



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

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

**Dydd Mawrth, 6 Hydref 2009
Wednesday, 6 October 2009**

Cynnwys
Contents

- 3 Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions
- 4 Cynnig Trefniadol
Procedural Motion
- 4 Ymchwiliad i'r Trefniadau ar gyfer Rhoi Plant dan Ofal yng Nghymru
Inquiry into Arrangements for the Placement of Children into Care in Wales

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

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

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

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

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Carol Floris	Voices from Care
Matthew Taylor	Uwch Swyddog Hyfforddi, Voices from Care Senior Training Officer, Voices from Care

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

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

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.30 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.30 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Helen Mary Jones:** Bore da, gyfeillion. Croesawaf chi oll i'r cyfarfod hwn o Bwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc y Cynulliad. Croesawaf aelodau'r pwyllgor i'r cyfarfod a chroeso arbennig i Joyce Watson sy'n ymuno â ni gan fod Christine Chapman yn methu â bod gyda ni y bore yma. Bydd y cyfarfod yn cael ei gynnal yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg ac mae offer cyfieithu ar gael. Hefyd, gallwch ddefnyddio'r offer hwnnw i'ch helpu i glywed yn well. Rhaid diffodd pob ffôn symudol, mwyar duon, *paggers* ac unrhyw beth tebyg. Mae'n rhaid eu diffodd; nid yw'n ddigon da eu rhoi ar 'tawel' gan eu bod yn amharu ar yr offer cyfieithu a darlledu. Nid ydym yn disgwyl ymarfer tân, felly os bydd larwm tân, bydd hynny'n golygu bod rhywbeth yn digwydd a bydd y tywyswyr yn

Helen Mary Jones: Good morning, friends. I welcome you all to this meeting of the Assembly's Children and Young People Committee. I welcome members of the committee to the meeting and extend a warm welcome to Joyce Waston who is joining us as Christine Chapman cannot be with us this morning. The meeting will be held through the media of both Welsh and English and translation equipment is available. Also, you can use that equipment to amplify the sound. All mobile phones, BlackBerrys, paggers and any similar equipment must be switched off. Simply putting them on 'silent' will not do, as they affect the translation and broadcasting equipment. We are not expecting a fire drill today, so if we hear the fire alarm, that will mean that something is happening and the

dweud wrthym sut i adael yr adeilad. A oes unrhyw ddatganiadau o fudd? Gwelaf nad oes. Yr ydym wedi derbyn ymddiheuriadau gan Christine Chapman ac Eleanor Burnham. ushers will tell us how to leave the building. Are there any declarations of interest? I see that there are not. We have received apologies from Christine Chapman and Eleanor Burnham.

9.31 a.m.

Cynnig Trefniadol Procedural Motion

[2] **Helen Mary Jones:** Cynigaf fod **Helen Mary Jones:** I propose that
y pwyllgor yn penderfynu gwahardd y cyhoedd o ran nesaf y cyfarfod yn unol â Rheol Sefydlog Rhif 10.37(vi). *the committee resolves to exclude the public from the next part of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order No. 10.37(vi).*

[3] Gwelaf fod y pwyllgor yn gytûn. I see that the committee is in agreement.

*Derbyniwyd y cynnig.
Motion agreed.*

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod cyhoeddus rhwng 9.32 a.m. a 9.59 a.m.
The public meeting was adjourned between 9.32 a.m. and 9.59 a.m.*

Ymchwiliad i'r Trefniadau ar gyfer Rhoi Plant dan Ofal yng Nghymru Inquiry into Arrangements for the Placement of Children into Care in Wales

[4] **Helen Mary Jones:** Ailddechreuaf ran gyhoeddus y cyfarfod. Croeso i aelodau'r cyhoedd ymuno â ni. **Helen Mary Jones:** I reconvene the public part of this meeting. Members of the public are welcome to join us.

[5] For this item, I formally welcome Carol Floris and Matthew Taylor from Voices from Care to the meeting. Thank you both for being here and for your written evidence, which we found helpful.

10.00 a.m.

[6] We also thank Voices from Care for facilitating an informal meeting that some committee members will attend after this formal meeting, with some of the children and young people who have recent experiences of the care system. We appreciate that very much. As a committee, we are committed to trying to hear the voices of the children and young people who will be affected by the recommendations that we make to Government. We appreciate your help in that. We have read your paper, and we have prepared some questions as a result. I will start with the first question, but given how long I have known Voices from Care in another capacity, I should explain to other committee members that when I worked for Barnardo's, Voice from Care, which was a new organisation then, was housed literally in the attic of our building. So, this is going to sound like an odd question from me, but, for the record, can you outline the work of Voices from Care and explain why you are needed? How are children and young people made aware that Voices from Care is there as an organisation?

[7] **Ms Floris:** Voices from Care is mainly a campaigning organisation. Our main aim is to make sure that the voice of people who have experience of care or are leaving care is

included at all levels as individuals and in policy and legislation, so that what is implemented improves the situation for them. I am sorry, but can you repeat the question?

[8] **Helen Mary Jones:** The other part of the question was about how young people going into care or who are leaving the care system are made aware of the fact that Voices from Care is there.

[9] **Ms Floris:** We have literature that we distribute as widely as possible in different directories with different voluntary organisations, so we develop lots of links with other organisations. We are quite a small team, so we probably do not get out as much as we should, but we meet young people who have not heard of Voices from Care. A lot of it is to do with word of mouth—which is the best recommendation—from people such as social workers and foster carers, and so on, saying to a young person ‘Voices from Care may be able to help you, or you may be interested in getting involved’. It is not just about when young people have problems and us helping them—it is about what they can give as well.

[10] **Helen Mary Jones:** It would also be true to say that you often end up doing peer advocacy work for young people who have individual issues, so that your campaigning work is informed by that direct experience of what happens when things can go wrong.

[11] **Ms Floris:** Yes, we have an advice and support service that is available to any young person in care or has been in care in Wales. We work a lot with advocacy providers, so sometimes we pick up cases that they are not able to work with because the young people do not meet their criteria. Sometimes, we find that young people prefer to come to Voices from Care because they may have met us, and they prefer having us advocating on their behalf.

[12] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you, Carol. Angela, I think that you have the next question.

[13] **Angela Burns:** Thank you for your paper. You were clear about the fact that you have great concerns about information-gathering and information-sharing, particularly between agencies. You say that there are some good examples around, but when it does not work it really does not work. Can you explain more about how you think that we could spread that best practice across the agencies that are involved with children’s care?

[14] **Ms Floris:** Generally, there is an idea that a child or young person can be summed up on paper, but in reality it is not possible to explain exactly what a person needs or what they do well and what problems they have. People have looked a little at how people can get past that paper system, but we would like to see much more than that. We also explain in the paper that when children and young people come into care, it is all new to them, so people may not be seeing the child or young person as they really are and the child or young person is not in a position to contribute. When someone asks, ‘Do you want to be in foster care long-term?’, what does that mean if you are seven or eight years old? It has no meaning for you. There are some systems in which young people are involved in decision making and information, such as review meetings, consultation papers and so on. Review meetings are now pretty standard and children and young people attend them, but that has not filtered much beyond certain small fora; it has not filtered right through the system.

[15] **Angela Burns:** I was struck by what you said in your evidence that when someone comes into care for the first time, it is easy, but by the time they have had multiple moves, everything starts to get substantially lost.

[16] **Ms Floris:** In addition, one thing that we come across quite a lot is that different local authorities have different decision-making fora. Some of them have set up different panels, such as the Stable Lives, Brighter Futures panels or transition panels, but other local

authorities do not have the same systems. For example, I am currently working with a young person, and if there was a transition panel in that local authority, all the agencies could have got together to talk about that young person's needs. As it is, we have spent months trying to get responses from different people, but by the time that we get a response, the situation has changed. There is a constant lack of planning. This is not about coming into care; it is about leaving care, but time is getting short and decisions will be made in a rush. The panel system works well.

[17] However, the other issue for us is how transparent it is, because there is no way for children or young people, their advocates or their birth parents to have an input into those systems. It is all done by social workers and reviewing officers. I have been at meetings at which people will say, 'We need to take this to the panel', but they are not including the children or young people, and the participation stops. Young people are dependent upon a social worker to put their case forward, whereas, in the beginning, they may have disagreed with what you wanted to happen. Young people do not always have the confidence that people are putting their views across.

[18] **Angela Burns:** So, they need direct access or more direct access to the ultimate decision makers.

[19] **Ms Floris:** Yes. It may not be possible for them to attend those meetings, but even if they could put forward their views in written form with the help of an advocate, something like that would be useful, so that they would know who was making the decision and they would have had an input.

[20] **Angela Burns:** For clarity, can I confirm that, when you are talking about multiple agencies, you are talking about health and education? The health and education systems are trying, or not, to dovetail with the placement of children in the care system.

[21] **Ms Floris:** Yes. It is about people knowing who the right person is. You have the educational co-ordinators and the looked-after children nurses, but, from my experience, they are involved with some young people but, for various reasons, they are not involved with other young people. In those situations, it is sometimes difficult to know who can make a decision and how far they can make a decision or whether it needs to go to a panel and what influence health and education have in that panel.

[22] **Angela Burns:** This will be a real quickie. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but I assume that the situation does not get better for out-of-county placements.

[23] **Ms Floris:** Most of our experience of those issues is with out-of-county placements, which seem to exacerbate matters completely.

10.10 a.m.

[24] **Joyce Watson:** You have answered some of the question that I was going to ask, which was about the input that a child or young person has in the information gathering process and what you would like to see. However, you have answered quite a lot of that question, and so I will move on. You quite rightly say that the young person has to have an opportunity; that is part of the process, and perhaps I could tease out some information. That is all well and good but if it is not counted in the decision-making process, is there not a real risk of building up expectation by saying, 'Your voice is here; it is being heard at this table', only for it to be ignored? I know that it is tricky but how can you convince the young person to engage in the processes to be heard?

[25] **Ms Floris:** In my experience, young people are learning that process. Sometimes,

with the help of an advocate, perhaps, or someone else, they can be advised. Advocates may say, 'Okay, you want A. You may not get A at this point; perhaps it might be better to ask for B and work towards A'. In the decision making, I tell young people, 'This is not your only chance and it should not be your only chance'; it should be part of a process so that young people learn how to get involved. I work with some young people—11, 12, or 13-year-olds—who have never been to their meetings, and I think, 'Why haven't they been involved in these processes?'. Much of that is just a matter of supporting them in those meetings and saying afterwards, 'It wasn't so bad, was it? You got to say what you wanted to say', or 'I realised that you weren't going to say it, so I said it for you'. We have had quite a few examples where we just help people to take that step and then they can go the rest of the way themselves. We have a few situations where social workers are saying, 'Let's see how this works out', and for some young people, if it is put to them in that way, there might be an element of not wanting to be let down or open to risk. So, the young person has an opportunity to kind of prove that he or she can do his or her bit. Also, the other players have an opportunity to prove that they can turn up for contact or whatever the issue is. It is about making it part of a process rather than just fora where it is one thing or the other and there is no negotiation.

[26] **Joyce Watson:** You have talked so far about fostering being part of that consideration and we have talked about out-of-county placements, but are the issues with information sharing exactly the same for those children who are placed in children's homes?

[27] **Ms Floris:** There is much more information about children in children's homes because they are scrutinised much more. Although foster carers write daily diaries, I do not think that they write them in the same way as residential workers will write them. There is much more scrutiny and information about children and young people in children's homes.

[28] **Helen Mary Jones:** Thank you. That is helpful. We will now come back to you, Angela.

[29] **Angela Burns:** In your paper, you were very strong on the actual placement issues and the way that the children and foster carers interact with each other and with local authorities. You go on to say that there is a lot of discrepancy between authorities on how much responsibility foster carers can have to make decisions and to take initiative. We have heard quite a bit of evidence on this already. What impact would you say that that has on the child that is being looked after if a foster carer cannot decide whether the child can go to the school picnic tomorrow or whether he or she can get information from the local education establishment about what the child needs and so forth?

[30] **Ms Floris:** Day to day it can exclude young people from many activities. Some of the young people who are in care have an ordinary experience, but other young people are almost sheltered, in the sense that they go to school and then go home where everything happens. It is not like the usual scenario where young people are going here and there, and having a bit more freedom to develop.

[31] On the bigger decisions, you have situations, particularly around education, where people are making decisions in a rush. For most children and young people, their lives are ruled by the school year, and at the age of 11 or 12, you go to high school, and then you leave high school and care. So, when there is a delay, it means that decisions are being made in a rush, and it is pot luck whether that is the right or the wrong decision. You can never really catch up. We have many young people who believe that the wrong decision was made, which may have affected them in all kinds of ways, and they feel bitter about that. Those things can never be caught up with, because they will never be that age again.

[32] **Angela Burns:** Do you think that this issue may be mitigated slightly if we were to

give foster carers a more professional status, and enable them to play a far greater part in the child's team? One thing that has come across to us in the evidence is that you get the professionals, who are deemed the social workers and the education and health officials, and so on, and then you get the foster carers, who are out there on their own and who are unable to make decisions or carry things through. What would be your view on giving foster carers a professional status, and do you think that that would help with some of these issues?

[33] **Ms Floris:** We are split on that issue. Carers need to know what decisions they can make, but that needs to be on an individual basis, because you get some young people who are very established with their foster carers and get on well with them and trust them. In that situation, they would probably feel that their foster carers would make the right decisions. However, you get other young people who do not connect with their foster carers, and their social worker is a safety net for them because they are sharing the decision making and the information. We do not see that it should be the same for everyone.

[34] Another issue is that foster carers are, in a sense, professionals, but they are not registered professionals. Young people like people who are homely, caring, fun, and all the things that professionals cannot be. They need to be recognised for their skills, but I do not think that we need to make them into the kind of professional who builds a barrier, comes in to do the job and who has no emotional connection. How that would be achieved is a difficult question to answer.

[35] **Angela Burns:** I want to dig a little deeper into this issue. It has been posited to us that foster carers are supposed to act like parents and take all of those parental decisions. When you say that you are divided on this issue, what line would you take, for example, on a foster carer being able to say to a child, 'Yes, you can go to the school picnic next week'? Do you think that it should be within the remit of foster carers to go to the school and say that it is not giving a child the proper education or support, or that, for instance, it has not picked up on the child's dyslexia, and so on? What would you say are the decisions that are too big for a foster carer to take?

[36] You talked about the fact that there are some children who do not have a connection with their foster carer. Do you have any feeling for how often that happens, and, if there is no connection, how long is that child left in that placement, which could be quite a tricky situation?

10.20 a.m.

[37] **Ms Floris:** We think that foster carers should be able to make the normal parenting decisions—for example, whether so-and-so can go on a trip, or stay with a friend. As for the example of the school, I think that the foster carer, in most situations, should be able to take some kind of initiative. Then it would be good to share that information because you have the education co-ordinator, the looked-after-children nurse—those people who can tap into expertise to see whether the child has dyslexia and can get certain assessments done. It is in the process of how that happens that you often get left in limbo, so that things do not happen. It is about foster carers being part of the team, but recognising their special role as well.

[38] As for young people being unconnected with their foster carers, I could not say how often that happens, but young people sometimes tell us that they have been in that situation but people have not listened, and no-one has looked into the emotional connection. If you do not know how long you will be with a carer, you tend to protect yourself; it gets very complicated, and it is difficult to make judgments. I think that emotional skills should be high up on the list of competences for foster carers, as well as decision-making skills and ability to access information, and so on. Those need to be kept at the top of the list.

[39] **Joyce Watson:** You write in your evidence about the effectiveness of the independent reviewing officers, and you have already mentioned this morning that things can go wrong with the timescales involved, and the challenges that tend to occur. You mention in your paper that the effectiveness of the independent reviewing officers is inconsistent across different areas, and because of that, decisions that have not been carried out and implemented are not actually reviewed on time, or certainly not within the three-monthly period that is being suggested. How do you think we can improve that service?

[40] **Ms Floris:** The IROs should have more of a monitoring role; not where they are constantly involved with the case, but where there are decisions that involve a timescale, or assessments to get done that have been recommended to keep a placement stable. In that kind of case, they should be asking whether these things have been done, and putting a bit of pressure on if things are not happening within the timescale. You find that some independent reviewing officers seem to have a knowledge of how things have been for the young person in between reviews, and then you get others who say, 'Let's catch up about the last six months', and anything could have happened in that time. They need to have a bit of a watching brief, and, in some cases, intervention may not be needed, or it may mean nothing more than a phone call to a social worker or whatever, if everything is going smoothly. However, in other cases, where people are waiting for information, then it may be that they have more of a role in bringing things together.

[41] **Joyce Watson:** May I just pursue this, because it is quite an important part of the journey for a young person and the people who are caring for them? We have annual or biannual reports from inspectorates and local authorities, and the key thing that comes up often is the fact that they are not reviewing their cases. So, if you are not reviewing the cases, and the recognised independent voice is not playing its part, there are huge gaps that people are going to fall into. The implications are really serious. I feel very strongly about this, because those reviews are critical; sometimes these people are at crisis point. So, if the reviews are not being done, and the independent reviewing officer is not playing his or her role, the whole thing can fall apart very quickly.

[42] I do not wish to put words into your mouth, but I have read so many of these reports—because this has been a hobby-horse of mine for a long time—and you mentioned that you would like to see their role strengthened, but I think that there is another part to this, which is seeing how critical their role is if they are in that position and that job is not being carried out. I do not know whether you share my view, but I think that they should be able to identify weaknesses very early on. For example, there may be a lack of staff; often, these reviews are not being done because there are not enough staff to do them. There is no point having an independent reviewing officer to see whether a review is being done if there are no staff to carry out the reviews. The reviews will be carried out according to need—they go from being an immediate need to something that can wait. Do you wish to add anything to that?

[43] **Ms Floris:** I am slightly confused; I am not sure that we are talking about exactly the same thing.

[44] **Joyce Watson:** Tell me if I am wrong.

[45] **Ms Floris:** The independent reviewing offices would carry out the looked-after-children reviews themselves. My experience is that their diaries are full. To ask them to do anything in between would be very difficult; they are stretched to meet the next review date, let alone do anything in between. They definitely need to have a role of identifying situations and having a watching brief. As I see it, the social services team managers do not have much influence over education and health. There are three players, and none seems to be able to influence the others or say, 'Come on; hurry up. Tell us what you are doing'. So, I think that

their role should be to have influence over all of those services, including adult services. They should be able to say to adult services, 'Okay, we may not meet the criteria, but you have some responsibility for this young person'. So, I think that they need to have quite a powerful role over whatever agency is working with the young person.

[46] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is useful. That might be something that we could make some specific recommendations about. We have touched on the area of young people's involvement in planning placements, but I want to come back to this a bit. In your paper, you say that, in your experience, children and young people have very little input to planning placements. What changes to policies and practice need to be made to address this to give young people more of a voice at that very early stage?

[47] **Ms Floris:** If you mentioned the concept of planning a placement to a young person, they would probably wonder what you meant. That idea needs to be developed for children and young people and the people who work with them so that they are part of that process. I do not think that they would feel involved at the moment; they feel that it is something that happens to them. Although young people go to reviews and see themselves as having some kind of a say over particular decisions, but they do not see themselves having a say on the whole thing—on their life journey and on where they want to be, given that where they are now is going to affect where they are going to be. So, that needs to be developed earlier.

10.30 a.m.

[48] The other thing is that, as soon as children and young people feel that things are being done to them against their wishes, it is hard to engage them. So, that whole process of coming into care needs to be more empowering. We need to say, 'We have to make this decision, but you can be part of deciding where the decision goes'.

[49] **Helen Mary Jones:** I would like to unpick how that could be achieved. Young people are supposed to be offered an advocate automatically when they go into care. Do we need to strengthen those arrangements and ensure that those advocates have particular skills? Most young people who go into care do not want to go into care, so they are going in from a negative point of view. As you say, it is not just that they feel that something is being done to them; something is being done to them, and it might be important for their own safety. Do we need to develop and strengthen that advocacy role?

[50] **Ms Floris:** Yes, their role from early on in the process needs to be strengthened. There is still a lot of opposition to advocacy. As an advocate, you are usually the last person to know about a meeting, so the likelihood is that you will not be able to attend. There is a lot of uncertainty about the role of the advocate in supporting children and young people through the care process. Advocates are clear that they will do whatever the child or young person wants them to do, help them with whatever they want help with, and support them with whatever they need support with. I think that other people feel that there should be limits on that, when there should not be. You, hopefully, get to the point where the child or young person does not need you—that should be the end goal. If you are saying, 'I can do this but I can't do that' or 'I can go there with you but I didn't know about that meeting so, sorry, I can't come', the role becomes less credible to children and young people.

[51] **Helen Mary Jones:** So, the role gets compromised in that way. One thing that needs to happen is a culture change within the other organisations that make those decisions so that advocacy is seen as a central part of what happens automatically. The advocate has to be as involved in deciding when meetings happen and so on as a social worker or anyone else involved would be.

[52] **Ms Floris:** Yes.

[53] **Helen Mary Jones:** We could look into that.

[54] On young people's influence on planning placements, very often, there is not much of a choice. In your experience, to what extent is a simple lack of foster carers and alternative placements limiting the influence that young people can have? Are there situations in which there just is not a choice?

[55] **Ms Floris:** In most situations that we have come across, there is not a choice around where they go. They might have a choice regarding whether they stay or leave, but we have not come across many choices with regard to where they go in the first place. We have had examples of young people wanting to stay. With private agencies, the placements are commissioned for 28 days originally and young people might want to stay, and they have to go down the complaints route or whatever to be heard. There is this idea that young people have to have a really strong argument, when sometimes their argument is 'I like these people', or 'I'm not happy; I want to move', or 'I can't see my family as much as I want to'. Those kinds of reasons that young people might have are pushed aside a bit.

[56] **Helen Mary Jones:** But, of course, that is sometimes the only thing that matters to the young person. It is quite shocking when you think about it. Do you believe that involving children and young people more in placement planning in the first place could improve placement stability? It has been put to us that a big issue is the number of moves that young people have. Would a stronger voice from the beginning help to deal with that?

[57] **Ms Floris:** Yes. If young people feel that they have an investment in where they are living and that they have chosen to be in that placement to a degree, they will feel that they can invest in it. It would also open up that dialogue. If there was something that young people did not like about a placement, they would be more likely to say, 'I would like to change this', or 'I would like to do more of that' if they had had that dialogue from the beginning.

[58] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is very interesting. Thank you.

[59] **Angela Burns:** I want to come back to the role of the independent reviewing officer. Over the last year or so, I have met several children and young people who have been placed in foster care and one thing that comes across from them is that they accept the fact that it cannot be a parental situation any more—and they are not with their family, but somewhere else—and yet they still seem to crave that one strong person. If a child is at home with a parent or a significant person who will look after them for the rest of their childhood, and the child has a problem at school, or whatever, that person will go off and fight the battle for them. For a child in care, everyone seems to have equal rights to make all sorts of decisions, so the child is pulled in different directions. There are endless meetings with faceless people all representing even more faceless organisations, and they all chip in. If we were to turn the whole care system on its head and say that a child who happens to be in care is still entitled to that one person to fight their battles for them, to get them a better education, better health services, or this, that, and the other, who would that person be? Would it be the independent reviewing officer? Could we find a person in whom we could vest the strength and the complete authority to organise the rest of the services? That one person would end up knowing the child better, although it may not be the person with whom the child lives.

[60] Your paper says that children are always saying that they are viewed negatively, that the reason they move is because there has been a breakdown, and no-one listens to their aspirations or their hopes. They need someone who will take on that role. Does anyone stand out as the person who would take on that role?

[61] **Ms Floris:** It would be different for each person. People choose their own person. In

most cases, people would probably choose someone from their family. However, children in care choose different people. If they have a connection with a foster carer, it might be the foster carer who takes on that role. For some young people, the person who knows them the best and who may be the best advocate for them is a member of their birth family. It would be very hard to say that it should be one person. If it were someone like an independent reviewing officer, the objectivity of the role might be lost.

[62] The good thing about that role is that independent reviewing officers can listen to the different arguments that people make, or the different positions and views about what the young person should be doing. They can take an objective view and really listen to the child or young person. However, if they were in that role, their objectivity might be a bit compromised. They could still be a significant person, because some independent reviewing officers have known a young person for years. You can see that it is almost a relief to the young person when they see that it is them who is heading up the review and not another person. However, they need to keep their distance, and the most significant person might be in the child's life from day to day.

10.40 a.m.

[63] So, in my view, it is for them to choose. They might choose a foster carer, an advocate, or occasionally a teacher—for a while, as a teacher's role would be time limited. If children and young people are choosing someone from outside the normal framework, perhaps that person should be assisted in being significant to them for a bit longer. For example, a teacher could still keep in contact with a child or young person even after they had moved on from the school or wherever.

[64] **Angela Burns:** You just talked about choice, but how can they be encouraged to participate and go out and choose someone?

[65] **Ms Floris:** What often happens to children and young people is that everything is imposed on them and they almost lose that ability to choose. People say of the young people whom I currently work with, 'They will tell you whatever you want to hear'. I think that some do that because they have almost lost the ability to say what it is that they really want, to whoever is asking them. They have lost the ability to do that.

[66] **Joyce Watson:** On the voice of the child being paramount, you say in your paper that some children and young people do not always have an opportunity to give their views independently of their foster carer. Given that you mentioned it, do you think that children and young people who go through this process need independent support? If so, how should that be provided?

[67] **Ms Floris:** The advocate is a key person, but some of this would apply to the foster carer review meetings as well as to the looked-after children reviews. If we want to hear the views of children and young people, we have to make time for that. What tends to happen now is that people are not asked, or they fill in a form at the last minute. When a foster carer has a review meeting, local authorities, along with an advocacy provider, could consider informing the advocate of that meeting beforehand so that they have time to listen to the views of the child or young person about their placement, to help them to complete the form. That would not be much extra work if the advocate was already working with the child or young person. Such a system could be quite useful to the advocate as a tool. For example, when they meet the young person, the purpose of the visit could be to seek that young person's views on the foster placement.

[68] **Joyce Watson:** On the same theme, we have heard that professionals are legally obliged to take account of the wishes and feelings of children and young people about the

decisions made about their placements. However, despite that, the evidence that we have heard so far indicates that that is not happening. What needs to be done to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard and that they are at the centre of decision making?

[69] **Ms Floris:** That relates to what I said about making that clear to the children and young people at the beginning of the process, when they come into care. However, we must also ensure that children and young people understand how all these decision-making fora work and how they can input into those fora. People say that they will make decisions, and we need to ensure that action is then taken, because there is an idea that the system is too bureaucratic and that young people cannot be bothered with it and just want to get on with their lives. If people undertook the reviews and took action, much of the bureaucracy would be cut out. This is about making the system more efficient and more effective, rather than adding on any more. It is just about making it work.

[70] **Helen Mary Jones:** I have one final question for you. Your paper makes several useful recommendations, but if I were to be really horrid by asking you to pick out the single most important recommendation that you would like this committee to make to the Government of Wales to improve the placement process, what would it be? What would be at the top of your list? I am not saying that we will pick up on only one of your suggestions. I do not mean that for a minute, but what would your priority be?

[71] **Ms Floris:** It would be to strengthen the role of the IRO and to make sure that they have a bit of a watching brief. Doing that would cut out some of the repetitiveness, and things would happen, which would, I hope, engage young people more. They would see that things happen and that there is someone who is objective and can see all the different people who are chipping in, but who can also see the child or young person standing out from that and really take account of their views and wishes.

[72] **Helen Mary Jones:** That is really helpful. I am sure that we will want to pick up on that. I thank you both for coming and giving your evidence. It is a bit daunting to come here, but I certainly found the session useful, and I could see from watching other Members' reactions to your responses that they have also found it really helpful, building on and clarifying some of the points in your written paper.

[73] That brings the formal part of the meeting to an end. Some Members will be staying on for the informal meeting with the children and young people—and thanks again to Voices from Care for facilitating that. I remind committee members and others that, tomorrow, we will be debating the committee's report, 'Parenting in Wales and the Delivery of the Parenting Action Plan' in Plenary. That will be our opportunity to scrutinise the Government's response. I hope that some Members will be present for that.

[74] Our next meeting is on 13 October between 12 p.m. and 1 p.m., when we will be scrutinising the Welsh Government's draft budget. I thank Members for agreeing to meet at that slightly unconventional time. Thank you all very much, and thanks again to Joyce for stepping in at the last minute to cover for Christine. We are really grateful to her for that. It is always good when we can get a substitute, but when we can get one who has a lot of knowledge about the issues and is really interested, that is even better.

[75] Diolch yn fawr iawn i Joyce. Thank you very much to Joyce.

[76] Thanks to the committee staff and to the staff of the Record of Proceedings.

[77] Yr wyf yn dod â'r cyfarfod ffurfiol i ben. I bring the formal meeting to a close.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.48 a.m.
The meeting ended at 10.48 a.m.