

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio

The National Assembly for Wales
The Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

Dydd Mercher, 6 Rhagfyr 2006

Wednesday, 6 December 2006

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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi 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 o'r Cynulliad yn bresennol: Janice Gregory (Cadeirydd), Mick Bates, Mark Isherwood, Trish Law, Huw Lewis, Sandy Mewies, Leanne Wood.

Eraill yn bresennol: Naomi Alleyne, Pennaeth Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru; Pam Clutton, Partneriaeth Merthyr, Barnardo's Cymru; Helen Davies, Gwasanaeth Bays i'r Ifanc Digartref, Abertawe, Barnardo's Cymru; Sue Finch, Swyddog Polisi Tai, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru; Simon Glyn, Grwp Ieuencid Sengl Digartref Arfon; Vin Murtagh, Rheolwr Ardal, Cymdeithas Genedlaethol i Ofalu am ac Ail-leoli Troseddwyr; Robin Staines, Cyngorydd Tai, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru; Kathryn Uche, Partneriaeth Cwmpawd, Wrecsam, Barnardo's Cymru; Jackie Vining, Partneriaeth Marlborough Road, Caerdydd, Barnardo's Cymru.

Gwasanaeth Pwyllgor: Dr Virginia Hawkins, Clerc; Claire Griffiths, Dirprwy Glerc.

Assembly Members in attendance: Janice Gregory (Chair), Mick Bates, Mark Isherwood, Trish Law, Huw Lewis, Sandy Mewies, Leanne Wood.

Others in attendance: Naomi Alleyne, Director of Equalities and Social Justice, Welsh Local Government Association; Pam Clutton, Merthyr Partnership, Barnardo's Cymru; Helen Davies, the Bays Youth Homelessness Service, Swansea, Barnardo's Cymru; Sue Finch, Housing Policy Officer, Welsh Local Government Association; Simon Glyn, GISDA; Vin Murtagh, Area Manager, National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders; Robin Staines, Housing Advisor, Welsh Local Government Association; Kathryn Uche, Compass Partnership, Wrexham, Barnardo's Cymru; Jackie Vining, Marlborough Road Partnership, Cardiff, Barnardo's Cymru.

Committee Service: Dr Virginia Hawkins, Clerc; Claire Griffiths, Deputy Clerk.

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.32 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.32 a.m.*

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

[1] **Janice Gregory:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee. As we all know, this meeting is to continue to gather evidence on our review into youth homelessness. Before we go into the meeting proper, as every Chair does in the National Assembly, I will just remind you of a few things. First, there is no fire drill today, so, if the alarm goes off, I advise you to follow the Chair and the top table, who will be straight out of the door, and to follow the instructions of the ushers, who will guide you safely out of the building. If anyone has a mobile phone, a BlackBerry or a pager on, I ask you to switch it off and not to put it into 'silent' mode, as that interferes with our broadcasting equipment.

[2] For visitors, the National Assembly, as I am sure that you are aware, operates through the media of the Welsh and English languages. If you need simultaneous translation, you will need to use the headsets that are in front of you and turn them onto channel 1, which is the translation channel. If you need them for the amplification of sound, for which they are very useful, that is found on channel 0. Tea and coffee will be available on the Oriel level during the break, and there will be tea and coffee outside this room, as usual. When you speak, I remind you all that you do not need to touch any of the buttons on the microphones, as they will come on automatically, though I do not want you to be frightened by that.

[3] To go into the meeting proper, I have received no apologies for absence, and I invite anyone who has a declaration of interest to make it now. I see that there are none.

[4] **Mick Bates:** It is good to see you back, Chair, and we all wish you well.

[5] **Sandy Mewies:** Hear, hear.

[6] **Janice Gregory:** Me and my kidney stone. It was a pain that I would not wish on my worst enemy. Thank you very much for those words, and thank you for chairing the committee in my absence, Mick.

9.34 a.m.

**Cofnodion y Cyfarfod Blaenorol
Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

[7] **Janice Gregory:** Item 2 is the short minutes of the meeting on 23 November. These have all been circulated. Does anyone have any comment on them? I see that you do not.

*Cadarnhawyd cofnodion y cyfarfod blaenorol.
The minutes of the previous meeting were ratified.*

9.34 a.m.

**Deddfwriaeth Ewropeaidd
European Legislation**

[8] **Janice Gregory:** As you know, this item updates us on the priorities that the committee has selected for 2006 from the European Commission's forward work programme. I do not know whether anyone has any issues that they wish to raise. If there is anything, and you wish to have a more detailed briefing, then that is available and you can ask either Virginia or Claire for the briefing, which will be provided to you. No-one has informed me that they wish to raise anything on that.

9.35 a.m.

**Adolygiad Polisi: Digartrefedd ymhlith yr Ifanc
Policy Review: Youth Homelessness**

[9] **Janice Gregory:** Things do not normally move this quickly; from here on in, we slow down. You have all received the background papers and we are delighted to welcome our presenters here this morning. They have been told that they have five minutes in which to make a presentation. I cannot apologise for that fact because you will then have more time to expand on your comments in answering Members' questions. I am sure that you are aware of that.

[10] So, I welcome, in no particular order, Pam Clutton, the children's services manager for the Merthyr Partnership, Kathryn Uche, the children's services manager for the Compass Partnership in Wrexham, Helen Davies, the children's services manager for the Bays Youth Homelessness Service in Swansea, and Jackie Vining, the children's services manager for the Marlborough Road Partnership in Cardiff. Thank you all for attending the meeting this morning. We appreciate the fact that you have taken the time to come here and we need your input into this review. Who is going to start?

[11] **Ms Davies:** I will.

[12] **Janice Gregory:** Wonderful. I am glad that you sorted that out before you came in. That helps me a great deal.

[13] **Ms Davies:** Rather than give a presentation, I will just give a brief overview of the report, which I know that you have. As you have already said, I am Helen Davies, the children's services manager for the Bays service in Swansea and, again, as you correctly said, I am joined by colleagues from our services in Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham, Cardiff and Newport. Obviously, we are all happy to answer any questions that you have on our report.

[14] First, I wish to thank you for inviting us to come to talk about the report and speak to you about this very important issue. As you can see, the report is divided into three sections. The first deals with service activity, the second deals with reference to good practice and the third identifies key issues around youth homelessness.

[15] On service activity, there are, throughout the four projects, some common themes and core activities, but each service is very different and is shaped to local need. On some of the core activities, we feel that what is very important in terms of how Barnardo's Cymru delivers its service is the emphasis placed on the participation of young people in helping to shape services.

[16] In my service in Swansea, family mediation work has been a key area. I hope that I get the opportunity to talk about that in some depth. Three of the services—in Merthyr Tydfil, Wrexham and Swansea—have supported lodging schemes. We would all like to highlight the work that we do in those services in terms of offering an alternative to bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

[17] We have outlined quite a few key issues there. Rather than go through them one by one, perhaps it would put more life into it if you asked us some questions about those issues that we have highlighted. Is that okay?

[18] **Janice Gregory:** Yes, that is great. Thank you very much. I am sure that Members have many questions, and I apologise to those who are either tuned into this or are in the public gallery because I neglected to say that our presenters are from Barnardo's Cymru. I should have mentioned that, but because I know that, I think that everyone else knows it; that is the problem.

9.40 a.m.

[19] **Sandy Mewies:** It might come as a surprise to you, or perhaps it is no surprise at all, that, in looking at the evidence that we have gathered, we see that there are common themes. The first thing that I must say, and I said this in my evidence, though it has been watered down slightly—and this is no criticism of anyone—is that, when I was a chair of social services, some of these themes were about then, and that was quite some time ago. When Mark and I talked to young people in Conwy, I felt disappointed in myself as a politician, and in the rest of us, for not taking some of the services forward, because the issues raised with us then were issues that were being raised at least 10 years ago. This is not a criticism in any way, because some things have moved forward, but one young man—and I would like this to be recorded because I felt that a few young people were extremely disillusioned with what was being done for them—asked me, 'Well, what are you going to do with this? What happens after this?', and I said, 'We will go back to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee and, hopefully, we will come up with policies that will address some of the issues and so on', and he must have thought, 'This is just jargon, jargon, jargon'. He said, 'What are you going to do about it? I have been coming to meetings such as this for years, and I have said the same things and I have never had any feedback'. He was a care leaver, and we asked that our evidence be sent back to them, did we not? I hope that it went to them before it came to the committee—Mark and I both asked for that to happen and I am glad that we did. I hope that they will be sent the outcomes from this meeting.

[20] I will get to my point now, namely the common themes that we are coming up with. One of the good things that has been done, and I used to meet with care leavers, was that we are no longer sending care leavers and other young people into accommodation on their own at the age of 16 without a clue how to manage it. We are now providing supported accommodation, which I think is important. Several issues are being addressed in different ways in different places, including move-on accommodation and access to bonds. The issues of people having to travel great distances to access services when they cannot afford to do so, and the unavailability of practical facilities such as laundry, shower and cooking facilities in bed-and-breakfast accommodation are also being addressed.

[21] Local authorities no longer have any housing accommodation for young people. You need a huge variety of accommodation because the young man whom I was speaking to experienced a particularly traumatic experience in a hostel, where he was staying with other people who had other problems. He had been kidnapped, and he made the point that it is not just young women—or very young women—who need more secure specialist accommodation; there are young people who have problems with substance and alcohol misuse, and they need strong support for those problems. So, there is this huge variety—I am coming to the question, Chair—and I have a list of issues that I bet everybody else has too, because I have been struck by the common themes in this. This is the first piece of evidence-taking that I have done here, and we know what the problems are, but what are we going to do about them?

[22] My question to the witnesses is: you are all working for different agencies; is there enough of a strategic overview in Wales to say, ‘These are the problems that are happening Wales-wide, and this is what needs to be done to solve these problems’? You may not be in a position to say, but, while I am not suggesting that there are too many organisations, are organisations working together, or do they need to work together more closely? Is information being shared between the authorities who have data, voluntary organisations and not-for-profit organisations? Is there a problem with that? I know that, because of the Data Protection Act 1998, there is a problem in terms of some people. However, we sometimes need to have the information on young people. Mark and I were talking to a young woman with disabilities, who said that the accommodation that she was being placed in was not adequate, and that there is no adequate accommodation for young people with physical or mental disabilities. This is such a broad question because the themes are clear. What do we have to do to make sure that the cash that we have available is focused strategically on everybody working together to achieve the outcomes that are needed to deal with these issues?

[23] **Janice Gregory:** Before I ask for a response, Claire has just reminded me of something. You mentioned the project that you and Mark visited and we have received a letter from the people working on that project, in which they say how much they appreciate the fact that you and Mark went there to speak to them, and the feedback that they received.

[24] **Ms Davies:** In answer to the question about strategic direction, I can only speak for Swansea and I know that you were looking for an all-Wales answer. We were talking to each other while waiting to come in to the meeting today and I think that it is heartening that the same strategic groups exist in all areas. In Swansea, we have a youth homelessness core group, which is the strategic visioning group, and a problem-solving providers group, which helps us to put some strategic direction into trying to solve these problems together, across the various organisations that are involved with young homeless people.

[25] The Bays project in Swansea is a partnership project. We have officers seconded from Housing Options in the city to the team that I manage. One thing that I think makes a big difference in terms of the practice that we see in Swansea is the fact that we see 16 and 17-year-olds as young people who are in need, under childcare legislation; we do not see them in terms of housing or homelessness legislation. That enables us to see them first as young people and children, rather than as homeless people, but also to support them if we have to place them in bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

[26] **Ms Vining:** I could not agree more about how long everybody has been aware of the issues. I have been operationally based until recently, so having a strategic overview is new to me. To get up for this meeting, I went on all the websites looking for any information that I might need, in case I was asked about such things. Some of the reports dated back 10 years, but the information was still very current. I was taken aback by that because I had put some issues forward, thinking that we had come up with them and that they were the key issues now, without realising that they were also the key issues 10 years ago.

[27] I came along today—this is the first time that I have been to anything like this—hoping that, from this, we could come up with a way forward. I still do a lot of what you described as direct work with young people, and as well as gathering up printed information, I have spoken to young people about today. I have been saying to them, ‘Maybe this is an opportunity; maybe it will not just be a paper exercise and people may be starting to talk’. This is the first time that I have been invited to anything like this and I was quite delighted to take up the opportunity; I thought, ‘Someone is going to listen’.

[28] I am not so sure about the Wales-wide strategic overview. I think that there are problems in Cardiff about sharing information locally, so I am sure that that is amplified throughout Wales. I do not know whether that is about professional boundaries or data protection. There may be professional suspicion about each other’s agencies at times, but I think that it is there.

[29] **Ms Uche:** There have been some improvements, particularly in my area, Wrexham, in terms of provision. However, there is still a long way to go and I think that some of the issues are to do with current financial pressures, particularly on children and young people’s services, which mean that funding has been pulled this week from our supported lodging scheme for care leavers. For us, that is devastating. It is a new scheme and Barnardo’s has invested time and money in developing it; however, because children and young people’s services need to find £0.33 million, that is one of the schemes that is to go because it is not a statutory requirement. It is an additional choice provided for young people who cannot manage on their own in a flat. These young people have been in flats and they have failed.

[30] We have an example this week of a young woman who is 19 years old and is therefore no-one’s responsibility: she is not a care leaver any more as she is over the age of 18. Her flat has been torched by persons unknown because she associates with dodgy characters. She is too scared to go back to her flat and the housing department has deemed her to be intentionally homeless, so she is not housing’s responsibility.

9.50 a.m.

[31] She has found out this week that her younger sister, who is 17, has received a custodial sentence. They are both care leavers, and are volatile and chaotic young people, towards whom social services and children and young people’s service have a duty. These two have been together through everything. Her sister has gone down, and she has also heard this week that both her mother and father are dying of cancer. She is roofless this week on the streets of Wrexham. She is no-one’s responsibility—everyone’s business but no-one’s responsibility. That is shocking, but true—you can meet this young person who is no-one’s responsibility. There is something wrong when that is still happening. She is falling between legislation and between funding pots.

[32] There is a massive issue about move-on provision. We have improved hostel accommodation in Wrexham, the Foyer is working very well and some of the social registered landlords have a commitment to these young people, and want to make it work, but some of the young people whom we deal with at the Compass Partnership are chaotic to the extreme, and they cannot be dealt with in some of the hostels. These young people have been in hostels and in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, and have had their own tenancies, but they are still homeless. We have an increase in roofless young people who are living rough on the streets, but we are unsure whether we are more conscious about taking note of that; since the Assembly has focused on young rough sleepers, we have been asking more searching questions. Some young people will not say that they are rough sleeping, because of the stigma that comes with that. So, there are more issues than we can talk about in half an hour. We are passionate about our work with young people, and I am sure that Pam also has some views.

[33] **Ms Clutton:** We have a strategic overview, a rights groups, a youth homelessness forum, a providers group and a subgroup of the framework partnership. We identify the gaps and we plan the resources needed to fill those gaps, but we are failing in terms of funding. Merthyr had one of the lowest allocations of Supporting People money; that is what we are working with. The information sharing and the working together happens on a practice level, because Merthyr is a small place and workers know each other, which works in the young people's favour. You asked how we could move this forward and should we have set standards—because we have a lot of standards in terms of timescales for assessments and everything else—but one of the things that we lack in Merthyr is direct access for 16 and 17-year-olds.

[34] Last summer, we had a 16-year-old young care leaver in bed-and-breakfast accommodation for six weeks. There were people in the same accommodation who had mental health problems and substance misuse problems, and she was very much at risk. Resources have developed across Wales in a way that is not the same for all, because that would not be right. Wales is a diverse country and we know, locally, what the needs are, but should we have standards like that, that every local authority should have a direct access facility for 16 and 17-year-olds and a mediation service? We could put more emphasis on the preventative arm, and a mental health service—dare I say it—for 16 and 17-year-olds. We do not have those services across Wales, and it is a disgrace when you cannot access those essential services. People cannot live in the community without that support if they are 16 or 60 years of age. It seems to me that the most vulnerable people appear to have, sometimes, the least amount of resources.

[35] **Mick Bates:** It is lovely to hear about your commitment and passion, which we all share. One issue raised by Sandy in her opening remarks summed this up—it is another consultation, another year. There is a frustration within that process, which we all find difficult to overcome at times. With devolution, most of us sincerely hope, as Jackie said, that this is an opportunity to take it forward. This will be the big test, and if we can do something that is really significant with this particular piece of information-gathering, we will all be very pleased.

[36] I want to ask you about three areas. The first is the relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors. We have heard about funding and working together. I would like to hear your views on whether that relationship is working, whether there are issues of communication breakdown that allow the cases that Kathryn referred to to occur, where the problem is always compounded by the lack of attention and integration of services to help the individual or family. I recently heard about how a massive improvement in the interface between the voluntary and statutory sectors was achieved by just getting them all to sit in, and work from, the same room. I would like to hear your views on the way forward on that.

[37] Secondly, the laws have changed so that local authorities have very little power to provide one-bedroomed apartments. Although the Foyer, as you said, is an excellent project, sadly there are not enough of these. To what extent is the provision of accommodation the most crucial factor in assisting people to improve the quality of their lives?

[38] Finally, we have undertaken detailed studies of substance abuse, whether that is drugs or alcohol. None of you mentioned any abuse in this, although I think that it was Pam who mentioned prevention. How much of an influence do you think that that has on the lives of the young people who you are dealing with and who are without a roof or are homeless? To what extent will that preventative agenda stop the increase in homelessness that we see? I would like you to particularly focus on the kind of mediation service that you consider would stop the increasing use of drugs and alcohol by young people?

[39] **Ms Davies:** I can only talk about Swansea in terms of the relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors. Bays is a longstanding partnership between social services, housing, health and Barnardo's. I have only been there for two and a half years but the project is about eight or nine years old, so there is quite a longstanding partnership agreement and working arrangement. In Swansea, we have statutory powers for the youth homeless service—I might not have made that clear before. The local authority has given us those powers, if you like, and that is an example of trusting the voluntary sector to bring additionality to the services that can be offered to young people. We do not just have the youth homelessness service in Bays, we also have a care leavers' service and supported lodging, and we are funded to run a mediation service. So, in a way, we have a good holistic model and a good provision of service. So, in Swansea, we are working well together.

[40] **Mick Bates:** Are you all in the same building or room?

[41] **Ms Davies:** Yes. So, that is quite a good model.

[42] In terms of accommodation, I am trying to remember exactly what your question was.

[43] **Mick Bates:** It was: is there enough?

[44] **Ms Davies:** It depends on what you mean by that. In Swansea, we have a nine-bed hostel for young people. That said, we have reduced by between 50 and 70 per cent the numbers in bed-and-breakfast accommodation this year. At present in Swansea, about 12 young people are in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, and that is on top of the nine who are in the hostel. This time last year there were 20-odd. So, we have reduced that due to our mediation and preventative work. So, there is accommodation, but there is a lack of move-on accommodation in Swansea. We can get them out of bed-and-breakfast accommodation but, sadly, very often we get young people from bed-and-breakfast accommodation into the hostel that is available to us, and then, for one reason or another, they never complete a planned move from that hostel, because of the chaotic nature of their lives.

10.00 a.m.

[45] That brings me on to the third part of your question. Often, some of them have serious mental health issues, as Pam mentioned, or, often, dual diagnosis, or are involved in substance misuse. I will tell you a harrowing story about a young man with whom we have been involved recently, who, since the age of 12, has been an intravenous heroin user. His mother got him involved in taking heroin, and he has just completed that cycle. We started trying to maintain him at home. He then presented as homeless, and we put him in bed-and-breakfast accommodation for a while. We supported him during that time, and then got him into the hostel; however, they could not keep him there, because of the level of his addiction, and their duty of care to the other young people in that hostel. Therefore, he is now back home again, because we could not find any bed-and-breakfast accommodation that would take him, and, again, we are trying to support him at home. However, home is far from ideal. Therefore, where is the right place for that young man? It is difficult to know.

[46] His health and emotional wellbeing are appalling. On several occasions—and, thankfully, we have laundry and shower facilities at the Bays—he has soiled himself when he has been on the premises, and we have had to wash his clothes, and get him showered, because his health is poor. Another area that we have not talked about yet is the link between these young people, who live predominantly on the street, and the way in which they are also sexually exploited. I know that that young man is selling himself for sex. Therefore, it is a harrowing picture. He is an extreme case, but not an uncommon case.

[47] **Ms Vining:** I was thinking about someone whom we are working with at Marlborough Road, who has just turned 17. Since July 2005, she has had 18 placements—and she is a care leaver. She has been in accommodation—she has not been roofless for any of that time—but the support needed to maintain her in accommodation, if that is not there, has failed every time. Some of those places were emergency beds in hostels, with a view to moving somewhere more permanent. With us, it is still not permanent accommodation—it is temporary until we can find her permanent accommodation.

[48] However, she said—and I am sorry if this sounds rather clichéd and twee—that this is the first time that she has had a home; she has had many houses, flats, and beds, but this is the first time that she has had a home. There is a big difference between just having a roof over your head and having some stability. She also has substance misuse issues, and possible sexual exploitation issues, but, hopefully, now that there is some stability in her life, those areas can be addressed. It is difficult to address chaotic lifestyles while housing contributes to the chaos.

[49] **Mick Bates:** Who built that accommodation?

[50] **Ms Vining:** Where she is now?

[51] **Mick Bates:** Yes.

[52] **Ms Vining:** It is a housing association flat. It is owned by the housing association, and Barnardo's manage the support.

[53] **Mick Bates:** So, it is a one-bedroomed flat, is it?

[54] **Ms Vining:** It is a one-bedroomed flat in a house that is converted into two flats—it is an old house in Cardiff.

[55] **Ms Uche:** I have a few points in answer to your questions. On the relationships between the voluntary and statutory sectors, when they are squeezed, we are squeezed—it is a simple combination. I am a big believer in that it is not what you have to do, but how you go about doing it. We have had some bruising experiences of the tendering processes, and, as people who have long-established services and invested voluntary funding in those services, the way in which we decide on new contracts and new tenders needs some examination. That is the point at which some of those relationships break down in partnerships. There is a commitment at several levels to effective partnerships, particularly at practitioner level, because they want it to work for young people. At a high level also, where you are, there is a desire for this to work, but something happens in between. I do not have the answer to that. I feel that we are sometimes affected by the fall-out of local politics in particular.

[56] **Mick Bates:** What is the length of the contract?

[57] **Ms Uche:** The latest contract is a two-year contract, but we have had a three-year contract that has lasted 18 months—it was pulled, so that begs a question. On paper, that is the length of the contract, but that is not being lived out at present.

[58] In response to your point on accommodation, there is an issue about the number of single rooms, but there are three elements to that issue. There is availability, affordability, and a huge issue about the benefits system with regard to single-room rent allowances. Young people cannot afford the additional amount. Forgive me, as it is not my area, but it is around £37. Most private landlords charge more than that. Who pays for the difference? Young people on low incomes cannot even afford the accommodation that you are talking about. Then there is the question of how you support them in that provision. Many of those young people are without additional support from services like tenancy support, which help them to look at how to keep safe, budgeting skills, and life skills. They do not last in the accommodation; they struggle.

[59] I agree with Helen and Jackie about all the additional layers of problems for these young people, such as the young woman that I told you about, where the house had been burned because there was a drug connection. That is everyday life for some of these young people.

[60] **Ms Clutton:** In terms of the relationship between the voluntary sector and the statutory sector in Merthyr Tydfil, we work well together. It is a small place; we need each other, so that works really well.

[61] In terms of the provision of support, the issues around that are that, in Merthyr Tydfil, we do not have enough accommodation for single people but, even if we did, if we did not have the support, it would not work, as Kathryn has just indicated. Long-term, low-level support is an issue. We have young people coming back to us, up to the age of 25, with tenancy issues. They have sussed most of the rest of it, but the tenancy issues remain. It is a complicated system to work your way around. Therefore, those two issues have to go hand in hand. It is not just about resource; it is a double thing.

[62] We should be getting at the preventative agenda years before hand. We should be using schools to promote emotional literacy; we should be working with parents on parenting before children get to that teenage stage that they all reach. They also have all of those other mental health or substance misuse problems. When they get to that crisis point, they do not have the resilience. If we could build families' resilience, I think that we would have far better success in keeping young people at home, when it is safe to do so. Not only that, but if they do have to leave, if they have that resilience, they will be far more successful in the community, making a way for themselves in the world and retaining their links with their family, which everyone needs. Perhaps we are more fortunate in Merthyr Tydfil that it is still quite a strong community. We have very few young people that have no other links; they are very much in the minority, which is a positive thing. We still have a situation with 16 and 17-year-olds, who are often the most vulnerable. They have not been in care, so they are not entitled to leaving care services. If they are estranged from their families, they have very little. We need to look at the whole preventative agenda and how we work towards preventing young people from reaching that point.

[63] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you, Pam. Before I move on to Mark and Leanne, you will notice that our videoconferencing screens have been switched on. I welcome Vin Murtagh from NACRO in north Wales—hello there, Vin—and Simon Glyn, who is the head of young people's services for GISDA. Vin and Simon are going to present to the committee after this particular session. You can talk among yourselves up there in north Wales. We did have a couple of seconds of your conversation, but do not worry, you are not live at present. We will come to you eventually. Therefore, hello and a good morning to you. Yes; you can wipe your brow. We will come to you as soon as we have finished this session.

10.10 a.m.

[64] **Mark Isherwood:** I think that Vin and Simon were also at the North Wales Regional Committee when we discussed youth homelessness, where, among others, Mark Williams from the Wrexham Foyer and the Wrexham youth services gave evidence on behalf of the Pennaf Housing Group, and made many of the points that you have made today, particularly about the single-room rent allowance and housing benefit. You referred to this in the context of work, but can you also comment on it in the context of full-time education and what your experiences are in that regard?

[65] You also highlighted that the Foyer has an extra wing that has not been occupied, but which will be. Can you explain what is happening, just to fill in the gaps?

[66] My experience in Wrexham, but also, as Sandy said, with the group of young people that we met in Old Colwyn, resonate exactly with the all of the issues that you have raised, such as the desperate need for early intervention in families and schools, and issues around Supporting People. What will be the impact if the Supporting People revenue grant and the Supporting People programme itself do not see growth in terms of the funding that is reaching you? Other providers, such as Cymdeithas Tai Hafan, have indicated that there will be problems ahead if there is no further movement in that regard.

[67] Can you comment on links with social services, because some of the young people that Sandy and I met said that once they had been referred to a service provider such as you, the support or the contact effectively ended, and there was no follow-through? What has been your experience of that in your areas?

[68] On bed-and-breakfast accommodation, as Sandy said, problems were raised by the young people whom we met about the provision of services, showers and cooking facilities. They also highlighted that it brings them in close contact with adult addicts and adult ex-offenders, and the problems that that can cause for them. The young people also raised an issue about food. They said that young people who had presented themselves as homeless often have to travel, sometimes from rural areas. For example, they have travel to Conwy to sign on as homeless, and then on to Rhyl to sign on for benefits, which means that they do not have money to pay for food and they often go hungry. They also said that when they are in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, they must leave once a day to get a hot meal, but that they only have £45 a week to pay for it. They also said that there was an excellent NACRO drop-in centre, but that there was no food provision there. So, can you comment on the food aspect?

[69] On the linkages between housing provision and the health, education, training, crime and economic development agendas, what are your views, Housing Forum Cymru, which consists of 17 organisations emphasised this, on the need to cross-subsidise this agenda from other budgets? It will save money in other budgets, particularly the budgets for health services, justice provision, and so on, if we could start to tackle the causes rather than dealing with the symptoms.

[70] On Wrexham specifically, Kathryn is aware of what is going on there. The street pastors initiative had an event a few weeks ago and it said that it has already saved at least one young man, who was an addict, from committing suicide, when it booked him into a hotel for a night, which was a practical solution to the situation. What has been the impact on your services due to the arrival of migrant workers and their families, which has had a major impact in Wrexham, without additional resources following through? On the debate about the night shelter, the situation is hopeful in terms of the work and cross-party support, and the support by Together Creating Communities and the churches in the town, but it is only a short-term measure. Where do you see the balance between night-shelter provision and hostel provision? Cymorth raised concerns that there is a need for support workers in the shelter to build bridges with the vulnerable young people and build confidence and trust, so that they will, hopefully, start to access services that will help them to deal with their addiction problems and other problems in the future. What are your comments on that dividing line and how should we be joining things up? I will stop at that point.

[71] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you. As always, there is a huge list of questions from Mark. We are used to Mark's lists of questions, but given the time constraints—because we are running over time—it will not be possible for all of you to comment, although many of the questions were specifically on north Wales. So, I will ask Kathryn to answer as many points as possible, and perhaps the other three presenters could respond in writing. Is that okay? I do not want to add to your workload, but many of us would be interested in the south Wales perspective of the important issues that Mark raised. I regret that we do not have the time for each of you to address those issues. Kathryn, please be as brief as possible, because Leanne has questions to ask.

[72] **Ms Uche:** There are issues about full-time education and housing benefit. It is more complicated than I can go through now, but there are some disadvantages for young people, and whether they are care leavers, again, makes a difference because care leavers will get additional provision up to the age of 19, and beyond to 21 if they fit the full-time education criteria. So, it is very different depending on your background. Pam's point is well made in that some young people do get services because they fit the criteria, while for some young people, services and provisions are scarce, and that needs thinking about.

[73] In answer to the question on Foyer, I have no idea. We at Barnardo's tried to bid for it and invested some money there as we believe that there is a need for supported accommodation for young parents, not just mother and baby units, but also accommodation for young fathers, who tend not to be included in some of these issues. We think that it is crucial, and we tried to make a bid ourselves. For a young couple with a child in Wrexham, provisions are not there, and they may well find themselves split up and on various sites. We feel that provision is needed. We were not successful with that because nobody wanted to put any money in with us, although we were happy to put in some initially. My latest understanding is that Triangle Wales, a housing support agency for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, has also attempted to go for the 12 currently vacant lets, and I believe that there has been a stop to that as well. So, the answer to your question is that I do not know what is happening right at this minute.

[74] There are issues about the night shelter, and we welcome some of the moves: we welcome people working together, particularly those in the Together Creating Communities charity. Our concern is often for the age of the young people that we work with, and that is exactly the point that you raised—we have an emergency accommodation scheme in which we can place a young person with a volunteer for three nights. What happens after that? Again, it is a matter of moving on, and where do they go after the three nights and after the night shelter? It is a matter of having a long-term strategy and more secure accommodation for them.

[75] Food is an issue, as are travel expenses. All we in the Wrexham area can say is that, if they present themselves to Barnardo's Compass, and they are under 25 and homeless, they will get food with us. We are looking towards developing a breakfast club for young people to which they can come to get something in the morning, and we are extending the service on a Wednesday evening to 8.30 p.m., just to see if it is used. We have to think about how that works with the night shelter as well, but we believe that some of our young people are very vulnerable going to the night shelters, particularly when they are involved with drug situations and owe money around the town. They are scared.

[76] The point you raised is not our experience for care leavers with social services involvement; we have a good relationship with the direct practitioner team in Wrexham—senior practitioners and the looked-after children team manager will work in partnership with us until those young people reach the age of 18. If they are in full-time education, then we will work with them beyond the age of 18. However, there is the issue that I raised earlier, which is, if they do not fit that criterion in housing, they fall between social services' identified pot of money and housing funding, and there is an issue about those young people.

[77] **Janice Gregory:** We will write to you all with the points that Mark raised, so that you can give your perspective.

[78] **Leanne Wood:** I have cut my questions down, because of the time constraints. Can I have your views on this issue of age of eligibility for social services? There are several different ages and cut-off points, depending on whether you are in education or have left care. Can anything be changed in terms of the criteria that social services work to that would enable them to work with chaotic young people, regardless of whether they have been in care or not, up until 21 or even 25? What are your views on that? Would we need a change in legislation to do that, or can it be done through practice guidelines to social services departments?

10.20 a.m.

[79] Is there anything else that social services could do differently? Earlier, one of you—I think that it was Kathryn—mentioned the budget squeezes on certain social services departments, which are going to have an impact on non-statutory services. There is a funding problem in local authorities but, aside from that, is there anything that you think that social services and social workers could do to improve the dialogue between you and to work more in partnership? Could they restructure, for example?

[80] The other point that I wanted to raise was about the more chaotic young people whom you work with. We have heard some horrendous case stories from you this morning and, unfortunately, I have heard a lot of those before, as we have been going around the different projects. There are many young people in such situations, which are not at all unusual, and nobody is taking responsibility for them. What do we need to do to protect those young people? Perhaps that is linked to the responsibility under social services too, but it seems that those young people need quite intensive long-term support, which could be quite expensive. So, what is your view on that? Does it have to be expensive, or could you do it in a cheaper way? I know that there are no easy answers for this chaotic group, but they are the most vulnerable, so we have to try to address their needs.

[81] **Ms Davies:** You visited the Bays project when you were going around. With regard to eligibility for services, I have said already that, in Swansea, we work with 16 and 17-year-olds. They present to us at the Bays project, and we run the entire youth homelessness service up to the age of 21. Unfortunately, even though we have workers from Housing Options seconded to us, we cannot offer the same degree of help to people from the age of 18 upwards. People are still eligible for our supported lodging service, but we cannot offer them the same support, for example, while they are in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. For 16 and 17-year-olds, because we see them as children in need, we can offer them subsistence. Whether you think that is enough is another matter—it is £5 a day, and there is not a great deal that you can do with £5 a day. We also give out food, as Kathryn said. I would say that it would seem that social services can choose to do that already, because we are in Swansea, and we are working with 16 and 17-year-olds.

[82] I suppose that the question is what do we think magically happens to young people at the age of 18 so that they can suddenly care for themselves much better than they could a week earlier when they were 17. Care leavers are supported by our project until they are 21, or until they are 24 if they are in full-time education. With regard to the legislation, many of the young people who come to us through the youth homelessness service have had involvement with social services for most of their lives, but they are not eligible for support under the care leavers legislation. So, their families have been in crisis for a long time. That comes back to the need for social services to make decisions on where they put the emphasis of their provision—whether they put more into preventative services or wait until issues have become more acute before responding.

[83] When you came to Swansea, I talked to you about the preventative work that we do, and we have already started to make links. When a young person presents to us, we will make links with the family and we will try to get them home, because, unless there are reasons why they cannot go home, it is usually preferable to bed-and-breakfast accommodation. We need a longer assessment period before we can get young people into supported lodgings because we need to have some idea of how they will respond to that environment if we were to place them with a family. We are looking to establish more links with schools, and education and welfare officers to get an early-warning system in place to highlight these issues when they are presented, because, for some young people, things break down when they turn 16. However, many of them have been known to social services long before then. So, there must be a better way for us to co-ordinate ourselves to get involved earlier and to start dealing with those problems earlier, in many of the ways that Pam outlined when she talked about parenting, among other things.

[84] **Janice Gregory:** Pam, do you want to comment on this? Do not feel as though you have to.

[85] **Ms Clutton:** Perhaps one issue is the link between children's and adult services. That is definitely a breakdown point. If a young person has a slight learning disability or a mental health problem, the transition is poor, and I do not think that that is true only in Merthyr, but across the board. It needs to be strengthened, because it leaves the young person in a dilemma. They are unable to access services, and it is not possible to plan properly for transition unless you know what services will be in place. The issue about those aged 18 or over suddenly being less vulnerable needs to be followed up, because, under the legislation, they are not entitled to services. We carry on supporting them at a low level—and it has to be at a low level because it is not funded—but they are no less vulnerable.

[86] As for what social services could do, the planning could kick in earlier. We have recently started to look at the cohort of young people who are in care from the age of about 12 or 13 and older. You can identify the vulnerabilities and start to plan out-of-county placements, which we went into earlier. Those placements are the most expensive, so you might have a child in a ridiculously expensive placement—around £4,000 per week—but who then comes back to live in the community on their own. It just does not make sense. That must be eating up an enormous amount of resources. I know that it is a difficult problem and that it is not easy to solve, but we have to remember that it is the child who is caught up in that. Some of the services that they could have had at a much younger age, which would have been far more effective in preventing matters from escalating, are not in place. So, because of a lack of resources locally, they end up being placed miles from home, lose all of their connections, and there is nothing there for them when they come back.

[87] **Sandy Mewies:** Chair, may I ask another question, which requires only a 'yes' or a 'no' answer?

[88] **Janice Gregory:** Yes, that is fine.

[89] **Sandy Mewies:** Having listened to what you said, it is clear that intervention has to start early and has to go on for a considerable time, but it does not. At the moment, for the vulnerable young people who we know are in the system—whether with the voluntary or not-for-profit sector, or with social services—are there multi-agency case reviews at various points in their lives that will guide what happens next?

[90] **Ms Clutton:** It depends on their age.

[91] **Sandy Mewies:** I am talking about those aged 18 or older and those in the transitional period.

[92] **Ms Clutton:** Do you mean for those who are in care?

[93] **Sandy Mewies:** All young people, when we know that they are vulnerable and homeless. Is there a multi-agency review of what happens next for those who come into the system and then go into the transitional period? I do not care how they come in, because I do not see any difference.

[94] **Ms Uche:** 'No' is the answer, but there are some practices that help to address it. Some of the services have a multi-agency problem-solving group of practitioners and resource managers who can make decisions about individual young people, so we present cases to that panel. That can often result in a reallocation or a move up on waiting lists, particularly for those young people who are on it.

[95] **Sandy Mewies:** I think that I will stick with the 'no', though, because that is what I wanted to hear.

[96] **Ms Uche:** We have developed practice, which needs recognising and maybe even paying for. However, the answer is 'no'.

10.30 a.m.

[97] **Janice Gregory:** Kathryn, you wanted to finish up. Jackie, did you want to, too?

[98] **Ms Vining:** Yes, quickly.

[99] **Janice Gregory:** Kathryn can go first, then, and then Jackie can come in on Leanne's questions.

[100] **Ms Uche:** This is slightly similar to the answer to Sandy's question. It is about a joined-up, agreed assessment of needs between those services, and extending that entitlement in terms of age so as not to make a decision based on someone's actual age, but on their functioning age. We have 19-year-olds who are functioning as though they were aged 12, 13 or 14, not because they have a learning disability, but because they are so emotionally traumatised that they are stuck at those ages. So, it is not about decisions based on their actual age.

[101] I had one other point and it was quite important, but I have forgotten it. I will have to come back to it, if I remember it.

[102] **Janice Gregory:** That is no problem.

[103] **Ms Vining:** I would echo some of those points about how the transition to adulthood is difficult enough and how there is no magic time limit for when it happens. You do not become an adult instantly at the age of 18, so it is the same point about actual age.

[104] One of the points that I wanted to pick up on was that you asked how we can protect those living some of the most chaotic lifestyles. What we need to do, first of all—and this is social services and all of us—is recognise that they need protection, because there is another view, namely that they need locking up or issuing with anti-social behaviour orders. The first step is recognising that they need protection.

[105] **Ms Uche:** This is crucial, but could we ban the term 'intentionality' in relation to homelessness for certain age groups and certain vulnerable young people? They are not making themselves homeless intentionally.

[106] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you all very much for that. I am sure that we have gleaned a lot from it. You will be sent a transcript, and you will also have the points that were raised but that we were not able to cover due to the constraints of time, so that you can reply to them. I do not want to add to your workload, but we would be grateful for your views on the points that were raised but not covered.

[107] We will try the wonderful videoconferencing now. Thank you for being so patient, gentlemen. As always, we have run over on this committee, because we cover such an important and huge range of issues. I understand, Vin, that you will go first.

[108] **Mr Murtagh:** Okay.

[109] **Janice Gregory:** Oh, good, the link is working. It is great for us to hear that. I invite you to make your presentation, Vin, and then Members will ask you questions on it. It is over to you.

[110] **Mr Murtagh:** Thank you very much, everybody. My name is Vin Murtagh. I work for NACRO, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, which is a national crime-reduction charity. I am based in Llandudno in north Wales and I work for the Housing Directorate. I have met one or two of you before, and it is good to talk to you again.

[111] NACRO provides a range of housing-related services for young people across north Wales, and the key element is that there is a range of provision. That range includes supported tenancies for people leaving custody, a night shelter in Rhyl for eight people who are street homeless, and floating support services, where we take support to people's homes to assist them to maintain tenancies and to develop independent living skills. We had a scheme specifically designed for young offenders, which had some major fault lines and problems. We also provide some advice and support services, and a bond scheme to try to help people to access private rented accommodation, overcoming the barrier of requiring large deposits. We currently have a 24-hour scheme, which is a unit for four young people in Llandudno, which, unfortunately, is due to close because of problems with funding, which I will come on to, echoing some of the points that were made earlier.

[112] The issue of prevention was mentioned earlier, and we are fortunate that the Assembly funds a youth homelessness prevention service in Conwy, which allows us to make interventions that are not limited to the same degree as the Supporting People-funded schemes are. We are able to intervene and mediate with families. We are able to talk to people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, or those who are about to be evicted from home, to try to prevent homelessness.

[113] So, the key issue there is whether there is a range of services to respond to specific needs. Most of the services are funded through the Supporting People initiative, which is mainly directed to tenancy support. One of the key concerns is that many young people are not in tenancies, or cannot manage them, so they fall outside the Supporting People remit. On the section 180 funding, the prevention agenda gives us more scope to work with some people.

[114] Some of the key concerns that we face include the lack of suitable move-on accommodation for people who no longer require support, which is a key element, and the lack of suitable accommodation available to local authorities to exercise their duties under the homeless persons legislation. If there is a physical lack of bricks and mortar resource, local authorities will be driven towards a quite restrictive interpretation of the homeless persons legislation. We are certainly finding that to be the case.

[115] I heard someone mention the single person rent restrictions earlier, which are proving to be a major impediment to young people attaining accommodation because of restrictions on the level of housing benefit that they receive and the gap between what is payable and what is charged in the private sector.

[116] A local concern to us is the withdrawal of a top-up grant in Conwy, which has rendered our 24-hour scheme for young people financially unviable. We are having to close that scheme. The major issue there for me is that the Supporting People tariff system means that 24-hour support schemes are largely financially unviable. The tariffs do not meet the costs of managing and running those schemes.

[117] For me, small units of 24-hour staffed accommodation for young people are one of the very useful tools to assist people who lack independent living skills and who would not manage a tenancy on their own. They provide a good model to stabilise people, to address offending behaviour, to address other support needs and to help people to prepare for independent living. That model needs to be boosted and regenerated, and not closed down, as is the case in Conwy.

[118] Supported lodgings are another model that needs to be looked at. Perhaps we could develop that as the morning session goes on. I was asked in a paper to identify good practice, and one of the bits of good news that I wanted to relay to you was the fact that we have managed to secure a small amount of capital funding, partly through the community safety partnership in Denbighshire, which is enabling us to go to private landlords and say, 'Look, if we spend £3,000 or £4,000 on your property, to decorate, furnish and equip it with white goods, we are happy to do so on the condition that we can choose the tenant, and we will support that tenant with Supporting People revenue grant funding'. That is a fairly new and recent initiative, which we hope will open up resources. The well has pretty much run dry in the public sector and the registered social landlord sector, so we are having to go to the private sector and that is one of the tools that we use in Denbighshire.

[119] The other bright spot for me, working for a national organisation, is that we have a very coherent resettlement support package for the people whom we support under the Supporting People regime. That enables us to identify people's support needs and work with them to develop independent living skills, and the feedback from the service users has been very positive on that. I do not know whether we will get the opportunity to develop the theme of service user consultation and service user involvement, but we are trying to find new and imaginative ways of engaging young people in feedback and consultation on how services are delivered. We do that through a variety of means, be that newsletters, gardening projects or holding a kind of *Question Time* panel for stakeholders where service users speak directly to the probation service, social services and housing providers about their experiences.

10.40 a.m.

[120] Finally, I wish to flag up the issue of homelessness prevention. Some of your other contributors have raised this issue, and I think that funding via section 180 of the Housing Act 1996 allows us to work with people who are not currently in tenancies. It is crucial that we are talking to people in custody, or lodging with a family, and, in Conwy, we are looking at going into schools to talk to school leavers about some of the issues around homelessness, and tools for preventing it. So, that is a broad overview of what we are up to in NACRO in north Wales, and some of the key issues.

[121] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you, Vin, particularly for the paper that you provided, which you have just expanded upon. We all had the paper beforehand, and there was some useful information there. Sandy has indicated that she would like to ask a question.

[122] **Sandy Mewies:** Thank you, Vin. There were lots of issues there, particularly in terms of the bond scheme that you operate. One of the things that we have heard from young people is that it is difficult for them to get rent deposits and bonds before going to see a landlord, and therefore a landlord would know immediately that they were care leavers, or that they had other issues to deal with, and by the time the money would be available, the property would no longer be available. That was one issue.

[123] The other issue was about your night shelter at Rhyl, which is particularly valued because it is the only one for miles around. I understand that it gives priority to young women, if there are young women there. I do not know whether this is correct, but we were told that if young women went there they would be given priority to get in, which means that, if you are a young man, and you are the ninth person, and there are young women in front of you, you might drop out of the system. The great concern then is that people would have to travel to Chester or Liverpool to get into a night shelter, and they might have already travelled some distance to get to Rhyl, and spent money doing so. They might have to spend more to move on to somewhere else, and there is an element of time and risk in that as well. Do you have any comments on that?

[124] **Mr Murtagh:** Picking up on the bond scheme first, there is an issue that, by definition almost, the bond scheme is working with people at the bottom end of the market, if you like—the people who cannot raise deposits. There has been progress in the sense that we have tried to speed up the process and get people moving quickly, because one of the concerns is the time that it takes to process information, conduct interviews, and so on. We have tried to do that by building a relationship with local landlords who understand what we are trying to achieve, and by trying not to stigmatise the people—whether they are young people, couples, families, or whomever—who are in a position where, in many cases, it is a service of last resort. However, the activity of the bond scheme has expanded considerably in Conwy and Denbighshire, and we find that we are building relationships with landlords who understand what we are trying to achieve, and do not label young people.

[125] On the night shelter, you are right to say that it is a scarce resource in north Wales. It is in the heart of the west end of Rhyl, where there is a lot of street homelessness, illegal activity, drugs, and so on. We operate on a first-come, first-served basis, but the staff are in a difficult situation every night of the week—they open the doors and there is a crowd of 10, 12, or 15 people on the steps. Generally, they have to make some sort of judgement about who should have access, and they take into account all sorts of things—people's general demeanour, their ability to respond to a fire alarm, and issues of sobriety, aggression, or particular vulnerability. The staff have to make those judgment calls on a nightly basis; that is just the situation that they are faced with—that is the problem of scarce resources.

[126] **Mark Isherwood:** To expand on that, I think that the issue with the Rhyl night shelter and the fact that it has eight beds is that, if five people of either sex turn up first, because they have two rooms of four—one for each sex—once those five are in, no-one else can get in. So, the shelter can be restricted to five people of the same sex who come in first. It is a question of who gets there first after 4 p.m., and then it is just a matter of luck. As Sandy highlighted, there is no other alternative provision unless they travel to Chester or Liverpool. What provision do you think that we need? There is a proposal for a temporary night shelter in Wrexham, but once the word is out, it is likely that young and older homeless people will start heading for Wrexham in the hope of accessing those limited number of beds. From your experience, what do you think that we need?

[127] **Mr Murtagh:** It is one of those issues where you could keep on providing. There is a particular feature about Rhyl that means that it draws in people from around north Wales, north-west England and even the midlands. Night shelters per se have a limited role. There is an important role for them where there are hotspots of street homelessness, with people sleeping rough and being exposed to the elements and so on, but I think that you have to measure that against the bigger picture of support and resettlement. In Rhyl, we try not to provide just a bed, a blanket and a meal; because we are funded through Supporting People, we are contractually obliged to look at the bigger issues, such as support, life skills and resettlement options. Night shelters are only one piece of a jigsaw and the other side of it is that, if we had more appropriate supported housing options, it would reduce the call on the night shelter itself. You front-end resource street homelessness at the expense of longer term resettlement.

[128] **Mark Isherwood:** I have a couple more questions. On that theme, the young people told Sandy and me that the problem was that housing benefit, per week, was almost equivalent to the rent paid for bed-and-breakfast accommodation per night. Do you have a comment on that? Obviously it would take intervention by the central UK Government, with local government funding, to change that, but it would mean using the same money in a different way.

[129] What role might registered social landlords and housing associations have in managing private-sector landlord accommodation? I know that there are some pilot schemes on that. For example, Cadwyn Housing Association in Cardiff and Save the Family in Flintshire have been doing some work on that basis. It takes the risk away for the landlord, the rent is collected by the intermediary and you have that specialist resource working for you.

[130] You mentioned the pending loss of the four places at the Heddfan hostel. I understand that Conwy is looking now at establishing new hostel and move-on provision for young people, but there is a lot of Nimbyism involved. How can we address that before we get to the local-objector stage?

[131] I have another two very quick points. You referred to independent living skills, which are crucial. In Cardiff, Cadwyn opened Nightingale House, which includes provision for developing independent living skills, from cooking all the way through, and I know that Save the Family in Flintshire does similar work. I have been to a number of new-centre openings where such provision has not been made because of funding issues. Do you feel that that is an appropriate and sensible way of delivering that sort of training?

[132] Finally, you mentioned funding via section 180, but my understanding is that that funding is for only three years. That can cause problems, or am I incorrect in that?

[133] **Mr Murtagh:** My understanding is that the funding is ongoing for the current section 180 schemes. We would be concerned if it is not. It is my understanding that the funding for the current schemes is ongoing.

[134] **Janice Gregory:** That is it from Mark, so if you want to answer those questions, Vin?

10.50 a.m.

[135] **Mr Murtagh:** I will start with the private rented sector and the issue of the role of other agencies there. We have a scheme in Denbighshire, in the south of the county, called Symud Ymlaen, which is specifically for young people, where NACRO has taken on the role of the landlord and the support provider. We are doing that in partnership with private landlords, and it is a good model that works—the landlord is relieved because someone else is taking the risk, as they see it, of housing people who might present housing management difficulties. It is someone else's problem to collect the rent and to deal with the housing management issues, the landlords just get a sum of money—a lease fee—which they are happy with.

[136] The cultural issue of identifying landlords who will go along with that model of work has been a problem for us, because some private landlords—I emphasise the word 'some'—have a fairly casual approach to people's security of tenure, and the way in which they expect housing management to be conducted. However, we have been fortunate in a small scheme to identify private landlords who have gone along with the model. There are landlord fora and there has to be a process for bringing private landlords into the fold, if you like, in terms of being part of this solution, because of the lack of available housing from the public and the RSL sector. So, there is a possibility there, and you have to have the co-operation, not only of the landlord, but also of the housing benefit section. Where support is a condition of tenancy, we are able to overcome the single-room restrictions.

[137] The cost issue is that we are paying the market rent to the private landlord, but we are incurring our own costs in delivering the service, which bumps the rent right up. That is covered by housing benefit, but it is a barrier for people who want to enter employment, creating another concern. Yes, that is working, but we have to take lower risk tenants in that scheme, because we want to maintain the positive relationships with the landlords, and because we need to identify people who already have some skills to manage a tenancy. The people who are falling out of all this are the more chaotic people who will struggle to maintain a tenancy, and that is why other models, such as supported lodgings and intensively supported housing schemes, provide something else for us.

[138] Conwy has a commitment to develop supported housing services for young people. We have been able to convert the supporting people revenue grant that was directed to Heddfan, the four-bedroomed unit, to provide a resettlement service for young people in Conwy. However, Isallt—I think that is its name—which is the proposed development in Llandudno, has met local opposition. It is a shame that a small scheme that has been through difficulty and has engaged with local shopkeepers and local residents, has to close, and that the battle and dialogue will have to restart, and the battle re-won. It is a shame that, having gone so far with Heddfan, we could not maintain the service. It worked as a small four-bedroomed unit, so it was not an institution, but people had a planned programme of support.

[139] Section 180 schemes are fantastic, in a sense that there is room to be creative and flexible, and that it does not have purely the same focus on tenancy management as the supporting people schemes. In our case, section 180 schemes are the bond scheme, an advice and resettlement service based in Rhyl and the homelessness prevention scheme. So, I think that more of that and more creative solutions and interventions in schools, young offenders' institutions and so on would be a good and cost-effective investment.

[140] The other question was about training. Could you repeat the gist of that, please? I think that I missed a bit of it.

[141] **Mark Isherwood:** It was on the provision of independent living schools, particularly training in life skills and soft skills within the hostel framework.

[142] **Mr Murtagh:** There are several ways of delivering that. If there is a shared housing scheme as a hostel framework, that can be built in, especially if the design issues are there and those skills can be addressed as part of a support plan. We do that for older offenders who are in one-bedroom flats but we are tapping into community resources. In Wrexham, for example, there is a cook and eat scheme. We are on board with the probation service on that and people go to a location and develop their cooking skills. That is also a means of getting peer support and feedback from service users about how services are delivered and it feeds into issues around budgeting and shopping skills and so on. So, there are different ways of delivering that but it is an essential component. If people are going to maintain a tenancy, they need the skills to do that and this might be the first time, via a support package, that they have addressed those skills gaps.

[143] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for your evidence and answers. I will focus on one of the points that you make in your recommendations about move-on accommodation. Could you give us more information about the type of accommodation that you want to see in place and, in particular, how it would be funded?

[144] **Mr Murtagh:** Again, there is not one simple model. The most straightforward case is—we have 30 supported tenancies and, sometimes, when people have held down a tenancy and have been in good standard accommodation, they reach the end of their time with us and the options are limited and, quite often, it might be a pretty grotty option in the private rented sector. Bangor, for example, is a student town where the options for our service users to move on to RSL or council accommodation are negligible and the options to move on to private rented accommodation are also pretty limited. So, it is a major struggle. People end up doing house shares or moving into caravans or whatever to solve that problem. So, they are moving from a supported, high-standard of accommodation to something poor and that can be a retrograde step.

[145] For those people, one model might be a house-building programme particularly focused on one-bedroomed units. Another option is for us to get more involved with private landlords, help to invest in those properties and help people to access accommodation that way. That is one model. However, people moving on from supported accommodation, shared units, hostels, whatever you want to call them, are sometimes not ready for an independent tenancy. In Colwyn Bay, there is a cluster of five bedsits in one unit and people there have another stage where they are moving on to a more independent type of accommodation but with support and peer contact if they want it. So, that is another model—the cluster model.

[146] At some point, the issue of the lack of bricks and mortar—the physical facilities to move people to—has to come into play, because we are just running out.

[147] **Mick Bates:** You are running out of accommodation?

[148] **Mr Murtagh:** Yes.

[149] **Mick Bates:** So what happens to people if there is no accommodation? Are they homeless again?

[150] **Mr Murtagh:** Some people go back on the circuit of homelessness and some—and you hear the term ‘sofa surfing’ a lot—depend on extended family and friends and so on. People are increasingly moving towards house-shares or flat-shares and are cramming in where they can. People sometimes move to other areas of the country. People have limited options, and just adapt as they can.

11.00 a.m.

[151] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you for that, Vin. We will now move on to Simon Glyn, who is head of young people's services at GISDA. Thank you for sitting there so patiently, Simon. You have also supplied us with an overview paper—thank you for that; I invite you to expand on it, if you wish.

[152] **Mr Glyn:** Diolch am y gwahoddiad. Mae GISDA yn elusen sydd wedi ei sefydlu ers 1985; erbyn heddiw, yr ydym yn 21 oed. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwnnw, yr ydym wedi tyfu yn aruthrol. Ar y dechrau, yr oedd gennym un hostel i wyth o bobl ifanc yng Nghaernarfon. Dros 10 mlynedd cyntaf ein bodolaeth, bu inni gynyddu'n sylweddol, a datblygu cynlluniau, nid yn unig mewn ardaloedd eraill yng Ngwynedd ar gyfer pobl ifanc, ond hefyd sefydlu cynlluniau newydd ar gyfer grwpiau eraill—er enghraifft, mamau ifanc, merched beichiog sengl, ac yn y blaen. Mae'r holl grwpiau hyn yn grwpiau bregus.

Mr Glyn: Thank you for the invitation. GISDA is a charity that has been established since 1985; today, we are 21-years-old. During that period, we have grown hugely. At the outset, we had one hostel for eight young people in Caernarfon. Over our first 10 years, we grew significantly, and developed schemes, not only in other areas of Gwynedd for young people, but also we established new schemes for other groups—for example, young mothers, single pregnant women, and so on. All these groups are vulnerable groups.

[153] Erbyn 2000, yr oeddem wedi datblygu cyn belled ag yr oedd yn bosibl inni ddatblygu o dan yr amgylchiadau a oedd yn bodoli ar y pryd o safbwynt cymorth ariannol. Fodd bynnag, y gwahaniaeth mawr yn ystod yr ail ddegawd oedd ein bod wedi dod yn ymwybodol bod angen gwneud mwy na dim ond cynnig to uwchben person ifanc.

By 2000, we had developed as far as it was possible for us to develop under the circumstances that existed at the time from the point of view of financial assistance. However, the great difference during our second decade was that we became aware that we needed to do more than just provide a roof above young people's heads.

[154] Yr oeddem yn adnabod anghenion yn 1989 a oedd yn cynnwys digartrefedd, a dim byd arall. Fodd bynnag, erbyn 2000, yr oeddem yn darganfod fwyfwy bod anawsterau a phroblemau eraill yn gysylltiedig â digartrefedd. Yr oedd llawer o becynnau ynghlwm wrth bobl ifanc a oedd wedi achosi digartrefedd yn y lle cyntaf.

[155] We identified needs in 1989 that only included homelessness, and no other factors. However, by 2000, we were discovering more and more that there were other difficulties and problems that were linked to homelessness. Young people had much baggage that had caused their homelessness in the first place.

[156] O ganlyniad i'r darganfyddiad hwnnw, penderfynasom, fel cwmni, osod gwasanaethau newydd yn eu lle. Yr oedd y gwasanaethau hynny yn cynnwys gwasanaeth eiriolaeth, cynghorwyr personol i bobl ifanc, a chanolfannau galw i mewn drwy'r sir er mwyn caniatáu i bobl ifanc gael cyswllt â rhywun pe baent angen siarad. Yr oeddent hefyd yn cynnwys ein gwasanaeth cwnsela ein hunain, gwasanaeth i gynnwys pobl ifanc ac i ganiatáu iddynt gymryd rhan a chael llais, hyfforddiant, addysg, sgiliau byw, a chodi ymwybyddiaeth ynglyn â chyfrifoldeb cymdeithasol pobl ifanc, ac yn y blaen.

As a result of that discovery, we decided as a company to put new services in place. Those services included an advocacy service, personal counsellors for young people, and call-in centres throughout the county to allow young people to have contact with someone if they needed to talk. They also included our own counselling service, an inclusion and facilitation service to allow young people to participate and to have a voice, training, education, life skills, and raising awareness of young people's social responsibilities, and so on.

[157] Yr ydym hefyd wedi gosod yn ei le hyfforddiant ar gyfer y Blynyddoedd Anhygoel. Yr ydym hefyd wedi gosod gwasanaethau ataliol yn eu lle, i rwystro pobl ifanc rhag cael eu hunain mewn sefyllfaoedd lle maent yn fregus a digartref. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn hefyd, yr ydym, fel elusen, wedi datblygu templadau traws-sirol i gyrff gwirfoddol eraill, a fyddai'n caniatáu inni weithio mewn partneriaeth â'r cyngor sir yng nghyd-destun plant mewn angen a materion amiddffyn plant.

We have also put in place training for the Incredible Years. We have also put preventative services in place, to stop young people from finding themselves in situations where they may be vulnerable and homeless. During this period too, we have as a charity developed cross-county templates for other charitable organisations, which would allow us to work in partnership with the county council in the context of children in need and child protection issues.

[158] I will turn to English now, if you will excuse me, because it might be easier for me to talk to you on a more personal level— a video-link is very impersonal as it is.

[159] We have also developed our own learning programme. Over the years, we have developed this in partnership with the north Wales open college network. The problem with education is that it is not funded through Supporting People. As we are not an accredited education provider, we cannot actually access direct funding at source from the Assembly. Therefore, we have had to juggle and find other means of funding for this important provision.

[160] We have also recently developed a theatre forum, which allows young people to participate in drama and theatre. Through this medium, we have been able to teach young people that they can change the script themselves, which I think is an important concept for young people. The belief among young people at one point in Gwynedd, was that whatever happened to them was their loss and they would have to live with it. We are trying to teach people that they do not have to experience homelessness or other debilitating circumstances; they can make a difference themselves by choosing to change their life scripts.

[161] We currently employ 32 people and we support 56 young people. We have one unique funding source, which allows us to be flexible with our support. It allows us to take on properties, either from the private sector or from the local authority, and to support young people in those properties. In a sense, we are doing what Vin mentioned earlier. We are the supporter and the landlord. This means that landowners or landlords can transfer the risk of managing properties on to us. We do this more with young people who are under 18 years of age because, by law, young people under 18 are not allowed to hold an estate, so they cannot hold tenancies. This is one way for the local authority to shift the responsibility of housing young people on to someone else.

[162] Statistics show that Gwynedd currently suffers badly from homelessness. In the first six months of this financial year we have had 383 people declare themselves homeless in Gwynedd. Out of those 42 per cent, or around 162, were vulnerable young people who fall within the categories that we have a remit to support. We are concerned about that; it is many more people than we can support. The main problem for us, in Gwynedd, is the lack of housing. We are finding now, in Gwynedd, that because of the lack of affordable housing, professional people whom you would ordinarily expect to compete to buy in the housing market are now competing for rented housing and edging young people and other less well-off groups of people out of the market entirely. Therefore, that is creating a jam, if you like; it is blocking up the system.

[163] We are also concerned about another way of blocking up systems. We find that when local authorities and housing associations have a responsibility or find young people reaching the top of their lists to be housed, they usually house them without housing support. We are forever talking to local authorities and housing associations about this because we often support young people in hostels, move them on ourselves into our own properties, and invest a lot of support in those young people and get them to upskill and to develop life skills. Once they have developed life skills, they are ready to move on into housing association and council properties, but because they are with us and hold permanent or secured tenancies, they do not have the points to be moved into other housing areas, which creates a blockage in our system, and it also means that young vulnerable people without these skills who are housed by local authorities and housing associations are set up to fail. That is a brief overview of the paper that I have presented to you.

11.10 a.m.

[164] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you for that, Simon, and thank you for being brief. There are some questions coming at you now. Mick Bates is first.

[165] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for that evidence, and congratulations on your work with the theatre in education; it is exciting to see that happen. I will concentrate again on the issue of accommodation and the availability and affordability of property to rent or to purchase. In your conclusions, you note that there are 100 fewer houses because of the right to buy programme. What is your solution to that? How do we build extra houses, and, from your 21 years of experience, how do we get more houses built in order to address the issues of availability and affordability?

[166] **Mr Glyn:** The only way that you can do this is in partnership between the Assembly and the local authorities. We must consider land outside village boundaries and use that land to develop affordable homes. It would be unwise if we were to be selective in choosing the groups that we want to provide for. It must be across the board, but it must also include provision for vulnerable groups. The strategy needs to be an all-Wales strategy. The problem in Gwynedd is that hardly anyone can now afford to buy there, including affluent professional people. So, everyone is downscaling, and, as I said, that is edging the most vulnerable people out of any housing provision. That is why in Gwynedd now we have a homelessness problem that is, statistically, on a par with Cardiff.

[167] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you for that, Simon. Mark?

[168] **Mark Isherwood:** Thank you for the fascinating presentation, which touched on many things that we have not reached yet, particularly the aspect of education and the key need for that in the provision that you are making. What effect, if any, are your experiences having within the north Wales regional partnership collaboration between the local authorities and the supposed regional partnership that is developing? You have some innovative projects that other counties could benefit from, and vice versa, no doubt.

[169] Mick touched on alternative means of delivering affordable housing, and you talked about developments outside the village or settlement boundaries, which presumably relate to TAN 2 and the potential in that regard. What work have you done with landowners, the Country Land and Business Association and farming unions to discuss a way forward? I know that they are listening, because I have spoken to them myself. What other models are you considering, such as community land trusts or working with private developers? I know of at least one company in north Wales which is looking to take the risk on low-cost home ownership, with section 106 reserving the housing in perpetuity for local people. How imaginative are you being in developing alternative models?

[170] Finally, you powerfully made the point that people must have life skills first before they are moved into unsupported housing. What do we need to do to carry that message forward to local authorities and mainstream registered social landlords from a Government level to put the middle stage or bridge in place?

[171] **Mr Glyn:** To respond to your second question first, Mark, as far as life skills are concerned, we need joined-up thinking in this regard. We also need partnerships. Our situation is that we are not really supposed to use our Supporting People funding to provide education and training, so we have to go elsewhere. For our initiative we have gone to the education authority and asked whether we can educate young pupils between the ages of 12 and 16 about this, on behalf of the education authority. In this way, we are making a modest profit, which allows us to fund our core work of educating and training young vulnerable people.

[172] With regard to a combination, again, we need joined-up thinking, and we need partnerships. At the moment, as a local county councillor, I have talked to people on a large estate in my ward, and I have developed a new affordable housing scheme in a village on the peninsula that will include all kinds of housing provision for different groups of people. It will eventually provide 24 affordable homes in that small village and encourage couples to return there to keep the school going and allow pensioners from other houses to move into smaller houses and free up their old houses for other couples. It will also allow people to rent houses in that project and engage in part-ownership schemes. However, that initiative is a local one, and a local partnership, parochially. We need some kind of leadership from the Assembly and from the local authorities so that it is not just down to the initiative shown by individuals parochially, but there is a wider scheme. Have I answered your questions fully, Mark?

[173] **Mark Isherwood:** Yes, indeed. That was very helpful.

[174] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you very much indeed, Simon. We are bringing this part of the meeting to a close now. We would invite you to join us for a cup of tea, but you are a bit far away up there in Colwyn Bay. Thank you very much, all of you, for your presentations this morning. As I said, it is important that we receive such presentations and answers to our questions. If there is anything that you feel you would like to have expanded on, please feel free to jot it down and send it to the secretariat. All the evidence that we heard this morning will go into the policy review and subsequent report early next year. Thank you for attending this morning; we now break for coffee.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 11.18 a.m. a 11.34 a.m.
The meeting adjourned between 11.18 a.m. and 11.34 a.m.*

**Adolygiad Polisi: Digartrefedd ymhlith Pobl Ifanc—Parhad
Policy Review: Youth Homelessness—Continued**

[175] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you all for returning on time. Welcome back to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee. If anyone switched on their mobile, BlackBerry or pager during the break, please turn them off now, as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment.

[176] I welcome the presenters who have joined us. Thank you for coming. I am sure that you have attended committees in the National Assembly enough times to know this, but I remind you that translation equipment is available for simultaneous translation and for the amplification of sound. The headsets are in front of you. I am sure that you know how to use them.

[177] I welcome Naomi Alleyne, who is the director of equalities and social justice in the Welsh Local Government Association. She is joined by Sue Finch, the housing policy officer for the WLGA, and Robin Staines, a housing adviser in the WLGA. Thank you for coming to the committee and for providing the paper. We have taken evidence for our youth homelessness review, and a number of issues came up around local authorities, so the committee was very keen to hear the WLGA's view on these. Naomi, I understand that you are going to lead on this, so I invite you to make your presentation.

[178] **Ms Alleyne:** I will try not to regurgitate the paper that Members have. It is a very detailed paper, covering trends, legislation, examples of good practice, gaps in the provision of local authorities, and some of the work that the WLGA is undertaking to support local authorities in this field. I will make a couple of points before I hand over to Robin, who actually works for Carmarthenshire County Council. He can introduce himself, but he is directly involved in these issues.

[179] First, homelessness cannot be seen in isolation from the wider policy agenda—either the housing policy agenda or the wider corporate agenda for local authorities at this time. Within the housing agenda, several issues have an impact on homelessness, and therefore on youth homelessness, such as, for example, the lack of affordable homes across Wales, the reduction in the availability of council housing through the right-to-buy scheme, the focus on achieving the Wales quality housing standard, empty home strategies, and so on. So, there is a much wider housing agenda, which has an impact on youth homelessness figures and homelessness generally.

[180] One issue that the WLGA is highlighting for local authorities at this time is their strategic housing role, focusing on planning for housing across an area over a given time. Homelessness, again, will be a key issue in that, but so will affordability and other issues. It is very important for local authorities to understand that strategic housing role, particularly in relation to stock transfer; those who are transferring their stock will lose their landlord function. It is also important for people to understand that strategic housing role and the fact that it will continue after houses have been transferred.

[181] One of the other important points to make is that this is not just a housing issue, and it is not just a housing agenda; it includes a range of agencies, those internal to local government, external agencies in the voluntary sector, and other public sector agencies. So, collaboration and partnership working are key factors in ensuring that we can tackle youth homelessness issues in a holistic way.

[182] I wish to focus on a couple of positives. These are included in the paper, but I think that they need to be highlighted. Since about 2005, we have started to see a downward trend in the homelessness figures. That is to be welcomed. I think that we would all wish to see that trend accelerated; nonetheless, it has started and we would like to see it continue. Homelessness levels are very much reflected in the different approaches that local authorities have taken over the past few years. Most local authorities have already reviewed their homelessness services, or are in the process of doing so, to ensure that they are taking a more preventative approach. So, rather than looking at crisis intervention, they are looking to intervene at an early stage to ensure that they can prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first instance, and to provide a range of services at an early stage when people have become homeless, so that they can receive the appropriate support while homeless but can also take on and maintain other tenancies in the longer term.

11.40 a.m.

[183] Some of the detailed proactive steps being taken are set out in paragraph 4.4 of the report. That preventative work is having an impact, and a number of effective schemes are in place within local authorities across Wales to pursue this. For example, there is an increased use of mediation services, homelessness prevention funds have been set up to include, for example, spending to save, and young people are being involved in the development and planning of homelessness advice services. There are some good examples of that work in the paper.

[184] I will finish off with some of the concerns, because you asked for evidence from us of particular issues and gaps in services. As I have highlighted previously, there is a need for an increased number of affordable homes across Wales. That is particularly relevant in rural areas. There are concerns, particularly from some of the rural authorities, about the loss of young people from the area, because people cannot find homes and so are moving to other areas. As highlighted in the paper, we are concerned about the potential impact of the local housing allowance with housing benefit changes. Some authorities are finding that an increasing number of younger people are presenting themselves as homeless, particularly those aged between 14 and 16, and that there is a lack of appropriate help and accommodation. Another issue is the uncertainty regarding the future grants and budgets for the Supporting People fund, which provides great services across Wales. Again, the lack of knowledge about the future provision of that budget does not help planning.

[185] Better links with the criminal justice agencies and the health sector are needed and there needs to be more collaborative and partnership working. We hope that the children and young people's partnerships, under the Children Act 2004, will take on these issues at the local level to ensure a holistic, joined-up approach to service provision. The availability of floating support is limited, particularly out of hours. There is also a need to make better use of the private sector stock that is available in local authority areas. That does not cover all of the concerns that have been identified or all of the gaps in local authority provision, but I think that it gives you a flavour.

[186] I would like to finish by saying that the work that local authorities have undertaken, particularly over the last couple of years, to refocus their services around the preventative agenda is having an impact. Robin can talk more about Carmarthenshire's point of view and can give you the detail of what it has been doing locally. The two important things are to make sure that this issue stays in profile and high on the agenda, and to ensure that there is clear strategic intent, not only through housing development, but also from local authorities at the corporate level, to ensure that they can address these issues through health and social care, wellbeing strategies, children and young people plans, and corporate and community strategies.

[187] **Mr Staines:** First, I would like to run through a few of the issues that we see with youth homelessness in Carmarthenshire, which are similar to what is happening in the rest of Wales. I would then like to run through a few areas of good practice that we are currently undertaking. When I get to good practice, I would like to say that the good practice is occurring pretty much throughout Wales. In my experience, local authorities are being far more proactive towards youth homelessness than previously. That does not mean that there is not still a way to go, but we are more proactive.

[188] I specifically do not want to talk about the housing market, the lack of temporary accommodation, or the structural economic factors behind youth homelessness. I would much rather talk about the individuals whom this affects, because it is a complex subject, and these are young people who have complex needs; hence, they require complex solutions. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach when we look at youth homelessness. We have to put together difficult and quite expensive solutions. However, expense in the short term can often save a great deal of public money in the long term, so it is money worth spending.

[189] The first point relates to authorities getting better at this and is about understanding the trends and what is happening in youth homelessness. We have certainly done quite a lot of work on that. One figure that struck us was that one in 10 of 14 to 15-year-olds run away for more than a week. That is quite frightening when you think about it. Consider Naomi's point about the age of the people coming to us for housing advice. People coming through the door are far younger than they used to be; it is not unusual for 13, 14 or 15-year-olds to come to us. That leads to the point that, if people come to housing services, it is too late; it is about picking these children up much earlier in the system, and we undertake that work with our education, social services, and health colleagues. It is about taking that joint approach. The strategic fit for youth homelessness has a role in the local housing and homelessness strategies, but, far more importantly, it has, or should have, a prominent role in the community strategy and the young people's partnership plans. That is the heart of it, because that is where we can get early intervention.

[190] An issue for us has been access and the approachability of our services. We found that young people do not like turning up at the local authority and meeting people like me, dressed as I am. That just does not work. So, we have looked at how we use the internet, text messages and telephone-based services. Our text-message service has been important, because that is how young people communicate these days. They do not particularly like sitting in stuffy interview rooms with stuffy local authority officers, so we have tried to gear those services far more around those young people's needs.

[191] We work closely with our colleagues in education and children's services. In Carmarthenshire, our children's social services have already transferred to the education service and that is beginning to show benefits, as we can target certain schools and communities with good information. As part of their personal and social education lessons, they learn all about what happens with housing and housing-related issues.

[192] The understanding that comes from working with social services colleagues has been tremendously beneficial, because we have started to understand the trigger factors or the push points of what makes people come through our door, which include all those issues around the breakdown of care and the family unit. It is not only the initial family unit; we have found that, as new families are formed, although the new partners get on with each other, it does not necessarily mean that they will get on with the children when they move into the family home. We found that that was quite an issue. So, family breakdown, together with the trust of children, and their lack of confidence means that they are quite disaffected individuals. Their skill levels and their employability point to the fact that we need to get in far earlier, and have a far more joined-up agenda, needless to say.

[193] When we get hold of those children, it is about a gradual transition with appropriate support, rather than some big-bang approach, as with temporary accommodation. I have seen some of the former temporary accommodation that we have used, and I certainly would not put a child in there without any level of support. That is why we are now doing our utmost and level best to ensure that children are never placed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. I know that my colleagues throughout Wales are trying to do the same.

[194] Before I go on to highlight some good practice, there are a couple of myths that I would like to bust about what is happening in Carmarthenshire. Youth homelessness levels are not falling as fast as homelessness levels among other groups. Secondly, the issues in rural areas are more profound than they are in the towns and cities, perhaps because of the level of services that are available, and how we previously developed services in towns and cities but maybe not so much in rural areas. It is not just a male phenomenon, although we may think that it is just about boys; it is not. It is almost equal between males and females.

[195] Lastly, the biggest factor with youngsters coming to us to present is unwillingness from their former home to accommodate them. So, the biggest category for us is people who have a bedroom and a home somewhere. It is not an issue of a lack of bricks and mortar and accommodation; it is that they can no longer live in that home because relationships have broken down. So, our efforts are to try to put those relationships back together, where we can, bearing in mind the risk of abuse at home, and so on.

[196] We also have social workers in the housing options team, so, when youngsters come to us for housing advice, we do not treat their problem as just a housing issue; it is also a social services issue. Co-locating children's social workers with the housing options team is beginning to bear some fruit. As I have said before, the type of services have to be provided by more electronic means, whether by podcast, the internet, text messages, phone or anything else, because that is how young people prefer to get their services. We run things like the bond scheme, but we have found that paying a month's rent in advance to private landlords is just as important as the bond scheme, and that has been particularly successful in getting access to the private rented sector.

[197] We have a good relationship with our landlords forum in Carmarthenshire, to which I pay tribute, because it has worked closely with us to try to access some suitable accommodation for young people—as have the registered social landlords with whom we work. We have a specialist young person’s support scheme. Around 30 people a year pass through that, when we can get them to pass through it, because move-on accommodation, as you probably heard, is becoming quite a factor.

11.50 a.m.

[198] Briefly, we also have our prevention fund, whereby we will, in certain cases, pay off people’s arrears to keep them at home rather than allow them to go down the homelessness route because, frankly, it is better for them and it is cheaper for us. We run a mediation scheme and around two-thirds of the people who go through that scheme return home. So, that tells us that there is a need for a respite-type scheme when youngsters just need to get away for a night or a week. We run a night-stop scheme where volunteers in the community host young people for up to three nights. That has been very successful—90 per cent of those youngsters then return home because that little bit of respite, just to take the heat off the family situation, has been achieved.

[199] We have a single policy for allocating homes in Carmarthenshire and we have a single waiting list between us and our housing association partners. So, we have tried to make the route into social housing as easy as possible. We have a successful homelessness forum, vice-chaired by Shelter. Next year, it will be co-chairing the homelessness forum because we want to ensure that we work closely with the advocates. We also have a successful youth council and we are trying to make links between the homelessness forum and our youth council to try to take those issues forward.

[200] Finally, making any service work is about involving people in service planning and service delivery, which has been difficult. We are talking about disaffected young people who traditionally do not want to be engaged and are difficult to reach. We have had initiatives such as ‘chips and chat’ evenings rather than the traditional political and consultation type meetings in the village hall on a Monday night when it is freezing. We have tried to get to youth clubs and schools and tried to provide a far more relaxed approach in terms of understanding what young people want from our service.

[201] On the issues regarding 14 and 15-year-olds, we are looking at our corporate parenting role there because, clearly, as younger people come through the door, there are issues for our social service and education colleagues.

[202] My last and most crucial point is on the lack of skills that many young people who come to us have. As we achieve the home standard in Carmarthenshire, we are looking at how we can get the biggest impact for our money and link in our youth homelessness work to the refurbishment and regeneration of our 9,500 homes. That is when we start to tackle some of the longer term problems of getting people skills, wages and far more independence than they currently have. I am sorry if I have gone over time.

[203] **Janice Gregory:** No, that is fine. Thank you. Over to you, Sue. Do not worry about pressing the button on the microphone. I am the only one who has to fiddle with that, apparently. It will come on automatically.

[204] **Ms Finch:** Good morning. I am very grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence to this very welcome review of youth homelessness in Wales. Briefly, because I know that time is limited, I want to provide an overview of the work that the WLGA is doing with local authorities to support their work. I think that it is clear, from the evidence that you have heard on other occasions, as well as today, that local authorities have made a step change. They are taking a much more holistic and strategic view of homelessness and are trying to get ahead—up-stream, if you like, of the problems so that we are not just dealing with people when they reach crisis point, but putting in place prevention strategies to address those issues. That, in particular, is an issue that we need to bear in mind for young people because, to some extent, once they are homeless, we have failed. We need to get ahead, up-stream, and ensure that we never reach that point. We have made that step change, but it would be naïve to expect that we do not have some way to go. Much improvement still needs to take place. Good work is going on across Wales, but that needs to be shared and disseminated.

[205] So, the WLGA has taken that on board very seriously and we are engaged in many ways in trying to assist local authorities with continuing that improvement. Very briefly, we are working with a network of housing cabinet members in north and south Wales to ensure that there is an understanding of homelessness strategies across Wales and that good practice is going on and can be understood, appreciated and disseminated back down to the local authority areas by cabinet members.

[206] We are also producing a members' guide to homelessness and we will run a number of seminars to provide member development opportunities around homelessness. We are also working on toolkits to assist officers with improvement work around sharing good practice. We are running a number of events where practitioners can come together and learn from what is happening in different areas of Wales. We are putting a lot of energy into this and taking very seriously the task of ensuring that what good practice is in place is shared for the benefit of the whole of Wales. That is all that I wanted to say.

[207] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you, Sue. I will now open the session up to questions; Mick will go first, then Mark, and then Sandy.

[208] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for your presentation this morning and the paper that you have given us. A comment that I have heard many times this morning is that it is a complex issue, but I would like to focus on three main areas. The first is the relationship between the voluntary sector, which is often your deliverer, and the local authorities. Although we have heard that there is good practice in this area, I am yet to pick up any data about how the WLGA would see the success of working together throughout Wales. I am yet to see even raw data about how many local authorities have put all the services in one room or building, as we heard Swansea has done. They are working physically together, which makes communication so much easier. I know, from my experience in Cardiff, that a lot of the services are spread throughout the city and, often, getting in touch with people, although we have electronic means, is extremely difficult. How good is communication, really, across our 22 authorities?

[209] The second issue is one of planning. Although Robin said that there was not a big issue about the supply of accommodation, it appears to me, as I move on to my final point about rurality, that there are issues about encouraging the planning system to provide enough accommodation, whether that is intermediate accommodation—where we often meet area problems and the Nimbyism that surrounds putting in accommodation—providing affordable houses for both rent and sale, or the use of the rural exceptions policy. In a small community, the provision of a small number of houses may well retain young people in that community and overcome many of the issues of young people putting more pressure on urban areas.

[210] Finally, and I look to Rob in particular for this one, as an officer for the pretty rural Carmarthen authority, could you give me a few more details on how you overcome the logistical problems that you meet in terms of access? For example, take a simple issue such as transport; how do you make sure that a young person who has needs in a remote rural location can access the advice?

[211] **Janice Gregory:** Naomi, are you going to start? How do you want to play this? I will leave it to you.

[212] **Ms Alleyne:** Sue will answer the second question around planning. I think that the reason why you may not have had some of the data that you were asking about, Mick, is that we may not have yet gone into that much detail on working together with the voluntary sector—it will be different across the 22 local authorities. There are a lot of successful schemes in operation, as you will have heard from Barnardo's earlier. A lot of those schemes involve local authorities. In terms of the data on success, we have not done any work on that, so I cannot really answer your question this morning. However, we can see whether there is anything that we can find out for you through the all-Wales chief housing officer panel and come back to you on that.

[213] **Mick Bates:** Naomi, I admire your honesty on that point—it is something that I have always looked for. To emphasise the issue, we make so much of the words partnership and good communications, yet often their physical requirements are overlooked. Relationships between people are often the main precursor to successful outcomes. I think that it is important for the WLGA to be able to provide that type of information for us.

[214] **Ms Alleyne:** A point that I would make is that, as Sue highlighted, there are now a number of mechanisms to ensure that good practice is shared across the local authorities. As Robin mentioned, the linking of social work into the housing and education teams has proven to be of benefit. We can do something on that and come back to you on it.

[215] **Ms Finch:** I will pick up on the point about the planning system. It is clear that the planning system is key to the delivery of affordable housing in Wales. We are seeing local authorities becoming much more adept at using section 106 agreements, which are the agreements that can be attached to planning permission so that developers incorporate, as part of the development, either a deal in terms of subsidised land or in terms of properties developed to sell on for low-cost home ownership. What we are seeing, to some extent, is a reflection of the area around homelessness in that there is a lot of effective practice going on. Some authorities are getting something between 30 per cent and 50 per cent in subsidy out of those developments, which makes an incredible difference to the amount of social housing or affordable housing that can be developed. So, it is happening in some areas, and that practice can be shared. Work is going on in terms of member development seminars and also training courses for officers around sharing that good practice. So, that work is very much under way.

12.00 p.m.

[216] On the question about rural exception sites, as you might know, an interesting project is under way around the role of rural housing enablers, who are jointly employed by housing associations and local authorities in rural areas in Wales. Their job is to work with communities and to bring them together with the planning system, the housing strategy officers and the housing associations, and to identify local housing need and then work with local communities to look at ways in which they can develop solutions. Often, that is extremely effective in breaking through the resistance around the development of affordable housing, in that the problems around planning are largely about objections locally to affordable housing and the stigma that gets attached to the idea of such housing. So, the initiative of bringing those partners together is working effectively, and a lot of lessons can be learnt from that project.

[217] **Mr Staines:** I have a couple of comments. In terms of the data and information on performance, you are right that there is no joined-up approach. I would desperately like to know how successful Carmarthenshire and its partners are at preventing homelessness. We do not have a joined-up way of dealing with that at the moment. We have been talking to Shelter and our other advocate providers recently about how we can say how well it is happening in Carmarthenshire, rather than according to each provider. So, that is something that we are working on.

[218] Co-locating different groups is easier in some areas than in others, depending on the nature of the geography and the services. In terms of planning, some authorities have woken up to how to extrapolate as much benefit from development sites as possible. However, that does not mean that it will always go to affordable housing and to housing for young, single people within that. There are a number of conflicting demands when it comes to section 106, and modernising education is one of them. While I will not judge which of those is the most important, our members face a difficult task, because there is a shopping list of demands in terms of the benefits that are available under section 106, and accommodation for young, single people is one of those demands. Certainly, in our programme, we are providing 300 new affordable homes for sale and for rent, by using some of the authority's land and getting a housing association to develop those homes at cost. So, the cheapest flat for a single person will be about £50,000, which still means that you need to be earning £16,000 to get into the home-ownership market, but that is probably a good £100,000 cheaper than the flat up the road that has not been subsidised by the authority. So, it is about the rented side of the market, initially, but those are the competing demands that we face.

[219] **Mick Bates:** I do not wish to be rude, but how much would the rent be for that single apartment?

[220] **Mr Staines:** On the open market?

[221] **Mick Bates:** Yes.

[222] **Mr Staines:** It depends on what we mean by affordable. There is a local authority rent, there is something that we call 'affordable rent', which is based on wages, and which is multiplied for mortgage purposes, and there is the market rent. If it were an authority property, it would be about £35 a week; if it is affordable rent for a key worker; it would be about £70 a week; and, on the open market, it would be around £90 a week. There are all the housing benefit issues underneath that, which no doubt you have heard about, but I will not go into those. So, there are still those issues.

[223] In terms of the rural logistics, we are trying to not get people to travel to us for all sorts of obvious reasons. We want to try to use electronic means of communication, and we have been successful in that, because that is how young people communicate. They use the internet and text messaging. We have also looked at having a housing advice unit available as a podcast. Those are the sorts of things that we are looking at.

[224] On the back of that, we offer outreach services. That is in terms of other arms of the authority, for example our customer service centres do outreach services in a trailer-type approach. We piggy-back onto that. So, it is about exploiting the other outreach services where we can, but, if we cannot, we try to provide the services in the way that young people want them. Asking them to get on a bus from Llandovery to Carmarthen to meet someone like me is just not what they want. The other side of rurality is the schools. Schools are the route into this because, in the main, you are getting people together and you can get in and address groups of people at a time.

[225] **Mark Isherwood:** Could you respond to the problem that the previous speaker ended with, namely that local authorities and RSLs often house people in priority need but without support. It was argued that people need life skills before they are moved into other housing areas.

[226] You referred to the lack of, and the need for an increase in, affordable homes. Given the interaction between housing, health, education, skills, crime and other matters, what do you think we should be doing with social housing grants? Should we be reprioritising this to address those broader cross-cutting issues?

[227] You referred to the trend in homelessness falling but, earlier on today, we heard from Barnardo's about the hidden homeless. Shelter representatives told me when I put this to them that they did not know where the people were going and the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations, which is now Community Housing Cymru, said that it did not match its figures. Why do you think the gap has arisen and what action needs to be taken to help you pick that up again?

[228] You referred to stock transfer. We have taken evidence previously on that, but it is a hot issue. How do we ensure that local authorities enter into agreement with whatever the transfer associations may be that protect priority needs, duties and allocations?

[229] In terms of early intervention, what role do you think the Beecham agenda has to play, particularly in regional collaboration, so that we can achieve critical mass across perhaps a whole region in delivery?

[230] You referred to a bond scheme and I was interested that you talked about paying rent monthly in advance. One of the issues that was raised with Sandy and I was that people can often get bonds but cannot then get the rent required up-front. So, that is relevant.

[231] I was interested to hear you talk about the prevention scheme and paying arrears for people and keeping their homes as a cheaper option, particularly as mortgage and landlord repossession orders in Wales have gone up by 36 per cent over the last year alone. Are you marrying that with any form of financial literacy, education or debt counselling to help people avoid getting into the same situation again?

[232] You referred to the need to involve people in service planning but the difficulty is that we are dealing with disaffected people. Some of the young people whom we met stated that they would like there to be a young homeless person's forum. The will is clearly there; it is a question of how you do it to ensure that the engagement overcomes their suspicions and lack of trust.

[233] With regard to rural housing enablers, this summer I arranged a meeting between a private landlord, who is engaged, at their own risk, in low-cost, affordable housing schemes, with a local rural housing enabler. The interesting thing that came out of that was that the Country Land and Business Association felt that we need a lot more rural housing enablers. Do you have a view on that? How, given the success of the meeting that we had, can we engage the private sector as well as the public and voluntary sectors in the partnerships?

[234] **Janice Gregory:** There is a list there. As usual, if there is anything that you feel that you cannot expand on because of time constraints, the secretariat will write to you, Naomi, with the list of the questions from all of the Members. Then, if you want to expand on them further, please feel free to do so, because it will all form part of the review.

[235] **Ms Alleyne:** I am just going to take one of them and leave Sue and Robin to deal with some of the others.

12.10 p.m.

[236] You asked about Beecham, and there are huge opportunities, through Beecham, to drive this agenda forward. Some of the comments that we have made are around it not being seen as a housing issue, but that it is linked into intervention and prevention work that is undertaken—or can be undertaken—to a great extent by other agencies.

[237] Therefore, there is huge scope here. For example, you will probably be aware that the WLGA has established four regional fora to drive forward 'Making the Connections' and the collaborative agenda. One of those fora is Central Wales Plus, which represents the rural local authorities across Wales. One paper that is going to the next meeting, on 20 December, is on affordability. It is about the opportunity to look at how you address these issues together. One issue, or concern, is that people do not look at boundaries. If you are looking for a home, you do not look—well, some people may look—at the boundaries of local authority areas. However, there is much scope here for people to look at joined-up solutions, to see what the opportunities are for collaboration. There is already, for example, a housing forum in south-east Wales, which operates and feeds into those regional fora that operate in that area. Therefore, there is a lot of opportunity here, and we want to ensure that we maximise those opportunities, and that these discussions are undertaken by those regional boards as well.

[238] Some of your other questions are best answered by Robin, who delivers some of these services on the ground, and Sue, who is very much involved in the policy discussion. You talked, for example, about stock transfer, and what will happen when the stock has been transferred; I know that Sue has had discussions with officials about how we ensure that those issues around homelessness and referrals maintain the priority that they have had up until now.

[239] **Mr Staines:** I apologise if I miss one of your questions—I will try to get through the list quickly.

[240] The social housing grant has to be determined locally. However, 'locally' can also mean 'regionally', so I will pick up on the link between the social housing grant, Beecham and regional co-ordination. For certain places in Carmarthenshire, it would be pointless our building anything without engaging Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, or Swansea. Therefore, there are issues about how we connect, and how we use that money most effectively.

[241] Part of the evidence that you have had is about the difference in figures—it is statistics and truth, is it not? We are going to go through a rough sleeping count in the near future, but we need to do some more work on hidden homelessness. We still talk about presentations and acceptances, and I do not believe that we necessarily fully understand what is happening on the hidden homelessness side.

[242] The point about stock transfer is pertinent. We are not transferring in Carmarthenshire—we have a business plan that has been accepted by the Welsh Assembly Government, and we will be putting £160 million into more than 9,000 homes over the next 10 years. We want to ensure that we get the biggest maximum community gain for that money. However, I do not believe that it matters who the owners are—it is just critical that all that investment, from wherever it comes, delivers the maximum community gain.

[243] However, in terms of stock transfer, it is crucial that bodies such as the Welsh Assembly Government give the authority the maximum level of support to ensure that the contracts that it draws up pre-transfer are robust. There are instances elsewhere where the authority has been left with some egg on its face when it has come to dealing with homelessness, because the arrangements were not put into place in the first place. Therefore, I would urge that we learn all those lessons from other places, and ensure that those contracts are water-tight; the culture and ethos of the new association is then geared to dealing with the most vulnerable people, which, as I say, has perhaps not always been the case.

[244] On the bond scheme, we were wondering a few years ago why our bond scheme was not particularly effective, and why the take-up was not particularly good. Once we spoke to young people, and to landlords, it was crucial that, from the landlords' perspective, it was not just the deposit for the furniture that was a problem, it was that first month's rent. There are issues there about housing benefit, and housing benefit performance, which I do not particularly want to rehearse, but, crucially, if we could fund that first month, to give time to sort the benefit side of things out, that opened up a new range of accommodation that previously we could not access. Therefore, the month's rent in advance is as critical as the bond itself.

[245] On paying arrears, that comes with an automatic referral to Citizens Advice. Therefore, if people have been in debt, we are willing to help them, to keep them in their own home, but we do then expect, as part of the deal, that they go to get financial advice and assistance to help them to manage their affairs. Therefore, we are not back in the same situation relatively soon after. I do take the point about the youth fora and the youth councils. I think that some authorities—I would certainly pay tribute to Gwynedd—have very successful youth councils. I would ask all authorities to build on that. Again, perhaps, there is also a link to the Beecham review there, and about youngsters interacting on a more regional level.

[246] In terms of the rural housing enablers engaged in the private sector, we have some resources there. However, with the issue of what is happening in the rural areas, while we think that we understand what is going on there, there are still some more resources that need to go in. Some of the work that the University of Glamorgan has done has been very good at uncovering some of those issues. I never come to these sorts of events thinking that it is all about resources—it is not; it is about something that is very different. When it comes to rural enabling, I think that that is money well spent. I would say that that is an area in which we probably need to invest more.

[247] I am sure that I have missed something, so I apologise if I have.

[248] **Mark Isherwood:** I think that you did remarkably well. [*Laughter.*]

[249] **Janice Gregory:** It never ceases to amaze me how our presenters manage to get through Mark's list.

[250] **Ms Finch:** To add to what Robin said, with the rural housing enabler, the Wales Rural Observatory has done some interesting work around issues of affordable housing in Wales. A startling figure that jumped out at me the other day was that something like 96 per cent of community councils have no affordable housing developed in them through the use of section 106. Therefore, there is a huge amount of work to be done; it is absolutely stunning. It is also clear that the rural housing enablers are uncovering levels of hidden homelessness that we are just not picking up in any other way. So, another figure that jumped out at me was that 90 per cent of people in those communities have a housing need, which could be seen as threatened homelessness or homelessness, but they just have not reported it.

[251] So, I would completely echo Robin's view that it is money well spent, because they are uncovering levels of need that are otherwise not being picked up. They are unlocking planning permission and development that would otherwise not be taking place, and it is desperately needed. So, I think that that project has proved to be a useful pilot.

[252] Again, in terms of stock transfer, there is a lot of worrying evidence from England that homelessness is less of a priority for transfer vehicles, once things are under way. Again, we need to ensure that those agreements—those compacts—are fully watertight over the long term. So, it is not just for the next five years, but it is an ongoing commitment that that organisation takes on to deliver for the extreme levels of housing need within that authority.

[253] I think that probably, between us, we have picked up on all of those questions.

[254] **Sandy Mewies:** I just have a few comments to start. I think that local authorities have come a long way. My local authority, in Flintshire, operates a bond scheme and an independent tenancy advice and support scheme for young people. I recently opened a hostel for young families, which you have not mentioned. It is important that young families stay together and so on. Having said that, and further to my first remarks at the start of this meeting, Mark and I met with some young homeless people from Conwy recently and I was extremely concerned at the disillusionment and disappointment that some of those people felt. One young man said to me, 'I have been coming to meetings like this for years. I have been telling them what has happened to me for years, and I am still coming here. What are you going to do with this?'. I really am concerned about what we are going to do. Some things have happened, but I think that there is a lot more to be done.

[255] Listening to the evidence that we have had previously, and to what we have been told today, there are several things coming forward. The WLGA is addressing those things as much as it can with local authorities. However, it seems to me, Chair, that this is a complicated and complex system. If I was a user of this system, I would find it quite difficult to access, because there are too many organisations trying to be all things to all people. That is coming to me very clearly now.

12.20 p.m.

[256] Mark and Mick mentioned the work that local authorities can do together, regionally, but it is not just local authorities that are the providers. So, how can we simplify the system for the service users, because it is extraordinarily complex? In other fields in which the Assembly operates, such as health and education, there are pathways to follow. Someone enters the service and they have a satisfactory outcome, and there are stage posts along the way. Are there any multiple case conferences on young people who might enter at the age of 13, which is an important point that Robin made, so that education must be heavily involved? It means that education, social services and any voluntary organisations involved must share their information, which does not always happen. When people move from one stage to another, is there some investigation as to how they can be supported to go on? I think that the age of 18 is an artificial barrier. The early 20s is the time when some people that have been homeless have got their act together and can start to think about returning to education. Should we be looking at organisations, which all do some things very well, and suggesting that they should perhaps be concentrating on certain aspects of provision? I know that there is a geographical need here, but that does not mean beans to the person involved. Young homeless people have every right to move across Wales or into England if they want, and they should be able to do so.

[257] We talked about night shelters; we have a night shelter in Rhyl which provides a good, but limited service. Our young people must go over the border to Chester and Liverpool to access the services. I realise that it is not a specific question, but how can we improve matters, because I think that regionality is an issue, and how can we simplify the system? Do you think that it is too complex? Should we look at simplification in geographical terms or through organisations? How can we do it? That is an easy one for you. [*Laughter.*]

[258] **Janice Gregory:** That is a nice simple question.

[259] **Mr Staines:** I agree with everything that you said. The starting point is to look at the issue from the service user's perspective, rather than the traditional perspective, which is of different organisations with different funding streams, values and cultures and levels of leadership. You are right—we need to find a system whereby a young person has a key link or a key worker from the most appropriate discipline. That worker can take the young person through the process of finding secure accommodation and identify the support needs that they have. If I was a young person being bounced between the criminal justice system, social workers, educational psychologists, housing officers and housing officers from the RSL, I would be completely bemused. The chances are that some of the messages that these young people receive may be inconsistent. I am not saying that that is the case, but it would be almost impossible not to be inconsistent because of the number of different organisations and individuals involved in providing care.

[260] So, if we started to look at the issue seriously from the service user's perspective, what the service user probably wants is one key worker that can do all of the back office work behind the scenes, which the service user does not need to see. The service user just needs to build up trust and confidence in an approachable and accessible individual that will take them through the pathway. There are local and regional organisational barriers to that, and across other boundaries, but we must start there. If you break it down, traditionally we have not looked at how young people access our services, because outside of school they do not access many other local authority services until they run their own household or until they work. So, we must look at aspects such as the time when the services are available, their location and the type of contact in terms of who they talk to. They could talk to a housing options adviser at midnight, but I would bet that they would rather talk to someone else who could give much more rounded life advice, who would not necessarily be a housing options adviser. Services are difficult to use on occasion because of the sheer complexity involved—we are talking about people with very complex needs that we should not underestimate, and that is particularly difficult to deal with.

[261] The other side of the issue is that it is difficult to exit. If we look at aspects such as the lack of move-on accommodation, people can easily get stuck in the service when the best thing for them to do would be to move on and move out, because they have gained their independence. The last thing that we want to create is a dependency culture. If people continue in temporary accommodation and on support packages for too long, that could mean that we are working against ourselves in the long run. So, you are absolutely right; we need to look at it, but let us look at it from the service user's perspective.

[262] **Sandy Mewies:** We talked about bonds and rent levels, but rent levels often do not match the locality—they cannot. Is there an argument for paying the proper level of rent, which would mean a reduced number of people, I guess, entering the rented sector, but which would, perhaps, free up the other services? If we have people in permanent rented accommodation, it will free up the other services. Should we be looking hard at that?

[263] **Mr Staines:** The whole housing benefit process should be looked at, as should the whole subsidy process. Looking at that one element may be useful, but there is the much wider issue of how we subsidise people through public services.

[264] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you. Does anybody else want to come in quickly on this?

[265] **Ms Alleyne:** This goes back to one of the earlier points about making sure that these systems are simplified. These are crucial issues that children and young people's partnerships need to get to grips with. Through local service boards and local service agreements, suggestions are coming forward that we look at how that collaboration actually benefits, as Robin said, the service user in the end. I am aware that there are a number of young people who will be disillusioned and disappointed, but we need to compare that with those young people who go through the system and for whom it works. We need more people to come out the other end saying, 'That was good and that's what works'. That is what we need to drive; we need to find out what made a difference to those young people's lives so that we can re-engineer services, as Robin said, behind the scenes to ensure that an increasing number of people come out the other end who are not disillusioned, but whose needs have been met in the most appropriate way.

[266] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you very much indeed for your presentation. As I said, you will be sent all the stuff, and we really appreciate your views and comments this morning, which will form part of the report. Thank you, the three of you, for attending.

12.27 p.m.

[267] **Janice Gregory:** At this point, I say a big thank you to the three regional committees for undertaking evidence gathering for us. It was very useful information. I also thank those Members who undertook visits: I am most grateful to you for sparing the time to do that. That, again, provided really useful information and evidence for our policy review.

[268] **Leanne Wood:** I have more evidence, but I have a problem in terms of support staff at the moment. So, I have an awful lot of information that needs typing up so that I can prepare a substantial report.

[269] **Janice Gregory:** Okay. There have been certain issues with illness in the secretariat. A flu bug has been sweeping the country, and there are other issues. I will have a chat with you after to see if there is anything we can do.

[270] **Leanne Wood:** What is the absolute deadline for getting this information in to you? I know that the deadline has passed, but what is the absolute deadline? [*Laughter.*]

[271] **Janice Gregory:** Yes, 'the deadline' has passed, but 'the absolute deadline' is a completely different date. We are looking at the early part of next week; is that going to be a major problem for you?

[272] **Leanne Wood:** It is going to be difficult, but I will try to do something on Sunday.

[273] **Janice Gregory:** We will all get together and see whether we can come up with something; I am sure that we can. We are very clever at doing that, are we not?

[274] **Leanne Wood:** Thank you.

[275] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you all for everything that you have done. All I need to ask now is, now that the papers have been circulated to you all, are you all happy with what we have had so far? Are you happy that we accept them as part of our written evidence, notwithstanding the fact that more is to come from Leanne, which we will see next week? I see that we are all happy with that. Thank you very much; that concludes today's meeting. Our next meeting is on 18 January 2007. I know that Leanne hates this, but, compliments of the season to you all.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 12.29 p.m.
The meeting ended at 12.29 p.m.*