

David J Rowlands AM –
Chair, Petitions
Committee

Via email only

22 February 2019

Dear Chair,

Re: Petition P-05-859 Provide Child Houses in Wales for victims of child sexual abuse

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Petitions Committee dated 8th February 2019.

Firstly I would like to acknowledge Matameen Meftahi's courage for talking about her own personal experiences as part of this petition.

I note that the specific action proposed in the current petition is for Welsh Government to:

"Provide Child Houses in Wales for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse"

Matameen Meftahi specifically refers to the Child House in London and the 'Barnahus' model on which it is based. I also note that since submitting the petition she has sent further correspondence to the Committee which acknowledges that this model and the new service in London service do not provide a place for children 'to run to' or stay following abuse but that she advocates that consideration is given to this in Wales.¹

For the purpose of clarity I will respond to the above two points in turn.

Child Houses in Wales

Children have a right to be protected from abuse (Article 19 UNCRC). The state has a responsibility to provide support for children who have been victim of abuse and neglect (Article 39) and specifically identifies that this should "take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child."²

The research from Iceland suggests that the Barnahus model assists with several aspects of support for children who are victims of sexual abuse including reducing re-traumatisation through avoiding multiple interviewing processes, achieving best evidence and access to timely therapeutic support. All these services are provided in

¹ [18.12.18 Correspondence - Matameen Meftahi to the Committee](#)

² [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.](#)



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an environment which is designed with children in mind and supported by those with relevant expertise.

I have recently stated in a BBC interview that I think it is appropriate to wait for the results of a pilot to consider how the model could be adapted in the UK including here in Wales. Commitment to a model is a considerable investment. This view appeared to be generally shared during a discussion with senior representatives from local and national government, the health service and police that sit on my Child Sexual Abuse Roundtable which met in January 2019. It was also shared by my fellow Commissioner in England, Anne Longfield, who produced a [report](#) in respect of the model in 2017. This report identified that countries have appeared to have successfully adapted the model “without compromising the core principles which deliver such impressive results”³ but that adaptations are needed for a number of reasons including different legal systems.

The Committee may also wish to note the following recommendation from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse Interim Report which I understand has been accepted by the Welsh Government:

“The Chair and Panel recommend that the Welsh Government and the relevant UK government departments work together to establish current levels of public expenditure, and the effectiveness of that expenditure on services for child victims and adult survivors of child sexual abuse in Wales.”⁴

Despite my above view in respect of a pilot this does not mean that the Welsh Government and public services should not take steps in the meantime to change provision here in Wales which will positively affect children and young people.

The Committee has been made aware⁵ that some of the services provided as part of the Barnahus model are currently provided by all-age Sexual Abuse Referral Centres (SARC). One element of service is non-devolved in respect of forensic medical examinations. However, as raised in my 2017/2018 annual report,⁶ I continue to be concerned about this and other elements of SARC provision specifically for child victims including those in South and East Wales. My concerns centre around the availability of trained and experienced medical practitioners to provide timely examinations, and the availability of suitable therapeutic services to enable survivors of abuse to recover.

Whilst I have seen renewed commitment to addressing the calls made in my report, by both the Welsh NHS and Police and Crime Commissioners, as of yet I do not believe children's experiences in these parts of Wales have changed. Interim measures are in the process of being implemented and long term arrangements are being explored and I am monitoring this issue closely. As part of this I have been seeking to establish how

³ Children's Commissioner for England. 2017. [Barnahus: Improving the Response to child sexual abuse in England](#).

⁴ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. 2018. [Interim Report: A Summary Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse - April 2018](#).

⁵ National Assembly for Wales. 2019. [Research Brief, item 2](#) and [11.12.18 Correspondence - Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care to the Chair](#).

⁶ [Annual Report and Accounts – 2017/2018](#).



this work fits with the former First Minister's announcement in November 2019, in respect of a review of refuges and SARCs.

The Committee may also wish to establish the parameters of the above commitment by the Welsh Government and whether the child house model and the CSA hub work referred to as part of Matameen Meftahi's correspondence with committee would be considered as part of this work.

My annual report also recommends that Welsh Government require Regional Partnership Boards (RBPs) to integrated children's social care and mental health services into multidisciplinary teams. I would expect that RBPs would consider how such teams would help address the emotional and/or mental health needs of children and young people who have been sexually abused. Joined up planning in respect of all services for children and young people who have been sexually abused is essential on a local, regional and national level considering available evidence.

Regarding service development as a whole, I have seen the real benefits for all concerned when children and young people are involved in the review or development of a service. Yet I do not believe this is common place in Wales. Children and young people should be empowered to give their views and provided with suitable opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them. These are two of the five principles of my children's rights approach and since 2017 I have urged all public bodies to adopt this approach in Wales. A copy of *The Right Way: A Children's rights Approach in Wales* can be found on the publications section of my website, www.childcomwales.org.uk.

A safe place for children following an allegation of abuse

Protecting children from current or future risk of harm, including where they stay in the short and long term, is covered in detail by a number of pieces of legislation, for England and Wales in the Children Act 1989 for example and in Wales under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) act 2014. Social Services have a lead role although other public bodies have a significant part to play including Regional Safeguarding Boards. The All Wales Child Protection Procedures support and advise any practitioners in dealing with child protection matters, and I am aware that these are currently being revised with multi agency involvement.

In Wales it is also clear that professionals involved in these processes are required to seek and consider the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people. I expect there to be no exceptions to this. Decisions should be made in children's best interests considering all available information, views and thorough assessment. Such assessments will often be considered in Court and it is paramount that a child's views are included for consideration. Without seeking and taking into account children's views, wishes and feelings I believe the decisions which are made under current or future arrangements are less likely to provide the protection and support that a child or young person needs. Were the Welsh Government to embark on consideration of whether the current arrangements in Wales provide sufficient options in respect of safe places following an allegation of sexual abuse I would be happy to engage in discussions.



Yours sincerely,



Sally

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