



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

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

**Dydd Mawrth, 20 Hydref 2009
Tuesday, 20 October 2009**

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

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
Christine Chapman	Llafur Labour
Helen Mary Jones	Plaid Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) The Party of Wales (Committee Chair)
Nick Ramsay	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (yn dirprwyo ar ran Angela Burns) Welsh Conservatives (substitute for Angela Burns)

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Beverlea Frowen	Cyfarwyddwr, Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Director, Health and Social Services, Welsh Local Government Association
Albert Heaney	Cymdeithas y Cyfarwyddwyr Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Association of Directors for Social Services Cymru
Bryan Isaac	Arolygwr, Arolygiaeth Gofal a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Cymru Inspector, Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales
Dot Jones	Cyfarwyddwr Gwasanaethau Plant, Cymru, Ymddiriedolaeth y Glasoed a Phlant Director of Children's Services, Wales, The Adolescent and Children's Trust
Kevin Williams	Prif Weithredwr, Ymddiriedolaeth y Glasoed a Phlant Chief Executive, The Adolescent and Children's Trust
Katy Young	Pennaeth Dadansoddi a Gwella'r Gwasanaeth, Arolygiaeth Gofal a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Cymru Head of Service Analysis and Improvement, Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

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

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

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.17 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.17 a.m.*

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

- [1] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bore da, gyfeillion. Mae'r cyfarfod ffurfiol yn dechrau yn fuan heddiw gan fod gennym gymaint o dystion i'w holi cyn 11 a.m.. Croesawaf yr Aelodau sy'n bresennol. Yr ydym wedi cael ymddiheuriadau am absenoldeb oddi wrth Lynne Neagle ac Angela Burns; yr ydym yn disgwyl i Nick Ramsay ymuno â ni yn lle Angela. Gobeithio y bydd yma cyn hir.
- Helen Mary Jones:** Good morning, friends. We have an early start to the formal meeting today as we have so many witnesses to get through before 11 a.m.. I welcome the Members who are in attendance. We have received apologies for absence from Lynne Neagle and Angela Burns; we are expecting Nick Ramsay to join us as a substitute for Angela. I hope that he will be here soon.
- [2] Atgoffaf bawb fod croeso iddynt ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg a'r Saesneg, a bod offer cyfieithu ar gael. Gallwch ddefnyddio'r clustffonau hefyd i glywed y sain yn well. Hoffwn ofyn i bawb ddiffodd unrhyw ffonau symudol, 'mwyar duon' neu offer electronig tebyg. Nid yw'n ddigon i'w gadael ar 'tawel' gan eu bod yn amharu ar yr offer cyfieithu a darlledu.
- I remind everyone that they are welcome to speak in Welsh or English, and that we have interpretation equipment available. The headsets can also be used to amplify the sound. I ask everyone to switch off mobile phones, BlackBerrys or other such electronic devices. It is not good enough to put them on 'silent', because they interfere with the interpretation and broadcasting equipment.
- [3] Nid ydym yn disgwyl ymarfer tân, felly os clywn y larwm, bydd rhaid inni ymateb. Bydd y tywyswyr yn dangos y ffordd orau allan i ni.
- We are not expecting a fire drill, so if we hear the fire alarm, we should respond. The ushers will lead us safely out of the building.
- [4] Gofynnaf i'r Aelodau wneud datganiadau o fudd, o dan Reol Sefydlog Rhif 31. Gwelaf nad oes unrhyw fuddiannau i'w datgan, fel arfer.
- I invite Members to make any declarations of interest, under Standing Order No. 31. I see that there are no interests to be declared, as usual.
- [5] Hoffwn atgoffa'r Aelodau bod ein hadroddiad ar gyllido plant yng Nghymru wedi'i gyhoeddi heddiw; felly, mae'r amserlen wedi dechrau ar gyfer ymateb y Llywodraeth.
- I remind Members that our report on children's budgeting in Wales was published today; therefore, we are on the timetable for the Government's response.
- [6] Hefyd, hoffwn nodi'n ffurfiol, er nad yw yma, fod Sarah Bartlett yn ymuno â ni heddiw fel dirprwy glerc. Bydd yma ar ôl wythnos hanner tymor fel y dirprwy glerc parhaol.
- I should also state formally, although she is not here now, that Sarah Bartlett is joining us today as deputy clerk. She will be with us permanently after half term as our deputy clerk.
- [7] You will see that we have a very tight agenda today, so I may have to be more unpleasant than usual about supplementary questions. I apologise for that in advance.

9.20 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**

[8] **Helen Mary Jones:** Mae'n bleser gennyf groesawu Beverlea Frowen o Gymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru, sy'n hen ffrind i'r pwyllgor erbyn hyn, ac Albert Heaney o Gymdeithas Cyfarwyddwyr Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Cymru, sy'n arwain ar faterion plant. Croeso cynnes i chi'ch dau, a diolch yn fawr iawn am y papur yr ydych eisoes wedi'i gyflwyno inni, sy'n ddefnyddiol iawn. Symudwn yn syth at y cwestiynau sy'n deillio o'ch papur.

Helen Mary Jones: It is a pleasure to welcome Beverlea Frowen from the Welsh Local Government Association, who is an old friend of the committee, and Albert Heaney from the Association of Directors for Social Services Cymru, who leads on children's issues. A warm welcome to both of you, and thank you very much for the paper that you have already submitted to us, which is very useful. We will move immediately into questions arising from your paper.

[9] I will start with the first question. In your paper, you state that local authorities are starting to shape foster care provision in Wales. Could you say a little more about how local authorities are doing this? What are the challenges in ensuring that there is sufficient capacity in the fostering services? I have just mentioned to Members that we have a very tight agenda today, so I would be grateful if we could be as concise as possible—I realise that these are very big issues and it is difficult to be concise.

[10] **Mr Heaney:** Good morning, and thank you for inviting us to the committee today.

[11] Local authorities have looked at their internal strategies to strengthen foster caring—recruitment campaigns, training and support, foster care appreciation evenings, and all sorts of different innovative ideas to try to generate awareness locally. We recognise that the situation has matured to the point that there is now an independent sector that is greatly valuable to foster children, and we have begun to work closely with independent providers to improve the quality of the placements and improve value for money.

[12] A good example is the work undertaken through the children's commissioning support resource. When that database was initially commissioned, it led to us having much more valuable information. It is a resource that lets us know what the provision is across Wales, and that is the first time that we have been able to do so. Following on from that, we have looked regionally at collaboration and commissioning together, and there is an excellent initiative across south-east Wales, which connects the south-east Wales agenda, where 10 authorities have worked together to develop a regional commissioning approach to work with our partners in the independent sector.

[13] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bev, do you want to add anything to that?

[14] **Ms Frowen:** Yes. Local authorities have been trying to improve for a while now the percentage of children who are placed, not only in foster care as opposed to residential care, but also within their own counties. It is one thing to be placed with a perfectly skilled foster carer, but if that is 100 miles away, and is within a different culture and so on, that impacts on the child's welfare. The inspectorate report last year showed that 77 per cent of all children who are currently in the care system are with foster carers. However, there is some misunderstanding around that, and I increasingly hear people who think that a lot of children are in residential care when they are not. There are many English children in Wales who are in residential care, but there are not many Welsh children—77 per cent of the children who are in the system are with foster carers. However, 84 per cent of those children are placed within 20 miles of their home, which is good—if you look at where we have come from, that is excellent.

[15] So, now that the CCSR system has been built, which was a means to getting at the real stuff about intelligent commissioning, foster carers and the provision of foster care is a priority for the next two years. It is also a priority to achieve more sharing between authorities for the benefit of foster carers, because there are still gaps in the system. However, foster caring is a priority now, and we want to improve on the 84 per cent figure and also to continue to develop highly skilled foster carers. In that way, along with some other initiatives, we will begin to turn the corner on the number of children coming into the system.

[16] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. Eleanor, I know that you want to come in here, but I must ask you to hang on to your supplementary and, if it is not covered, we can come back to it.

[17] **Eleanor Burnham:** I will ask it as part of my own question.

[18] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. Christine Chapman is next.

[19] **Christine Chapman:** Some witnesses to this inquiry have suggested that foster carers should be professionalised and treated as an integral part of the children's workforce. What, in your view, would be the benefits and disadvantages of that? On a related point, how can local authorities ensure that foster carers are given sufficient autonomy around everyday decisions to allow looked-after children to enjoy the same opportunities and experiences as other children?

[20] **Mr Heaney:** I will lead off on that one, if I may. In relation to your first question about the professionalisation of foster carers, it is important to start from the basis of a shared understanding across the partnership world that foster carers provide an invaluable resource; they are crucial to us, and we cannot survive without them. There is often a debate about whether they undertake their duties as a good, caring, loving family, or whether it is a professional role. Having looked at the evidence, I think that the complexity of the children placed requires professional skills—a skill base broader than that necessary for dealing with your own family circumstances. Fostering takes you into the complexities of care planning, health treatment, and therapeutic services, which are often required for children in the looked-after children's system. A lot of authorities have begun to approach fostering in that professional way. In my authority, for example, we have a career carers' grade with an appropriate skill base for the types of complexities that arise; we support the carers through that process with rewards and an enhanced package of support. So, the starting point is that foster carers are invaluable to us, and we have to support them across the whole sector in Wales. As for the professionalism debate, we have already seen changes in the way in which local authorities are supporting carers.

[21] There is a complex debate around how many decisions, and what type of decisions, foster carers should make. Having been out to meet foster carers over the years, and spoken directly to them, it varies from placement to placement depending on the situation that a child finds itself in. There are some basic, everyday decisions that foster carers can make, and local authorities can support that kind of decision, but sometimes, some of the complexities of the decision require social work support and social work intervention to assist foster carers. There is a real debate, but my answer will not answer your question fully, I am afraid, because I think that this has to be looked at on a case-by-case basis rather than with a global description saying that all types of decisions should be made by one partner or another.

[22] **Christine Chapman:** There have been incidents, for example, of children not being allowed to go on school trips, which seems ridiculous.

[23] **Mr Heaney:** It is those types of day-to-day, family life decisions that we have to bring

down to the lowest possible level of decision making. However, it has to be seen in the context of providing safe care to the child. When you get into trips and those types of things, we want to make that a part of everyday life for the child, and not something that is difficult and requires a bureaucratic process to be followed.

[24] **Helen Mary Jones:** I would like to ask one specific follow-up question on that, which is something that has been raised by lots of witnesses to this inquiry, namely, the issue with overnight stays. Would it be your view that they are reasonable? I take your point about looking at this case by case, because the children have complex needs, but is it reasonable, if a child has been in a foster care placement for a period of years, and wants to stay overnight with a friend, that that friend's family need to be police-checked before it is allowed?

[25] **Mr Heaney:** My understanding of the process is that we usually have short-notice arrangements in place in most local authorities that have removed some of the barriers. Where we have had longer-term relationships, I think that local authorities have looked at their corporate parenting responsibilities and sought to check families to ensure that everything is fine. There is a case for that balance, because as a corporate parent you are trying to ensure in these days that you protect the child, and ensure that everyone is safeguarded, but usually an overnight stay would be part and parcel of ordinary decision making within local authorities today.

9.30 a.m.

[26] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful.

[27] **Eleanor Burnham:** Byddaf yn siarad yn y Gymraeg. A ydych yn gallu clywed y cyfieithiad? Nid wyf yn siŵr a yw Beverlea yn gallu clywed.

Eleanor Burnham: I will speak in Welsh. Can you hear the interpretation? I am not sure whether Beverlea can hear.

[28] **Helen Mary Jones:** Could somebody give Beverlea some assistance, please?

[29] **Eleanor Burnham:** Gwelaf eich bod yn gallu clywed y cyfieithiad yn awr. Mae'n ddrwg gennyf; yr wyf yn ceisio defnyddio'r Gymraeg mor aml â phosibl.

Eleanor Burnham: I see that you can hear me now. I am sorry; I try to use Welsh whenever I can.

[30] Yr ydym wedi clywed gan amryw o dystion bod diffyg capasiti. I ba raddau mae diffyg capasiti i ddiwallu anghenion arbenigol rhai o'r plant sy'n derbyn gofal, a sut mae mynd i'r afael â hynny? Mae gennyf ddwy esiampl o blant o'r fath. Y cyntaf yw plant ar eu pen eu hunain sy'n ceisio lloches a'r ail yw pobl ifanc sydd mewn carchardai dros y ffin yn Lloegr. Mewn pwyllgor arall, yr ydym wedi bod yn edrych ar sut mae gofalu'n well am y bobl ifanc hynny ac ystyried a fyddai'n well iddynt fod yma yng Nghymru mewn gofal maeth.

We have heard from various witnesses that there is a lack of capacity. To what degree is there a lack of capacity to meet the specialist needs of some looked-after children, and how can we get to grips with that? I have two examples of such children. The first is unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the second is young people in prisons across the border in England. In another committee, we have been looking at how we can better look after those young people and considering whether it might be better for them to be in foster care here in Wales.

[31] **Ms Frowen:** I will answer on a broad, strategic basis. Special needs is definitely an area in which more work needs to be done. Through the intelligence that we have now, we are starting to bring authorities together. They have low numbers but, collectively, across a group, it is a case of sitting down and having intelligent discussions with providers. My early

understanding is that providers welcome this approach because they want to provide those services. That is a real example of where authorities are starting to recognise that they need to work in partnership, not just with the provider but with their other colleagues, so that they can shape the market. Over the next couple of years, we should see improvements. It will take time to put in place, but that is the approach that we are taking, and it is much more productive than the approach taken a few years ago, when people were working in silos. Those young people were forgotten because they were in small numbers. However, when you suddenly have four or five authorities coming together, they see that, between them, they could have 12 or 15, and that is a reasonable number to sit down and have sensible discussions about with the provider, which can bring in specialist skills. You can identify the most appropriate place, you can drive down costs for better procurement and you can do some sensible things around quality. I think that that is where we will go in the next couple of years. We will develop that. However, I accept that it is an issue at the moment.

[32] **Helen Mary Jones:** Do you want to add to that, Mr Heaney?

[33] **Mr Heaney:** Capacity in the system is crucial. All local authorities are allocating social workers to children in the looked-after system. There has been an overall, year-by-year improvement in local authority delivery on looked-after children. However, we have not reached the point where we are satisfied. There is much work to be done. One way of achieving that would be to look further. I know that in ‘Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future’—and through working with partners—it is stressed how we brought health, education, the voluntary sector and other players together. Crucially, today, we have further work to do because what will strengthen the looked-after children arrangements is enhanced partnership working. We have seen from the child protection work done in the system recently that partners are working well together at the beginning of the child protection process, but to strengthen things further, partners need to stay engaged throughout the life and journey of the child. So, there is an issue around capacity in the whole system to ensure that children get their health assessment and so that personal education plans are delivered in a more reflective way.

[34] I know that time is pressing today but there is another point that I would like to stress. There is a crucial issue. We listen to the voice of the child, but we also now have the voice of the social worker saying to us that they are spending more time in front of the computer. We have to listen to that voice and look at how we get a balance in the systems and forms that social workers are required to complete.

[35] **Eleanor Burnham:** That has answered my question. You have just said that there are children from England in Wales, and yet there is not the capacity for Welsh children in Wales, who really want to be as close as possible to home. They must be going somewhere.

[36] **Ms Frowen:** Children are going out of county, and very small numbers of children go outside Wales. The point that I was making is that we do not have the right number of the right specialists in the right places, but we are doing considerably better than we were. However, the providers—particularly those on the border—are, at the end of the day, there to run a business; they are not there, predominantly, just to serve the needs of those in Wales. So, if they are providing a good service, have vacancies, and councils from England want to place their children there, they get placed there. That is a real issue for us, and I have made the point several times here that it is a matter for us all to determine the effects of that. When a child from England comes here—and some of my councils would wish me to make these points strongly—a whole range of services are then required from Welsh providers: education, healthcare—everything. That places a considerable burden on those authorities. In the main, they deal with that well, but it is a growing issue, and one that we need to have a sensible debate about.

[37] **Helen Mary Jones:** I could not agree more with that. Local authorities have a responsibility to look after the children in their own areas, but it is a bit much when they have to spend a lot of their resources on children from elsewhere, which cannot then be spent on looking after those already here.

[38] **Eleanor Burnham:** Particularly as resources are so finite here, whereas over the border there are many more.

[39] **Helen Mary Jones:** Indeed; that is also true. Nick, I will bring you in. In doing so, I thank you for substituting for Angela. We do appreciate it, particularly because we are a small committee, and if we are one or two members down, it becomes a problem. So, I am grateful to you and the group.

[40] **Nick Ramsay:** I am happy to be here, Chair.

[41] I will ask one more question on workforce and placement capacity, if I may. In your evidence you talk about the high turnover of staff, which we have touched on, and the need for a well-trained and stable workforce in children's services across the board. How serious are recruitment and retention problems, and how do you feel that that impacts on services? It is probably an epic question, so you may like to break it down.

[42] **Mr Heaney:** The workforce has an extremely complex professional job to do. The vulnerability of looked-after children is well known to all professionals working in that arena, and will be well known to you. Workforce turnover has been a consistent and persistent feature in children's services throughout Wales, and I would suggest that that is the case throughout the UK. We are currently working on a number of levels to try to produce retention and recruitment strategies that bring in the workforce at the right level. You will be aware of the work of the Care Council for Wales and some of the excellent standards that it has introduced in Wales, which is fabulous. It is a persistent challenge, which each local authority finds itself facing at different times in its life. It has been a circular debate; we tried to change things about three years ago through the Garthwaite report, which looked at the workforce and produced a number of suggestions for improvement. We have seen some improvement, but clearly the skills required in the workforce training, recruitment and retention strategies remain challenging. We have to broaden the discussion and look at the range of services that are provided by social workers to child protection and looked-after children cases, and we have to have a debate on the type of workforce skills that are required to work with our children-in-need population.

9.40 a.m.

[43] **Mr Heaney:** As a local authority, we deal with around 45,000 live cases of children who are in need in any one year. There will be children who are at risk of coming into the looked-after system and who therefore require the intervention.

[44] I can assure you that work is taking place, but we need to look carefully at support and funding support at a time of critical challenge for children. We welcome, for example, the intensive family support team concept. We thought that that was especially rich. It brought us into the domain of partnership working. The more that we bring partners together, the more we free up and enable social workers. At the moment, from the social services and social care perspective, we and social services take the lead role for co-ordination and delivery.

[45] **Helen Mary Jones:** I stress the need for people to be brief, because we have you for only 10 more minutes and we have another 12 questions. We obviously will not get through all of them.

[46] **Ms Frowen:** I wanted to reinforce that we have turned the corner on recruitment and we are starting to turn the corner on retention. However, experience will take time. We are aware that children's social workers, in the main, are relatively inexperienced in operating at senior grades. You cannot build experience overnight. Whereas, two or three years ago, we were concerned that we were not recruiting enough and that people were favouring other parts of social work, there is still a debate—and I hope that it comes out of the integrated family support team work and the evaluation—regarding whether there is a special set of skills, training and incentives for those social workers who have to work in this very challenging arena. We explicitly say that they are different to other parts of the profession. That is a debate that will go around and around, but it is necessary due to the complexity of this work.

[47] **Nick Ramsay:** I would like to move on to the issues around assessment, care planning, and review. Evidence to this inquiry has highlighted variation and inconsistency in local authority practice around the placement of looked-after children. Given the extensive legislation and guidance in this area, why does this problem persist and what can be done to address it?

[48] **Mr Heaney:** One of the critical challenges is the type of information that is required for a child. The public law outline has strengthened, which is an illustration of the strengthening of the way in which care planning takes place before a child goes into the system. That is a good thing and we welcome that.

[49] In relation to care planning, it is about the critical information going to, for example, foster carers; ensuring that the right type of information goes through. At the moment, we have a complex situation in that the social worker will provide key information and will bring across that key information, but they are also providing weighty documentation to foster carers because they are trying to cover all aspects of a child's life. Therefore, one thing that would help is a review of the documentation requirements in order to streamline them and get that balance to enable workers, especially social workers, to share information with the critical partners, such as foster carers.

[50] The sharing of information is crucial. It is part of this debate, because good care planning is enhanced through good information sharing. We have to look at our IT systems. At the moment, we have all developed IT systems that are singularly focused—agency focused—and we have to begin to consider connectivity to enhance the way that we work and share information.

[51] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. Beverlea, do you want to come in on this point?

[52] **Ms Frowen:** Yes. I would like to stress how much we would welcome a strategic lead on connectivity between health and social service IT and information systems. We have gone around this for years and it is absolutely crucial that we finally link up our systems in a way that allows people to access different levels of information. However, it is something that comes in and out of favour. It is crucial.

[53] The WLGA has had early discussions with the Welsh Assembly Government about a review of the independent care system because everyone welcomes the philosophy, but, in practice, it is turning out to be incredibly bureaucratic. People tell me that if they do it properly, they can have in excess of 25 forms, with different exemplars. Social workers are skilled and expensive resources; they should not be spending their time filling in all of these forms at a computer—if they can get to one that works. There is a need for balance, because we do not want to go back to the days when we did not record and could not provide evidence, but we have gone too far the other way now and we would therefore welcome some recommendations on looking at connectivity and the balance of recording against front-line care and support, and being with the child.

[54] **Helen Mary Jones:** Nick, I will move on because I think that that answers your question. Could we move on to the question on exchange of information, Eleanor?

[55] **Eleanor Burnham:** Bu inni dderbyn tystiolaeth fod pobl yn ofni rhannu gwybodaeth. Dywedodd rhywun wrthym ei fod yn well rhannu gwybodaeth oni bai fod rheswm difrifol dros beidio â gwneud hynny oherwydd bod rhannu gwybodaeth yn hanfodol, fel yr ydych wedi'i nodi. A gytunwch ag hynny? Yr ydych wedi cyfeirio at enghraifft o arfer da yn Sir Benfro lle mae'r gofalwyr maeth yn cael rhestr o gwestiynau i'w gofyn er mwyn sicrhau bod ganddynt yr holl wybodaeth briodol cyn cytuno i leoliad. Pa mor effeithiol yw hynny ac a allai gael ei ddefnyddio mewn mannau eraill?

Eleanor Burnham: We received evidence that people are afraid to share information. Someone told us that it was better to share information unless there was a serious reason not to because information sharing is crucial, as you have just noted. Do you agree with that? You referred to an example of good practice in Pembrokeshire where foster carers are provided with a list of questions to ask in order to ensure that they have the appropriate information before agreeing to a placement. How effective is that and could it be used elsewhere?

[56] **Ms Frowen:** We included that example of good practice in our evidence because we think that it is commendable and should be transferred. It is now part of the south-west Wales collaborative where six directors meet. It is supported by the Social Services Improvement Agency. We envisage that that will be transferred and built on because it makes jolly good sense.

[57] **Eleanor Burnham:** It is also very basic.

[58] **Ms Frowen:** Yes, but sometimes the best things are sensible and simple things.

[59] **Helen Mary Jones:** Do you want to add anything to that, Albert?

[60] **Mr Heaney:** Without taking up too much of your time, the issue for me is the need to get the information sharing right. That is crucial because coming back to the start of that question, a good example was fearfulness around sharing information. I often think back to when Lord Carlile presented his report; he said that it was better to share information in order to safeguard than not to do so. That still holds true.

[61] **Helen Mary Jones:** That brings us neatly on to Eleanor's next question.

[62] **Eleanor Burnham:** Yr ydych yn amlinellu'r broses ar gyfer darparu gofalwyr maeth â gwybodaeth ar unrhyw risgiau sy'n gysylltiedig â lleoliad. Mae'r pwyllgor wedi clywed na chaiff risgiau o'r fath eu cyfathrebu'n effeithiol i ofalwyr maeth. Sut y gellir gwella'r trefniadau pwysig hyn?

Eleanor Burnham: You outline the process for providing foster carers with information on any risks associated with a placement. The committee has heard that such risks are not always effectively communicated to foster carers. How can these important arrangements be improved?

[63] **Mr Heaney:** I think that they can be improved by earlier planning. The emergency placement will always come up and we can react to that. That can still be dealt with professionally and well. However, early planning is about pre-planning. Most authorities have now set up pre-admission multi-agency panels to begin to plan and to work on ensuring that the child who needs to come into the system is brought in.

[64] Sharing information is about providing the key information to the carer. Professionals

are being trained to provide crucial information on health and education, so the essential information is brought to the fore along with risk management issues relating to the life of that child to safeguard the child and carers. That information and training are provided to professional front-line workers to enhance how they respond.

[65] The emergency placement is about that moment in time. I have had examples of this where a social worker is moving a child to a placement and providing comprehensive documentation and, at that moment in time, it is, for me, about ensuring that that critical information is known, so it is about partners sharing information and timing it so that they are responding together. We are now aware of these challenges, and, as ADSS Cymru, we are actively working on them through training and educational awareness work with our professionals so that they enhance the way that they deliver information at that time in order to safeguard.

9.50 a.m.

[66] **Eleanor Burnham:** But who decides—

[67] **Helen Mary Jones:** Eleanor, I am sorry, but we have to move on to Christine's questions.

[68] **Eleanor Burnham:** Can we have an answer in writing as to what critical information is? What one person might think is critical information may be different from another person.

[69] **Helen Mary Jones:** It would be useful for us to receive a definition of what is considered to be critical, because that is something that people have raised concerns about.

[70] **Christine Chapman:** To move on quickly, there are some challenges in maintaining up-to-date information on the children's commissioning support resource, as you have indicated in your evidence, and other evidence to this inquiry suggests that the CCSR is not as effective as it could be. How are these problems being overcome? May I add another issue, which is to do with the South East Wales Improvement Collaborative Children's Services Commissioning Project? How does that project help to improve service commissioning?

[71] **Ms Frowen:** I will take that question, because I have the delight and pleasure of being the senior responsible officer for the CCSR, and have been since 2005. On keeping accurate information, the critical information that needs to be there that varies the most and gets out of date quickly is that on vacancies. The other information changes infrequently: the status of the provider, the quality reports, the inspection reports and so on. At the end of the day, it is the providers' responsibility to keep that information up to date. We have worked with the independent providers to have a system in place in which they work to keep the information up to date, because they understand that if we do not know about a vacancy, then, to put it crudely, they will not have a placement. So, that is well in hand.

[72] We are just about to start to work upon up-to-date information on internal placements for authorities. The reason why I raise that—it has not come up so far in the evidence that you have received that I have read—is that a lot of placements are currently provided internally by councils, not by independent providers. Until recently, they were in the private domain of that council and practice varied considerably. We have now negotiated with the councils that they will share information on internal provision and keep that up to date, and we are about to pilot that in south-west Wales. Individual authorities, such as Albert's, are doing that already, because they choose to. However, collectively, we will start in south-west Wales and move across Wales. The aim is that all information, whether it is provided by a council or an independent or third sector provider, will be kept up to date.

[73] What is also helping is that, to take south-east Wales as an example and answer your question, 10 authorities that, between them, have spent 46 per cent of the total budget for looked-after children have now come together and started to procure on a regional basis. To give you a real example, because they are working together, they are now able to sit down with the provider and negotiate a flat-rate fee and quality. This is not just about money; it is about quality and outcomes. They were not part of the commissioning process before. So, they are now able to sit down and agree a standardised fee for a standard quality for all of those councils. In the past, the same provider would have had seven different fee rates with individual councils, effectively for providing the same service.

[74] That is historical, that is because that is the way that it was, and that is no longer the case in south-east Wales. The other thing that is important is that they are going to start on outcome-based procurement, as opposed to saying, 'Yes, we have a placement; thank goodness, let's stop worrying about that'. There will be real savings, but I do not think that that is what is really driving it at the moment. What is driving it is the consistency of outcomes. The real spin-off is that the providers are really engaged because they feel, for the first time, that their skills have been recognised and that they are being asked to help to shape the market in a collaborative way.

[75] **Helen Mary Jones:** That was very helpful. We are going to have to bring this part of the meeting to a close. I thank you both very much for your written evidence and for being here today. There was some useful material there that I know that we will want to discuss. We have mentioned a note on what constitutes critical information. I am also interested in the information sharing that you are going to be rolling out in south-west Wales. That is a really positive step forward. It would be interesting to have a note on the timescales for that and an update on how it progresses. Could you give an outline of how procurement will move towards being outcome-based? This committee is very keen on that: not just what is happening, but what difference it is making. It would be brilliant to have a note on that. We may drop you a line, setting out those requests, because we have had to do it in a bit of a rush.

[76] **Ms Frowen:** That is fine. On behalf of south-east Wales, we are more than happy to give you a presentation and for you to meet that team and see how it is shaping commissioning now.

[77] **Helen Mary Jones:** We will certainly consider that. It may not be possible for the whole committee to attend, but some members may be able to.

[78] Croesawaf Dot a Kevin o I welcome Dot and Kevin from The Ymddiriedolaeth y Glasoed a Phlant i'r Adolescent and Children's Trust to the table. bwrdd. Bydd cwestiynau'n cael eu gofyn yn Questions will be asked in both languages, so y ddwy iaith felly dylech sicrhau bod popeth you should ensure that your headsets are yn iawn gyda'r clustffonau. working.

[79] There will be questions in both languages, so if you need the headset, please make sure that it is working.

[80] Diolchaf yn fawr iawn i chi am eich Thank you very much for your paper and for papur ac am eich presenoldeb yma heddiw— your presence here today—this is not your nid dyma'ch tro cyntaf yn y Cynulliad first time at the National Assembly. We will Cenedlaethol. Symudwn yn syth at move straight to questions, if that is okay gwestiynau, os yw hynny'n iawn gyda chi. with you.

[81] Thank you very much for being here. I know that it can be a slightly daunting experience for people the first time that they come here, but we are not a scary committee, are we, folks? I hope that we are a fairly focused one. I will ask the first question. You state that

there needs to be an urgent and positive balancing of financial constraints with the needs of children. To what extent, in your experience, do resource constraints, rather than suitability, influence placement decisions?

[82] **Ms Jones:** I speak from experience—that is where I am speaking from in everything that I say. Currently, in TACT in south-east and south-west Wales, we work mainly with the 10 local authorities that are now part of the South East Wales Improvement Collaborative. We have referrals from Powys and a few from Ceredigion, but nothing from Carmarthen and very little from Pembrokeshire. So we mainly work with 10 authorities. The SEWIC base is coming online, but not everybody is in it, and we have the children's commissioning support resource database, which local authorities are supposed to be signed up to and working with, but we are finding that they are not totally signed up to or working with it. Referrals come on an ad hoc basis and they do not always come via the database. So, I would say that we are, in fact, working with about five different systems. There seems to be a lot of emphasis on systems, rather than on children. It is the children that we are all there for—all of us in this room and all who work with children. It is for the children who have been let down by adults in their home. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we do not let them down in the systems and processes that we all join and sign up to, if you like.

10.00 a.m.

[83] With referrals, I am not convinced that they are made for the right reason. When they come to us, they now ask for our costs and invite us to tender. We do not know who else has tendered, and so we wonder whether the placement that is chosen for the child is the right one, having been matched correctly, or whether it is based on cost.

[84] **Helen Mary Jones:** Kevin, do you want to add to that?

[85] **Mr Williams:** Yes, if I may. Hard-pressed local authorities in difficult financial times, quite rightly, are looking for best value. The weighting given to price against that given to the quality of a placement and, in particular, a focus on outcomes can at times be swayed too much by the cost. Within the independent and third sector, we see a push for us to drive down our prices, and that will inevitably have a longer-term consequence for quality, which is a concern for us as an organisation. We certainly support the notion of best value, and we want to ensure that what we provide is a quality service that is efficient and effective at the best possible price that we can deliver.

[86] There is confusion at times between the cost of the independent sector and the cost of in-house provision. The Fostering Network and BAAF did a report several years called 'The cost of foster care', which looked at what running a reasonable fostering service would actually cost, be it in the independent sector or in the local authority sector. I am not sure that local authorities fully grasped that report with regard to understanding the true costs. Many costs are not taken into consideration when the price of an independent placement is compared with an in-house placement.

[87] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That is helpful. I want to stress the fact that we have asked you here precisely because you have that front-line experience. When Dot says that she is speaking from experience, that is exactly what we want to hear. In some ways, that can be something of a reality check against the stuff that we may hear from others. Christine, you have the next question.

[88] **Christine Chapman:** You identify a number of problems and weaknesses with the CCSR. Dot, you mentioned the fact that not all local authorities are signed up to it. The Deputy Minister has said that she intends to commission an evaluation of the CCSR. What issues need to be addressed in order to make it more effective?

[89] **Ms Jones:** As I said in my document, some parts of the information in the database are not available to us. For some local authorities, our information is not always available, so it does not work.

[90] A meeting was held about a fortnight ago between CCSR and the independent agencies. One of the issues brought up related to the fact that independent agencies, and certainly someone from TACT in Wales, said, 'We should all meet and talk, and together say what's good and what's not working, to see if we can all resolve matters so that it is a proper working database, rather than how it is'. One of the other independent agencies—a charity like us—informed me that it was having problems as it thought that because we are not classed as a private agency, given that we are a charitable and a voluntary agency, we have in fact been missed out on occasions.

[91] It has been interesting. The point that I really want to make is that there is a need for people to get together to talk. Let us try to make it work. I think that there is a need for it; there has to be a need for it because it is supposed to help to provide an opportunity for children all over if they do not have a placement in their own communities, local authority areas or whatever. It is about them, so let us try to make it work for them.

[92] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That is very helpful. I now call on Eleanor.

[93] **Eleanor Burnham:** Yr ydych wedi nodi yn eich tystiolaeth fod effeithiolrwydd eich gwaith o gasglu gwybodaeth a pharatoi plant ar gyfer eu lleoli yn amrywio rhwng gwahanol awdurdodau lleol, fel y soniwyd gennych ynghynt. O gofio'r canllawiau sydd ar gael eisoes i ymarferwyr, pa gamau pellach y mae eu hangen i wella'r gwaith yn gyffredinol?

Eleanor Burnham: You have stated in your evidence that the effectiveness of information gathering and preparing children for placements varies between different local authorities, as you mentioned earlier. Given the guidance that is already available to practitioners, what further action is needed to improve practice in general?

[94] **Mr Williams:** We do see that variety of practice, which is not just about the local authority base. We see that individual social workers within a local authority have different practices. Therefore, even people working to the same policies and procedures offer a different standard to children, which is about their experience and their own professional practice. We see that difference not only between local authorities, but within local authorities.

[95] With many children that come into our care, there has not been a thorough assessment in terms of their needs and their understanding of why they are in care. Therefore, families are not fully assessed and there is vital information that is often missing at the point of referral. We see that children are not prepared to come into the care system, and we know from research evidence that the more that children are prepared and placements are planned, the greater the chance there is for success with that placement working and lasting. We often see same-day placements being made in an emergency and in crisis, rather than being planned. There is some practice out there where there are planned placements and we know that there is greater success with that. Even for long-term placements, when a request has been made for a permanent placement to see a child through to adulthood, we still see same-day placements being made rather than some planning taking place in advance.

[96] **Eleanor Burnham:** Therefore, is it a case of crisis management rather than a proper strategy and timed action?

[97] **Mr Williams:** That is often the case.

[98] **Eleanor Burnham:** Surely, in the social context in which I used to work years ago, there would be a supervisor for a team who would oversee and ensure that, hopefully, minimum standards or same standards applied in a team of social workers.

[99] **Mr Williams:** We see a series of policies and procedures, which are standardised within a local authority, and often between local authorities those policy procedures are very similar. However, individual social work practice can vary tremendously given the experience of the social worker and the busyness in terms of their caseloads. We are finding that we are receiving referrals for children where, often, there has not been a complete assessment of their needs. Often, even if there is information that is known by the social worker, or by the area team, that information is not shared with us. Despite several requests, at times, to social workers for full and complete information, it is often lacking in terms of coming forward. As a real practical suggestion for long-term placements, and where long-term placements are planned and agreed, we would like to see the foster carer treated as a professional, and the foster carer should have access to the child's file. We sometimes see, in a local authority, that if an unqualified worker is doing life-story work with the child, for example, they have access to the child's file, and yet our foster carers, who are often the people looking after these children, do not have access routinely to those files.

[100] Arguments are put forward around confidentiality, but we believe that foster carers, as part of the workforce, are able to understand and hold confidential information, and they do so all of the time in relation to the children that they look after. In terms of information sharing, we think that a real breakthrough could be made if, as a routine service, foster carers were given access to the local authority file on the family. That way, the foster carer has a responsibility to get the information, as well as the local authority having responsibility to share that information with the foster carer.

10.10 a.m.

[101] **Eleanor Burnham:** We have heard that comment from many witnesses.

[102] **Helen Mary Jones:** We certainly have. Eleanor, could you move onto your next question?

[103] **Eleanor Burnham:** Yr ydych wedi rhoi enghreifftiau o achosion lle nad yw'r risgiau sy'n gysylltiedig â rhai plant arbennig wedi cael eu cyfleu'n llawn i ofalwyr maeth, ac yr ydych newydd gyfeirio at hynny. Pa mor gyffredin yw hyn a sut gellir gwella ar yr arfer gwael hwn?

Eleanor Burnham: You give examples of instances where risks associated with particular children have not been fully explained to foster carers, and you have just referred to that. How common is this and how can that bad practice be improved upon?

[104] **Ms Jones:** As Kevin explained, we take many referrals for placements that, say, come in on a Friday at 12 p.m. and require a placement by 4 p.m. As I have written in our evidence, we have had some bad experiences where crucial information was not passed on, such as the information that a young person had been abused at home. That is crucial stuff and is part of the risk assessment. What we have done in The Adolescent and Children's Trust is to have our own risk assessment; we ask people things, and we even ask people to sign things. However, sometimes, as Kevin said, it goes back to people who may not be well trained in this field, and who are not that experienced. I think that there is a level of inexperience out there.

[105] **Mr Williams:** The relationship between local authorities and the independent sector is very much improved, and we are seeing much more partnership working and sharing of

information. However, there still exists, for some workers in some local authorities, a mistrust of the independent sector, and, within that mistrust, there is a belief that if we had the full information, we would cherry pick the children that we place. For us, the importance of ensuring that we have the full information is to get the right placement match. What we see too often is a child being moved around the place and around the system, with one foster placement breakdown after another, and we know that each breakdown causes further disruption to a child's life. With the full information and with our knowledge of our foster carers, we are able to make better assessments to ensure that we get the right placement when a child first enters the care system.

[106] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That is very helpful. Nick, I believe that you have questions about reviewing placements and supporting staff.

[107] **Nick Ramsay:** In your written evidence, you state that the process is in place for reviewing placements and supporting staff. You also state that the measuring of outcomes is relatively unstructured at present. How can outcome measurement be improved and the information used more effectively to inform practice and placement decisions?

[108] **Mr Williams:** TACT has undertaken what we believe to be the first longitudinal study in terms of the outcomes for children in care. We have reviewed 100 children in our care, many of whom are in Wales, although they do cross boundaries to the other three countries of the United Kingdom. We are following those children through the system. We carried out an assessment in terms of their behaviours and their level of difficulty at the point of entry into the system, and then reviewed them a year into the placement, looking at what had made a difference for them and what the carers felt had made a difference. We are following that cohort of children through on a three-yearly basis, and because the children are of a mixed age range, we will follow those through into early adulthood as well.

[109] One difficulty with outcomes and outcome measures is that we focus too much on short-term outcome measures, and we expect to see turnaround very fast, which is possible for some children. We see the greatest turnaround in children's health needs after they enter into the looked-after system. So, we see improvements in terms of the keeping of dental, doctor and optician appointments. Those are very practical and straightforward outcomes, but, in terms of longer-term outcomes, our job as a state parent is to ensure that these children move through into early adulthood and later adulthood when they have relationships of their own and they are able to parent their children. Statistically, we see that children from the looked-after system in Wales are 66 times more likely than their peers to have their children removed, and at an earlier age, and placed into the care system.

[110] **Nick Ramsay:** That is an incredible statistic, is it not?

[111] **Mr Williams:** Yes, and it is a reflection of a failure of our care system. We are not educating our children to look after their children. Often, that is because of the difficulties that they have had, and we must remember that more than 70 per cent of the children who come into the care system are there because of abuse and neglect. These children already have high levels of complex needs, and we do not have a benchmark for the outcomes for each child when they come in. Too often, we talk about groups of children and measure outcomes by groups rather than focusing on individuals. Although measuring outcomes is important, we also have to understand the difference between a short-term and a longer-term outcome. Similarly, we have to understand what an 'input' is, and how that directly affects an outcome. I am not sure that we are sophisticated enough, either within local authorities or as a whole system, to understand the relationship between inputs and outcomes.

[112] **Nick Ramsay:** That goes back to what Dot Jones was saying earlier about seeing this too often as a system, and forgetting the children.

[113] **Mr Williams:** Absolutely. We need to measure individual improvements for individual children, and keep that focus on the individual. That said, however, it is important that we have measurements of educational attainment and of involvement in the youth justice system. We have evidence intact that our children not only perform better educationally than their peers in the looked-after system elsewhere, but also have a lower rate of involvement in the youth justice system. We think that, in part, that is because of the level of support and training that we provide to our foster carers, but also because of how we have empowered our foster carers to be real advocates and supporters for the children in their care. We have focused on allowing our foster carers to reach and make decisions with and for the children whom they look after. Another problem with reviewing in the system is that foster carers, the very people who know the children best, are often the last people to have an input into such a review. They should be the first people to have an input. Professionals, such as social workers and others, often see themselves as having the right answers for children's care, rather than focusing on those who are looking after those children. The other issue that we have with reviews is that, when a care plan is made, it is permanent or long-term and there is a lack of understanding about what that means. A review will often also look at whether a rehabilitation home is possible. We know that some families will change over a period of time, but it can be confusing and unsettling for children and for foster carers when each review—even when a long-term plan has been agreed—asks whether a rehabilitation home is a possibility.

[114] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is interesting. Nick has a supplementary question.

[115] **Nick Ramsay:** That has pretty much answered my question. I was going to ask you about the role of independent reviewing officers and how they contribute to placement reviews, which you have just touched on. Could their role be enhanced?

[116] **Mr Williams:** Absolutely. We think that we have seen an improvement in the reviewing process as a result of independent reviewing officers. I suppose that the question is how independent they are, given that they are employed by local authorities.

[117] **Nick Ramsay:** Do you think that it would be helpful to involve foster parents early on, rather than at the very end of the process?

[118] **Mr Williams:** Absolutely. Too often, we see that reviews are held in inappropriate settings. We think that the child ought to be the person to choose where the review is held, and often, that should be in the foster home. Too often, the review can become overly professionalised, so that too many adults are there, and it is difficult for children to make their voices heard.

[119] **Christine Chapman:** You make some observations about the need for better dialogue between the key players in the process of making placements. Are current systems hindering such communication, or is it dependent on individual practice?

[120] **Ms Jones:** Much of it is dependent on individual practice. We work with very good local authorities and social workers, and many of them seem to have been around a long time. We have worked with them over many years and, when there are issues with the local authority, we try to engage on an individual basis rather than just go through the system. If there are issues or concerns about a child, or if they have issues with us, let us get together and talk. It is easier and better.

[121] **Helen Mary Jones:** It is not rocket science, is it?

[122] **Christine Chapman:** You also say in your evidence that private agencies are

sometimes contacted before voluntary agencies when placements are being made. What is the reason for that, and how can a level playing field be created?

10.20 a.m.

[123] **Ms Jones:** I referred to that earlier. We have mentioned it to the children's commissioning support resource, and I believe that it will look at changing something on the database, which will put that right, hopefully.

[124] **Mr Williams:** It is certainly our belief that there should be a mixed economy in welfare provision, ranging from private and voluntary sector providers to public sector providers. A main concern of ours is that we have seen an increase in venture capitalists becoming involved in the provision of care services, and our huge concern is that their main aim is to maximise profit for themselves. We do not have a problem with that with some of the private sector because we think that the independent sector, including the private sector, has driven up standards for foster care, and we often see local authorities following the practice of the independent sector. So, we see the independent sector as a positive, but we have a concern around venture capitalists being involved. In the short term, it is possible to maximise profit by reducing the level of support or training for staff and foster carers but, in the longer term, we think that that will have an impact on children and their outcomes. So, one of our concerns about commissioning is that commissioners do not fully understand the market, and I am not sure that local authorities are managing the market in the longer term. Given the pressure on price, they have a short-term investment in trying to achieve the cheapest rather than thinking about the best quality and the longer-term impacts. Venture capital certainly has the ability to undercut placement costs but I worry that, in the longer term, that will create a more expensive service, given the further damage that can be created as children are not supported as fully as they should be.

[125] **Eleanor Burnham:** It is interesting. I think that it was Beverlea Frowen who said that it is a business. That is quite concerning. You have mentioned not looking properly at the outcomes and, beyond that, you have outcomes in society and the issues beyond short-term care.

[126] Mae eich tystiolaeth yn awgrymu bod gwendidau o ran y wybodaeth am sgiliau a chysondeb staff mewn adrannau gwaith cymdeithasol, a soniasoch am hynny yn gynharach. Awgrymir hefyd fod hynny'n effeithio ar y gwaith ac ar brofiadau plant sy'n derbyn gofal. Pa mor gyffredin yw'r problemau hyn, a sut y dylid eu datrys yn eich barn broffesiynol?

Your evidence suggests that there are weaknesses in the information about skills and the consistency of staff in social work departments, and you talked about that earlier. You also suggest that that affects the work and the experiences of looked-after children. How widespread are these problems, and how could they be solved, in your professional opinion?

[127] **Mr Williams:** They are widespread, and we see variation not only between local authorities but within local authorities and in individual workers' practices. There are ways to improve that. It is about the value that we place on social workers and the role that they play in our communities and society. A drive to improve the value of social work will give social workers a sense of pride. Increasingly, we see good social workers moving through management systems and being taken away from the very thing that they are good at, namely supporting families and young people. We would much rather see a move similar to that taken in the health service, namely a move towards having consultants. A consultant can be promoted and can take on managerial responsibility but, at the same time, he or she becomes an expert in the field and continues to be a clinician. So, we would like to see a system in which social workers come to be seen much more as consultants, and a career structure developed that would allow people to develop their ideas and remain committed to practice.

So, in TACT, we have established the roles of senior practitioner in practice and senior practitioner manager, so that people can choose to remain in practice and have a career path or they can move into management.

[128] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. I have two questions to finish. The committee has heard evidence from several witnesses about a lack of flexibility and autonomy being given to foster carers, particularly around the decisions that they can make for the looked-after child. Some believe that fostering should be made more professional. What is your view on that? Would treating the foster carer as a professional member of the childcare workforce have an impact on recruitment and training?

[129] **Mr Williams:** Absolutely. We support the notion that foster carers are a part of the children's workforce. Some of the most damaged children in our communities are being cared for by very skilled and able carers, and we think that foster care is a profession. The tension relates to how to develop boundaries for the profession, given that we expect our foster carers to form strong attachments to children in their care. In fact, in long-term placements, we expect the foster carers to love the children in their care. So, the tension relates to how you develop a professional set of rules and boundaries that gives foster carers the normal respect and expectations of a professional within the workforce. They have experience of child development, psychology and sociology, and they are a part of the treatment plan for the child. So, clearly, they are professionals, but there is that extra part to their role, which is that they form strong attachments to children. As part of our research, conducted by Professor Bob Broad from London South Bank University, we asked children who the most important people in their lives were, and the current foster carer was considered to be the most important person, above birth family members. For some children, birth family members are much more important than foster carers, but our study showed that, for whole groups, the current foster carer was the most important person. We expect our foster carers to have that dual role of being professionals and people who care, above and beyond the care provided by a normal social worker, teacher or health professional. That role is one that can be achieved.

[130] **Helen Mary Jones:** I do not often make comments from the Chair, but I just want to say how nice it is to hear someone use the word 'love' when talking about children. That is the key thing that foster carers need to do that no other childcare professionals do in the same way.

[131] I have one final question. To what extent do the skills and knowledge of foster carers who are available to work with looked-after children reflect the range of special needs that a child might have, including the need to be cared for through the medium of Welsh, physical or emotional disabilities, or other issues of ethnicity? Do we have the people we need to meet that range of needs yet?

[132] **Mr Williams:** TACT Cymru recruits locally for local children. Our philosophy and our view is that a child needs to be kept within or as close to their community as possible. We are not an agency that imports children from England. We think that that is completely inappropriate in the local context. There is a shortage of foster carers in Wales, but that does not mean that children today are not being looked after in residential care; it is about the choice of placements. One issue that we will need to deal with is how we pay our foster carers if we are to make sure that we have a sufficient choice of placements. If there is a choice of placements, it will mean that foster carers do not have a placement for periods of time. While arguments have been put forward that we could use their skills to support other foster carers, you cannot have a foster carer doing another piece of work that has to be dropped suddenly if they get a placement. If we are to increase the pool of foster carers, which is needed if we are to give children the most appropriate choice, we will have to look at how we remunerate our foster carers as we would remunerate any member of the children's workforce.

[133] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is an interesting point. Have you addressed that within TACT Cymru, as an agency? Can you do that, or do the constraints of the funding that you get make that impossible?

[134] **Mr Williams:** The constraints of the funding make that very difficult for us. We get paid only when we have a child in a placement. If we are to tackle this issue, we need to work in partnership with local authorities and think about how we commission, or how local authorities can pay for, placements.

[135] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That brings our questions to an end. It has been a very useful session, and I am most grateful to you. Thank you for your paper, too. I am sure that we will want to address some of the issues that you have raised in our report.

[136] Diolch yn fawr.

Thank you.

[137] Croesawaf Bryan Isaac a Katy Young I now welcome Bryan Isaac and Katy Young.
yn awr.

[138] The likelihood is that questions will be asked in both languages. Will you ensure that you are happy with using your headsets before we start and that they are on the correct channel; I am sure that they will be.

10.30 a.m.

[139] A ydych yn gallu clywed y cyfieithiad? Can you hear the translation?

[140] **Mr Isaac:** Yes.

[141] **Helen Mary Jones:** Excellent. Thank you for coming and for your paper, which has been useful. We will go straight to questions arising from evidence in your paper. I will start. You state in your written evidence that CSSIW is increasingly undertaking joint or integrated inspections and working with other inspectorates such as Estyn and Healthcare Inspectorate Wales. The committee has heard evidence that education and healthcare services are not always as fully involved as they should be with looked-after children. How will CSSIW's co-inspection regime help to address this?

[142] **Mr Isaac:** The provision of services for looked-after children depends on many different agencies and different professionals. All too often, when we have gone in as an inspectorate, we have been able to understand, and sometimes use levers to influence, one aspect of the service, but not others. So, an important benefit of undertaking more joint and shared inspections is not only a better understanding of the problem, but also a better understanding of the systems involved in delivering services to looked-after children. It will also give us the scope to make recommendations and use some of our shared levers to make a difference to the service that is presented.

[143] It is also important to recognise that it is quite difficult to bring inspectorates' work together, because each inspectorate is governed by its own separate rules and requirements. However, we are committed to that as an inspectorate and the Welsh Assembly Government has recently issued some principles of regulation and inspection, one of which is fundamentally about inspectorates working together and sharing information. If we do that as a body of inspectors and as an inspectorate, it would model sharing behaviour and partnership working in the rest of the services.

[144] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, that is very helpful. Katy, did you want to come in on that?

[145] **Ms Young:** I just wanted to add that undertaking an inspection heightens the awareness of issues, so the more joined-up we are, the more heightened is the awareness of issues across all of the agencies and they do not just see something as being a social services issue. They are aware that the inspectorates are coming in and that they will share information. Even when we do not go in jointly or have a joint methodology, if we find issues, we raise them with the other inspectorates.

[146] **Christine Chapman:** The committee has heard evidence that there are some problems with the children's commissioning support resource, such as under-resourcing and inconsistent use by local authorities, and that that is not as effective as was hoped. Your own evidence states that,

[147] 'the CCSR got off to a slower start than expected'.

[148] Is the CCSR now fulfilling the aims set for it and what contribution does it make to improving the placement process for children and young people?

[149] **Mr Isaac:** The CCSR is a work in progress. It must be recognised that commissioning services for looked-after children is fairly complex. Wales has a history of each local authority working separately for its own children, with different rates of payments for foster carers. A difficulty for the CCSR has been to encourage local authorities to use the database in terms of providing information to it, because that information base is only as good as all of the information put into it. One problem has been the lack of access to the database of independent and voluntary providers. Although, they are required to provide information, they do not always see the product of that work and have not been able to use that as a resource for their own purposes.

[150] It is important to recognise that it is fundamentally a database—it provides information on placements but cannot provide information about children nor replace the negotiation that needs to take place on the ground between the child's social worker and the carers. It is also important to recognise that the resource has stimulated better commissioning practices in Wales. Recently, there have been encouraging signs that local authorities are working together in partnership more and developing a shared strategy. We feel that they need to do that more than they have already, in order to improve the level of commissioning and take it to another degree. Commissioning is a very complex and technical activity and most people would say that commissioning in children's services is at a relatively unsophisticated level. The resource has achieved quite a lot, but it now needs to become more efficient, to involve more of the stakeholders in the use of their resource. Also, local authorities need to value it more. There was an issue earlier about local authorities being convinced that it was a useful resource. That argument has been won now, by and large, and the database is ready for further improvements.

[151] **Eleanor Burnham:** Mae hynny'n ein harwain at fy nghwestiwn i ar ddiogelu data a rhannu gwybodaeth. Yr ydych yn nodi yn eich tystiolaeth nad y cyfyngiadau cyfreithiol na moesegol sy'n effeithio ar yr oedi o ran cael gafael ar wybodaeth bwysig, ond y rhwystrau sefydliadol neu ddiwylliannol. Mae tystion eraill wedi awgrymu bod materion yn ymwneud â chyfrinachedd a diogelu data yn ffactorau sy'n cyfrannu at yr oedi. Sut, yn eich barn chi, mae goresgyn y rhwystrau anodd hyn?

Eleanor Burnham: That brings us to my question on the safeguarding of information and information exchange. You state in your evidence that it is not legal or moral constraints that cause delays in terms of accessing important information, but rather cultural or organisational barriers. Other witnesses have suggested that issues surrounding confidentiality and data protection are factors that contribute to these delays. How, in your opinion, can these difficult barriers be overcome?

[152] **Mr Isaac:** Some of the barriers are around a lack of understanding of the law and the procedures. People sometimes become too defensive and anxious about the information that they hold and forget that their primary purpose and role is to support the child, whose interest is paramount. Generally speaking, where social workers and other agencies work very closely with the child, the family and the carers, information is shared. It is about working much more openly and effectively with all of the participants in the child's care.

[153] **Eleanor Burnham:** Would you say that some of the information that we have received, even this morning, suggests that there are some very inexperienced social workers who, for various reasons, are withholding absolutely vital information that, in the end, causes huge angst for the child, perhaps because they are not properly placed from the very beginning?

[154] **Mr Isaac:** That can happen. There is a section of the workforce that is relatively under experienced. We are doing quite a lot in Wales to strengthen the workforce, particularly for social workers. However, that is a problem; the anxiety sometimes gets in the way of more relaxed and open partnership working between the social worker and the family. It is important to distinguish between the essential information that the foster carers should be given—there are procedures in place for the sharing of essential information at the point of placement—and the information that might be more difficult and intimate, which requires more skilled communication. There is no excuse for carers not to be given the full information, particularly about the child's risks.

[155] **Ms Young:** Sometimes, the child does not come complete with a package of information; information is gleaned over a period of time. So, if a child comes in who has not been known to social services for whatever reason, you are going to have to build up that relationship with the child and the family to identify the important information. Families do not always provide it. Sometimes, it takes a long time to get to understand what has been going on in a family. We have heard of families where they do not tell you that new partners have moved in; they can be quite secretive. Sometimes, children have been told to keep secrets, and it is an issue of getting alongside the child and forming that relationship. I would hate to think that a social worker, particularly, was withholding information deliberately. I would like to think that, if they do not have the information, they will be taking steps to try to identify it and, as issues become clearer, they will continue to have a dialogue with the foster carer and keep on sharing that information. It is difficult, and the workforce is inexperienced in some of this, and the complexity is the other element that I would remind you of.

10.40 a.m.

[156] **Eleanor Burnham:** That was the issue in the case of baby P, in that they did not understand that the perpetrator was living in the home.

[157] **Ms Young:** You can go into houses and you might not see these people. I have had cases of people hiding from me, as a social worker. It is not a usual thing; it is a complex issue.

[158] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is a valid issue to bring up, but we have had evidence, particularly from foster carers, that information that is available to social workers is sometimes withheld because of issues of confidentiality and confusion about what they are and are not allowed to know from a data protection point of view.

[159] **Ms Young:** Safeguarding should always take priority. Certainly, when we issued the safeguarding guidance in 2006, for the first time, information sharing was given a whole chapter to try to get past this idea that you cannot share information because to do so would

somehow be illegal. What we are saying is that safeguarding is the priority.

[160] **Eleanor Burnham:** And that it should be shared unless there is a very good reason not to.

[161] **Ms Young:** Absolutely, but the issue is to do with other agencies as well, and not just social services.

[162] **Nick Ramsay:** I have a question about care and placement planning—it is something that I have asked previous witnesses—with regard to the quite notable variation in service across Wales. Your evidence states that, despite improvements in the timeliness of assessments, social worker visits, care plans and reviews, there is variability in the quality of assessments and in the care planning process. You state that, in some instances, care plans ‘show little relationship to the assessment’. What levers would improve practice, and are new duties or incentives needed?

[163] **Mr Isaac:** This is quite a difficult area to tackle and improve, because many regulations and requirements are placed on social workers. Care planning is essentially about the quality of the work with the child, the family and the carers, and it is difficult to prescribe in exact detail every aspect of the quality of the care planning, because it does require a very detailed and personal understanding of the child’s circumstances.

[164] Some of the levers are about ensuring that social workers have an opportunity to reflect on their practice and have good supervision and support in their practice. The workforce shortages sometimes mean that social workers have heavy caseloads, with too many children to care for. Consequently, their assessments and their plans are rushed and superficial, and that is where the independent reviewing officers have made a difference to the quality of the services in a local authority. There is still a long way to go, but it is essentially about giving people the opportunity to reflect on and to challenge practice so that the care plans are that much more effective.

[165] The other problem that young people tells us about is that the care plans are not always followed through, and that a care plan can be the same as the one used 12 months previously, and that although so many actions might have been agreed on in a review, those actions will often not be carried forward. That revolves around the problems of capacity in our sector, with social workers and other professionals simply not having sufficient time to do a good job.

[166] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, that is very helpful.

[167] **Christine Chapman:** In your evidence, you say that,

[168] ‘a holistic assessment and the active ongoing involvement of the social worker are highly correlated with good placement outcomes’.

[169] What is needed to ensure that such good practice is more widely undertaken?

[170] **Mr Isaac:** We have repeatedly mentioned in our reports the importance of working effectively with the child, and the quality of assessments and care planning is dependent on working on the relationship between the child and the social worker, and the relationship between the child and the carer. The main thing that needs to change is the opportunity to have more time to reflect, consider and drive up the quality of the care planning. This area is relatively resistant to regulation and requirements, but it does require good-quality working.

[171] **Ms Young:** It needs good quality working with the agencies. Our recent safeguarding

review found that most professionals are better at identifying abuse and neglect, but when it came to longer-term planning for those children and involvement in the care plan, it found that the inter-agency working began to fall apart and disintegrate—it was seen as just being a social service responsibility. A child has a range of needs, and the social worker must maintain their responsibilities, form a relationship with a child and promote good quality care for that child, but they are also dependent on the other agencies to play their part. With regard to children's emotional mental health, you are dependent on health to provide its part of the plan as well. So, trying to maintain and forge those links with the other professionals is another important part of a social worker's role.

[172] **Mr Isaac:** The local authority in its corporate parenting role also has a fundamental responsibility to try to get that message across about other agencies, particularly local authorities and education, and other services that provide information and are involved in the planning for children who are looked after.

[173] **Eleanor Burnham:** Mae gennyf gwestiwn am werthuso. Sut y caiff agweddau ansoddol y gwasanaethau ar gyfer plant sy'n derbyn gofal eu gwerthuso? Dywedodd TACT gynnau y dylid sefydlu trefn feddygol er mwyn cael arbenigwyr ymgynghorol a fyddai'n galluogi gweithwyr cymdeithasol o safon i ddatblygu eu gyrfa a hefyd i roi mewnbwn o'r ansawdd gorau i'r gwasanaeth yn gyffredinol.

Eleanor Burnham: I have a question on evaluation. How are the qualitative aspects of services for looked-after children evaluated? TACT mentioned earlier that a medical system should be established to have expert consultants, which would enable good quality social workers to develop their careers and also have a high quality input into the service in general.

[174] **Helen Mary Jones:** TACT was referring particularly to the idea of a consultant grade for social workers, so that you did not have to leave front-line practice to progress in your career.

[175] **Mr Isaac:** This is one of the measures that need to be looked at. It is about giving social workers and other professionals more status to represent children within their local authorities and also within the wider community. However, it is not just about status—it is also about people being listened to. It is partly about remuneration, but it is also about people being seen as having professional skills and knowledge. Other agencies seeing social workers carrying their expertise is also very important.

[176] **Eleanor Burnham:** Do you think that it is also to do with better valuing our future citizens, because these vulnerable youngsters are our future?

[177] **Mr Isaac:** Yes. Sometimes, the attitude to social services reflects the value that is placed on particular children in society, and some of the prejudices and judgements that people make about children and families in disadvantaged areas in Wales. Any measure that raises the esteem of the people who work with those children will also indirectly benefit the children and young people concerned.

[178] **Ms Young:** It would also reinforce the importance of front-line managers because it is their experience that is keeping the social workers on track. The ability to have those managers that can stand back, and question and challenge is essential to the whole process.

[179] **Christine Chapman:** Moving on to children's participation in placements and decision-making, you say that CSSIW's surveys of children and young people show a mixed experience. Can you tell us more about the surveys that CSSIW undertakes with looked-after children and young people and how the findings help to inform future practice?

[180] **Mr Isaac:** We endeavour to undertake surveys with all of the inspection and regulation activities. In the past, some of the samples have been relatively small, because it is very difficult to engage children and young people—they are often quite suspicious and concerned about meeting with strangers.

10.50 a.m.

[181] We are developing more skills in the techniques of surveying, making sure that we ask the right question. We also use various other methods and means that are more convenient and comfortable for children and young people to use. In most inspections, we also meet up with the children and young people concerned. We have found that engaging with children and young people and ascertaining their wishes and feelings is a skilled activity. Recently, we have engaged other organisations, such as Tros Gynnal, Barnardo's, and other voluntary organisations, to facilitate some of that work with the children and young people concerned.

[182] The children's wishes can be quite startling. Children can be very positive on occasions. For example, in the review of independent reviewing officers, children have said that, generally, independent reviewing officers have made a difference to the quality of their experiences. The large majority of looked-after children say that, generally, their experience of being looked after is very positive. However, they can also be very critical and shocking in some of the things that they say. For example, they say that they often do not turn up to the reviews because the venues are not suitable. They have also told us that the care plans are sometimes not followed through. There are fancy targets, tasks and so on, but the reality is that they find, at the next review, that many of those tasks have not been completed by the professionals concerned.

[183] Being involved and participating with children in inspections gives us better information. Sometimes, the information is much more powerful and it also holds us to account as an inspectorate because if we include their comments, and take their comments seriously by making recommendations and requirements, we can then go back to the children and young people and say, 'This is the difference that it has made'.

[184] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That is very helpful. I now call on Nick to ask about monitoring.

[185] **Nick Ramsay:** On monitoring placements and the wellbeing of looked-after children, I have a question that I asked the previous witnesses about the role of independent reviewing officers. The committee has heard evidence about your review of the independent reviewing officers, as it has done from a number of witnesses about the importance of the role and the contribution that the officers make to the wellbeing of looked-after children. What were the main findings of your review and what improvements could be made to the role of independent reviewing officers?

[186] **Mr Isaac:** The main findings were that IROs were generally highly regarded by parents, young children and carers, and that they had made a difference to the looked-after children service in the past three or four years. We found that all local authorities had met the guidance and requirements about independence, which was not an issue. There was some concern that the IROs would not be strong enough or independent enough to make their voices heard. That was not a problem that we found in the review.

[187] The monitoring and quality assurance systems around looked-after children have improved particularly since IROs have become actively involved. We found that the supervision and training of IROs was generally good and that they had raised the level of agencies' attendance at review meetings. However, the children themselves have said that, while these improvements have been made, reviews can still be long and boring. Sometimes,

the issue is not so much about attendance of all of the participants, but more to do with the fact that there is too many of them in the room. Therefore, it is about trying to get some of these formal procedures right without them overwhelming the child and the young person so that their full involvement can be assured.

[188] Young people have often said that the best IROs and chairs of reviews start with a young person's views, outcomes, and what they want. The least experienced IROs have a plan that they work to, and the child's views is somewhere in that plan. So, there is something about the expertise, knowledge and ability of the IROs, but we generally found that IROs were highly respected individuals and were very skilled and experienced.

[189] On the further improvements that are needed, young people need to be given more choice in relation to the venue for reviews and to play a fuller part in the review process. The care planning needs to improve greatly, and we have already touched upon that. The care plans from courts, that is, where court proceedings have kicked in, are largely good, but care planning for children once they are in the system is less good. At the start, the arrangements seem to be relatively robust, but once a child has been looked after for six or nine months, some of those systems become too fluid and superficial. We have also made recommendations about the quality of assessments; again, it goes back to social workers being able to provide full and comprehensive assessments of children who need to be looked after. The other improvement that we are seeking from the report is better oversight of placements, particularly for children who are placed at home on care orders.

[190] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is helpful. Nick, do you have a brief supplementary to that?

[191] **Nick Ramsay:** Briefly, because I know that time is short, there were a lot of positives in that answer, but I am still amazed, going back to my previous question, by the difference between what an assessment shows that a child might need and how the plan for a child is formed and put into practice. It sounds as though good stuff is going on, but, as you said, when they get into the system, that does not necessarily follow through. I hope that you can find some way of improving that aspect.

[192] **Mr Isaac:** In Wales, our early systems are improving greatly, the procedures and requirements around entry into care and initial assessments are working relatively well, but we are finding too often that the practices and procedures later on in the system are not so assured. Once the issues have become more established, it is all too easy for children and the professionals to lose sight of the key focus for the child.

[193] **Ms Young:** In addition, assessment is seen as a one-off. A timescale is associated with assessment, so that has focused attention and social workers are now much better at doing assessments, which is good, and they are doing them in a more timely way. However, the timescales took over, to some extent, from quality, but this is now beginning to be addressed. The issue is that, when you have a review and when you look at a plan and change it, you also have to update your assessment of what is going on and look forward. It should not be about what the assessment was two years ago—you have to keep on updating it and trying to push it, so, you are not just looking at the next six months, but further ahead to where you are going with this child, what you want to achieve with the child and how you will help that child to move into adulthood.

[194] **Eleanor Burnham:** That is exactly the point that I was going to ask a few more questions on. Earlier, TACT made the point that we are only looking at short-term outcomes and not at the long term. In the Communities and Culture Committee, we are looking at the care of children and young people in the judicial system, and we have been over the border, because it appears that most of them, particularly those who are in prison, are over the border. Many people believe that good-quality foster care would be far more efficacious. What is

your view on that?

[195] **Mr Isaac:** More efficacious than what?

[196] **Eleanor Burnham:** Than some of the care that they are already having in prison-type establishments.

[197] **Mr Isaac:** It would be, providing that we could recruit the right foster carers to do that job and providing that they were supported financially and professionally to do the job well. It would also be contingent upon good assessments of the children, because these children will have complex and difficult needs and complex relationships with their birth families. So, it would be vital that the assessment would be sophisticated and clear and that we recruited foster carers who had the skills and the ability to take that work on, because it would be challenging work.

[198] **Helen Mary Jones:** We have a couple of other questions about workforce issues. May we write to you with those for further clarification, because we need to draw the meeting to a close? Thank you both very much for a useful and helpful session. We will write to you about those couple of additional issues.

<p>[199] Yr wyf am ddwyn y cyfarfod ffurfiol i ben. Yr oeddem i fod i fynd i sesiwn breifat i drafod yr adroddiad ar y gyllideb, ond gan mai Eleanor yw'r unig Aelod arall sydd yma a oedd yn y cyfarfod blaenorol, gallwn drafod hyn yn anffurfiol y tu allan i'r pwyllgor, oherwydd nid oes digon ohonom i gytuno i fynd yn breifat yn awr.</p>	<p>I want to draw the formal meeting to a close. We were due to go into a private session in order to discuss the report on the budget, but as Eleanor is the only Member here who is at the last meeting, we can discuss this informally outside the committee because not enough of us are present to agree to go into private session.</p>
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[200] I thank Members for attending and thank all the staff, including the Record of Proceedings, the legal staff and our clerk. I welcome Sarah, who was not here when I welcomed her at the beginning of the meeting, because she was outside the room, sorting stuff out. Thank you very much and I look forward to your working with us. I hope that you will enjoy it and find it interesting. I extend my thanks, as always to the Members' research service, without whom, we could literally not do what we do. The next meeting is on 10 November, which will be an important meeting, because we will scrutinise the annual report of the children's commissioner. I thank Nick again for being here; it is really important that we get substitutes.

[201] Gyda hynny, yr wyf yn dwyn y cyfarfod i ben. With that, I draw the meeting to a close.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.01 a.m.
The meeting ended at 11.01 a.m.*