend is correct—and there were several cases in some of the broadsheets—it is very worrying. There was one particular case of a foster mother who had not been told the exact dysfunctionality of a young person before fostering them, but that person had then gone on to harass them. If that is the case and if it is true, surely there are issues that foster parents need to know about the dysfunctionality of youngsters because they may need some extra dealing with to make the placement worthwhile, and also to look after themselves, as foster parents. Being a foster parent is very complicated, is it not?

Ms Williams: You are absolutely right. It is about that early 'matching', which is the old-fashioned word, and of being aware of all aspects of a child's needs. Perhaps they have additional or special educational needs and so may need a lot of extra input in various aspects of their lives. That is a part of the placement discussion with the potential carers, whether it is residential or foster care: are you as a family able to cope? I mentioned sexualised behaviour. It was always tricky to have to say, 'Look, because of this child's experience, this is how he or she speaks, acts or behaves, so can you cope with that?'. Hopefully, pre-approval, a lot of that information should be on the documentation. That needs to go to the people who are to care for the child.

Ms Williams: You pick up some really interesting points there, and it is important to remember that we can share only the information that is on the file. There are several consistency issues, but one for young people is the lack of consistency in their lead worker or key worker. That can also be true of the support worker for the foster carer. When it works, it works exceptionally well, where there is that good, healthy, consistent relationship between a key worker and the foster carer. Too often, there is a constant change of staff, which is having an impact. That is where gaps are created and things fall between them. Information is not passed on and the file is completed by several different people over the life course of the child. So, the more changes there are, the more risks there are to information not being captured and not being shared effectively. As you point out, foster care is an extremely challenging and difficult job, and lots of foster carers need more support than they get at the moment.

I do have to say that, where it does work well and where you have a good social worker, foster carers are telling us that the relationship is fantastic and the young people tell us that, but that does not happen all the time. That is one of the big challenges: foster carers are unclear who the social worker will be this week, and the child has not seen the social worker for a couple of weeks, although they may have had contact by telephone, but there is not that quality relationship. Social workers need to spend quality time with families and, if there is stuff on the file, they need to sit down and talk, to explain why it is on the file so that children do not get labelled and have a burden to carry throughout the rest of their lives. If it is on the file, there will be a clear reason why it is there, and that needs to be explained to the foster carer and to the child or young person, so that they understand what is on the file and why it is there.

Nerys Evans: Lynne, are you happy to move on to equality issues and the rights of the child? We are quite limited on time.

Lynne Neagle: Thanks, Chair. To what extent do children and young people participate in decisions about their placement? What role, if any, is played by the independent advocate?

Ms Williams: I will give a very short response and Sean can follow. Again, it is variable. When we talk about placements, it is important to look at all the different sorts of placements, because the short-term, emergency placement is very different from the long-term planned placement. There are also respite placements and placements with family, and so on.

It is quite hard for us in Children in Wales to say exactly how it is out there because who is talking to the young people to find out? Perhaps one thing that we could improve is exit interviews. Let us find out a bit more from young people about what it was like so that we can improve.

There are various dimensions to this. Children and young people are in a difficult situation at the time of being placed. They are emotionally upset. Their views are really important, but their welfare and their best interests, from a protective point of view, are also important. If a young person said that they really wanted to go and live with an uncle or with their granny or they said, 'I want to live in the country' or, 'I do not want to change my school', those are basic issues and they are very important. My answer—without the data, I have to say—is that that will be variable, and it will probably link back to what Sean said about how well the social worker involved knows the child, and whether there has been any consistency for that child beforehand.

Mr O'Neill: Yes, I very much concur with that last point. The participation agenda has come a long way in Wales over the past few years, and we welcome that. However, one thing that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child picked up last year in its concluding observations was how poorly it is happening sometimes in individual cases and for individual children, particularly in relation to article 12.

Prior to placement, it is imperative and clear in the policies and guidance—both the Children Act 2004 and the regulations that came out last year on the placement of children—that the participation and involvement of children have to be central to all these decisions. It is very clear. We go back again to the implementation gap in many years, and, largely, much of that is dependent on the relationship between the key social worker, the foster carer, the child, the family, and members of the extended family. So, there is a whole group of people who need to be effectively and properly involved when these key decisions are made.

10.10 a.m.

It is not just about ascertaining the wishes and feelings of the child; it is about ensuring that the child is clear about the information, understands the information and what is happening, and understands the future options open to them. Much of this will take time, particularly given that we are talking about different groups of children, including very young children and disabled children. Practitioners need the additional skills and capacities to spend time. With asylum-seeking children, a pool of interpreters will also be needed, so there are additional challenges. Time and the tools are of the essence, but we also need the value base. We need to believe in why we need to spend time and explain it properly to the child or young person.

As Catriona has already said, it is not always possible. If it is an emergency placement, it is not always possible to involve the child effectively at every point, but that does not mean to say that we cannot involve the child. We need to do it as soon afterwards as we can to make sure that their concerns are fed in.

Advocacy is an interesting one, and I know that this committee has looked at that in depth. We still have some issues with that. It is important to remember that advocacy is crucial because many children who find themselves in such a situation have had difficult upbringings and difficult lives, and are extremely disempowered in the first place. So, recourse to advocacy is crucial. To have somebody there to support them, to ensure that they understand, and that their wishes and feelings are carried forward is vital.

Of course, if they are placed in care, it is important that the advocate is routinely involved in the review, to make sure that the placement has settled down and that everything is sorted around that. There remain concerns in many areas about the capacity of advocacy provision. Many areas are just working with children who are in the looked-after system. Other areas can extend and work more broadly with other groups of children, particularly children in need.

The advocates are doing their best, and there are issues to do with tight timescales in involving children and young people effectively in the process. It is vital that we improve and get better consistency across Wales in our involvement with children and young people, because the recurring message from care leavers is that they were unclear about what was happening to them. Sometimes, they were placed far away from family, friends, their community, and their networks. Contact arrangements were not sufficient or were not respected. They lost contact with extended family members particularly, even if they managed to retain contact with their birth parents. Sometimes, they lost contact with siblings. Many felt disempowered and isolated throughout the whole process. I think that we need to look at what the voices of care leavers are telling us so that we do not repeat the patterns and so that we put the participation and engagement of children right at the very heart of all the decisions that are made, which is what the policy and guidance tell us to do.

Lynne Neagle: You touched very briefly there on disabled children and the children of asylum seekers. How effectively do you feel the needs of disabled children, the children of black and minority ethnic families, and accompanied asylum-seeking children are met when they are placed in care?

Mr O'Neill: We have not covered that in great detail in our written evidence, but it is really important, particularly when we look at disabled children. There are advocates working specifically with disabled children across Wales, but not many and not enough. The resources are not available to employ sufficient numbers of individuals who have sufficient specialist skills, and that is really important. I do not want to get into the debate of what constitutes a disabled child, because it is a very broad church and we can capture lots of different children within that. However, there are some real challenges in engaging effectively with children who have severe impairments and communication difficulties. I do not believe that that is happening consistently across Wales, because there is not the workforce, and the workforce that is there does not have sufficient skills, resources or capacity to engage consistently with disabled children and young people.

I touched on asylum-seeking children, and, again, the issue is about ensuring that we have a pool of key professionals working on a daily basis with them. In many parts of Wales, social workers will not be working with asylum seekers on a daily basis, so there need to be effective partnership links with agencies that are working and that have the capacity, the language skills, the knowledge and background to deal with some of the traumatic experiences that some of these children experienced back home. It is vital for that partnership and information exchange system to work effectively, because the experts are those case workers who are working in the field with asylum seekers on a daily basis. I am not clear how that is working consistently across Wales.

Ms Williams: I think that there is a big issue about the skills of communicating with children—all children. Our members tell us that they would like to have more time to understand child development, and to gain skills and practice. How do you effectively communicate with a traumatised child of this or that age, or a child who has these needs?

Many years ago, it was fashionable to do a lot of training in this area, but, somehow, the space to do that has been lost. In Children in Wales, we are looking at developing more training to offer, so that practitioners feel confident about how they communicate. The issue is not about sitting and having a meeting with a child; it is about playing with a child, doing the life story bookwork and all sorts of different methods. Certainly, with regard to the disabled children's forum and the disabled children's network that we run, there is huge expertise in Wales, but it is in very small pockets. There is not the opportunity to spread it throughout the workforce. We think that that is a big priority. Social workers, foster parents and residential staff would feel much more confident if they had a lot more of that opportunity to have training in communicating with children.

Nerys Evans: We are running over time, so if we could have succinct questions and answers, that would be great. We have two more questions.

Lynne Neagle: Moving on to monitoring, how effective are the arrangements for monitoring and reviewing the placements of looked-after children?

Mr O'Neill: It is important that monitoring placements is effective, and I think that the review process is important. There is an important role for the independent reviewing officer. I know that some work is going on in Wales to ensure that the independent reviewing officer is independent, because there have been concerns in some areas about the perception. Independent reviewing officers need to be separate.

There needs to be effective monitoring of placements, and this is largely in line with what I have already said about involving the child, the family and the extended family members. It needs to be effectively improved. In a lot of this stuff, we need to capture the soft indicators, so that they build into the wellbeing agenda that we have in Wales. We are building up a good bank of indicators around children's wellbeing, but when we look at looked-after children, we need to capture more of their experiences. What more are they saying? Where are things going right? Where are things going wrong? It is very difficult for us to be able to capture on a national scale, at the moment, how effective placements are working from the point of view of the child or young person or the foster carer. Pieces of research go on, but we do not have a bank of knowledge that we are able to report back on consistently. So, I think that we need to improve that.

It is difficult to generalise on the review process. In some places it is working well. Children are very content with their reviews, the process is working properly, the same social workers are consistently there, information is shared effectively, there is plenty of time and there is plenty of preparation. Unfortunately, that is not routinely happening. There are clear guidelines about when a review should take place, which is all very well and good, but what we need is a quality review. Quality needs to be built into that, because just ticking a box and saying that we have undertaken this, we have spoken to the child, we have spoken to the birth mother or we have spoken to the foster carer, tells us very little. What children, young people and foster carers are telling us is that the quality is not always there. When it is there, it is very effective, but it needs to be much more consistent. The only way that we can get that is by capturing that information directly from the people who are working on the front line. That is very difficult to do. We capture a lot of it through our networks and through our training, but we need to capture it more effectively, I think, as a country.

10.20 a.m.

Ms Williams: I would like to make one quick comment, about the wellbeing indicators. We believe that that is the way forward for all children in Wales. One of the current issues that we need to address is measuring—whether it is on an individual or national basis—the soft indicators. It is always easier to measure the outcome of a health improvement or an educational improvement, but measuring the happiness scale or emotional wellbeing is where the future work is. Again, across Europe, there is a lot of work being done around indicators, particularly on the wellbeing linked to combating the effects of child poverty, which is a big agenda in Wales.

For individual children, it is about some of the skills that I was referring to earlier, about communicating properly. It is very difficult. If you are a child, you are in a very lowly situation with all of the adults around you. You are not powerful. It is difficult for you to say, 'I hate it here; I would rather be somewhere else', or, 'I think that it is fantastic here; I do not want to go home'. We have put a rather problematic spin on our evidence, but some fantastic work is being done out there with individuals. That could be replicated, but there is a skill issue in what we are measuring in terms of a successful placement.

Nerys Evans: Thank you. We will have the last question now. We are over time, so please be succinct.

Eleanor Burnham: Pa ganlyniadau neu faterion penodol sy'n deillio o osod pobl ifanc y tu allan i'w hawdurdod lleol i alluogi monitro eu lles a'u sefyllfa?

Eleanor Burnham: What specific outcomes arise from placing young people outside their home local authority to enable the monitoring of their wellbeing and situation?

Ms Williams: Obviously, very occasionally, it is essential to move a child away from a situation, but for the majority of children it is a disastrous move in a whole range of areas. It is harder for the systems to link across. I saw that you heard evidence from Heather Payne. Health systems do not necessarily work across boundaries very well. If you go over the border into England, it is even harder. The frequency of visits and the education of the young person suffers. Links with home and community, friends and school are all broken. So, the child is actually in isolation. What we do know is that we have seen a large number—almost a half—of young people who have gone through the looked-after system gravitating back to their original environment once they leave care. So, it is really a dislocation for those young people. We are very supportive of moves to try to look at keeping young people as close to their families and communities as possible.

Mr O'Neill: When we look at the matching process, we should be asking ourselves, 'Is this placement in the best interests of the child? Is it an effective match for that child?'. It is sometimes the case, where there are safety issues, that the child is better off some distance away, but the guidance is clear that children should remain in their own area whenever possible and appropriate.

The other issue is the challenge of advocates being able to engage with children and young people. I have talked at length about capacity issues in most advocacy projects across Wales. When an advocate has to go all the way to Scotland, as I saw in a case not long ago, to try to engage with a child, I really do not need to elaborate on the challenges to that worker, and on the impact on that child of being placed miles away from their birth parents, their network, their friends. That has an impact on their health, education and emotional wellbeing.

Eleanor Burnham: They may also be Welsh-speaking. I have a constituency matter on such an issue. The child is quite young and wants to continue within Welsh-medium education but is now somewhere in England.

Nerys Evans: Some people have to leave at 11 a.m.. If Members have further questions, are you happy that we write to you for more detailed answers?

Ms Williams: Yes.

Nerys Evans: Thank you, both, for your written and oral evidence. It forms a very important part of our inquiry.

Ms Williams: Thank you.

<p>Nerys Evans: Symudwn ymlaen at ein tystion nesaf. Mae Barnardo's Cymru yma i roi tystiolaeth. Yma heddiw mae David Beard, cyfarwyddwr cynorthwyol, Pat Duke, cyfarwyddwr cynorthwyol, ac Anne Marie Browning, rheolydd gwasanaethau plant.</p>	<p>Nerys Evans: We will now move on to the next witnesses. We have Barnardo's Cymru here to give evidence. With us this morning are David Beard, assistant director, Pat Duke, assistant director, and Anne Marie Browning, children's services manager.</p>
<p>Diolch am ddod yma ac am eich tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig. Symudwn yn syth i gwestiynau, gan fod amser yn brin. Mae gennym lawer o gwestiynau i'w gofyn.</p>	<p>Thank you for your attendance and for your written evidence. We will move straight to questions, as time is short. We have many questions to ask you.</p>
<p>Daw'r cwestiwn cyntaf gennyf fi. Mae canran llawer uwch o blant y gofalir amdanynt yng Nghymru yn cael eu rhoi mewn gofal maeth nag mewn cartrefi plant. A yw'r cydbwysedd yn iawn ar hyn o bryd o ran anghenion y plant?</p>	<p>I have the first question. A much higher proportion of looked-after children in Wales are placed in foster care than in children's homes. Is this the right balance for meeting the needs of those children?</p>

Mr Beard: First, thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today on behalf of Barnardo's Cymru. As Members will know from the previous organisations giving evidence, the drive in local authority care in Wales has been away from the residential provision, except for the more specialised placements, which we can perhaps talk about a little later.

The percentage of children placed in local-authority-run children's homes is extremely low. I think that, across the 22 authorities, the amount of local authority residential provision is extremely small, meaning that independent providers with more specialised provision is what local authorities are looking for.

If we look back at the history of this, the question that we possibly need to ask is whether we now have the balance right. So, particularly for some of the more difficult issues that local authorities are struggling to deal with, such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, have we got the balance right between foster placements and residential provision?

Ms Browning: I manage a foster and adoption service for Barnardo's, and, in my experience, in most authorities there is a preference for placing children within families. The outcomes for children are often better within families, but I think that there is still a place for high-quality residential care, especially for children with sexually harmful behaviour or older children with particularly challenging behaviour who might not be able to fit into a family environment. It is about that being a very highly resourced and high-quality residential home. I think that some of the issues in the past have been down to some of the children's homes having staff who were not skilled and were low paid, so you did not get the quality and the outcomes for children that were needed.

Angela Burns: Good morning. Thank you for your paper; it was a very interesting read. You say that the financial constraints on local authorities affect placement decisions. You are not the first of the witnesses to say that during the course of this inquiry. I would like to clarify your views on this. Is it a recent trend? Do such financial pressures lead to inappropriate placements?

Mr Beard: Anecdotally, the answer to the latter part of your question is, on occasions, 'Undoubtedly yes'. I think that we all recognise that there are extreme pressures on fostering resources in local authorities. There is not the pool of foster carers who can provide the range of placements that local authorities are looking for, which means that, on occasion, more specialised provision, where the whole issue of finance comes into the picture, does come into play.

10.30 a.m.

However, I think that what it does mean is that, on occasion, the wrong matches are made in local authority placements in order to avoid the big decisions about financing the more expensive placements. There are huge risk factors in there. I chair two local authority fostering panels on an independent basis. It is always disappointing to read of disruptions to placements. Hindsight is a glorious benefit. When you look at the skills match of the carers, what they had been approved for in the initial circumstances, and the nature of the placement that was made with them, unless it is backed up by a huge level of support, you see that the risk factors around it breaking down, leading to a negative outcome for that child or young person and possibly another placement move, are an essential part of it.

I consistently raise concerns in that process that foster carers are extremely well-meaning people who want to do the best for children and young people, and who find it difficult to say 'no' to placement requests that are made to them. One comment that I always make to people who come forward as first-time foster carers is that I hope that they have the strength of mind and the ability to say 'no' to the pressure that we all understand is placed on them. When that match of foster carers' skills and needs of young children does not come into play, the outcomes are negative. Those big decisions around finances, therefore, come into question.

Angela Burns: Can you pinpoint where this mismatch happens? I understand that it is in the process, but where is the kernel? That is what we need to find. Independent fostering agencies and foster carers say that they ask for information that would help them to decide whether or not they are suitable to take a child, but are told that they cannot have the information, because it is a level playing field, so no-one should have more information than anybody else. We need to try to find out exactly where the issue lies, so that we can address it. It seems to be affecting everybody; no-one is saying, 'We are all run by a marvellous system'. In fact, it is not a marvellous system; that is what is at fault. We need to find out what it is that has caused this.

Mr Duke: I will pick up on David's point. My background is in the provision of assessment and treatment services for children and young people with sexually harmful behaviour. Quite often, that leads into the realms of specialist resource in terms of fostering. I think that it is unfortunate that, sometimes, those children and young people are solely defined by their risk and, quite often, their undoubted needs and at-risk issues are not addressed equally. They put considerable strain—for want of a better word—on the fostering network. I think that your point is exactly right. In considering placements for such children and young people, there needs to be free access to the information that relates both to their needs and their risk; quite often, that is not forthcoming.

Going back to the first question, what that inevitably leads to is that, because they put such a strain on local resources, there can be an immediate jump to specialist residential provision, not by dint of need or risk particularly, but a lack of resource. That raises a lot of questions in terms of not only the transfer of pertinent information, in a safeguarding context, but also on the skills necessary in the body of appropriate foster carers that we have. The vast majority of such children and young people can be accommodated within the fostering system and do not need that specialist residential resource. So I think that it is a damning state of affairs with regard to the proliferation of such private residential resources.

Angela Burns: My final question is again trying to just get through to the middle of this. You state in your evidence that some local authorities are piloting a tendering process. We also have the children's commissioning support resource. Do you think that the new one is going to be better than CCSR, or is the CCSR actually good but just not utilised correctly or opened up enough? Surely we do not need both systems.

Ms Browning: That has been a question that I have asked, in terms of where the two systems fit in together. I know that I am not alone in that; I have met and spoken with other colleagues who run independent fostering agencies.

On your question about finance, the CCSR database obviously supplies a lot of useful information about numbers, such as numbers of carers across Wales, but it is important that it is not used as the sole matching tool. I think that there was some risk that local authorities would run a search for carers and come up with 'Yes, this agency has a carer' but would try to match on that basis with limited information. The CCSR is a tick box, and it might deal with what the carer feels that they can manage, but you need far more than that when matching carers to children.

On finance, we are being informed, as an agency, that if we do not put down how much our service costs we will not even be considered for a placement. That shows how fundamental, in a way, the cost is, when the carer that you have could be the ideal carer. If you do not put the price down, they will not consider the placement. So, I think that finance is very high up on the agenda.

From there, then, they select two or three out of the tenders that they receive and decide which carers they would go with before they would give more information. So, at the point of tendering for a placement, you have very limited information, really. I think that there could be a risk of agencies just throwing in tenders when, further down the line, they may say 'Actually, this carer does not match with that child's needs or cannot meet the needs of the child', once all the information comes out. So, it can also prolong the process of finding the right placement for the child.

Mr Beard: We would welcome evaluation of the processes, really. We are not sure whether it achieves more positive outcomes for children and young people and more stable placements. As an organisation, we are not aware that that has been evaluated or that the evidence has been looked at as yet.

Nerys Evans: Lynne, if you are happy, we will move on to Eleanor's questions on information exchange, because she has to go.

Eleanor Burnham: Thank you, Lynne and Chair. We have heard in previous evidence that information exchange is difficult. You say that information sharing with foster carers and agencies has improved, although it is still patchy. You also state that this is dependent on the skills and experience of the child's social worker and that there are too few qualified and experienced staff. How serious and widespread, in your view, is the lack of social worker capacity to effectively manage this and other aspects of the placement of looked-after children?

Mr Beard: There are two immediate answers to give to that question. I am sure that I am telling you something that you already know, but there is a vast turnaround of social workers in the childcare field. In some local authorities of which I am aware, almost the whole of the locality childcare teams—social workers who are specifically there to work with children and young people—have changed and they now have relatively new, newly qualified and inexperienced workers. While they may well be extremely capable practitioners, there have to be questions around that in terms of capacity, resilience and so on.

The days of family placement teams in local authorities have also gone, I think. Teams supporting foster and adoptive carers were proliferated by people who had years and years of experience. You cannot replace that overnight. In the reviews that I see when I chair local authority panels, foster carers often question the support that they have been receiving and the consistency and stability of that support, and they raised the information-sharing question that you asked in relation to this. Another common theme is that they feel that they do not get all the information or it is not provided in a timely and expedient way, or that some parts of the information are removed.

As ever, we will have very good examples of good practice where people are hugely capable of doing this and ensuring that it happens, and knowing where it does not. I strongly believe that there is no substitute for good supervision and support. So, the managerial support that should be there to protect social workers when they are new into the profession is absolutely crucial.

10.40 a.m.

There is also the notion that every little bit of information that is shared with foster carers is going to be crucial in enabling positive outcomes for children and young people who are placed with them. It is when people feel they do not have that information that they begin to struggle and question their abilities, and they begin to put some markers around whether the placement can continue.

Eleanor Burnham: Beyond that, you state in your evidence that you are not convinced that social workers always provide the full information on young people at risk of harmful behaviour. Two cases about dysfunctional behaviour were highlighted in the broadsheets over the weekend which, if they are correct, are very worrying. One particular person was placed, other issues ensued, and the foster parents were harassed by that young person and so on. What are the reasons for this provision, or lack of it, and what do you think needs to be done to ensure that this happens?

Mr Duke: Again, speaking from my experience of advising local authorities on placements for children and young people with sexually harmful behaviour, I think that the practice is variable. I would echo what David was saying in relation to my local authority experience and the population of social workers. What we have seen in front-line intake and assessment workers, and the strain upon those services, has now hit upon the family placement teams, as David was saying, which used to be one of the bastions of stability. It used to be a static workforce. It was one of the better resourced areas of children's services, but increasingly what you are finding is reliance upon newly qualified social workers for assistance and so on.

Again, it is anecdotal, but what can sometimes happen in relation to children and young people with risky behaviours is that the need to get a placement overrides the consideration of risk management and proper planning for those needs to be addressed. That can pose particular difficulties.

Eleanor Burnham: Earlier testimony pointed to the negative impact of the media as well. If you think back to the Baby P situation, it must be extremely difficult for many social workers who know that they will be blamed if anything goes wrong. Do you think that watching your back, so to speak, as a social worker is part of it, and although this is done in the most positive way, it has some kind of impact?

Ms Browning: There is no doubt that the media coverage of cases like Baby P has a huge impact on social workers on the ground. They feel that they are damned if they do and damned if they do not. Often the media do not know the full extent of the issues; they are not aware of the full story. It affects recruitment and social workers working in children's services now, but it also affects future recruitment. From my understanding, social workers generally feel undervalued in the work that they do within society. It is not viewed as a positive role.

Mr Beard: The more cautionary approach that the Welsh Assembly Government has taken post Baby P is welcomed by the profession, rather than the more reactive approach which I think that the English Government is taking. I think that that probably gives the profession as a whole more confidence that they are supported at that level rather than having to deal with the raft of changes, Measures and suggestions that our English colleagues are faced with.

Eleanor Burnham: Thank you very much.

Nerys Evans: Lynne, are you happy to go back to capacity for placements?

Lynne Neagle: Yes. You said in your evidence that you are concerned about the increasing professionalisation of fostering and the increasing emphasis on qualifications. Could you expand on that a little?

Ms Browning: On the one hand, the demands on foster carers to care for children who are more challenging has meant that there has been a need for specialist training, and also the remuneration that we give to carers needs to acknowledge the important role they play. Since the fostering regulations were implemented in 2003 in Wales, the demands on foster carers have increased and, therefore, they are expected to have a professional role.

We are concerned that the demands on foster carers have increased, but often they are not viewed as part of the professional team by childcare social workers. They are excluded from receiving information. They are not seen as part of a team around the child, which would be an approach which would work far better. So, that is something that we think would need further exploration.

Mr Duke: All of this points to the role that we are expecting of foster carers in looking after children and young people. If we realise that the majority of young people in accommodation will have traumatic backgrounds, then inevitably, as a product of that background, they will have personality deficits. With the best will in the world, a social worker on regulatory visits is not going to impact upon those personality deficits, for example, and we will be asking foster carers to do that. So, they need to be part of the team that surrounds the child because their role is crucial in addressing the need which then identifies risky behaviours.

Mr Beard: On recruitment, it is crucial that we do not frighten off a wedge of the population by overprofessionalising foster care—those with the intuitive skills, who need and want to look after young people. If you ask most people who come forward what their motivation is to be a foster carer, the sense that it is a passport into some form of career or training or whatever is going to be fairly low on their agenda. Their need to offer something back to children or young people and their view that they and their extended family can give support is generally the main motivating factor and, indeed, should be the main motivating factor. We need to get that balance right so that we do not scare off a whole wedge of the population.

Lynne Neagle: How can we ensure that there are enough foster carers with the right skills to provide a choice of placements, including those that can provide emergency placements?

Mr Beard: Well, that is the ultimate challenge, is it not? How many times have people been asked that question? We know there is a deficit of foster carers. I think that most fostering agencies have probably exhausted every conceivable innovative piece of recruitment that they could. The main drivers and the important issues for foster carers—and I alluded to one of them earlier—is the provision of good support. So, whatever fostering agencies—whoever they are—say they are going to provide for foster carers, they absolutely need to provide it in order to hold on to them. Undoubtedly, the best form of recruitment that works for us is word of mouth. If somebody has a good experience of fostering then they will talk to their friends about it and over a period of time they will come forward. Organisations and agencies will achieve a reputation, deserved or otherwise, on how they support their foster carers. I agree that financial remuneration is important, but the ultimate issue is that, when somebody picks up a telephone and wants advice or support, they have a consistent relationship with a worker and can talk through those difficult issues that Pat alluded to with young people. That is going to be one of the main issues that will bring people back into the profession.

Lynne Neagle: You said in your evidence that the participation of children and young people in their placements is variable, and this is something we discussed in the previous session. How can this be addressed? Are you aware of any particular good practice in this area?

Mr Beard: Participation has, for a long time, been one of the key drivers for Barnardo's Cymru as an organisation and how children and young people become involved in their decision-making practices. There are a number of aspects to this in relation to looked-after children and fostering provision. The most positive aspect, which I want to talk about first of all, relates to the ability of young people to make choices where permanence is an issue for them. Some years ago, there was a major drive for adoption; there was an assumption that the older population of looked-after young people—so 10 years old and upwards—might be better suited to adoptive placements than to long-term foster placements. If that were true, by now there would be a greater number of that population in adoptive placements, and that is not the case.

10.50 a.m.

An important transition in that thinking, therefore, has been the opportunity for young people, through their looked-after review process, to say, 'I'm extremely happy in this foster home, where I've been for a number of years. I know I'm not going to go home, nor do I want to be adopted. I want this to be a long-term permanent placement for me'. Long-term fostering on a permanent basis was a no-no some years ago, and I it is important that that has now come back and is accepted. A number of local authorities now have permanency panels, rather than adoption panels, where those decisions on long-term fostering are made. Young people have a real opportunity to look at their needs and how they may be matched to those long-term foster carers. That is a hugely important move.

The honest answer to your question is, 'I do not know'. The major problems relate to emergency placements and how children and young people are able to participate in those processes in a meaningful way. The nature of the word 'emergency' indicates that they are going to be done very quickly. Alluding to a previous answer that I gave, the degree of choice is not going to be great.

It is important that the review process of looked-after children kicks in immediately after those emergency placements are made. It should do, should it not? It should be immediate. Within a month after that placement has been made there should be a review so that young people have the opportunity to talk about whether this is meeting their needs. If the emergency placement is as a result of a previous breakdown, they can move into other areas.

We had the opportunity to listen to the previous evidence so we are aware that Children in Wales spoke very passionately about advocacy. That clearly has to be an important role in all of this. There is a deficit in advocacy services. The opportunity for children and young people's voices to be heard through a third party, if they are not competent enough to do it themselves, is not as strong as it should be.

Christine Chapman: I want to ask you a few questions about monitoring placements and the wellbeing of looked-after children. In your evidence you state that clear roles and written agreements are needed to ensure that responsibilities do not fall between the foster carer and the social worker. To what extent are and should these issues be addressed in foster placement agreements?

Ms Browning: In my experience, written agreements are now a lot clearer at the stage of making a placement. However, although they outline everybody's responsibilities, part of the issue is about whether those responsibilities are revisited throughout the placement. Regulations and guidance are much clearer now on what should be in placement agreements, what we need to be looking at, the role and responsibility of the child's social worker, the foster carer's supervising social worker and the foster carer.

From my experience, it seems that as placements move along, supervising social workers for the foster carers have to challenge local authority childcare workers who may change a number of times. There may be something about ensuring that foster care agreements are revisited. This is particularly an issue with longer term placements because as placements go on, the child just wants to become a normal part of that family and they do not want to experience some of the interventions in relation to them being the looked-after child. So, foster carers move along and carry out day-to-day care, and social workers change. Revisiting foster care agreements on an annual basis is something that we look at in Barnardo's. When we review foster carers annually, we talk to them again about their roles and responsibilities because carers need to be reminded of that.

Christine Chapman: Does it need to be more consistent?

Ms Browning: Yes. The experience is variable.

Mr Beard: Respite is often important to foster carers, and that is clearly written into the agreement and they know how they are going to get it, where they are going to get it and the frequency of it. It is often those supports that will enable a difficult placement to keep going.

Christine Chapman: What additional problems are experienced by children and young people placed away from their home authority?

Ms Browning: We have had particular experience of placing children with Barnardo's foster carers from English authorities. Some of the issues that come up relate to health and education.

<p>As a particular example, we have placed a disabled child with a family where the foster carers are very appropriate for this child, but it is a long distance from the child's home authority. The foster carer has a nursing background and a lot of experience, but because the child's condition has deteriorated he needs adaptations to his home. This has become a huge issue in relation to who funds these adaptations—the local authority where the foster carer lives or the placing local authority. The delay is quite concerning as regards meeting this child's needs because of this issue of authorities deciding who is responsible for what.</p>
<p>That is just one example of the issues that can come up. Other issues include education and getting a school place, as well as all the usual factors such as the children being placed away from their own social networks.</p>
<p>Mr Beard: The reality is that distance can create issues around frequency of statutory social work visits. We know that that is the case. Alluding to your previous question, often foster carers do things by default because the social worker is not visiting.</p>
<p>The financial issue can often be paramount in relation to some of the issues that Anne Marie was talking about. If those cross-border issues—whether across local authority boundaries or, indeed, across the border into English local authorities—are not sorted out at the point of placement then they cause major difficulties around who is responsible for those very important provisions, such as adaptations to property, that children and young people need.</p>
<p>Christine Chapman: This is my final question. You highlight some weaknesses in the role of independent reviewing officers. What would you suggest is needed to overcome those problems?</p>
<p>Mr Beard: If they are to be truly independent—and in a previous life I was an alleged independent reviewing officer but working for a local authority—then I would suggest that those services need to be commissioned from another organisation in order to achieve that absolute independence. We have independent chairs of adoption fostering panels. We are increasingly looking to have independent chairs of local safeguarding children boards, serious case review panels and so on. The independent reviewing officer role in chairing looked-after children reviews is the crucial opportunity for children and young people to have their voices heard statutorily in the looked-after system.</p>
<p>If you are in one of those positions, it is incredibly difficult, on occasions, to challenge the management structure within the local authority. You must have extreme strength of mind and a supportive line manager to be able to do that. Anne Marie has an example in one of her services where she felt strongly that the independent reviewing officer was not willing to challenge elements that were critical to that young person's looked after children care plan being effected in an appropriate manner.</p>

<p>Nerys Evans: Mae amser yn drech na ni ac mae rhai cwestiynau nad ydym wedi cael cyfle i'w cyrraedd heddiw. A ydych yn fodlon inni ysgrifennu atoch gydag unrhyw gwestiynu eraill er mwyn ichi ymateb yn ysgrifenedig? Gwelaf eich bod. Diolch yn fawr.</p>	<p>Nerys Evans: Time has caught up with us and there are some questions that we have not had the opportunity to ask you. Would you be happy if we sent you those questions so that you can send us written replies? I see that you are. Thank you.</p>
<p>Diolch ichi unwaith eto am eich tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig ac am eich presenoldeb yma heddiw. Bydd eich tystiolaeth yn elfen werthfawr o'n hymchwiliad i leoli plant a phobl ifanc mewn gofal.</p>	<p>Thank you once again for your written evidence and for your attendance here today. Your evidence will be valuable to our inquiry regarding the placement of children and young people into care.</p>
<p>Daw hynny â chyfarfod heddiw i ben. Atgoffaf yr Aelodau bod cyfarfod nesaf y pwyllgor yn cael ei gynnal fis Medi, lle y byddwn, unwaith eto, yn cael rhagor o dystiolaeth ar gyfer yr ymchwiliad hwn. Ar ran y gadeirydd parhaol, Helen Mary Jones, hoffwn ddiolch ichi am eich holl waith.</p>	<p>That brings the meeting to a close today. I remind members that the next meeting of the committee will be held in September where, once again, we will be getting more evidence for this inquiry. On behalf of the permanent Chair, Helen Mary Jones, I would like to thank you for all your work.</p>

"Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.58 a.m.
The meeting ended at 10.58 a.m."