

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru

Cyfarfod ar y Cyd rhwng y Pwyllgor Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, y Pwyllgor Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio, y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal a'r Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol

The National Assembly for Wales

Joint Meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee, the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee, the Committee on Equality of Opportunity and the Health and Social Services Committee

Dydd Iau, 8 Mawrth 2007

Thursday, 8 March 2007

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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynnddi 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 Cynulliad yn bresennol Assembly Members in attendance

Lorraine Barrett	Llafur Labour
Mick Bates	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Peter Black	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Welsh Liberal Democrats (Committee Chair)
Christine Chapman	Llafur (Dirprwy Weinidog) Labour (Deputy Minister)
Jeff Cuthbert	Llafur Labour
Jane Davidson	Llafur (Y Gweinidog dros Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau) Labour (The Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills)

William Graham	Ceidwadwyr Cymru Welsh Conservatives
John Griffiths	Llafur (Dirprwy Weinidog) Labour (Deputy Minister)
Mark Isherwood	Ceidwadwyr Cymru Welsh Conservatives
Irene James	Llafur Labour
Helen Mary Jones	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Laura Anne Jones	Ceidwadwyr Cymru Welsh Conservatives
Sandy Mewies	Llafur Labour
Jenny Randerson	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Janet Ryder	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Karen Sinclair	Llafur Labour
Gwenda Thomas	Llafur Labour
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Leanne Wood	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales

Swyddogion yn bresennol
Officials in attendance

David Middleton	Is-adran Strategaeth Plan Children's Strategy Division
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Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Maria Battle	Comisiynydd Plant Cymru Dros Dro Acting Children's Commissioner for Wales
Rhian Davies	Is-Gomisiynydd Plant Assistant Children's Commissioner
Sara Reid	Is-Gomisiynydd Plant Assistant Children's Commissioner

Gwasanaeth y Pwyllgor
Committee Service

Steve George	Clerc Clerk
Ruth Hatton	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 10.38 a.m.
The meeting began at 10.38 a.m.

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

[1] **Peter Black:** Good morning everyone. I welcome you to the joint meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee, the Health and Social Services Committee, the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee and the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. I have some housekeeping announcements before we start, particularly for members of the audience. In an emergency ushers will indicate the nearest safe exits. Headsets are available for simultaneous translation and amplification of sound—ushers will explain to members of the public how to use them if they are unclear about it. Members will wish to note that channel 1 is the simultaneous translation and channel 0 is the floor language. I ask everyone to switch off all mobile phones, BlackBerrys or any other electronic device because we are using wireless technology that does not like that type of device, as it interferes with it.

[2] I have received apologies from Janice Gregory, Edwina Hart, Jane Hutt, Huw Lewis, Trish Law, Jonathan Morgan, Catherine Thomas and Brian Gibbons. Are there any other apologies that Members are aware of? I see that there are none. I have not had any notification of substitutions.

[3] I invite Members to make any declarations of interest under Standing Order No. 4.6. I see that there are none.

[4] To explain briefly, because we are, effectively, four committees, each committee must be quorate for us to remain quorate, therefore please try not to leave early. If you do leave early, please ensure that three members of your committee are still here, because if we cease to become quorate we may have to suspend the sitting.

[5] **Karen Sinclair:** Chair, I just need to check that, because I was hoping to slip out for 20 minutes at around 11.15 a.m..

[6] **Leanne Wood:** I also need to leave at 12 p.m..

[7] **Peter Black:** We will do our best, but if we cease to become quorate we will have to stop the meeting, so it is your responsibility, I am afraid.

[8] **Karen Sinclair:** I was asking whether you could ascertain whether it was possible for me to do so.

[9] **Peter Black:** Other people also have plans to leave early.

10.40 a.m.

[10] **Karen Sinclair:** I will be coming back.

[11] **Peter Black:** I understand that, on current attendance, it will be possible for you to do that.

[12] **Karen Sinclair:** So, I can nip out and come back, and that will not be a problem.

10.40 a.m.

Cyflwyno Adroddiad Blynyddol Comisiynydd Plant Cymru 2005-06 Introduction of the Annual Report of the Children's Commissioner For Wales 2005-06

[13] **Peter Black:** Right. The purpose of our meeting is to provide an overview of, and an introduction to, the children's commissioner's annual report and to allow questions from committee members on sections 1, 2 and 3 in particular. I welcome Maria Battle, the acting children's commissioner, Sara Reid, the assistant children's commissioner, and Rhian Davies, who is also an assistant children's commissioner. I remind you that a verbatim record of the meeting is being taken, a copy of which will be made available in due course.

[14] Before we continue, on behalf of everybody here, I pay tribute to the work of Peter Clarke and I note in particular the tremendous contribution that he made as children's commissioner, much of which is summarised in the report before us. It is only right that, as you are here today, we record once again our gratitude to him and offer our commiserations to you and to all your staff on the tremendous loss that the whole of Wales suffered when Peter died.

[15] I invite Maria to introduce the report, and we will then take questions.

[16] **Ms Battle:** Thank you ever so much for your comments, and I thank everybody here; we have received so many wonderful tributes and kind wishes from all Members and from people throughout Wales. It has been a great comfort to us all. I would like to place on record a thank you to the staff at the Office of the Children's Commissioner of Wales. It was a huge shock for everybody. We knew that Peter was ill, but everyone believed, including Peter, that he was getting better, so the end came as a big shock. The staff have really rallied around as a tribute to Peter, because he wanted everyone to continue the work.

[17] Before I introduce his report, I will reflect on some of Peter's achievements during his six years in office, so that we can all remember. We can all share in those achievements as well, because it was the National Assembly for Wales that created the office. Peter was the first children's commissioner in the UK. The Assembly involved children in his appointment, he also ensured that each and every one of us was appointed by children. Children have always had a direct influence on his work; for example, some of his first reports on school toilets and on school transport are possibly not subjects high on many agendas, but they are very high on children's agendas, and he took them forward.

[18] On the morning of the publication of his first report, in 2002, and as a result of his many comments in the media, the establishment of the Wales child poverty task group was announced. On the day of the publication of his second report, when Peter made comments about the child and adolescent mental health services, additional funding was announced to coincide.

[19] As you know, Peter conducted a number of major reviews on whistleblowing complaints and advocacy procedures for children in Wales, which are the main services that help to safeguard and protect children. Many of the recommendations have been accepted, but we are still continuing the fight to get them implemented as well as accepted.

[20] Peter also, in highly controversial circumstances, held the Clywch inquiry into the chronic sexual abuse of children in a school, and he made over 30 far-reaching recommendations across the board to protect children. Within the media, we now have child protection procedures, as we do in examination boards, where they never were before. We have training for teachers now on how the abusers and sexual abusers of children operate. The Government has published guidance for schools on the teaching of drama. Also, we have a unique way in which allegations of abuse are investigated in Wales when they involve school staff. The all-Wales children's safeguarding procedures have incorporated the recommendations of the 'Clywch' report, and a public consultation on whistleblowing is being undertaken in schools, and that, too, came about because of the Clywch inquiry.

[21] Because of Peter's work, children now have the right to appeal directly and in their own right against exclusion and to appeal to special educational needs tribunals. During Peter's term of office, he published many reports. It is good for us to reflect on what he achieved in a short time as the first children's commissioner in the whole of the UK. Personally, I thank Peter for appointing all of us to do that work with him; it has been a great privilege, and a privilege that we hope to continue. Therefore, thank you for the opportunity to make those comments, Chair.

[22] Vis-à-vis Peter's report, I will confine myself, as I know that everyone has read it, to updating some of the major issues that he raised. The two issues that caused him the greatest concern were advocacy and counselling. He said in his report that he was severely disappointed with the draft strategy and that he was giving careful consideration to using his legal powers to review the way in which the Assembly reached decisions.

[23] The four fundamental pillars of a good advocacy service—which are in the paper, and which we all know of from many reports, including the commissioner's—are independence, quality, accessibility and funding. We have a bad history in Wales, with the Children's Society withdrawing and leaving children high and dry, and a lot of contracts being changed and spot purchasing still continuing. I am glad to say that we have taken that work forward, and we have had many discussions with National Assembly officials, and many of the concerns that Peter put in his paper have been raised directly with them.

[24] We are awaiting the publication of the new report, and the concern that we raised is that all vulnerable children are included. Officials have indicated that that will be in the next draft, but we will have to wait to see what is in it. The first draft that we saw artificially confined children into categories, which was not acceptable. All vulnerable children will be included, and there will be a catch-all for children who are vulnerable, as opposed to definitions of the particular groups. There may be a proposal that advocacy workers will be registered with the care council, which will account for their professional ability. There may be a proposal that there will be an inspection of the advocacy services by the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales. One thing that Peter raised with officials before Christmas that was very close to his heart was the accessibility of the single telephone number. I understand that that may also be in the consultation document.

[25] Peter felt, as we all do, that an independent advocacy unit was needed to ensure that all the fundamental principles of advocacy for children in Wales were in place, including the monitoring, advising, overview, and steering. I have had negotiations with officials and we are looking at whether or not those particular components could come into the office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales. That would be subject to adequate resources, because we could not take in that 'unit' without more resources. The discussions that we had and that Peter had before Christmas were very frank, but they were also constructive, and we will continue those discussions and respond accordingly to the paper when it comes out.

[26] The second major issue that Peter raised was counselling. As you know, the majority of the 31 recommendations in the 'Clywch' report have been accepted, which he was very pleased about. However, the major issue was the lack of progress on the counselling recommendation. Peter believed very strongly, because he came from a background of providing counselling for children, that counselling for all children in Wales would have a tangible impact on their lives in a relatively short period of time. He was so concerned about this that he joined the working group after he came back from sick leave. Again, I am glad to say that we have met Assembly officials, and we are much happier with the content of the draft, and all the recommendations and suggestions that we made have been incorporated. We welcome that, but we will be watching how this strategy is implemented in reality, whether it is adequately funded and whether there are adequate people to provide the service for children in Wales. However, it is a step in the right direction.

[27] Another major issue that Peter raised in his report, and in his report every year, is that the child and adolescent mental health services in Wales. He states in his report that the services are in crisis. For the last five years, I have dealt mainly with individual cases and with individual children, as have many people around this table. My experience on the ground is that it is an absolute disgrace at the moment. The service is not equal for children; it is difficult to access, and there are very vulnerable and very sick children who are not receiving the service that is their right.

10.50 a.m.

[28] As you know, there are children who are waiting for in-patient treatment that is not available, some go for treatment in parts of Wales far away from home, funding is being refused for specialist beds that have been recommended by other professionals, and children are on adult mental health wards and we are visiting them on those wards. It is basically a postcode lottery. We know that Healthcare Inspectorate Wales and the Wales Audit Office will be reviewing CAMHS. I am going to ask for a meeting with the director of inspections and the audit office to look at the terms of reference, as any review depends on the adequacy of the terms of reference. If they are far-reaching, we will feed in our evidence base—evidence from the individual children that we have helped and the professionals that we have met across Wales. If we feel that they are not far-reaching enough, we will consider reviewing the parts that are not being reviewed. We are keeping a watching brief and are being very proactive in that area.

[29] Turning to our work plans for this year, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires a major piece of work, which we will be doing this year. We are working very closely with the other UK commissioners on that. We will highlight the Welsh issues in the joint report that we will produce with the UK commissioners. We will also be doing a number of reviews this year. I completed a review yesterday, which will be published shortly, on the unacceptable and widespread practice of unofficially excluding children from school. That has gone to be translated and will be circulated in approximately three weeks' time. There are a number of recommendations—not many, but we hope that there are enough to help safeguard children—for the local education authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government.

[30] We will be completing the review on thematic bullying, which Peter commenced, which is being led by children. We will also be doing another bullying report that will draw on the complex bullying cases that we have been involved in. We will be predominantly picking up how we can assist people to work together better, involving all agencies—the police, social services, health, and education—in these very complex bullying cases. We will also be doing a review on out-of-county placements and private fostering agencies. We may be doing that review in partnership with the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. We are discussing that at the moment.

[31] We did a huge piece of work with children and young people, so that they could influence the type of work that we do this year. They voted that we should undertake a review on play and children with disabilities. Most of the children who voted for that were able-bodied, and that goes to show how wonderful children are and that they think about their peers. We will be taking that forward and taking forward another issue that children have voted for: education and learning, or the lessons themselves. We will be giving some thought as to how we can best add value to children's lives on that issue.

[32] On 26 April, we will be launching our freephone and freetext service for all children in Wales. We have recruited a number of volunteers. There will be a huge launch, with a number of celebrities in Wales endorsing us. We have also produced a DVD that will go into all secondary schools in Wales and we hope that that will increase the number of children who contact us directly. Year-on-year, the figures have been far too low—I think that it is only about 4 per cent—and we are hoping that with a concerted campaign directed at children, they will know that we are here. We have increased our capacity through the volunteer base to be able to take calls directly from children. We are also working closely with South Wales Police on something that I raised at last year's meeting: we are looking at a single point of access for children for everything, which would encompass all the telephone numbers that are out there.

[33] That is a brief summary, Chair, of some of the major issues in the report. Sara, would you like to add anything to that?

[34] **Ms Reid:** The main thing that I would like to give an overview of is the work that we have done as part of the framework that we have set up for the involvement of children and young people. It is a requirement of our office that children and young people have a say, not only in some of the daily aspects of running the office, but in setting the work programme.

[35] So, we ran it for the second year, and it is a continuous process. We gather information from all of the work, including policy reviews, involvement in working groups, as well as individual casework, workshops and events that we attend, at which we work directly with children and young people from all kinds of backgrounds and life experiences throughout Wales. Those issues are looked at. Our advisory groups form the second part of the framework that we have set up. There are two advisory groups linked to the two offices in Colwyn Bay and Swansea. They help us to look at the issues that have come up, and narrow down the themes so that we can come up with a piece of work that is deliverable and which they feel can make a difference.

[36] The process of consultation continues throughout the year. It is likely that we will hold two events every November from now on, though, hopefully, with increased funding in future years, we will be able to increase the number of events. Those events involve young people and children, as it is important that children of primary school age are also given a chance to contribute. They have a chance to select exactly what they want us to take forward. The two issues that they voted on and which Maria highlighted earlier are: disabled children and young people's access to play and leisure opportunities; and how to improve the learning experience for children in schools. As I said, the process is continuous, and we have learned a lot from it. To begin with, we looked at the broad themes, but, in doing that, a clear brief often cannot be developed, so we developed the advisory groups, which are more concerned with things like how we work, being involved in the recruitment and selection of staff, and commenting on our publications and promotional materials. These are areas that will add a lot to the process of refining those themes, helping us to develop the project plan so that we can take them forward. That is a duty on the commissioner and has been a significant piece of work—similar to painting the Forth bridge. We are reaching the end of the financial year and we are already identifying the issues from 2006-07 so that we can continue to involve children and young people in narrowing those issues down, selecting, voting, and choosing next year's projects for the commission.

[37] **Ms Davies:** The issues that you see identified in the annual report are there mainly because these are the issues that children and young people raised directly with our office, as well as their parents, carers and other professionals. Maria has already mentioned child and adolescent mental health services and provision, and our concerns about that. One of those concerns is that there is no aggregated information about CAMHS in Wales. It is simply not available. There is no website or any one document in which it is clearly laid out what services are available across the whole of Wales. So, we finally decided that we had better go out to obtain that information ourselves. Consequently, we have devoted a lot of time over the last year to liaising directly with the 22 local health boards in Wales and the 13 trusts—we also included the ambulance service. We asked specific questions, raised awareness about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and tried to set CAMHS provision against that framework, as well as the Welsh Assembly Government's framework, 'Children and Young People: Rights to Action'. We wanted to understand how local health boards were applying and understanding that, and what they felt their responsibilities were.

[38] We looked at the whole of CAMHS: tiers 1, 2, 3, and 4. Sometimes, there is some confusion. When people talk about CAMHS, they mean different things. Some people use CAMHS to describe tier-4 provision, for example, namely provision where, quite often, a child has to be detained or subjected to provisions under the Mental Health Act 1983 and provided with services outside Wales. Other people will use the term to describe a tier-1 service of counselling in a school. So, we wanted to try to unpick that with LHBs.

[39] The other issues that we wanted to include had a safeguarding element to them. So, we wanted to obtain an understanding of LHBs' understanding of services for children and young people with sexually harmful behaviour, and of how LHBs commissioned those services from the trusts—how that happened and how the trusts were responding. We are coming to the end of that piece of work and we will be in a position to publish the results of that. There are very similar results, contributions and comments about how CAMHS is currently being delivered in Wales across all tiers. That is what we have concentrated on.

11.00 a.m.

Adolygu Materion sy'n Berthnasol i Hawliau a Lles Plant
Review of Issues Relevant to the Rights and Welfare of Children

[40] **Peter Black:** Given the fact that what we discuss here will very much inform the Government's response on 21 March, when there will be an oral statement to Plenary, I want to structure this by concentrating as far as possible on the issues that have been raised by the report and then on the future work programme. Before I do that, are there any questions on sections 1, 2 and 3, which are essentially the introduction of what the children's commissioner's office is about, and what it has been up to as regards keeping children and young people at the heart of what we do? A few people have indicated already. Do you want to come in on this particular section, Rhodri?

[41] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** No, I wanted to come in on counselling services.

[42] **Peter Black:** Okay. Helen Mary is next.

[43] **Leanne Wood:** I just want to raise something that is not in the report, something that is missing.

[44] **Peter Black:** Raise it in this section, then.

[45] **Leanne Wood:** Okay.

[46] **Peter Black:** I call on Helen Mary to speak first and then you, Leanne.

[47] **Helen Mary Jones:** In a way, this may relate to the forward work programme as well, but I want to ask the office of the commissioner some questions about the balance of its work. What analysis does it have of the balance of resource that goes into individual casework, which can have huge benefits for an individual child, as opposed to the balance of work on policy, which can potentially have an impact on many more children, though perhaps not so specifically? Reading through the report, I could not get a feel of where that balance lies and, if I am honest, it concerns me.

[48] I also wanted to ask about individual advice and support, and, again, this may relate to the forward work programme. Only a small percentage of those referrals come from children, with the vast majority coming from parents, which I suppose is not surprising. Is that a concern for the commissioner's office? When we set the office up, we anticipated that it would be a direct forum for children. It clearly is in the way in which you consult children, but almost all of your referrals are mitigated through an adult of some kind. That may be inevitable, but I wondered whether it was a concern at all, or whether you thought that it needed to be addressed. I genuinely do not know whether we should be worried about that or not.

[49] **Peter Black:** I will group these questions, as that may be helpful for us to make progress. Did you want to come in as well, Janet?

[50] **Janet Ryder:** Is this on specific issues that have been raised in the report?

[51] **Peter Black;** It is on sections 1, 2 and 3.

[52] **Janet Ryder:** They cross over with counselling and advocacy.

[53] **Peter Black:** We will be covering advocacy later.

[54] **Janet Ryder:** That is fine.

[55] **Leanne Wood:** An issue that is missing from the report is the situation of children in the criminal justice system. We have this situation in which prisons are overcrowded, we have seen a doubling of the youth prison population in a decade, some 84 per cent of imprisoned children from Wales are in prisons in England, and there are issues with Welsh speakers who cannot be rehabilitated in their first language. Criminal justice is not a matter devolved to Wales, and your office can deal with devolved matters only, so does that mean that you cannot have a position on that? Is it the Children's Commissioner for England who would have to take up these issues regarding young people in Wales? If you can take a position, can you explain why it is not in the report?

[56] **Peter Black:** I will take Gwenda and Karen's questions first, and then bring Maria back, as well as anyone else who wants to come in on this section.

[57] **Gwenda Thomas:** I will start on a negative point, although it is not in regard to the report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, of course. I feel that this committee does not represent all of the portfolios of the Assembly. The Local Government and Public Services Committee, in particular, is not here. Every portfolio in the Welsh Assembly Government has a responsibility towards children, and we need to take that seriously and perhaps include it in a legacy report, if this committee can have such a thing, because I feel very strongly about that.

[58] I also thank the office of the children's commissioner for the support that it gave to the review that I chaired on services for vulnerable children, particularly Rhian Davies, who attended those meetings as an observer. Although that report was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government—and I feel that the First Minister and the Minister responsible for children had great vision in commissioning that report, which was necessary work—the report does not feature prominently when the Welsh Assembly Government is consulting on issues. For example, the consultation on the social services strategy did not include a single reference to it. To the best of my knowledge, there is no reference to it in the counselling document either. That is a shame, because the children and young people were involved. A mass of evidence was collected by the committee and by that group of children and young people, and to miss that opportunity is a shame. I have made those views known to Ministers. I feel that we have to be open and above board, because we are approaching the end of the second Assembly and I feel that we still have not got things right.

[59] I will not stop saying that we need a committee for children to gather together what the children's commissioner is saying. That committee should be the means by which we bring together the portfolios and identify cross-cutting issues that affect our children. I speak personally, and not as Chair of the Committee on Equality of Opportunity, when I ask how the children's commissioner's office feels that it will most effectively produce the report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child this summer. Each children's commissioner in the UK will produce a separate report. How can you suggest that the Welsh Assembly Government produces a report that also identifies devolution? I could go on, but I will not. However, that is an important issue, and responding to that report will be very important.

[60] **Karen Sinclair:** I will pick up on what Gwenda said about an overarching children's services committee. Many local authorities have acknowledged that and are working in that way, which is good practice because it takes away the silo thinking, which has been a huge problem in local authorities.

[61] On the 26 April freephone and freetext service, I will pick up on what Helen Mary said about not enough children contacting directly. Hopefully, that service will create an avenue that will enable them to do so. However, there is a huge consequence to that, because your response to children will be totally different from how you work with adults. For a start, children will expect a more immediate response—and deserve such a response when they contact you, because their circumstances will be different from those of adults. What provision have you made to meet that different way of working? This is a serious piece of work and, if it is not right, it is almost not worth doing. I do not mean to go that far, but it needs to be right, so how will you gear that to meet that response given that it will be so different?

[62] **Peter Black:** Maria, there are a fair number of questions there, and I am afraid that there is another set to follow.

11.10 a.m.

[63] **Ms Battle:** I will start off with the criminal justice system, if I may. Technically, the Children's Commissioner for England has the responsibility for non-devolved matters. However, his powers are more restricted than those of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, in that he can only talk about their best interests; he is not there to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children, he is not there to meet individual children, and so on. Since the office was set up we have been very involved in the criminal justice system, and we have been able to raise matters because there is an overarching power to comment on any matter that affects any child in Wales, which encompasses everything. So, we visit children in secure provision on a regular six-week basis in Wales, and we are hoping to expand that so that we can go into England to visit some children there. We raise the general issues; for example, at the moment we are working in collaboration with the Children's Commissioner for England in looking at the mental health of young offenders. So, we would undertake that kind of review jointly, rather than the English commissioner's doing something unilaterally that would affect Welsh children.

[64] We have set up links with prisons in Wales, with the children and with the youth offender panels and so on, and it is then for us to take that forward within Wales—that has been agreed with the English commissioner. We are concerned, obviously; our stance has always been that we do not think that children should be locked up at all, but those who are locked up should be held in a humane environment with a lot of therapy—full stop. We are very concerned that the children who are assessed with a high level of mental health needs are not actually receiving treatment. Their outcomes are appalling, and many of them, we know, come from the care system. So, we are very actively involved, and the fact that it is not necessarily a devolved matter has not stopped us, and will not stop us. We sometimes have to remind England that we are dealing with these issues, so that they do not rush ahead.

[65] **Ms Reid:** On the question of why this was not included in the report, there are a lot of issues that were not included. I am sure that Rhian Davies, as head of our policy team, will confirm that many issues were presented to Peter, there were discussions, and then Peter decided upon the key issues that he wanted to highlight in this section of the report. So, if something is not mentioned, that does not mean that we are not doing anything on that issue.

[66] **Ms Davies:** As the country in the EU with the youngest age for criminal responsibility—10 years of age—it is something that we will raise in our report to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We will certainly be making strong representations—all four commissioners' offices across the UK—about the age of criminal responsibility, the way in which we detain young people, the issue of where they are detained, and the services that are available to them. The other initiative that we have just begun with our colleagues in England is looking at mother-and-baby units in prisons, because essentially, you might say that the babies are incarcerated.

[67] **Ms Battle:** We are also active in the national offender management groups. There are two relevant groups, one looking at children and young people and the other at children of offenders, which seems to be a group that has been very much overlooked. They suffer a lot of shame and isolation, and they have poor attainment in school, mental health needs, and so on. So, we have started to go into adult prisons, promoting the work of the commissioner; we went into Cardiff prison yesterday for the first time, and we are going to the English women's prison, because mums are being shipped out of Wales. We are not there for the mums, but if they know that we exist, and their children are in difficult circumstances in Wales, then at least there is a pathway for the children to come to us for assistance.

[68] That brings me to the issue of children coming to the office. My view is that I do not mind how they come to the office, so long as they get to know about us and that someone advocates for them. Ideally, it would be best if they knew about us themselves. If you remember, when the legislation was going through Parliament, there was an awful lot of opposition to the existence of an office, on the grounds that it would usurp the rights of mothers and fathers, when in fact they are now using us a lot, and I am glad that parents and carers come to us. We are trying to expand access for children through the freephone number, through the school ambassador schemes, and by getting out there—I think that everybody has a responsibility, because we do not have the resources to tell every single child in Wales about the office of the children's commissioner. We made recommendations in the 'Clywch' report that every school should teach about us, and we have met with the police, because they go into every school, so that they can tell children about us as well. Therefore, we are trying everything that we can to communicate, and we hope that the freephone will help. We have several initiatives with that. We will have the celebrities, we will have young journalists whom we have picked throughout Wales to write articles, we will have pavement art, and we will have events, and so on, to raise the profile. We have an easy telephone number and an easy text number for them to ring.

[69] We visited a similar project in Birmingham, which receives something like 25,000 calls a year from children. If they can do it, so can we, and we are trying to learn from their best practice. How do we deal with the increase in calls? We have been careful in recruiting the volunteers; they have the same job description and person specification as a member of staff. The majority are second and third-year social work or psychology students, and they also have trained staff with them.

[70] I agree with the point about responding immediately to children. We have a high resolution rate with cases—it is a 90 per cent resolution rate, and 7 per cent partially resolved. We try to speak to a child within 24 hours of receiving a call from an adult, or immediately—it is generally immediately—or even meet the child. If we find that there is a huge influx and a flood, then we will have to come back for more funding. We do not expect that to happen; we hope that we have sufficient arrangements. We have a rota of volunteers, and we have staff—so we hope that that will be sufficient. On the basis of the research that we have done, we anticipate that it will be sufficient. If it is not, we will have to come back and look at expanding.

[71] That brings us on to resources. Page 56 of the report lists the different objectives and the money that is related to them. That is not really a true picture; it makes it look as though there is just one objective at a time, when, in fact, although we have several teams, we work in a cross-project way. Therefore, there may be, say, £200,000 going towards an advice team, and £100,000 towards a top policy team, and £200,000 towards a communications team, but the actual policy reviews will involve staff from all those teams. We work as one office, so the money is pooled. That brings into a review the knowledge of what is happening around Wales, so that we can add value through policy contacts, networking, and so on, what children and young people are saying, through how we speak and listen to them, what the evidence basis is from the casework, and what everyone's individual skills are in the office.

[72] Therefore, it does not give a true reflection of the work—it is pooled together. Peter felt strongly about that; he commenced that about 18 months ago, and we are doing more of that now. The reviews that we have identified in the report are cross-office reviews, led by one person, but bringing in all knowledge. At the same time, we are reviewing this year the structure of the office and our resources, and seeing whether we need to do it differently; Peter had started that as well.

[73] **Ms Reid:** On the impact of helping children and young people deal with the difficulties that they face—it is not recorded in the statistics, as it is about the advice and support work—an important component of the communications and participation work is about supporting young people's empowerment, as well as their ability to deal with the difficulties that they face in their school, youth group or locality. So, the workshops that our staff do with children and young people raise awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and will talk about structures that are in existence locally that will enable them to have a say and to make a difference to their circumstances.

[74] The ambassador scheme, in particular, which we will gradually roll out throughout Wales, encourages the development of rights-aware environments in schools. It is also linked closely with the work on pupil involvement and school councils. We saw that as being essential, in that it will give an awareness of rights and of a different approach to dealing and negotiating with children and young people.

11.20 a.m.

[75] There have been some interesting experiences, where the ambassadors have had to develop good diplomatic skills to deal with issues such as playground discipline and school dinners. That is a very important aspect of the role of the children's commissioner's office. As Maria said, we are not the only people whose job it is to take children seriously; we need to encourage everybody else to do so too.

[76] **Ms Battle:** The children's committee thinks that it is a necessity. We are talking about joining together and having single plans, but we are not reflecting that here as a committee in the Assembly; we need that. I am also sad that some people are not here today, when we know that their decisions are crucial to children and young people in Wales. I would like to see this work go further than a children's committee; I would like to see a children's department, which would bring all of those strands together.

[77] As an office, we are still finding that we are an afterthought or that we are not thought of at all in some areas that have an impact on children. We find out about these matters only through the hard work and research of our staff. I raised that with officials recently, so we are hoping that we are going to meet with a number of divisions together three times a year to look at forward work plans and our work plans, and we will say which ones we feel we need to influence. Once consultations have taken place, we will get involved again. That is how things should work, rather than the children's commissioner being an afterthought or being in the same place as everybody else; we need to add value to what everybody else does. I would support that and more.

[78] Rhian has taken the lead on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, so she will respond to the question about raising that in the report.

[79] **Ms Davies:** The four commissioners will combine their reports. I do not know whether Members are aware that, although the report for Wales will be published in Wales, it will be subsumed by the Department for Education and Skills, as will the reports for Scotland and Northern Ireland. Therefore, I guess that the report will be a DfES-edited version. However, although the commissioners have agreed to put the reports together, you will be able to identify clearly what is happening within each jurisdiction. So, there will be four lines every time. We will come together to identify key issues and priorities, because there is strength in the four of us presenting on the same issues, but we will have individual issues for each of the countries of the UK too. That is the way that we are going forward with UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reporting.

[80] **Peter Black:** There are five Members who wish to ask questions on these three reports.

[81] **Sandy Mewies:** My question follows on from what you have just said. The children's commissioner's office has raised awareness of the need to involve children in decisions made about them in many Government departments, local government, voluntary organisations and so on. You have talked about sharing good practice. You have a panel of young people who contribute, so are you able to share your experiences with other organisations? I suppose that the first question would be whether they ask you to share those experiences. I often hear people asking how they can get to young people and how they can get them involved. Do people ask you for advice on doing that?

[82] The Welsh Assembly Government has produced its autism strategy. Have you had any thoughts on it yet, or will you be studying it in depth for the next report?

[83] **Christine Chapman:** We have already discussed the issue of the children's commissioner taking up individual cases. If I remember rightly, when the office was set up, people said that the commissioner would not be there to do that, because he or she would be inundated. I know that we have discussed this at length, but do you think that things have worked out like that, or have you shifted focus slightly? As more children know about your services, more will come to you, which is a good thing. However, have things worked out differently to the original idea?

[84] My second question is on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and influencing that. I know that a number of us have been interested in the campaign to abolish the physical punishment of children, and work with the other commissioners to do so. How strong do you think Wales's position will be in influencing the UK Government on that? We had an event a few weeks ago to do so, but we need to keep pushing on that.

[85] My other question is on bullying, which I do not think is in the next section. Some progress has obviously been made, which is good, but the report suggests that things are still not working out as they should. What is your opinion on what further work we need to do to address this serious problem?

[86] **Peter Black:** The United Nations convention is in the next section, so we will wait until we reach it for an answer on that.

[87] **Jenny Randerson:** I want to endorse and develop the comments that Gwenda made about her concern that the Local Government and Public Services Committee is not represented here. The Culture, Welsh Language and Sport Committee should also be here. I know that Laura is a member of that committee, but she is here by chance because she is a member of another committee. The only solution is to hold a Committee of the Whole Assembly, and we might recommend that, in future, we have a Committee of the Whole Assembly to do this, because the other people who are not here are most of the Ministers with responsibility. We have a representative Minister here and not the full group, and I think that Maria made that point just now, although rather less pointedly than me. If we had a Committee of the Whole Assembly, in a structured debate or questions you would expect all Ministers with responsibilities—I cannot think of a Minister that does not have any responsibility—to participate.

[88] You referred at the beginning to work that you are doing for disabled children and access to services in relation to school. The Committee on Equality of Opportunity has completed its report, therefore how are you coordinating the work that you are doing with the findings of that committee?

[89] **Mark Isherwood:** On page 18, you say that 5.5 per cent of your advice and support applied to housing. Shelter has highlighted concerns about the number of children living in unfit housing and becoming homeless, and Housing Forum Cymru has highlighted the linkages between unfit housing, whether it is public sector, privately rented or owner-occupied housing, and poor health and educational achievements. When the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee did its review of youth homelessness, the young people whom Sandy and I met suggested, among other things, that there should be youth homelessness fora. What work are you doing or considering in this area?

[90] **Irene James:** You mentioned the role of school ambassadors and school councils, which we fully endorse, but how are you empowering young people with the confidence to take the lead in such areas? It is often those pupils and children who are fully assertive who come forward with the ideas, so what are we doing to encourage those who are not as assertive?

[91] **Ms Battle:** I will start with the issue of being inundated with the cases. That was the major argument when we were set up and it was the major argument that won in England, therefore the commissioner in England does not do the cases. I passionately feel that you cannot say to a child, 'Thanks for telling me about the fact that you are homeless—I will look into the policy and we will change it'. You have to do both aspects. We are not inundated; that has not happened, and I think that that is because of the way that we approach the cases. We are not bureaucratic and we try not to write loads of letters; we pick up the phone and we try to solve the problem as quickly as possible by going straight to source, to the person who has the ability to change it. We often find that we come across fellow professionals who are also really frustrated. We treat people with respect and we try to work together. We find that children fall through the net, so we bring all the agencies together. It just needs someone in there. So, we try to do it in that way.

11.30 a.m.

[92] If ours was an organisation that wrote long letters to chief executives and so on, I do not think that we would have as quick a resolution rate, and we would have so much paperwork to do that we would not work as well as we do. Therefore the method is important, but the moral principle is fundamental. Then again, we will keep an eye on what happens when the freephone comes along. Thirty per cent of the cases that come to us are signposting; it is about children not knowing what is out there. We do not do what other people do; we try to get other people to do their jobs. That is another way that stops us being inundated.

[93] On a Committee of the Whole Assembly, I think that that is an excellent idea. That shows respect to children. Every single one of us, in everything we do, has an impact on children in Wales, and it is a sign of respect if the person or office that has been put in place to represent children should be given access to the whole Assembly. That is an excellent idea, and I support that totally.

[94] To pick up the issue of housing, on an individual case basis, we deal with housing issues. We also meet with groups of homeless children, and those who work with homeless children. We try to influence the development of policies in that way. I am still shocked by meeting a group of homeless children about three weeks ago in a certain area, which I will not name, of whom several were sleeping rough that night and had fallen through every single safety net. One of the things that we have done in the advocacy paper is to ensure that homeless children are included so that they have access to their own advocacy services. I am sure that Rhian would like to expand on what else we are doing in the policy field vis-à-vis homeless children.

[95] **Ms Davies:** We are certainly working very closely with Shelter Cymru and other non-governmental organisations, which was a subject that I was going to pick up. Going back to an earlier question about the balance of work and how policy development is reflected in the work of the office, and what the balance is, as cases arise, as individual matters are raised that have a strong policy aspect to them, or when we identify policy gaps, we then go out and approach NGOs to find out what they have to say to us directly from children and young people's experiences so that we can try to ensure that we are reflecting the widest needs of children. Consequently, as far as homelessness is concerned, we are members of the leaving care forum, so we are able to pick up issues directly around looked-after children, children leaving care and associated homelessness issues, as well as working directly with Shelter and other NGOs.

[96] **Ms Battle:** Bullying is an issue that comes to us often; bullying in the community and bullying in school environments. We deal with individual cases, and we have come across a glut of quite complex cases, in which, as in other examples, individual agencies are dealing with the issue but not sharing information. We have actively become involved, and we have called what are not so much case conferences, but we insist that people meet and share information, and we have represented individual children there. In the very tragic cases of a child death, we have had access to all the review reports and the overview of the individual agencies. As a result of that Peter gave a commitment last year that we would carry out an in-depth analysis of the evidence base that we have to draw out lessons that, despite the fact that they may be being drawn out in individual local authority areas, are not being drawn out nationally. We will be taking that piece of work forward across the organisation this year.

[97] Sara is taking the lead on the thematic bullying review. We are into the second phase of that review.

[98] **Ms Reid:** There are still problems and things are still not working on bullying, even though we have clear guidance. That guidance maybe needs updating or expanding. There are sometimes difficulties that are highlighted in cases in relation to how incidents or prolonged experiences of bullying are responded to by agencies. However, there is also an important role to play in terms of work that changes the culture and ethos of the school. So, the next phase of the thematic review will look at children and young people's experiences of being involved in bullying initiatives, because it was clear from our direct work with groups of children and young people that bullying has an impact on virtually every child's life. That does not mean that every child will have necessarily been bullied, but that children are aware that it does happen and there will be fears about it. The child may have been a bystander unclear about what to do, or may be supporting a friend, a brother or a sister who is being bullied. Even though there are very good initiatives, sometimes they are short lived, or there are clear policies, but pupils are not aware of them.

[99] There are still some barriers to effective implementation of all the good work. So, we want to identify the barriers on the preventative side and promote a different culture in schools, in youth groups and in the community. By dealing with it in that way, you are not just looking at firefighting, you are addressing issues around emotional intelligence and children and young people's behaviour, as well as adults' responses to it. That is why I think that there is a considerable value in looking at it from both sides, from the handling of the cases by the agency, the policy context and from looking at children and young people's daily experience.

[100] **Peter Black:** Laura wants to ask a supplementary question on that aspect.

[101] **Laura Anne Jones:** How are you working with school councils to raise awareness of your office, to access their thoughts on bullying and on how they would deal with it? We are covering a whole age range of different groups, so there are likely to be spokespeople for their age groups.

[102] **Ms Reid:** I will deal with that question and also Sandy's questions about participation, because they link to the area of work that I lead. We involve children and young people in our work and we try to model good practice. However, one thing that we have had to recognise from the start is that we are a new organisation, we have far from limitless resources, and direct work in participation is quite heavy in terms of resources. There are other organisations out there—fortunately, many of our staff have come from those organisations—and they also have a far longer history and detailed experience of direct work. Many organisations and agencies that are new to the idea of participation contact us for advice, information and guidance, and we will often signpost them to bodies such as the participation consortium. We are active in the participation consortium and our participation workers work closely and have good links with other organisations working directly with children and young people. We do not see ourselves as being the experts, because we are still learning. We are building on this and we need to recognise the expertise of others and give them opportunities to promote that work.

[103] On the work with school councils, again, we have four or five members of staff engaged with that throughout Wales. As well as the involvement framework for children and young people, we also have communication and participation frameworks. That includes visiting workshops for groups of children and young people whom we have identified as being vulnerable, hard to reach or marginalised in some way. We have a mainstream general programme, which predominantly visits existing youth groups and, primary and secondary schools.

11.40 a.m.

[104] We look at things such as pupil referral units in the targeted programme as well. We also have contact with school councils, and, when Peter was alive, he would be invited, when a new school council was established, to meet its members, and the communications and participation staff would go out to talk to them as well.

[105] We try to maintain a good relationship with WAG officials regarding their ongoing work, to ensure that we are all aware of what each other is doing. With the resources that we have, we need to encourage partnership and encourage everybody to inform school councils, healthy schools co-ordinators, and personal and social education co-ordinators and advisors about the existence of the office and what support and resources we can offer.

[106] One key thing to come out of the school ambassador scheme was that the schools that joined it were encouraged to use an open process to select the ambassadors—they were encouraged not to go for the usual suspects. Schools are also encouraged to do that in terms of establishing school councils, and it is something that we are keen to ensure. In the pilot, for example, we included a special school, so there had to be appropriate support in place, through link teachers, so that the children and young people who might not normally be involved in those sorts of structures had an opportunity. That is something that we are particularly aware of.

[107] **Ms Battle:** We made a lot of comments on the autism strategy and pushed for it before it came out. I have seen a copy now and we are all considering it. It always comes down to adequate and sustainable funding. We will be responding to the autism strategy in the next few weeks.

[108] **Peter Black:** Before we move on to the next issue, did you want to come in, Karen?

[109] **Karen Sinclair:** May I just come in on bullying? I am sorry, but I did go to visit some children, as did Janet, so I think that we can be forgiven for that. I wanted to come back to bullying because that is one of the issues that has become problematic in my home town, not necessarily in my whole constituency, but in my home town. The children actually raised this issue and it would have been quite nice to wheel them in to talk to you about it.

[110] A zero-tolerance policy is being implemented in the town, which means that young people in a group of more than three—I thought about which word I should use and I think that ‘ebullient’ is good enough—if they were being ebullient, could end up being dispersed. I really feel quite strongly that that could be a form of bullying because if, for example, I was out with Maria, Gwenda, Irene and Sandy, and we were having a good time and being ebullient, nobody would think of dispersing us. It is a real issue of bullying young people because that can be done. Are you picking that up elsewhere as well or is that something that is fairly unique, which may have the potential to be rolled out? It is worrying because, at one point, there were stories about Rottweilers eating children and then children eating old people, and it is really quite scary if that sort of situation is becoming apparent at this point in time.

[111] **Ms Battle:** It is a total breach of children’s rights, whatever label we give it, and it is not right. I have found that practice varies across Wales. Some police forces view a number of children together as a positive thing and will interact and work with them, and then some forces choose to move them on. If you want to tell us where that is happening, we will—

[112] **Karen Sinclair:** It is somewhere in north Wales.

[113] **Ms Battle:** Tell me later. Peter used to meet regularly with the chief constables, and I have started to meet them regularly down in the south. We are supposed to be meeting in the north this month and we will raise that issue because it is not acceptable—it is a breach of their rights, whatever label we put on it. It is in the report that we found the Mosquito device to be horrendous. It is awful and absolutely disgraceful. We raised it with them. If you look at the manufacturer’s website, it suggests that children eat not only Rottweilers and grannies, but everything else as well. The device is a breach of children’s rights and no-one knows the potential health damage of using them. If the police will not use them and they have all the science available, how can it be used by private enterprises?

[114] All we are doing is failing to address why children are there; we are moving children somewhere else. I think that everyone had a copy of the report that we published recently called 'Someone to Listen: Something to Do'. If children are hanging around, it is because there is nothing else that they want to do in that area or there is nothing for them to do there. It is for us to get together to look with them at what needs to happen in that particular area. As to the individual policy, there is no problem with raising that directly with the chief constable in that area. Time and again, children tell us that they feel disrespected. They would not do it to you or me, and they certainly would not do it to someone who has a title or who is an elected member, so why should they be able to do it to children? They have every right to hang around.

[115] **Peter Black:** I will move on to the policies. Before I do, two issues have been raised. The first was raised by Gwenda and refers to the possibility of a children's committee, children's unit or a children's Minister. The second was raised by Jenny and is about how this report is considered in the future in terms of whether it should be a committee of the whole Assembly. I will not take a vote, because that is complicated. Is there a general consensus with regard to those issues? If there is not, I need to know. If there is consensus, I will make a note of it and forward it on to the next Assembly's Business Committee to look at.

[116] **Helen Mary Jones:** On the process—and I asked about this when Gwenda Thomas mentioned it—is it possible, under Standing Orders, for this joint committee to have a legacy report in the same way as the individual committees? I think that it would give the issue more status if we were able to have a legacy report. We touched on some of these process issues, and we may want to ask any successive joint committee, a children's committee, or a committee of the whole Assembly, to look at some of the issues that the children's commissioner has raised. We might want to highlight some of those major issues.

[117] **Peter Black:** To do that practically, it would have to be done by e-mail correspondence. The best practical way forward on this issue might be for individual committees to incorporate it in their legacy reports. I have seen no dissent, so we will record in the minutes that there is consensus in favour of a children's committee and in favour of the reports being considered in future by the whole Assembly; we have this mechanism as a consequence of Business Committee discussions many years ago. Perhaps we can do things in a different way in the next Assembly. We will record that and move on to the next section, which looks at the issues.

[118] I will take each issue individually, so if you are going to indicate that you want to comment, you will be indicating on the issues as I call them. The first is independent advocacy services. Do any Members wish to speak on this? Mark, you go first, and then Janet.

[119] **Mark Isherwood:** I will just quote the report. The commissioner says in the report:

[120] 'I have serious concerns about the proposed model...The document appears to espouse a model for commissioners, rather than attempt to meet the needs for advocacy of children and young people'.

[121] You mentioned earlier that you have been able to engage with Government since then and that you feel that the right progress will be made in this direction and that there is full comprehension about what needs to be done to ensure that those young people are truly receiving advocacy that is independent of any other conflicts of interest.

[122] **Peter Black:** I will bring Janet in as well.

[123] **Janet Ryder:** I think that you quite rightly underlined the need to have a central unit that overlooks the development of advocacy. As you have seen today, it is difficult when you organise things across committee boundaries. However, advocacy for young people crosses those boundaries. Therefore, you need a centrally placed unit that will see to the development of those advocacy services in every department. Are you satisfied that the Government is mindful of that, or does this committee need to—either as the Chair has recommended, through its individual subject committees or through a joint committee like this—strongly recommend to the new Assembly that it revisits this area and that there is a need to develop a central advocacy unit?

11.50 a.m.

[124] You also touched on where that possible advocacy unit might sit and about registering it with the inspectorate. That is something to be welcomed; we want to see those services being inspected. You talked about placing the advocacy unit within the office of the children's commissioner. I can see the sense in that, as it would set it apart from the Government, and its independent boundaries would be visible. However, if it were to sit with you, how would it ensure, more than you are doing now, that services in Government definitely develop? Or does it need to sit partly with you as an independent watchdog—an advocate on behalf of advocacy services, if you like—and a central unit within Government, with officers to develop the work and ensure that it crosses all departmental boundaries? If it were to sit with you, would your present resources be able to cope with that, and, if not, what would need to happen rapidly to ensure that they could?

[125] **Mick Bates:** I am interested in a 2004 report by Cardiff University, which said that children, from its talking to them, had no notion of what advocacy meant. I know that you talked to 1,000 children as part of the work on this, but what did children and young people identify as the being most important thing to them with regard to advocacy and what work are you doing to find that out?

[126] **Ms Battle:** We still get children ringing us up—children from among the 4 per cent in residential care—and, because it is our job to get other people to do their job, I ask them if they have an advocate, and I still get the response, 'What is an advocate?'. The 4 per cent in residential care are the most vulnerable children, and you would have expected everyone to have told them. We will find an advocate for them, but we will also stay around to ensure that the advocacy is of a suitable quality.

[127] To pick up the issues about the unit, the ideal—and what Peter wanted—which came out of the reports 'Telling Concerns' and 'Children Don't Complain', would be an independent, national body that provided advocacy to all children in Wales. That is where we want to get to. We can do it with CAFCASS Cymru, so why not with advocacy provision? We are starting from a position of having a number of advocacy providers—I think that there are five in Wales—that are commissioned by individual local authorities. I had to intervene recently where a local authority had no advocacy provision for children and young people. Spot purchasing is still going on. There is also some good advocacy provision, but, on a case basis, we know that it is not sometimes available for children. So, despite all the goodwill in the world, we have a mess at the moment. It is a question of how we get from here to there. The model that Peter saw, and that we all saw and discussed in a meeting with people before Christmas, was not good enough and not acceptable. There was no mention whatsoever of an independent unit and it was a commissioning model mainly, as he said.

[128] I have met Assembly officials to try to see if we could have components similar to the independent investigation service. Peter wanted tribunals. We now have something that we hope will deliver the fundamentals that he was asking for, but in a different way. The ideal is still a national service. If this paper comes out with all the amendments that we have requested, it will be a step in the right direction. That is as far as I can go.

[129] The regulation that requires the workforce to be adequately qualified and so on is essential. The inspection of the provision is essential; it cannot rely on service level agreements. That leaves the other components: the monitoring; the overseeing; and the steering. Where can these components go? They cannot go to a provider or a purchaser. All that I could see that was left was the National Assembly or us, and I said that we would be willing to consider it, subject to resources. Resources would mean more staff dedicated to doing this work, with a clear framework to their remit, based on research such as the Cardiff report and our research. So, it was a step in the right direction, but we are watching it and negotiating.

[130] **Karen Sinclair:** Once you move in, Maria, you also become a very clear service deliverer and—

[131] **Ms Battle:** We would not do that; we would monitor and give advice, which are the two components that would not be provided by the unit, when inspection is taken out. In terms of steering it, there may be blurred boundaries in that regard. So, we would have to discuss that and consider our powers. We would not provide the service or enter into contract with anyone. Our independence is fundamental.

[132] **Karen Sinclair:** That is exactly what I wanted to hear. Thank you.

[133] **Janet Ryder:** If the service goes to you as the monitoring body, how do you ensure that Government departments take action?

[134] **Ms Battle:** We do what we do now: we make recommendations, and that is as far as our powers go.

[135] **Janet Ryder:** If the service goes to you in that way, do you think that there is no need to have a central governmental advocacy unit, or would there still be a need for both?

[136] **Ms Battle:** That depends on the components that come to us.

[137] **Peter Black:** I see that there are no other points on that, so I will move on to Clywch and counselling support. Helen Mary is first, then Mark and then Janet.

[138] **Helen Mary Jones:** If I understand it rightly, one of the purposes of this committee is to highlight the issues that we want the Government to comment on when it gives its response. I simply wish to say that the Government must respond to this; this has gone on for far too long. If it does not accept this recommendation and does not intend to act on it, it ought to tell us as much. If it tells us that it will act on it and then does not, that is not okay. I do not suggest that we discuss that with the Minister today, but it needs to be flagged up for inclusion in the response.

[139] **Mark Isherwood:** On advocacy, counselling and whistleblowing, which you referred to, are you still considering using legal powers, if required, to address the concerns that Peter raised? I am referring to Clywch, but the Waterhouse report said that unofficial counselling and advocacy services were provided by certain politicians and senior council officers who befriended the victims. When the case was over, charges were brought against at least one of the victims by those same people. After four years of hell, those charges were dismissed by a court. That is an example of how failing to have truly independent and effective advocacy and counselling services and whistleblowing policies can have a dramatic effect. Would you use those legal powers if needs be?

[140] **Ms Battle:** I agree that independence is critical, and that is why we think that a national model, funded independently from the providers and commissioners, is the best one. Would we consider using our legal powers? We would always consider that if we felt that children were being failed.

[141] **Janet Ryder:** You said that you have looked at the strategy that has come out. We know that Peter had considerable concerns regarding the development of this, and I still have considerable concerns about the strategy that has been put forward, because it does not have a timetable for the development of an all-Wales service. It refers to the 10 counties that are providing the service now, and the three counties that will provide it next year. It includes dates that would take us up to 2008 and 2010 before the courses have even been developed for trainees to come through, and it would take perhaps another year or so for the trained counsellors to come through and take up their positions. No targets have been set for extending the service to the other nine counties in Wales. Until we know how that will happen and we get the Government's response to the establishment of an accessible all-Wales counselling service, we do not have an all-Wales strategy. How are you going to keep monitoring this? I would like an assurance from you that you will keep monitoring this, and that this will be at the top of your list of concerns, because it is a service that all children everywhere in Wales should be able to access.

[142] **Ms Battle:** We will monitor advocacy, counselling and the child and adolescent mental health service very closely. Those were the three major issues that Peter was disappointed, angry and concerned about; he even said that he would use his powers in that regard. We will continue to monitor those issues and do everything that we can to influence the development of the strategy. If we are not happy with it and if it does not go far enough, we will consider what we need to do about it. So, I reassure you about that.

12.00 p.m.

[143] We also need to link the council with ‘Everybody’s Business’ and so on, and ensure that it is a non-stigmatising, universal service for all children in Wales that is funded and accessible. If that is available, it can make such a difference in every area of their lives, as we have seen not only in the Clywch inquiry, but with all our experiences.

[144] **Janet Ryder:** By what date do you anticipate an all-Wales strategy and counselling service being available to every child in Wales?

[145] **Ms Battle:** We would have liked to see an all-Wales strategy and counselling service for Wales around three years ago. So, we will see what comes from the consultation exercise and will respond then.

[146] **Janet Ryder:** There is nothing there.

[147] **Ms Battle:** We would have liked to see that immediately after the recommendation was made, but that is the one that has dragged on and on.

[148] **Peter Black:** I will now move on to the next item, which is CAMHS.

[149] **Helen Mary Jones:** This is obviously of enormous concern. I will not repeat what has been said year on year, or what is clear in the commissioner’s report. He uses the word, ‘crisis’, but I do not think that ‘national disgrace’ would be too strong. I am sure that almost all of us in constituency surgeries hear cases that are unbelievably and unbearably tragic. I know that the commissioner’s office does. I do not understand why we are reviewing ‘Everybody’s Business’, because we have not implemented it, so how can you review something that you have not yet implemented? However, if the Government is dead set on this review—and we have said time and again in the Health and Social Services Committee that we do not see the need for a review; we see the need for money—I would like it to report on the timescale for that, and on how soon we can expect it to be completed. Again, I reiterate that I think it completely unnecessary.

[150] I would like to ask the commissioner’s office whether it has reached the point where it would consider a formal investigation into this, because I think that it has gone on for long enough. I put it to you that all the evidence demonstrates that all your efforts to influence and work with the Assembly Government on this, and with health bodies, have failed, sadly. It is time for you to use the teeth that many of us around this table fought very hard for you to get, which, sadly, the commissioner for England does not have. I am at the end of my tether with this and I think that Peter was at the end of his tether, as Maria has said. It is time for formal steps to be taken. This matter is raised continually in the health committee, and I know that it is raised continually with Ministers by others, and yet nothing has been done. Children in our country are dying because nothing has been done, and I have had enough.

[151] **Jenny Randerson:** Following on from that, with which I agree, it seems to me that the Mental Health Bill has the potential to make a bad situation even worse. You will probably be aware that the Minister considered seeking framework powers in that Bill, but decided not to. The committee's view, when we discussed this, was strongly in favour of asking him to reconsider that decision. We had a recent debate on this in Plenary, when Gwenda raised CAMHS, as did I. What work are you doing with the Welsh Assembly Government and the UK Government to try to get some adequate provision in the new Mental Health Bill for dealing with child and adolescent mental health services, given that it neglects the kind of protections that we would expect? I am particularly concerned about what we currently have for 16 to 18-year-olds, as they fall between two stools. The service for under-16s is inadequate, and there is not even a specific service for 16 to 18-year-olds. What are you doing on that particularly?

[152] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Cytunaf â'r hyn y mae Helen a Jenny wedi ei ddweud. Hoffwn godi'r effaith y mae diffyg gwasanaethau yn ei gael ar blant ac ar bobl ifanc yn arbennig. Os nad yw'r plant ifanc hynny'n cael mynediad at y gwasanaethau hynny yn eu harddegau, yn aml, gall hynny arwain at effeithiau difrifol yn hwyrach yn eu bywydau; yr wyf yn meddwl yn arbennig am wasanaethau iechyd meddwl. Bydd Maria yn cofio ein bod wedi cydweithio ar achos arall, a oedd yn ymwneud ag anorecsia.

Rhodri Glyn Thomas: I agree with what Helen and Jenny have said. I would like to raise the impact that a lack of such services has on children and young people particularly. If young people do not have access to those services during their teens, that can often lead to serious consequences later on in life; I am thinking particularly about mental health services. Maria will recall that we worked together on another case, which involved anorexia.

[153] I am sorry, is everyone following the translation? I will switch to English, as that will be easier.

[154] I was referring to the impact that the lack of services for young people can have on them in later life. It can leave scars that have major implications for them later, especially in terms of mental health provision. You will remember, Maria, the anorexia case on which we worked to get that provision; that was in danger of creating a serious problem in that young girl's life. What thought have you given to that? Going back to Helen's point, does it come to the point where you are thinking of using the powers that you have in that situation, because of the implications of not having that provision available?

[155] **Mark Isherwood:** For years now, we have been talking with you, with these annual reviews, about the fear of rationing CAMHS by restricting it in certain areas to young people who are deemed to be suicidal or who have life-threatening conditions. That has been used particularly to exclude people on the autistic spectrum disorder, and many parents come to us with concerns about that. We also know that one concern that has been raised by the National Autistic Society is the lack of reference to mental health services in the autism strategy. I recently visited young people from north Wales who are at the Royal School for the Deaf in Cheshire. I was told there that there is no mental health service provision for young deaf people.

[156] At the transitional phase, I have been contacted by parents regarding an anorexia case—a different case to the one that Rhodri Glyn mentioned—where the adolescent's psychiatrist has been writing to me and to Health Commission Wales with grave concerns. The girl in question has just turned 18 but because her body mass index now ticks the right box, they have sent her home, despite her psychiatrist saying—and I must be careful about what I say, as some of it is confidential—that that was the wrong clinical thing to do. She needs mental health provision, but, because she is over 18, that bridge has gone, and she is now back at home—in direct contravention of her clinician's guidance and advice. Therefore, it is not just CAMHS, but also that transitional phase. That is just one example that applies to many.

[157] **Gwenda Thomas:** On the Mental Health Bill, there seems to be a lack of specific reference to children and young people. A section of the Bill mentions it, but, overall, it is vague regarding child assessments and the appointment of advocates, and is geared towards adults. Will you make representations on the Bill? The House of Lords has made some useful amendments; there are other amendments from the House of Lords that I do not agree with. However, are you making representations specifically on children and young people?

[158] **Karen Sinclair:** Have you done any analysis of young people in the penal system who may have difficulty accessing CAMHS, because that is a real issue? We talk about value for money, but it seems crazy if that is happening. If you have an analysis of it that can prove that, that would be useful.

[159] **Ms Battle:** I feel strongly that the person who should be answering these questions is the Minister for Health and Social Services, who is responsible for CAMHS. I concur with everything that has been said about the disgrace of the service, and the crisis. You have mentioned individual cases, and I know that they happen across Wales.

[160] We approach this in several ways. We meet many professionals who are pulling their hair out and are worried, because we are told that children are at risk of death. We intervene, and we get funding, but that is not good enough. That is just in those individual cases that come to our attention, and it is not good enough. We hope that we have managed to secure advocacy for children with mental health needs in the advocacy paper that is coming to the Assembly, because I asked specifically for that. We do not have numbers for the children with mental health needs in the criminal justice system; we are told by professionals that it is approximately 95 per cent, but once they are assessed they are not treated. It is a disgrace.

12.10 p.m.

[161] What we are doing at the moment, as you know, is compiling a report from all local health boards, health trusts and ambulance trust, and meeting with Healthcare Inspectorate Wales and the National Audit Office, to discuss their review. Then we will consider whether the time has come for us to put all our resources into a massive review, because it is happening year-on-year. However, as I said at the beginning, somebody else should be answering these questions about the state of the service.

[162] **Peter Black:** Does anybody have any further questions on child poverty?

[163] **Mark Isherwood:** I have a brief point on the issue of severe poverty—below 40 per cent median income. Save the Children say that there are 50,000 to 60,000 children in Wales in that category, and I think that UK research has shown some growth in that area, although overall there has been a reduction in relative poverty in Wales compared with the UK average, which is still one of the worst in Europe. I wonder what observations you have on the need for a strategy to tackle that severe, as opposed to relative, poverty.

[164] **Ms Reid:** We are still very concerned about child poverty, but, in this report, Peter chose not to be as critical as before, because there had been some progress. Clearly, the issue of families living in persistent poverty, and the impact that that has on children and young people, is something that is of great concern. However, it is a very big challenge, which is why, in common with many other organisations, we feel that, although there needs to be a focus at both the UK and the Welsh level, it is very important that local government, schools and organisations providing services locally, also consider what they can do to help alleviate the problems. There are improvements, but there are also poor children who are not registering in the statistics because of the density of the population in their communities. They do not have the same sort of support as is offered through Communities First or other local initiatives. So, there is a need to emphasise the role of universal services, and it is something that we have stood back from to see what happens now with the implementation plan, and how effective the Welsh Assembly Government is in meeting the milestones that have been set within that implementation plan.

[165] **Peter Black:** The next section is on services for young people with sexually harmful behaviour; I see that there are no comments. Then there is the section on education for looked-after children—I see that you want to comment, Mick.

[166] **Mick Bates:** Yes, I was concerned when I read this part of the report, and in particular I wanted to hear what you think about the Children First group, and the fact that its funding is no longer hypothecated—next year, it is going into the revenue support grant. To me, that could even make the situation worse, because there will be a loss of focus. Moving on from that, I think that only about 1 per cent of looked-after children go into higher education. I know that this is perhaps a big ask, but it seems to me that there has to be a programme to enable quality education to be delivered, and it appears to me that the situation may deteriorate with the loss of this money, and I just wanted to know what views you had on that.

[167] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I feel obliged to raise this issue, because it has been highlighted by the Health and Social Services Committee over the years, and I know that my predecessor as Chair, David Melding, felt passionately about this. I feel that the Government should be responding on the specific funding of education for looked-after children. We know that they are underachieving, but is that because of the lack of resources or the lack of incentive that they are given? Have you made any sort of assessment over the last five years of whether those services have improved at all?

[168] **Karen Sinclair:** Is it worth talking about having a bank of placements? There is some serious work going on around looked-after children, but I feel strongly that we fail them. Do you have any comparisons with other countries, because one of the big problems—they have many big problems—is that, as placements break down and children are moved around, they have to move schools? There are huge problems connected with children moving from school to school, and not simply the loss of continuity of what is happening in the classroom, but the loss of contact with peer groups and so on. That is a downward spiral for youngsters. Have you done any comparisons with other countries, because some countries deal with the education of looked-after children very differently? Some secure continuity by, dare I say it, using boarding schools. I am not saying whether that is right or wrong, but some very good outcomes are achieved in some other countries.

[169] **Mark Isherwood:** There was a report from England a few months ago on looked-after children that highlighted their very low levels of educational attainment on leaving care, and the fact that they were on a conveyor belt, statistically, to prison, homelessness and prostitution. We raised this in the Audit Committee, and Jeremy Colman said that he had no reason to consider that the situation would be any different in Wales, which underscored the problem. In addition to corporate parenting, real parenting is a solution. There are some charities, and one in particular that I work with, that aim to reunite often intentionally homeless families, where the children have been taken into care—the parents may have been in prison or in some type of support programme. The aim is to bring families back together by rebuilding and rehabilitating the whole family on a programme that meets individual and family needs; it is working. Could we be doing more work on this basis? This charity was formed by people whose experience was in the looked-after sector who realised that this was a gap in provision.

[170] **Ms Battle:** The statistics for the education of looked-after children are very depressing. We have continued to fail these children. This is not a new problem. There has been a slight increase in their educational attainment, but it is not a new problem and the solution is not rocket science: these children need a stable placement. Research shows that one adult who takes an interest can change a child's life. It is complex in the sense that placements are not stable enough and the one adult that a child needs does not appear to be there. There are other issues, such as the funding, quality and availability of foster placements, which have an impact on the education of a looked-after child. Education is the one way out of the poverty trap for all children, particularly the most vulnerable.

[171] We have not carried out any comparison, as an official study, with other European countries. However, I am glad that you have made the suggestion, because it is not a difficult thing for us to take forward as we are part of the European network of children's commissioners. Recently, I came to understand that the practice of exclusion did not exist in, I think, Denmark or Finland, which is amazing when you think of the problems that we have. Therefore, I will consider that suggestion.

[172] The situation vis-à-vis the grant worries me, because once something is ring-fenced you know that the money will be spent in a particular area. There has been a slight improvement in the educational attainment levels of looked-after children. It is something that we have no power over, but we shall be watching the figures and the outcomes. Again, we need to know more about the practice, and we need to spread that across Wales. As a nation, we are failing on this.

[173] **Jane Davidson:** This is central to the work that I do as Minister. It is worth highlighting the fact that there have been many changes in the past year, some of which are mentioned in the report, although some are not. There has been year-on-year improvement, although it has been small. However, one of the things that we have found—and members of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee will know this, because we have talked about it in some detail—is that authorities such as Swansea and Pembrokeshire, which took decisions to keep stable placements, saw better outcomes in educational achievement. That is a very important message, and we have sent the message very strongly to local authorities that, for looked-after children, we should be looking for a school that suits them, and that, rather than moving them as foster care and other arrangements change, we should ensure that they stay in one place.

12.20 p.m.

[174] Secondly, Huw Lewis's proposal under Standing Order No. 31 will make statutory the post of a looked-after-children education co-ordinator, and it tightens up arrangements for considering education provision in placements; that is another important aspect for which the Assembly voted. We have set up a stakeholder group to look at how we can improve the education and training of looked-after children, build on best practice and deliver some guidance on best practice issues. The commissioner's report is not quite correct in terms of the focus on looked-after children in years 10 and 11 from the Assembly Government's perspective, because that was actually the view of Voices from Care. Voices from Care told us that, in the first year of a new grant, if we wanted to get the best effect in terms of looked-after children, we should focus the grant on years 10 and 11. We have committed ourselves in terms of the delivery of the additional grant, and we will be looking over the next few years at where best to allocate it, in terms of improving the life chances of looked-after children.

[175] I have specifically included looked-after children in our review of mission and purpose in further education. We have worked with the Frank Buttle Trust and we are looking at the new kitemark quality in higher education in terms of driving that agenda forward. Earlier this morning, in the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee meeting, we discussed the care leavers' legislation, which now means guaranteed support for care leavers moving into the higher education system. So, we are bringing all these issues together.

[176] **Peter Black:** We only have 10 minutes left of the time that is available to us, so I will take contributions on the rest of the subjects in this section, which include voluntary withdrawals, exclusions, the Mosquito device, limousines, children, food, and so on.

[177] **Lorraine Barrett:** The Mosquito device reminds me of a recent discussion that we had in the Environment, Planning and Countryside Committee on banning electric dog collars. I do not know how widespread these devices are, and whether or not they are in the country now or whether or not they are volume controlled. Certain sounds can cause a lot of damage to your hearing, particularly when you are young, so, as someone with a hearing problem, I was wondering whether we should we look at legislation to ban it. Have you given any thought as to how we might do that? Why is the Mosquito device only for people up to the age of 25? What happens when you become 25—does it affect you then? In any case, I am glad that the issue has been raised and we all need to look at ways of getting it banned.

[178] On limousines and vehicle safety, we have all seen these crass vehicles, but I have heard that they are made up of two vehicles joined together, and some of them can be quite dangerous. While I have not seen many of them speeding, because they could not speed on our roads, they do get stuck. The more worrying part, which we have probably all seen, is that people of all ages, but especially youngsters, get excited and stand up in the vehicles with their heads through the roof or they wave out of the window. I do not want to think about what would happen at even 20 mph or 25 mph if the vehicle had to stop suddenly when there are children and young people hanging out of these vehicles. Is there anything that we could do between the various levels of Government in terms of whether traffic wardens or the police should have the power to stop and search these vehicles to see the condition inside? Presumably, the vehicles must have MOTs but while they are on the road, I do not see why a police officer cannot stop them; there seems to be no control by the people who drive these vehicles. I am glad that you raised those two particular issues, and I am sure that there are things that we can do to look at getting rid of them.

[179] **Jenny Randerson:** On voluntary withdrawals and informal exclusions, I know that those are the particular issues that you have looked at, but have you looked at other aspects of school exclusions, particularly the length of time that it can take a local authority to find alternative provision? I recently dealt with a case where, for a variety of circumstances, a child had not been given alternative provision, partly at the parent's request. Nevertheless, this dragged on until the child turned 16, when the local authority was no longer responsible for providing alternative education. The circumstances that stacked up against this child were tragic. Have you looked at the obligations to deal with things in a timely manner?

[180] **Karen Sinclair:** I will try to brief. I really welcome the fact that you have been monitoring the use of informal exclusions from schools, because it worries me that schools can retain a budget for a child and just walk away from their responsibility. It is far too easy, and parents can be very lacking in the confidence needed to challenge that. That leaves a child with no money for education during that time. I could tell you a couple of horror stories, but we do not have the time.

[181] There are a couple of other things that I want to ask about. Have you looked at exclusion in further education? There is an issue in that, if you are excluded from an FE college, and it is the only one your area, and you want to go back the following year, you are still regarded as an excluded person and you often cannot actually get back into education, and that is a real issue for youngsters who may have had a problematic time but who have worked through it.

[182] Your piece about children and food is very good, but you focus on school food and advertising, and I feel very strongly that an awful lot of this is to do with the marketing of ready meals. Whatever we say, ready meals are here to stay; it is like the disposable nappy, is it not? We would all like to say that we would never use it again, but if you have used towelling nappies and then disposable nappies, you have to be a saint to go back to the towelling nappies. Let us be realistic about it; in a very busy working woman's life, it is problematic. Increasingly, we are moving towards people buying instant food off the shelves, and we are not going to backtrack from that, I do not think. What is important is to try to make a lot of strong representations about what is in the food. Have you thought about looking at that, and making representations about food and food contents? Ultimately, the Government will have to take responsibility for it, but the more forces that drive that agenda forward, the better. All you talk about is food and drink companies and advertising of food, but I do not think that it is about advertising, because we are where we are with instant ready meals. I only use them in the week; I do not use them at weekends, as I go back to the craft of cooking, which I thoroughly enjoy. In 20 years' time, however, I seriously think that it will be a craft rather than something that everybody does all the time. What are your views, therefore, on that, vis-à-vis obesity and children?

[183] **Helen Mary Jones:** Under reporting on the convention, are you and the other commissioners looking at whether the whole anti-social behaviour order system is compliant with the convention, given that it places criminal sanctions on children without criminal procedures having been gone through?

[184] **Peter Black:** Mick, did you have a question?

[185] **Mick Bates:** No, I am okay.

[186] **Laura Anne Jones:** On vehicle safety, what have you done on seatbelts? It was literally two decades ago, when I was in primary school, that BUSK—Belt Up School Kids—was set up. The fact that not every single school bus has seatbelts for children now is frankly disgusting. This Government, and perhaps the previous Government, have let us down in this matter. It should be something that is in place, and if you were to ask people on the street, they would assume that it is in place, but it is not. How much work are you doing with this Government and the Government at Westminster to ensure that children's safety is paramount when it comes to vehicle safety?

[187] **Peter Black:** Okay, Maria, can you manage that in two minutes?

[188] **Ms Battle:** I will try. ASBOs and physical punishment will be in the UK commission's response. On seatbelts, we issued a report, and we are continuing campaigning behind the scenes for safety for children. In fact, we have a meeting scheduled, I think, for April to pick that up. On Mosquito devices, there some in Wales at a railway station and a couple of shops. The police have now said, 'no', and the chief medical officer did not seem very concerned, but we are still very concerned, as a rights issue and as a health issue—and yes, being aged 25 and a day, who knows what it does to anybody; it just should not be there.

12.30 p.m.

[189] We are carrying on. Government guidance clearly states that unofficial exclusions should not happen, but they are happening in practice. Therefore, our recommendations focus on how to empower parents and children to say 'no'. That is what we are aiming for. We deal with a lot of exclusions, and we try to negotiate children's packages back, find alternative schools or sufficient education at home, and so on. We have not done a policy review on exclusions, but we will consider it. Perhaps the easiest way of doing it would be having a sample of 60 cases, for example, and drawing together the lessons from there. We will consider that.

[190] Rhian, do you want to pick up on food?

[191] **Ms Davies:** I am not sure how far ready meals are accessed by every community in Wales, and I think that there may be socio-economic factors involved in the ability of families to purchase ready meals. However, we are concentrating on school meals and the content of school meals, because it is the best way to ensure children's nutrition.

[192] **Laura Anne Jones:** Can I comment on item 4?

[193] **Peter Black:** Yes, but very quickly, because we have run out of time.

[194] **Laura Anne Jones:** I want to put on record that I am delighted that you are intending to look at access to leisure facilities, particularly for disabled people. They are a group of people who are often forgotten and left out. It will have a knock-on effect on the health budget, because it will be preventative. These children do not have the access to facilities that often, but it is not just about facilities. They may have access to facilities around Wales, but getting to them in the first place and using the changing rooms, toilets, and so on, is also difficult. So, it is a cross-portfolio issue.

[195] **Ms Battle:** Absolutely, and we welcome the Committee on Equality of Opportunity's report; it was excellent. I met your reference group two weeks ago and they are really anxious about the Government's response, and I promise that I will liaise with them when the response comes through. They did another workshop of five different groups for us, which included play, accessibility, and so on. I thought that it was an excellent report, and they were a lovely group of children, absolutely amazing.

[196] **Gwenda Thomas:** They were here today.

[197] **Ms Battle:** Oh, no.

[198] **Peter Black:** The BBC is recording us leaving the committee, just so that you are aware. Thank you very much.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 12.32 p.m.
The meeting ended at 12.32 p.m.