



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

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

**Dydd Mawrth, 29 Mehefin 2010
Tuesday, 29 June 2010**

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

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

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Helen Mary Jones	Plaid Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) The Party of Wales (Committee Chair)
Sandy Mewies	Llafur Labour
Nick Ramsay	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (yn dirprwyo ar ran Angela Burns) Welsh Conservatives (substitute for Angela Burns)
Joyce Watson	Llafur Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Roger Bishop	Ymddiriedolwr, Plant yng Nghymru Trustee, Children in Wales
Suzanne Chisholm	Pennaeth Hawliau Plant a Phobl Ifanc, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Head of Children and Young People's Rights, Welsh Assembly Government
Elin Gwynedd	Pennaeth y Gangen Cyfranogi ac Eiriolaeth, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Head of Participation and Advocacy Unit, Welsh Assembly Government
Huw Lewis	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur (y Dirprwy Weinidog dros Blant) Assembly Member, Labour (the Deputy Minister for Children)
Sean O'Neill	Cyfarwyddwr Polisi, Plant yng Nghymru Policy Director, Children in Wales
Keith Towler	Comisiynydd Plant Cymru Children's Commissioner for Wales

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Sarah Bartlett	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Sarah Hatherley	Gwasanaeth Ymchwil yr Aelodau Members' Research Service
Abigail Phillips	Clerc Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.14 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.14 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bore da, **Helen Mary Jones:** Good morning, gyfeillion. Croeso i bawb i gyfarfod y colleagues. I welcome everyone to this Pwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc. Hoffwn atgoffa meeting of the Children and Young People's pawb bod croeso ichi ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg Committee. I remind everyone that you are a'r Saesneg. Mae offer cyfieithu ar gael, a welcome to use Welsh and English.

gellir ei ddefnyddio hefyd i'ch helpu i glywed os oes angen. Gofynnaf i bawb ddiffodd unrhyw ffonau symudol, mwyar duon ac ati; nid yw'n ddigon i'w rhoi ar 'tawel' gan y byddai hynny'n golygu eu bod yn dal i amharu ar yr offer darlledu a sain.

Interpretation equipment is available, which can also be used to augment the sound if necessary. I ask everyone to switch off any mobile phones, BlackBerrys and so on; it is not sufficient to put them on 'silent' as they can still interfere with the broadcasting and sound.

[2] Nid ydym yn disgwyl ymarfer tân, felly os clywn larwm, bydd hynny'n golygu bod problem, a gofynnwn ichi ddilyn y tywyswyr a wnaiff ddangos y ffordd fwyaf diogel o'r adeilad.

We are not expecting a fire drill, therefore, if we do hear an alarm, it will mean that there is a problem, and I would ask you to follow the ushers, who will show you how to exit the building safely.

[3] Gofynnaf i Aelodau ddatgan unrhyw fuddiannau o dan Reol Sefydlog Rhif 31. Gwelaf nad oes unrhyw ddatganiadau o'r fath.

I ask Members to make any declarations of interest under Standing Order No. 31. I see that there are no such declarations.

[4] Yr ydym wedi cael ymddiheuriadau am absenoldeb oddi wrth Angela Burns. Diolch i Nick Ramsay, sydd wedi ymuno â ni yn ei lle.

We have received apologies for absence from Angela Burns. I thank Nick Ramsay, who is substituting for her.

[5] Welcome, Nick. I hope that you will enjoy the meeting.

9.15 a.m.

Dilyn Hynt yr Ymchwiliad i Wasanaethau Eiriolaeth ar gyfer Plant a Phobl Ifanc yng Nghymru

Follow-up on Inquiry into Advocacy Services for Children and Young People in Wales

[6] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bydd Aelodau yn cofio ein bod wedi penderfynu dychwelyd at y gwaith a wnaethom ar wasanaethau eiriolaeth. Croesawaf y Dirprwy Weinidog dros Blant, Huw Lewis, Elin Gwynedd, pennaeth yr adran, a Suzanne Chisholm. Diolch yn fawr am eich papur ac am eich presenoldeb heddiw. Gyda hynny, symudwn yn syth at y cwestiynau.

Helen Mary Jones: Members will remember that we have decided to go back to the work that we undertook on advocacy services. I welcome the Deputy Minister for Children, Huw Lewis, Elin Gwynedd, head of the unit, and Suzanne Chisholm. Thank you for your paper and for your presence today. With that, we shall now move straight to questions.

[7] In March 2008, the Welsh Government announced its new service framework for the future provision of advocacy services in Wales, which was to be implemented over a two-year period. So far, to what extent have developments and changes in advocacy provision had a positive impact on the lives of children and young people living in Wales?

[8] **The Deputy Minister for Children (Huw Lewis):** Some changes will take a little time yet. We are still discussing a work in progress, as we move towards a wholly different and better way of delivering advocacy services. The nationally recognised qualification, for instance, will take us some time to construct. However, there has been a huge leap forward with the launch of Meic, the national advocacy service and advice helpline for children and young people, which was launched in May. I think that I am right in saying that it is the first

of its kind at a national level. It gives young people and children a single point of contact via telephone, text and instant messaging. It is a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour service. Thus far, the feedback that we are getting is very positive from children and young people. It is being used, and we have some usage statistics, which are very positive. The inquiries range from very serious issues like homelessness, housing problems and issues about local youth services, to university difficulties, friends and family problems and the need for emotional support. We have also had contacts from children and young people just testing it out, reassuring themselves, I think, that it is actually there. It is there for them. There was a wonderful launch in Wrexham, where I saw, face to face, the enthusiasm that children and young people had for the service. The ways of communicating that children are so used to now hit a note immediately. I suppose that the biggest development since your last update is Meic.

[9] **Sandy Mewies:** Welcome to you, Deputy Minister. Thank you for answering that question. I am moving on slightly, but my question is still on advocacy. The committee has some concerns about the pace of change in commissioning advocacy services and their implementation. What are the reasons for the delay in implementing the model for the delivery of advocacy services in Wales?

[10] **Huw Lewis:** We got our advice out there very early. Some advisory guidance was issued in June 2009; so, everyone has been aware for 12 months of the shape of the advocacy model, and what was expected, and what the Assembly Government was working towards. There should be understanding across Wales of the changes that we need to implement to get what will be a consistent, high-quality service—consistency will be very important.

9.20 a.m.

[11] There have been issues beyond the control of the likes of me, with which we have to integrate ourselves and take account of. There are two main issues. The first is the reorganisation of the NHS—the establishment of the seven local health boards and the requirement upon them to arrange advocacy services through children and young people's plans. There is, as yet, no formal duty upon them in that regard, but the duty will move from the community health councils to the local health boards, which will work with the children and young people's partnerships. That piece of bureaucracy has not yet been worked through. So, there has been an issue with the NHS, but that was unavoidable.

[12] The second issue is the Education (Wales) Measure 2009 and the requirement for young people with special educational needs to have the option to access specialist advocacy. That piece of legislation has worked its way through the system and so we have had to take account of that change. However, the end point is arriving, because we will be issuing statutory guidance this year, which will draw a line under all of the conversations, developments, changes and all the rest of it. So, that statutory guidance will be out there during this calendar year.

[13] **Sandy Mewies:** Do you have a date for the statutory guidance? I also want to ask you whether the change to the Llandudno location has affected implementation.

[14] **Huw Lewis:** I visited the team shortly before the Llandudno move, and the poor dabs were doing a little bit of work out of cardboard boxes and so on. I am confident that there has been no perceptible problem with the move to Llandudno Junction and that it has gone smoothly.

[15] Elin, can you comment on the precise date of the statutory guidance?

[16] **Sandy Mewies:** It does not have to be the precise day, but perhaps the month.

[17] **Ms Gwynedd:** We are looking at the end of the summer and towards the autumn.

[18] **Eleanor Burnham:** Dechreuaf drwy eich atgoffa ein bod wedi cyhoeddi adroddiad ym Mawrth 2008 a'r ffaith bod pryder ynghylch y diffyg datblygiad ers hynny ar y mater pwysig hwn. Cododd y pwyllgor bryderon yn ei adroddiadau yn 2008 a 2009 ynghylch annibyniaeth darparwyr eiriolaeth. Pa warant y gallwch ei roi i'r pwyllgor, Ddirprwy Weinidog, y bydd y trefniadau comisiynu newydd yn sicrhau gwasanaeth hollol annibynnol?

Eleanor Burnham: I will start by reminding you that we published a report in March 2008 and that there is concern with regard to the lack of development since then on this important matter. The committee raised concerns in its reports in 2008 and 2009 regarding the independence for advocacy providers. What guarantees can you give the committee, Deputy Minister, that the new commissioning arrangements will deliver a fully independent service?

[19] **Huw Lewis:** I am aware of the committee's concerns on independence. It is quite right that we all focus on the independence of advocacy services. There have been subtly different views about how to set this up, but the national independent advocacy board, which consists of four adult professionals and four young people, is independent. It is quite a body of people and, if you have the time to meet them, I am sure that you would be enormously impressed. The board's job is to ensure independence across all aspects of what we are doing on this. We are commissioning, through children and young people's plans, on a regional and sub-regional basis, which is the nub of guaranteeing how independence operates best.

[20] It is the Assembly Government's belief that the local perspective is still important. So, we are taking a step back from front-line services through the advocacy board, but, at the same time, we are enabling ourselves to have a local perspective of what is going on, so that we take account of those real regional differences that we have across Wales. We all know that Wales is a country of stark differences across its various regions, and what goes on in the Rhondda is not necessarily the best fit for, say, Meirionnydd. Does Meirionnydd still exist?

[21] **Helen Mary Jones:** It does.

[22] **Eleanor Burnham:** It does in my mind.

[23] **Huw Lewis:** It is such a marvellous name; it should exist for ever. I know that there are different philosophical viewpoints on some aspects of how this works, but this is the model that is being rolled out at the moment. I am confident that the board is robust, it is certainly vocal, and it is able. The young people in particular who are taking part—and let us remember that they have had an input on how models should work all the way through this—are not going to let anything slip by them with regard to guaranteeing independence. We now have this grasp of local need together with a guarantee of independence with this model.

[24] **Helen Mary Jones:** Before I bring Eleanor in to ask the next question, I want to explore that with you a bit further. I have met the national board and 'robust' is absolutely the right word, but I am interested in the process. You will be aware from our report that young people were very clear with us that, in the end, they think 'I can't completely trust him because he is paid for by the same people who pay for my social worker'. That is still true, given that the children and young people's partnerships are largely made up of local authority representatives. Supposing that a complaint was made to the national board, say via the children's commissioner, that a particular young person in receipt of local authority social services in a particular county did not feel that their advocate was fully independent and was compromised or, because we also heard this in evidence, that advocates themselves found it difficult to be as challenging as they needed to be because they felt compromised—of course, this is under the old arrangements, Deputy Minister, and I am not saying that this would happen now—what would the process be whereby the board could intervene? Or would it be

a question of the board making a report to you and you intervening?

[25] I can quite see how the national board and the national standards constitute a robust framework, and I can see how there is a clear expectation, once it becomes a statutory framework, that it must be delivered on. However, what happens if a children and young people's partnership thinks it is delivering an independent service and the advocacy board comes to a view that it is not? What do we do?

[26] **Huw Lewis:** The board reports to me, so there is this national backstop or safety net, which, ultimately, is me. We also have that national coverage safety net through Meic. Built into the system we also have the right of a young person at any point to change their advocate without any questions or quibbles. So, there is a no-quibble guarantee, if you like. With regard to reporting from the children's commissioner, individual children and young people or from the board itself, although, of course, we cannot completely predict what will happen in future, we have safeguards. So, there is a national safety net through Meic, the backstop of the Deputy Minister or Minister and the right built in for a young person to change their advocate at any point, just like that, if that is what they feel is necessary. So, I think that we have a system that would deal with most circumstances that might be predictable.

[27] **Helen Mary Jones:** With regard to the young person's right to change their advocate, that clearly means that they can choose a different person, but can they choose a different service?

[28] **Huw Lewis:** A service in what sense?

[29] **Helen Mary Jones:** I am thinking about what would happen if the young person's concern was not about the individual advocate, but the independence of the service as a whole. Some of the young people we spoke to were not complaining about the advocate as an individual; they were saying that they were not convinced that the set-up was robust. In such a case, which I am sure would be a very unusual circumstance, would they have the capacity to say that they were not happy with anyone who worked for that service and that they needed somebody else?

[30] **Huw Lewis:** I think I will have to turn to my officials to answer that.

[31] **Helen Mary Jones:** It is a detail, but protecting independence for the young person is quite an important bit of detail.

[32] **Huw Lewis:** I understand.

9.30 a.m.

[33] **Ms Gwynedd:** It would depend on local commissioning arrangements, but we would hope that local commissioning arrangements might be commissioning more than one advocacy provider at the same time to provide enough advocacy expertise to deal with any issues that the child might have. So, that might be possible in very extreme situations.

[34] **Helen Mary Jones:** Yes, and I am positing a very unlikely set of circumstances here, but not an impossible one.

[35] **Ms Chisholm:** As you have raised it, it is something that we can look to include in the statutory guidance.

[36] **Helen Mary Jones:** And I suppose that that would be easier where there are regional arrangements rather than purely local ones. Thank you; I think that it was worth going into

that in a little detail.

[37] **Eleanor Burnham:** Nid wyf yn siŵr a ydych yn teimlo eich bod wedi ateb y cwestiwn hwn eisoes, ond fe'i gofynnaf eto rhag ofn. Sut y bydd barn y defnyddwyr, sef plant a phobl ifanc, yn eich barn chi yn cael ei ddefnyddio i asesu a sicrhau ansawdd yr annibyniaeth hon, a hefyd sicrhau cysondeb a bod yn adnabyddus i blant a phobl ifanc? Y pwynt diwethaf yw un o'r pethau pwysig. Yr ydych chi'n sôn am alluogi pobl i newid, ond yr ydych yn delio â phobl fregus, a phobl sydd heb gymwysterau i fynd allan i edrych am bobl eraill os yw'r sefyllfa y cyfeiriodd y Cadeirydd ato yn codi. Dyna un o'r pryderon, sef nad yw pobl wastad yn gallu cael pwy maent eisiau i weinyddu'r gwasanaeth i'w siwtio nhw.

Eleanor Burnham: I am not sure whether you feel that you have already answered this question, but I will ask it again in case you do not. How will the views of users, namely children and young people, in your opinion be used to assess and quality-assure this independence, and also ensure that it is consistent and recognisable to children and young people? That last point is one of the important issues. You are talking about enabling people to change, but you are dealing with vulnerable people and people who do not have the qualifications to look for other people if the situation that the Chair referred to arises. That is one of the concerns, namely that people cannot always get the people they want to administer the service to suit them.

[38] **Huw Lewis:** If you go back to the advocacy model, which is laid out in five sections, one of those is very much about evaluation, and another places a very central emphasis upon involving children and young people themselves. We have a commitment to inspect the advocacy services for vulnerable children particularly, and young people, and that evaluation will be underpinned by the national advocacy standards. So, that entire quality guarantee is built into the machinery of how this will work. Am I getting to the nub of what you asked?

[39] **Eleanor Burnham:** Yes.

[40] **Helen Mary Jones:** On the point about the involvement of children and young people, presumably that is clear at a national level, namely that the board itself is 50:50. Will there be arrangements locally to ensure that children and young people are involved in the commissioning process?

[41] **Huw Lewis:** The children and young people's partnerships are an integral part of this, and the input and advice of children and young people is there both in respect of delivery and commissioning. So, that is built into the system.

[42] **Eleanor Burnham:** However, how will youngsters who are perhaps not involved with the children and young people's partnership—because not everybody is and not every area is involved—find out about these wonderful services that we are hoping to provide for them?

[43] **Huw Lewis:** We are working hard on raising awareness. The launch itself was something quite special given the innovative ways in which it undertook to get the message out there. A great deal of this will ripple out as the advocacy work of operations like Meic for instance becomes better known among young people themselves. However, we will continue to invest in that awareness-raising across the board.

[44] **Eleanor Burnham:** Will it involve organisations such as the NSPCC?

[45] **Helen Mary Jones:** The voluntary organisations are involved through the children and young people's partnerships.

[46] **Joyce Watson:** Good morning, Deputy Minister. I will ask a question on the specialist integrated advocacy services that you said would be planned and commissioned by the children and young people's partnerships. How confident are you that the children and young people's partnerships will be in a position to take forward the commissioning of advocacy on a regional or sub-regional basis by the end of this year?

[47] **Huw Lewis:** I have every reason to be confident. As I said, the advisory guidance first went out 12 months ago. There was a further update last October and another in March this year. The underlining and full stop of all this will be the issuing of the statutory guidance later this year. At that point, everyone should be more than aware of what is to be expected of them. There is variation across Wales in how far forward people have moved. For instance, children and young people's partnerships have undertaken an amount of work thus far. I am advised that every children and young people's partnership has started work—they are all working on the guidance, and they have all done preparatory work. However, no-one is going to be starting from a standing start when that statutory guidance is published. We are there to advise and support, and we will work hard to ensure that everyone meets this deadline. No-one should have the excuse that they do not know what they are working towards or that this is a surprise to them. Indeed, our feedback is that, across Wales, work is under way.

[48] **Helen Mary Jones:** Nick Ramsay has the next question. Thanks again for making time to be here today, Nick. It is much appreciated.

[49] **Nick Ramsay:** That is okay. It is always a pleasure to be on the Children and Young People's Committee.

[50] You have just mentioned the children and young people's partnerships, Deputy Minister. I want to ask you about the future of integration. Your paper notes that some children and young people's partnerships are already looking at ways in which they can work on a regional or sub-regional level. At the same time, you have said that there is no specific additional funding for the partnerships to enable the establishment of the consortia element of this. In its response to the committee's 2008 report, the Welsh Government said that many of the children and young people's partnerships had expressed an interest in developing future advocacy services in collaboration with neighbouring CYP partnerships. What do you believe are the next steps, given that there is no funding for that element, and given that you see a change in the development of the regional level? What balance do you see in the next steps of developing the integration of advocacy services?

[51] **Huw Lewis:** Funding is built into the allocation of money that the children and young people's partnerships receive, and advocacy is built into the core funding that they receive. The next big step, as I have mentioned, is the statutory guidance, which consolidates everything, and brings everything to a termination with the timescales. There is an expectation on us all now that we will get on with running the service and monitoring its outcomes. I hope that that answers your question.

[52] **Nick Ramsay:** So, the statutory guidance is the most important aspect of it.

[53] **Huw Lewis:** Yes, that is the next bit.

[54] **Helen Mary Jones:** Joyce Watson has the next question.

[55] **Joyce Watson:** The Children's Commissioner for Wales has highlighted the importance of not losing focus on the more vulnerable groups of children and young people, who have a statutory entitlement to an advocacy service under current legislation. We know that they are all vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others. What is your response to the commissioner's concern?

[56] **Huw Lewis:** The children's commissioner is right to stress the importance of the issue of vulnerable children and young people. We must guard against losing focus on those groups of young people, at all points. Built into the model—which, as I say, is the bible for how this system will operate—are five elements. One of them concentrates entirely on the needs of vulnerable groups. Therefore, we will not lose focus on these groups of children and young people. Indeed, I believe that this model will be an enormous step forward for more vulnerable children and young people. We will have made it a great deal easier for them, compared with the systems that existed in the past. That is not to say that we now have a piece of paper that will deliver a perfect experience for all children across the country, and the commissioner is right to ensure that we remain vigilant about how things pan out for those groups of people. My role will be key in this. Any inspection regime and evaluations that we will undertake along the way will have to maintain a clear focus on the most vulnerable in particular.

9.40 a.m.

[57] **Helen Mary Jones:** This question is almost the opposite side of the coin to Joyce's question. In your view, in the light of financial pressures on local authorities and the fact that the financial situation is quite different from what it was when the model was first being developed, is there a real risk that local authorities will focus on meeting their statutory obligations for advocacy services under the current legislation, and would therefore place the provision of universal access to advocacy in the 'if we have any money left' box?

[58] **Huw Lewis:** I will not sit here and pretend that there is no financial risk. What I can say is that we have a cast-iron commitment for 2010-11. Some £0.75 million has gone into Meic, but everyone out there should be resourced sufficiently at the moment to be able to deliver universal access to advocacy. What transpires over time depends on what the UK Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and local government do. No Assembly Member, including me, can guarantee anything beyond May next year in relation to financial pressures.

[59] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you; that was a very frank answer. To bring us back to something that you do have control over, to what extent will statutory guidance, which will provide the legislative framework for advocacy—we have mentioned this a few times today—help to ensure that advocacy for all children and young people is part of the statutory framework?

[60] **Huw Lewis:** The universality of what we are doing is central to it. The launch of Meic is a demonstration of that commitment. It is universally accessible, in Welsh and English, by all groups of children and young people across the country. The advocacy model is the document that guarantees universal access for all children and young people. So, the commitment is cast-iron and solid.

[61] **Helen Mary Jones:** Eleanor has the next question.

[62] **Eleanor Burnham:** A symud ymlaen ychydig, yr ydych wedi cyfeirio amryw o weithiau at Meic, ac yr ydych newydd gyfeirio at y swm yr ydych wedi ei fuddsoddi, sef £0.75 miliwn, er mwyn sicrhau bod y gwasanaeth am ddim a bod digon o eiriolwyr proffesiynol ac annibynnol ar gael. Bydd hynny'n wych, os bydd yn gweithio, yn enwedig o ystyried y ffaith y

Eleanor Burnham: Moving on a little, you have referred several times to Meic, and you have just referred to the sum of £0.75 million that you have invested to make sure that that service is free of charge and that enough professional and independent advocates are available. That will be excellent, if it works, especially as it will be available to children and young people 24 hours a day. To what

bydd ar gael i bobl ifanc drwy'r dydd a'r nos. I ba raddau y mae manylion y gwasanaeth yn gwarantu'r safonau hyn? Sut y bydd y fframwaith canlyniad ar gyfer eiriolaeth yn crynhoi llwyddiant Meic wrth ddarparu'r gwasanaethu hyn?

extent does the service specification guarantee these standards? How will the outcome framework for advocacy encapsulate the success of Meic in delivering these services?

[63] **Huw Lewis:** I am sorry for banging on about Meic.

[64] **Eleanor Burnham:** I hope that he is a nice person. *[Laughter.]*

[65] **Huw Lewis:** He is cutting a dash thus far. That allocation of £750,000, which has been made in very tough times, has moved us on to the 24/7 service provision, which young people lobbied for. The 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week service has come about because of the demand from children and young people, which has now been met. I hope that that demonstrates my commitment to making that service specification a reality.

[66] There has been a rigorous procurement process in awarding the contract for Meic, which will be a three-year contract. It is based on the provision of a bespoke service that is free, that is available 24 hours a day and seven days a week, and that will ensure the availability of independent and professional advice in Welsh and English. We will, of course, evaluate the service independently. So, we have demonstrated through our actions that we are going for this in its entirety, in its fullest sense. There is no pulling back from the commitment to provide a bespoke service or to the universal access that we have been talking about.

[67] **Eleanor Burnham:** However, we have only about 10 months until the next elections. Bearing in mind that it has taken so long to come this far, is all the work going to be speeded up to ensure that everything is in place before we depart at the end of March? That is exactly what we want to know, is it not?

[68] **Huw Lewis:** Yes. All the indications are that it will. As I said, the statutory guidance will go out at the end of the summer or the beginning of the autumn this year. All Welsh Assembly Government commitments will have been made by then. We should have a fully functioning service. We already have a fully functioning national service through Meic. After next May, of course, all things depend on the will of the people. There is a question hanging in the air for all political parties in Wales about what they will take to the electorate with regard to guarantees on advocacy services for children from next May onwards. There will be the question of political will and of seeking the democratic permission of the Welsh people.

[69] **Helen Mary Jones:** In fairness to you, Deputy Minister, although we are a fairly unreasonable committee, we do not expect you to make commitments regarding what will happen at a time when you might not be the Deputy Minister. What happens after the elections is a question for all of us, and perhaps an interesting message that we as committee members can take back to our own political parties is that, if we want to ensure that this carries on, ideally, we would like to see that commitment in everybody's manifesto, because that is the only way to guarantee it.

[70] **Nick Ramsay:** I will now move on to training programmes for advocates. In its 2008 report, the committee recommended that arrangements for the provision of a training programme for advocates within a portfolio of recognised skills should be established, and the Welsh Government accepted that. What assurances can you give the committee that the necessary resources will be made available to safeguard the longevity of the training programme for front-line staff and to provide advocates with continuous professional development? We know that there are pressures at the moment, but my focus is really on the front line, so how can you guarantee that front-line staff will not bear the brunt of any cuts?

[71] **Huw Lewis:** As I said, crystal balls aside with regard to what will transpire after the next Assembly elections, we have begun this process by funding the training of 20 advocacy providers, who are not there just to absorb the training and then deliver the service, but to become trainers themselves and to cascade that training within their own organisations. So, that is the commitment that has been made to date.

[72] **Joyce Watson:** I have a short, perhaps more probing, question on this. I know that you are all aware that I have produced a report on the trafficking of women and children. We are talking about continuous professional development, delivering a service to people and knowing what you are talking about. That is clearly what we are saying here. Deputy Minister, could you please somehow ask the question—because you are in the ideal position to do so—of those people who are administering advice or advocacy services to some of the most vulnerable people, and trafficked children are some of those most vulnerable people, what levels of understanding and training they have? My initial inquiry into this does not demonstrate anything that fills me with absolute confidence in this field.

[73] **Helen Mary Jones:** So, you want to know whether people will be trained to be aware of the issues of trafficking and the issues that children might face.

[74] **Joyce Watson:** Yes, absolutely. If they do not understand what it is they are talking about—and I am not convinced that they do—how on earth are they going to advocate on behalf of the people they are supposed to be speaking up for?

9.50 a.m.

[75] **Huw Lewis:** Chair, I am well aware of the tremendous work that Joyce has done on raising the profile of this issue. It is one of the most valuable contributions that Joyce, through the committee, and the committee itself can make to how we continue that. We are all concerned about the ongoing improvement of what we are providing. This is not a model that has been set in stone, which we will roll out this year and will never change. Joyce has hit upon an issue that needs more work and, in line with a great many of the recommendations that have come from your committee—both formally through reports, and through conversations such as these—this is a piece of work that we need to take away and think about and we need to work with the committee now in ensuring that we plug this gap. If there are gaps, they need to be plugged. The purpose of my sitting here is not just for committee members to make me extraordinarily nervous on a Tuesday morning—as committee appearances always do—but to learn. I know that Joyce has done good work that points to problems here, and we have to pick them up.

[76] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, we very much appreciate that, Deputy Minister.

[77] **Joyce Watson:** Moving on to inspection and regulation, assuming that we have got it all right and that everybody knows what they are doing, we have to inspect it. The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales may have a role here. What will that role be in the regulation and inspection of advocacy and what will be the role of other inspection bodies such as Healthcare Inspectorate Wales and Estyn?

[78] **Huw Lewis:** To be perfectly upfront and honest, I do not have a fixed view yet on inspection. Again, the committee's input will be valuable, as will as input from the children's commissioner and others. CSSIW has been working with the advocacy unit on how the model has been constructed. National standards would be the basis for any inspection that we undertake. In considering the best way of taking this forward, there are alternatives. As yet, I do not have a fixed view of what will be the role of CSSIW, Healthcare Inspectorate Wales or other bodies. This is a piece of work that we have to complete relatively quickly. We must

meet people's expectations of clarity on this. We must have the input of children and young people themselves to make this as robust as I hope that the preceding work has been. I would value the input of the committee into how we push forward the inspection regime and make that clear for everyone.

[79] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, Deputy Minister. One thing that we could do is to put that point about inspection to other witnesses during this short inquiry. That may assist you in coming to a conclusion.

[80] The final question is from me. The Welsh Government has made a commitment that advocacy providers will be regulated and registered. Can you assure the committee that these new regulatory arrangements will be in place by 2011?

[81] **Huw Lewis:** That is the aim. There will be a new qualification in independent professional advocacy, which will be a level 3 qualification. Again, that is a Welsh first and something of which we can be proud. We would expect those people to register with a professional body. The advocacy unit is in discussions about how that registration would take place, but the timescale that the unit has been given by me is for this to be sorted out by 2011.

[82] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you very much, Deputy Minister, and thank you all for your evidence and for being here today. As committee Chair, I paid a visit to the north of Ireland last week. Whatever concerns this committee may have about the amount of time that it is taking to get these advocacy arrangements in place, and our ongoing concerns about independence, people in the children's sector in Northern Ireland were telling me that they have yet to convince some of their politicians that children have rights and need advocacy to access them. So whatever concerns we may have, it is fair for the committee to congratulate the Welsh Government on getting this far; it is in sharp contrast to what people working in the children's sector over the water are experiencing, and they are looking to us as a good example.

[83] **Huw Lewis:** Thank you, Chair. I stress that the work of this committee has also been central to the way that things have developed.

[84] **Helen Mary Jones:** Diolch yn fawr i chi, Ddirprwy Weinidog. Yr ydym yn symud ymlaen at y sesiwn nesaf, ac yr wyf yn croesawu hen ffrind i'r pwyllgor hwn, Keith Towler, Comisiynydd Plant Cymru, i'r bwrdd. Diolch i ti unwaith eto, Keith, am wneud amser i fod gyda ni.

Helen Mary Jones: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister. We now move on to the next session, and I welcome an old friend of this committee, Keith Towler, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, to the table. Thank you once again, Keith, for finding the time to join us.

[85] We are very glad to see you again. Thank you for coming.

[86] **Mr Towler:** It is good to be here.

[87] **Helen Mary Jones:** We will go straight to questions, if that is okay with you. In your original response, you expressed a number of concerns about the Welsh Government's new service framework for the future provision of advocacy services in Wales. Can you tell us about any specific or ongoing concerns that you have in relation to the direction that is being taken?

[88] **Mr Towler:** I am glad to do so, and I thank you for the opportunity to come before you. I have only just discovered that this is a memorable day, not only because you are doing what you are doing but because it is a memorable birthday for the Government, so many happy returns. The concerns that I had, which I have heard you discussing with the Deputy

Minister, were around independence, a lack of commissioning guidance and what you were just touching on in relation to inspection criteria. I heard most of what the Deputy Minister had to say this morning, and it is fair to say that these are early days—we are still moving forward on something that is exciting and groundbreaking, as you quite rightly pointed out. However, I think that a sense of urgency is needed; a lot of the focus has been on the establishment of Meic, for very good reasons, but as we discuss things this morning there may be other things that should be considered. I do not think that the Government has lost sight of those things, but some urgency is required.

[89] To give you a flavour of those issues, we need to look at defining what we mean by universal, as I still have that in the back of my mind. Work is still required on clarifying entitlement, particularly in relation to children whom we describe as being children in need. Also, there is the issue of whether we are absolutely confident that we have the provision in place to meet demand. On the question of independence, I remember sitting before this committee and saying that you cannot have degrees of independence: something is either independent or it is not. I have come to the conclusion that we are where we are, and we just need to deliver something. One concern that I had when I became the commissioner two years ago was that I was not getting answers—I still do not have them—to the question of what a map of advocacy provision in Wales would look like. I still do not know where the specialist provision is, or where the gaps are geographically, and we should all know by now what the position is on those things. My position on independence has not changed—you cannot have grades of independence—but there is a need to sharpen things up and to have a sense of urgency. However, I have become rather pragmatic about it; we just need to get things moving. Does that help?

[90] **Helen Mary Jones:** Yes, it does. Do you still have concerns about whether the new framework will deliver a service that will be perceived to be independent by vulnerable young people who have had a lot of contact with the system and may not like it very much?

10.00 a.m.

[91] **Mr Towler:** I do. When you were having a discussion earlier on in which you posited a series of ‘what if’ questions about where a young person would go, I was sitting there and thinking that the bottom line is that they would come to the children’s commissioner. If all else fails—if the advocacy provision is not available, or a child is completely confused—the bottom line is that they should come to the office of the children’s commissioner, but I hope that that there would not be a need for that to happen. It would be foolhardy to say that it would not; that absolute backstop position has to be there. I still meet children in the looked-after system who are a bit confused about where they might go for advice and help. I heard the Deputy Minister talk about marketing, and he is right about raising awareness. However, that job of ensuring that children and young people understand that a service is available to them is never done. So, I have concerns about this. Children and young people—and we have rehearsed this—do not get the credit that they deserve for understanding issues. There is no mileage at all in people thinking that children would not understand the distinction between what is independent and what is not. Children have an innate sense of social justice. If something is not independent, they will be able to say so. If someone is being compromised, giving them awful advice or not presenting their views, they will know it. If they are not getting resolution on those issues, they should be able to come to the children’s commissioner, and I would hope that those kinds of arrangements would always be in place. Therefore, I suspect that the answer to your question is, ‘No, I do not think so’.

[92] Regarding the guidance that we are all waiting for in the autumn, it presents a real challenge for the children and young people’s partnerships. I do not mean to demean what they are attempting to do. I think that they understand what the issues are, and that they are working within the parameters that have been set. Everybody has been striving to ensure that

the service is as independent of influence as it can possibly be and will be delivered for children in the way that they would expect. However, your question has to be answered in the negative.

[93] **Helen Mary Jones:** Joyce, I believe that you wanted to ask a supplementary question.

[94] **Joyce Watson:** Yes, I wish to probe this a bit further. If we say that children know about their rights, in this case their rights to advocacy, local government, through social services, will be delivering those rights in the main. My understanding is that you have children's champions, older people's champions and equalities champions in the political leadership of local authorities. Are you aware—because I am not—of any of those champions extolling young people's rights and ensuring that young people are aware of these rights at a local level? There is little point in having champions for this, that and the other if they do not do any championing. Are you aware of a system that is in place whereby those political leaders try to ensure that the people for whom they are corporate parents know about their rights?

[95] **Mr Towler:** I can say, hand on heart, that I have met champions who have such a personal commitment that they make this their business. You asked whether there is a system in place to ensure this; I have not seen that. However, I have seen very good champions that articulate really well locally what their role is, what rights-based practice is all about, how they can challenge things, what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says and what the role of the commissioner is. I am sure that that is not just because I am there; the point is too well-argued and they are too imbued in that way of working for that to be the case. I could list five or six people, off the top of my head, about whom I feel quite confident. As to whether there is a system in place, I have not seen that.

[96] **Joyce Watson:** Do you think that it is worth considering?

[97] **Mr Towler:** I think that it is worth considering. Being a champion with responsibility for children, older people or whatever comes with a series of responsibilities. It is not just a badge that you wear and say, 'Oh yeah, you are the children's commissioner and I am the champion for children'. It is more than that, and I have seen people who have grabbed that opportunity and made it their business to do so. It is brilliant to see that. However, I do not think that that is universal.

[98] **Sandy Mewies:** Good morning. Children in Wales has raised concerns over the pace of change in commissioning advocacy services and their implementation. I asked the Deputy Minister some questions about this earlier, and he told us that statutory guidance would be in place by the end of the summer. What do you understand to be the reasons for the delay in taking matters forward?

[99] **Mr Towler:** There has been a delay. I heard the Deputy Minister talk about the health reorganisation and the Education (Wales) Measure 2009, but, nevertheless there was advisory guidance. I do not sense that children and young people's partnerships have been sitting on their hands entirely. They have been doing what they can to prepare. There is nearly always a kind of disconnect between Government and local government, with local government saying, 'If you give us the guidance, we cannot really do anything until we know the colour of your money'. Therefore, you get that kind of trade-off between the local and national levels. It happens all the time. However, I do not sense that people are hiding deliberately behind that. I have concerns over the regional specialist model and I do not understand how it is moving forward. I do not really yet see how that is all panning out. I suppose that the bottom line is that the Meic development is a really positive one. As children and young people engage with Meic and, as the Deputy Minister referred to earlier, they are testing it out, wondering

whether there is really anyone at the end of the line, it has to be a positive experience, which has to be backed up with local delivery. Getting that to move smoothly in a short period of time is a complex task. In a sense, the delay is almost inevitable because you have the ambition and not meeting the practical tasks, but I am kind of comfortable with that. However, I still think—and I suppose that it takes us back to the top of this—that it is a matter of the urgency with which we are moving on it. I was grateful to hear the Deputy Minister say that he agreed with the concern that I was registering about vulnerable groups. As I said the last time that I appeared before you, this is the tenth anniversary of the Waterhouse report. There have been 10 years since Waterhouse talked about looked-after children, advocacy and their voice. Can we, hand on heart, say, ‘Just for looked-after children’? No, we cannot. That is not great, In fact, that is poor.

[100] On the understanding, there is that tension between the local and national level. I think that people at a local level and the partnerships are working really hard. We may have gone through the health reorganisation, but I really cannot see how the regional stuff is progressing. I think that advocacy providers are confused and worried about what the commissioning arrangements will look like, and what their futures are. Many third-sector providers will hope that they will still be in existence by the time that the commissioning arrangements come through. So, there are a number of tensions at a number of levels, all of which probably exacerbate the issues around delay.

[101] **Sandy Mewies:** In view of what you have said, and you have explained a lot of the positive aspects, can you say anything else about whether children and young people’s services and access to advocacy has improved over the last few years?

[102] **Mr Towler:** I think that the answer to that is ‘yes’. Things have improved. We can get more confidence from that. Inevitably, you focus on those things that need to be better, and improve upon them. However, we should not lose sight of the progress that we have made, and there are some very good advocacy providers out there doing a really good job. Because they do a good job, and because they are so concerned, we have that kind of debate about the quality of services that are provided, what an inspection regime should look like, how the partnerships have been supported, and what the commissioning arrangements will be. Things have certainly improved, but there are still a lot of children and young people who are sat listening to this debate and think, ‘What on earth are you talking about?’. Some of them would be vulnerable and some of them would be those that we would expect to access a universal service. In other words, there would be quite a number of children and young people—like my own daughter, for example—who would have precious little idea of what we are discussing here, apart from the fact that she knows that I am the children’s commissioner. It does not really touch her in her life, but she should know about this. We have made some progress, but there is still a way to go.

10.10 a.m.

[103] **Eleanor Burnham:** Yr ydych yn datgan yn eich tystiolaeth fod yr arfer o brynu yn ôl y galw ar gynnydd. Pa gamau sydd angen eu cymryd i fynd i’r afael â’r materion sy’n gysylltiedig â phrynu yn ôl y galw ac er mwyn sicrhau na chaiff plant sy’n hawdd eu niweidio eu gadael heb gymorth eiriolaeth? **Eleanor Burnham:** You state in your evidence that the practice of spot purchasing is on the increase. What action is needed to address the issues associated with spot purchasing and to ensure vulnerable children are not left without advocacy support?

[104] **Mr Towler:** I have a concern about spot purchasing.

[105] **Eleanor Burnham:** Before you continue, would you care to remind anyone who is watching or listening what you mean by ‘spot purchasing’?

[106] **Mr Towler:** Spot purchasing is when a child is identified as needing an advocacy service and a commissioning agent, a local authority, comes to you as a provider and purchases an advocacy service for that child.

[107] **Eleanor Burnham:** Is that a one-off?

[108] **Mr Towler:** Yes. Good advocacy for children and young people is built on an ongoing relationship of trust. Children and young people can fall out and subsequently be unhappy with their advocate and want to change their advocate, so it must be about a relationship of trust, because we are expecting those children and young people to say to an advocate, 'That is how I feel and what I think is going on, and this is what I want to say'. That is a huge responsibility. So, it could be a case of an advocate turning up and saying, 'Hi, I'm your advocate; we've not met before', and the professional will do his or her best. However, that can be a difficult position for a child or young person to be in.

[109] So, the difficulty with spot purchasing is that, if it becomes just a telephone number on a wall, to be called or texted when in trouble, and where there is no relationship of trust, then I am a bit confused as to the extent to which children and young people would have the confidence to use such a telephone number, or feel that the service that they were receiving was a good one. While you can understand, in the current economic climate, that it may be cheaper to spot purchase, there are big questions as to the quality, trust and outcomes that children and young people would have.

[110] **Sandy Mewies:** I want to turn what you just said on its head. There are some very good advocacy services, but do you think that they are too fragmented, given that there are so many of them? There are two sides to this story: there is what the Welsh Government wants to achieve, which is a universal advocacy service, and what is provided. So, what should that advocacy service look like and what should the industry do?

[111] **Mr Towler:** That is probably for Howard Williamson's national independent advocacy board to consider. With regard to what I would like to see within the board's work programme going forward—and I hope to have an opportunity to meet it soon—one of the things that I will suggest, which you may also want to consider, is that the board sets up a directory or map of advocacy provision for children and young people in Wales. Not only should the board establish what that is, but it should oversee its development as advocacy providers come and go. Someone must take a Wales-wide view of how this fits in and works, which is about specialist provision and universal provision.

[112] Advocacy providers should be able to go to the board in relation to how their service fits. To be fair to providers, I realised when I met with the all-Wales children and young people's advocacy providers group when I became the children's commissioner that I was asking an unfair question. After seeing what the map of provision looked like, I asked what service it was providing in x and why it was providing a certain service. That was an unfair question, because a smaller or larger organisation may have been looking at how it provided advocacy. There is a task for the board in ensuring that the provision that we make is up to the job and has the kind of coverage that we want it to have. That is an ongoing monitoring role and I think that Howard's board is the place for that to happen. They can then advise Ministers when they have concerns.

[113] **Sandy Mewies:** Those were the issues that I wanted to explore.

[114] **Helen Mary Jones:** We might want to make a recommendation to the Deputy Minister about that.

[115] **Mr Towler:** That would be helpful.

[116] **Eleanor Burnham:** To take that a step further, when you go to see a GP for example, or go anywhere, you should be able to see where you need to go if you want to access an advocacy service, because not everyone has been involved with the children and young people's partnership.

[117] **Mr Towler:** The other issue that we have not touched on is asylum-seeking children and young people. Their situation can be incredibly confusing for a number of reasons, but that right of entitlement will not be apparent to them unless someone takes the initiative.

[118] **Eleanor Burnham:** We must also consider Traveller children.

[119] **Helen Mary Jones:** There is also the point that Joyce raised about children who have been trafficked, who are some of the most vulnerable and those are the ones who need the clearest information.

[120] **Nick Ramsay:** My question ties in with what you said about the need for a universal coming together of all the local services, which was fascinating. The Government clearly has, in principle, an idea for a universal, seamless service. I asked Huw Lewis about current budget constraints. How do you perceive that the squeeze on local budgets together with an increased demand for statutory advocacy services will play together? Do you think that this ambition of a universal statutory service will ultimately lose out because of budgeting problems?

[121] **Mr Towler:** There is a risk of that and Huw acknowledged the risk. There are similarities to be drawn in relation to advocacy and how we started the discussion about children's participation all those years ago. One thing that we began to think about was that a teacher, a police officer or anyone could be an advocate. On universal provision of advocacy and of workforce development, we may be missing a trick if we think about universal advocacy being a professional specialism. So, in other words, what I am trying to say is that we were at risk, with the participation agenda for children and young people, of having a concern about children's voices to the extent that we would put in place participation officers whose job it would be, on anyone's behalf, to meet and discuss things with children and young people whereas, in fact, every profession should be able to have some kind of relationship with a child or young person and understand what they are saying and how they want to say it.

[122] On universal advocacy, I do not mean that teachers and others do not need to understand what the role is and how that should be taken forward, but we do not need an additional workforce or an additional line of resource that should confuse what a teacher could do in speaking up on behalf of a child or what a youth worker or anyone could do with the right support. So, I accept that there is the issue about risk and there will be an inevitable squeeze, thinking about statutory obligations and ensuring that things are in place. Local authorities will be mindful of the fact that they have a commissioner and a Government that will be on their backs if statutory entitlement to advocacy is not delivered. I would expect them to be able to prove that those services are in place, but I do not think that it necessarily has to be at the expense of universal provision.

[123] **Nick Ramsay:** Setting aside your pragmatism, which you spoke about earlier, you said that you had moved on this issue. Are you still sceptical? Do you question the whole way in which this is being approached? As you say, if you have police and teachers and so on, those people are probably recognised more by a family at the moment, so are you questioning the whole basis of this advocacy service?

[124] **Mr Towler:** No, I think that the advocacy service is needed, but my pragmatism boils down to the fact that I want it to be delivered. I have a view that we are where we are and we all know what the arguments are and the debate about independence. I have not changed my position on what would happen in an ideal world, but I am very clear about the fact that children and young people are still not receiving what we would call a good advocacy service, because they do not know that it exists. That can be the case for some vulnerable children and young people, too. There is no complacency on the part of my office or me on that either. A lot of children and young people still do not know about the children's commissioner or the fact that they can get in touch with me, and should do if they do not know how to find their way to the poster on the wall that tells them about Meic. If they come to my office, we should be able to respond to them. We still have a job to do on that.

10.20 a.m.

[125] I have a pragmatic view that we just need to deliver this. My patience is about ensuring that, if you hold your follow-up next year, we will then be able to say that it is not early days, that we can see how it is working, and that children and young people have confidence in it. However, at the moment, apart from the early indications, it is still far too soon to say. That is where my frustration lies.

[126] **Joyce Watson:** Following on the same sort of theme, is there a real risk that the quality of services, in particular the ability of services to offer a choice of advocate, could be undermined by local budget cuts? If so, do you think that it is a serious issue in relation to what children and young people might expect?

[127] **Mr Towler:** We have not really rehearsed the issue of quality yet. I take your point that there are some very good advocacy providers out there, and, in the discussion that you had with the Deputy Minister just now, you talked about inspection and standards, namely how we know what a good advocacy service looks like. There are big questions about quality that we need to be comfortable with and clear about. Advocacy providers are looking for that themselves. That is the expectation of how they should deliver, with good-quality standards, and they will have a lot to contribute to that debate, but we do not talk about quality a lot.

[128] In talking about quality—although you would expect me to say this—children and young people's feedback on the quality of that service, their confidence in it, and whether it is able to do what it says on the tin are critical. I hear good and positive information about how the board is working, with that 50:50 split between children and young people, and adults. I would like to see that mirrored across commissioning arrangements. Is that pie in the sky? I do not think that it should be. Children and young people should get involved in those things; they can get involved in those things and work with adults on those arrangements. However, we have yet to have a debate on quality.

[129] **Helen Mary Jones:** I will bring Nick in briefly, but I ask the witness and Members to be aware that we have several questions that we want to get through and about 15 minutes left in this session. However, I am happy for there to be a supplementary question.

[130] **Nick Ramsay:** On that point, the Deputy Minister was open about wanting feedback on the monitoring framework. Do you think that enough work has been done so far on the monitoring? Should that be factored in at this stage, rather than setting up the board and then looking at that afterwards?

[131] **Mr Towler:** I am not entirely sure that we have cracked this. It was interesting that Huw was very open about that, was he not? The Deputy Minister was saying that we have more work to do, and that he recognises that. I do not think that we are factoring that in sufficiently well. To be honest, I completely understand why, but the focus has been so much

on getting Meic sorted out that a whole load of other things are still on the to-do list. That is my point about the urgency of some of this. I am pleased that the Meic initiative is in place, but there is very much more that needs to be done and delivered in relation to advocacy.

[132] **Helen Mary Jones:** Keith, do you have a view about where the inspection regime ought to sit or would you be able to give some consideration to that, because it is clear that the Deputy Minister does not have a settled view, so we have an opportunity to influence this?

[133] **Mr Towler:** We have not looked at that, as an office. Instinctively, it seems obvious that the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales should have the lead responsibility for advocacy, particularly in relation to the vulnerable groups that we have been talking about. However, we need to develop some thinking, which includes you, around the universal aspect of this, because Estyn ought to have a view on what good advocacy looks like and how that is provided in schools, and the health inspectorate, similarly. We have not really gone through this, but, to me, instinctively, it is screamingly obvious that this is CSSIW's territory, although I have not spoken to it about it.

[134] **Helen Mary Jones:** I think that I know the answer to my next question from what you have already said, but I will put it to you for the record, Keith. How successful do you think the Welsh Government has been at raising awareness among professionals more broadly about the concept of advocacy? You have touched on that in earlier replies.

[135] **Mr Towler:** I would give it a mark of six out of 10—'Could do better'. However, I have been very encouraged by the start that has been made. There is a very helpful debate going on, as a direct result of the awareness being raised, on the distinction between best interests and the voice of the child. So, while people are beginning to say that the voice of children is important in this regard—and a lot of that comes down to what the Welsh Government has done to raise awareness—the debate then comes to the point of 'As a social worker, I also have to make a judgment or assessment about the child's best interests, so where does the voice of the child fit into all this?', which is as a direct result of professionals across the piece thinking that through. It is a legitimate question to ask, and it raises the issue of workforce development and training and how we respond to that. So, we are not doing a bad job of raising awareness among professionals, but there is still a way to go. Awareness raising across all sectors, including the police, health and education, has to be nailed. The youth offending service, for example, has done some wonderful work on advocacy and has done some thinking around the voices of children and young people in that service. As we all know, that has a huge preventative arm to it. The work has been really quite groundbreaking in many ways, but it is never a job done, I suspect. You have to acknowledge that it is an ongoing process.

[136] **Nick Ramsay:** I will combine my questions. The Meic initiative is dominating our conversation today. First, are you concerned about the capacity of the voluntary sector to deliver on Meic? Secondly, the Welsh Government wants a universal approach to advocacy, so do you have any evidence that children and young people are being told that they are not eligible to receive advocacy services?

[137] **Mr Towler:** On the capacity within the voluntary sector to deliver, as I am sure you will hear from other witnesses this morning, much of it depends on the commissioning guidance and the extent to which it will provide sufficient stability for any voluntary sector organisation to provide advocacy, and so that is an issue of concern to the sector. Meic will be only as good as the services that it is able to refer. I know that that sounds very simplistic, but it is the absolute truth. For example, a call centre operator who asks a caller, 'Can you hold a minute while I try to find...?' will not do the trick. So, there needs to be a seamless service, and I have been impressed with the technical arrangements put in place for Meic. However, it raises the question of the extent to which advocacy providers from the voluntary sector are

geared up to deliver on that when it happens. These two witnesses who have just walked into the room will be able to provide you with a much better answer—he said, throwing the ball in their direction.

[138] The second part of your question was whether I have any evidence of children and young people saying that they are not eligible. We have not had a tremendous amount of evidence of that, so I could not say, hand on heart, that that has happened. We get a different question, because children and young people will ask, ‘We need this, so how do we go about it?’ which takes us back to the awareness aspect. However, people are not being refused advocacy.

10.30 a.m.

[139] **Helen Mary Jones:** Joyce, you have some questions on the specialist integrated services.

[140] **Joyce Watson:** I have. Your paper makes reference, as you have this morning, to the statutory obligations concerning the entitlement of vulnerable groups of children and young people to access specialist advocacy within the health service, for example, and within education. Are you satisfied that the needs of the more vulnerable groups of children and young people are being adequately addressed?

[141] **Mr Towler:** I would take you back to the answer that I gave about mapping out what is there. I cannot give you a guarantee that we have those things in place, or say that I am satisfied. I still do not know what the answers are, but I do not think that anyone does. We have talked today about looked-after children, asylum seekers and Gypsy/Traveller children. They would never forgive me if I did not mention that, yesterday, I met with people from Adoption UK, who would say that adopted children are forgotten in many ways in relation to services. So I cannot say, hand on heart, that adequate provision exists. There is a real task for Howard Williamson and the board to establish what exists and where.

[142] I am not entirely sure how Meic can do its work unless it has that information in place, and it ought to be freely available to me and you. My understanding is that it is not, so some work needs to be done; otherwise, how do you deal with a client on the other end of the telephone? You cannot tell them whether a service exists, or whether you can spot-purchase. It does not make any sense, so we need this essential tool if Meic is to do its job.

[143] **Joyce Watson:** Moving on, we have talked many times about the needs of children and young people who are placed outside Wales, out of county, or in secure establishments. What about their needs? How are they being met, or how might they be met?

[144] **Mr Towler:** You are right to raise that. It works both ways, as there are also children from England who are placed in Welsh authorities and Welsh homes who also have needs to meet. I am trying to look at this issue at the moment, as it was raised by the director of children’s services in Ynys Môn. He is anxious about not knowing how many children from England are placed in homes on his patch, and he said that he would only ever find out if there was a child protection concern or maybe an offending issue. I have written to all directors of social services in Wales to try to establish whether they have similar concerns, with a view to writing a letter to all authorities in England and Wales, just reminding them of their obligation to keep each other informed. Sharing information about where children are seems to me to be a pretty basic element that it is critical that we get right.

[145] I have gone off the subject a bit, but you are right to raise advocacy, because I do not have a feel for the extent to which those children and young people could be accessing advocacy services. I have seen some good work by youth offending services and young

offender institutions. I have not been in one since Meic was launched, so the next time I go, I would expect to see Meic posters in places such as HMYOI Stoke Heath and HMP and YOI Parc, and prison officials should know about advocacy. However, I have not been since Meic was launched. You are right to raise the concern.

[146] **Joyce Watson:** Are there any groups whose needs you think need to be addressed urgently?

[147] **Mr Towler:** Without doubt, we absolutely have to have confidence that every looked-after and adopted child can access an advocate. Ten years on from the Waterhouse report, it should not just be on a wish list. We should know that every child who is looked after understands their rights and entitlements, and that advocacy is available to them.

[148] **Sandy Mewies:** Just on that aside that you made there, I am rather concerned. I have a background in inspecting, as you know, and also as a county councillor and chair of social services, and I am concerned that you are saying that there is still these big silos of education and social services. I thought that a lot of work had been done to get rid of them. Speaking from my own experience, I know that, very often, it was the children on the playground who knew that a foster child was upset about a planned move rather than the staff at the school. I do not know whether this is possible, but I would be interested in having a note from you about your investigations into this matter and its prevalence. If I am honest with you, I am absolutely sick of seeing things about looked-after children or vulnerable children not being listened to. It is some time since my involvement, but the same problems were happening then, and it is those two big departments that sometimes refuse to share information. If you would not mind, would it be possible to have some sort of note on that?

[149] **Mr Towler:** Yes, we can do that. The whole safeguarding debate that has gone on this year in Wales has had some very positive outcomes at senior level in local authorities. It is not very often that I would hear a director for education say, 'Safeguarding is not my No. 1 priority,' anymore. When I first took on the role of commissioner, which was only two years ago, I would hear that, so there has been a shift, which I think is good. Nevertheless, when I was talking to Adoption UK yesterday—there were no adopted children there—adoptive parents were talking about their experience of their children being in school, and I know that this is anecdotal, but they told me that their children are still seen as very different to other children in the classroom, and are made to feel that way. That is a challenge in the classroom.

[150] The safeguarding work has shifted people's perceptions, but there is something that I still do not get. I am going to meet the local safeguarding children board in Swansea this afternoon, and I am hoping to have meetings with a few of these boards, because I want to understand why, when the legislation and regulations are clear, they are not sharing information. I will ask if they can please explain, because I do not understand why that is not happening. In every sense, I do not know what more this place can do through legislation and regulation. So, what is preventing these boards from doing that?

[151] **Helen Mary Jones:** We would be very interested in feedback on that. There may be things that we could help with. The last question is from Sandy Mewies—we have a couple of minutes to get this asked and answered.

[152] **Sandy Mewies:** This is quite straightforward, really. Is the consultation on revising the national advocacy standards necessary and who, in your view, should be responsible for ensuring compliance and governance in line with new national standards?

[153] **Mr Towler:** The answer to that is that, yes, we do need it. I am interested in knowing what the work programme for the national independent advocacy board is and what the division of responsibility will be between the board and the Deputy Minister on some of those

issues. We do need to go through that. We need absolute clarity, so that everybody is clear, from commissioning arrangements through to standards and the issue that we were talking about in relation to quality. It just has to happen.

[154] What I am not yet sure about, and what I would like to see, is a programme of work for the board and where that sits in all of that. One of the questions that I will have for it is how it sees that working.

[155] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you for that, Keith. If you have any other concerns about what is happening with advocacy, drop us a line. When you have seen the transcript of the meeting, if you find that there are points that you wanted to raise but did not, let us know, because, as usual, the process is that we shall be making a formal report to the Government as an outcome of this short update inquiry.

[156] Symudwn at y tystion nesaf, sef Plant yng Nghymru. Gwahoddaf i'r bwrdd Roger Bishop a Sean O'Neill. Let us move on to our next witnesses, namely Children in Wales. I invite Roger Bishop and Sean O'Neill to the table.

[157] Diolch i chi am fod yn bresennol, a diolch am eich papur. Symudwn felly yn syth at y cwestiynau, os yw hynny'n iawn. Thank you for attending, and thanks for your paper. We shall go straight into questions, if that is all right.

[158] In your paper, you express concerns over the pace of change in commissioning advocacy services and its implementation. What is your understanding of why there has been this delay?

10.40 a.m.

[159] **Mr O'Neill:** First of all, Chair, I welcome this opportunity to give oral evidence today to support our written evidence, which you would have received last week. We are delighted to be here today to give evidence to this committee, which follows up the suggestions that we made two years ago in the initial inquiry. We raised many concerns at that point and we are pleased that many of those are progressing, but we still have many issues and concerns that we wish to raise and which we raised in our paper.

[160] In relation to the commissioning arrangements, as you will be well aware, advisory guidance was issued last year. Prior to that, when we had the consultation on the new model, it was very clear that the new arrangements would move away from what is currently the case in most authorities, where local authorities commission advocacy services, towards children and young people's partnerships commissioning services, on a local and a regional level. We had a number of reservations, particularly at that point, around how sufficiently independent that was, and we discussed this at great length with our members and with this committee as well, and the jury is still largely out on that.

[161] We feel that there has been sufficient lead-in time for this to have moved forward a lot quicker than it has. We are rather concerned and disappointed that things have not moved faster, considering that there has been plenty of warning and lead-in time for partnerships to work more effectively together to look at specialist advocacy provision and roll it out to a wider group of children, beyond just looked-after children. We would like to see the pace quickened in that respect. One of the issues is that the guidance still remains on an advisory basis and we would very much like to see statutory guidance as soon as possible.

[162] **Eleanor Burnham:** A oes gennyhch bryderon penodol neu barhaus o ran a fydd y trefniadau comisiynu newydd yn rhoi digon o **Eleanor Burnham:** Do you have any specific or ongoing concerns as to whether the new commissioning arrangements will

annibyniaeth i wasanaethau darparwyr eiriolaeth? Pa gamau pellach sydd angen i Lywodraeth Cymru eu cymryd i sicrhau bod yr annibyniaeth yn gyson ac yn weladwy i'r plant a'r bobl ifanc a fydd yn derbyn y gwasanaeth eiriolaeth?

provide sufficient independence for advocacy provider services? What further steps does the Welsh Government need to take to ensure that the independence is consistent and recognisable to the children and young people who will partake of the advocacy service?

[163] **Mr O'Neill:** I will start and perhaps Roger can add a few points to that. In our original evidence to the committee, we raised concerns about the new commissioning arrangements, and we were proposing a centrally funded advocacy unit, which would commission services across Wales, and which would provide quality and equitable services for children and young people. This committee agreed with that point, but the Welsh Assembly Government did not agree to it. We have a situation now where the model has been taken forward and commissioning guidance has been put in place for partnerships to take that forward, but it is far too early to make a decision on that. If I recall rightly, it was said at the time that the new arrangements would be 'more independent'; I am not sure what that means as something is either independent or it is not. It is far too early to make a judgement on whether the new arrangements will be sufficient and will guarantee the independence that so many of our members and children and young people wanted and still want. Therefore, we need to see fuller and greater progress on the implementation of the guide.

[164] To touch on your last point about how we will know if it is independent, we can go back to ask the children and young people who are the recipients of the service. We knew that it was not independent in the first place after engaging with looked-after children, who told us very clearly that they had concerns about engaging with providers due to the links between the providers and the local authorities as the then commissioners.

[165] **Mr Bishop:** To add to that, very little has changed on the ground in the last two years. So, we are waiting to see what will happen. We understand that children and young people's partnerships are gearing themselves up to commission, but in the main, the ones that are commissioning are the ones that were commissioning before two years ago. In general, very little has changed in that respect. As Sean said, it is too early to know how one would evaluate how independent the new arrangements are.

[166] **Eleanor Burnham:** With the Assembly elections looming, it can be passed on to the next Government and Minister.

[167] **Mr Bishop:** There is a need for sufficient investment and will to make this change. One of our concerns is that this is not a great time economically to push this forward, but it needs pushing.

[168] **Helen Mary Jones:** That leads us to your question, Nick.

[169] **Nick Ramsay:** I have asked this question on budgets to each of the other witnesses, and I will try to score a hat-trick with you. You said in your evidence that there is increased pressure on advocacy services because of increased demand for advocacy at a time of restricted local budgets. What evidence do you have to support this view?

[170] **Mr O'Neill:** As we said in our evidence, there was insufficient money in the pot to begin with to provide effective advocacy provision for all children across Wales, particularly looked-after children. We raised the issue that there was a need for increased resources when we first gave evidence, two years ago. However, we know that there has been a steady increase in the number of looked-after children and a number of provider organisations have said that there has been an increase in demand, particularly for advocacy on safeguarding

arrangements, attending child protection conferences and providing support and advocacy for those children who are, perhaps, on the cusp of going into care. There is a lack of specialist advocacy provision for disabled children and young people in some areas. A number of services in Wales have specialist advocates who work closely with disabled children and young people, but that is not routinely available.

[171] **Nick Ramsay:** I have looked through your evidence, and it seems that you have been saying for a while that there has been a problem in this area before the current proposals or arrangements were made. Do you think, therefore, that introducing a statutory obligation now will mean that the pressure on services will be too great? Do you feel that this statutory obligation will be difficult to meet?

[172] **Mr O'Neill:** Without additional resources, there is a challenge; there has always been a challenge for some of the service providers in meeting their statutory obligations. We are now in a very different situation to the one that we were in two years ago; we are hearing about services where funding is being reduced and posts have started to be cut, at the same time as there has been an increased demand for those services. There is an expectation that the sector will provide more for less money, and that it will try to maintain the high standard of delivery that children and young people demand and should expect. There are clear capacity issues that have been exacerbated over time, and there is a real anxiety that bigger threats are looming around the corner.

[173] **Mr Bishop:** It is certain that some Cymorth funding, which purchased advocacy services in local areas, has been cut. Local authority social services have also reduced funding for some advocacy services—I know that because my organisation provides some of those services. As Sean said, there is a real concern that we will be required to do more for less. Having said that, it is always possible to improve and make things more efficient, but in some situations it is very small services that are under pressure with the funding. We have a situation where the guidance requires the service to become comprehensive and wide, but where is the money coming from to deliver that? That is the question that is hanging over us.

10.50 a.m.

[174] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you for that answer. I remind Members and witnesses that we have just over 20 minutes left. I know that people have to get away promptly, and we need to get through about eight questions. These are incredibly important issues, but I would be grateful if we could be as focused as we can.

[175] **Joyce Watson:** My question has a real focus, because I am one of those who have to get away fairly quickly. What further action is needed by the Welsh Government to address the capacity and resource issues that you have identified in order to meet the statutory entitlement to advocacy services under the current legislation and to further develop advocacy services for all children and young people?

[176] **Mr O'Neill:** I feel that we are at a crossroads in this agenda. The Welsh Assembly Government, and we support it, has made it clear that it wants to expand advocacy provision, that it wants to ensure that all looked-after children and other groups for whom advocacy is to be provided on a statutory basis take up their entitlement to advocacy, and that it is freely available to those groups. However, we are at a crossroads, because we could go forward with this model, as is planned, through the commissioning arrangements—hopefully, there will be additional resources for that expansion of advocacy provision, although it is not clear where they will come from—or we could remain where we are or go backwards. There is a real threat that we will go backwards, because of the cuts.

[177] I have already raised the issue of there being a need for the guidance to be statutory. I feel that the guidance has made a start, but there needs to be a greater sense of urgency, because we know that, where there are budget cuts, it is often the services for the most vulnerable children that are cut first. We need to safeguard those services now, because in six months' time some of those services may well be gone and we will be talking about trying to get them back, or they will have been reduced. So, it is important for the guidance to be statutory.

[178] As I say, there also needs to be a greater sense of urgency, so that we are beginning to ask questions about what progress has been made in each of the partnerships in each of the local authority areas on complying with this new model. We also need to ask what the barriers are in implementing the new model, and whether the new model is to do with working together more closely and having more resources. We are not quite clear on that at this stage. There should be a greater expectation with regard to the role of the advocacy unit in ensuring compliance with the new model, and we need to know what the role of the National Independent Advocacy Board is in relation to this. Over the last few years, we have had many outputs and processes, and many things have been happening, but, in relation to the outcomes for children and young people, as Roger said earlier, from the perspective of a child on the ground in Wales, there is very little difference.

[179] **Helen Mary Jones:** Sandy has the next question.

[180] **Sandy Mewies:** I should have said that I will be attending the same meeting as Joyce.

[181] **Helen Mary Jones:** So, you need to get away too.

[182] **Sandy Mewies:** Yes.

[183] We are told that the practice of spot purchasing is on the increase. What should be done to address the issues associated with spot purchasing and to ensure that vulnerable children are not left without advocacy support? In line with that, I asked the children's commissioner about the fragmentation of advocacy services. Are there too many organisations chasing the pot? You may not have a view on that, but I am wondering what can be done, because we are all facing cuts. Are there any structural ways of overcoming that?

[184] **Mr O'Neill:** I will start and then hand over to Roger. We are deeply concerned about spot purchasing. It is certainly not the way forward. It is not what is being proposed by the model, and it is not what our members want. We want a high-quality, equitable advocacy service in each local authority area across Wales. At the moment we have some very good services, and some that are less good. So, there is still a postcode lottery. Spot purchasing is all about gatekeeping. How on earth will children and young people access an advocacy service if there is a spot purchasing arrangement in place? It comes nowhere near providing the independence that is required, and it is not in keeping with the national standards or the children's rights framework. A clear message needs to go out at this point that spot purchasing is not acceptable to the Welsh Assembly Government or to providers.

[185] My second point, which I would like to touch on briefly, relates to your question about whether there are too many providers. Currently, as part of our specialist advocacy provision, we have three major providers that cover 20 authorities in Wales, namely Tros Gynnal, the National Youth Advocacy Service, and the NSPCC. The NSPCC has announced recently that it will be moving away from providing advocacy services in some of those areas. Therefore, there are not hundreds of thousands of advocates already trained up to go into this new model. I will not say that there are not enough advocacy providers, but, in order to meet

the expectations of this new model, there is a concern about where all these services and advocates will come from. It will take time to train advocates up; we have a training qualification in place, we are trying to professionalise the advocacy provision, and there is also a move to the inspectorate next year. Therefore, there are many things happening, but I am a little concerned about where all these services will come from.

[186] **Mr Bishop:** I would agree with all that. Spot purchasing is a last resort; a spot purchased service has to be done on the back of a properly commissioned service for the infrastructure. It would be impossible to run the whole system under substantial spot purchasing arrangements—it would be impossible to operate. It is an easy and cheap way out, and it means that, as Sean said, only certain young people can access that service—the favoured few. Therefore, that is no way to go forward.

[187] On the number of services or organisations out there, Sean is right. There is an issue regarding capacity to replace the NSPCC. I believe that that will be done over time. I guess that many of the people that the NSPCC has trained and used in the past will be available to work for us. Therefore, in the medium to long term, hopefully, there will not be a problem. However, there are not too many organisations out there.

[188] **Helen Mary Jones:** Eleanor Burnham has the next question. I remind everyone to keep their questions brief—that is not directed at you in particular, Eleanor. [*Laughter.*]

[189] **Eleanor Burnham:** I have not even had any supplementary questions.

[190] You have answered the next question that I was going to ask, so I will ask my final question.

<p>[191] Yr ydych yn datgan yn eich papur y byddai eglurder ychwanegol o ran swyddogaethau, disgwyliadau a chynllun gwaith y Bwrdd Eiriolaeth Annibynnol Cenedlaethol ac uned eiriolaeth Llywodraeth Cymru yn y dyfodol yn cael ei groesawu. Pa sicrwydd penodol yr hoffech ei gael gan y Dirprwy Weinidog o ran gweithredu ei fodel eiriolaeth?</p>	<p>You note in your paper that additional clarity over the future functions, expectations and work plan of the National Independent Advocacy Board and Welsh Government's advocacy unit would be welcome. What specific reassurances would you like to receive from the Deputy Minister in relation to the implementation of his advocacy model?</p>
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[192] **Mr Bishop:** It is to do with the ability of the board and the unit to implement the model. That is not a concern as such, but we are waiting for the model to be implemented. The board is getting up and running; it has had five meetings, and we hope, as the children's commissioner said, that it will be able to push this programme forward. However, we are still waiting to see how it will do that.

[193] **Helen Mary Jones:** Nick Ramsay has the next question.

[194] **Nick Ramsay:** How successful has the Welsh Government been in raising awareness among professionals of the concept of advocacy?

[195] **Mr Bishop:** Shall I answer that?

[196] **Mr O'Neill:** Yes.

[197] **Nick Ramsay:** There is stunned silence. [*Laughter.*]

[198] **Mr Bishop:** No, it is more to do with who will answer first.

[199] It is patchy. The Meic development will help with that; greater publicity and greater awareness will come through knowledge of the Meic service, as it is creating an advocacy-for-all portal. However, I still think that there is a long way to go with professionals, and that is an ongoing task, because advocacy in the sense of just promoting and giving a voice to the wishes and feelings of children and young people is quite different from the need of professionals to look after the best interests of the child. Sometimes, there is great confusion around that. So, that is the message that needs to be reinforced constantly.

11.00 a.m.

[200] **Mr O'Neill:** To add to that quickly, it is about changing cultures in many areas as well. Some of that will take time. I think that there is still a perception among many stakeholders that advocacy is something that happens in relation to complaints. We are also still picking up on tension between advocacy services and social services, for example. So, individual workers are still resistant to engaging with advocacy services due to a lack of experience in the workforce or a lack of understanding of the benefits to children and young people and of how advocacy services can assist them in their work.

[201] **Nick Ramsay:** Is social services one specific area where there is a big misunderstanding among professionals?

[202] **Mr O'Neill:** It is a misunderstanding on the part of some individuals. I do not want to give the impression that there is a big misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding on the part of individual workers, rather than something that is endemic. It depends very much on the individual working with the child. The Meic system should help, but people need to know about Meic. We need greater publicity and greater urgency on publicity, with posters and campaigns, so that children and young people recognise that as an outlet or an avenue, so that they know that they can pick up the phone or send a text and engage with that service. If you do not know about the service, you are not going to use it, and it will have poor outcomes when it is evaluated. So, we feel that there needs to be ongoing training, but among all professionals, because if we are going to roll out the system, we need training in schools and with health professionals to ensure that everyone can see the benefits of advocacy for children and young people.

[203] **Joyce Watson:** Do you have any information on the number of advocates operating in Wales who have achieved the nationally recognised qualification in advocacy? Do you have any information on how the training programmes are being cascaded further?

[204] **Mr Bishop:** This particular qualification is brand new. I think that there are 22 advocates in training at the moment. They have been through the initial part of the training. It is a City and Guilds qualification, so there is evidence collection and that sort of thing going on. So, the first cohort of 22 is being trained now.

[205] **Helen Mary Jones:** So, again, it is a case of the jury being out on how effective the cascading will be.

[206] **Mr Bishop:** There is no cascading taking place, because they have not completed the training.

[207] **Helen Mary Jones:** Exactly.

[208] **Sandy Mewies:** It has been suggested that the success of Meic will depend on the local provision of the services that people who approach the organisation need. Do you have any evidence that children and young people now are being told that they are not eligible to

receive advocacy due to lack of provision?

[209] **Mr Bishop:** I do not have any evidence for it, but that must be the case, because, as I think that you have already heard, there is a postcode lottery. In some areas there is a very good, pretty comprehensive service, while in others it is very restricted; in some areas it is very very restricted. Therefore, yes, in some areas of Wales, lots of young people are ineligible for specialist services, because the services do not exist.

[210] **Mr O'Neill:** One danger with regard to expectations is that we are asking children and young people to make that call initially, to come forward to engage with advocates, but, if there is a gap in service, they will find that the service is lacking or that there is insufficient capacity within the service. So, I think that there is a real danger here. However, I echo comments made earlier about the fact that we need to know exactly what is happening on the ground and what services are available in each county. We need a clearer picture of this. At the moment, what happens to those calls that comes through the Meic service where there is a serious safeguarding issue, possibly with regard to a child, and there is no service, or the service is running at such reduced capacity that it is not able to deal with the issue or work with the child immediately, and so the child has to wait? We do not want children waiting; we do not want gaps in services.

[211] **Helen Mary Jones:** Finally, are there any other issues that you would like to raise with the committee about how things are getting better for children and young people in advocacy, and what needs to be done to change things if they are not right? You have raised a wide range of issues, both with us this morning and in your paper. Is there anything that you want to add that we have not had the chance to touch on this morning?

[212] **Mr O'Neill:** I would just repeat that we are at a crossroads; we need to go forward. We do not want to come back here in two or three years' time giving the same message again. We need to have action. We have guidance and it needs to be implemented. We can then evaluate its implementation effectively. One thing that has not been raised yet is that we should not lose sight of the safeguarding element of this agenda. It concerns me that we are moving slightly towards the participation side—and I am not saying for one moment that it is not important—but we should not lose sight of the messages of the Waterhouse inquiry, the Carlisle report, and 'Telling Concerns'. We need to provide effective services for those children most at risk and for all looked-after children. For me, the safeguarding element is the key to this agenda and is the top priority.

[213] **Helen Mary Jones:** Roger, is there anything that you would like to add?

[214] **Mr Bishop:** I endorse that completely.

[215] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you both very much, for the paper and for being with us today. You know the process: we will be considering the evidence and producing a further report to the Deputy Minister. Thank you very much, and I am sure that we will be hearing from you again on this, as on so many other things.

[216] Diolch yn fawr, a diolch i'm cyd-aelodau o'r pwyllgor. Atgoffaf pawb y cynhelir ein cyfarfod nesaf ar 13 Gorffennaf, pan fyddwn yn cael tystiolaeth gan Voices from Care, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru a Chymdeithas Cymru Gyfan o Swyddogion Cymorth Partneriaethau Plant a Phobl Ifanc. Thank you, and thanks to my committee colleagues. I remind everyone that our next meeting will be held on 13 July, when we will be hearing evidence from Voices from Care, the Welsh Local Government Association and the All-Wales Association of Children and Young People's Partnership Support Officers.

[217] They are running out of the room before I have even closed the meeting. [*Laughter.*]

[218] Mae'r cyfarfod ar ben. Diolch yn fawr. The meeting is closed. Thank you.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.07 a.m.
The meeting ended at 11.07 a.m.*