

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Supporting vulnerable adolescents, HC 730

Monday 21 November 2022

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Olivia Blake; Sir Geoffrey CliftonBrown; Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Mrs Flick Drummond; Mr Louie French.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Adrian Jenner, Director of Parliamentary Relations, National Audit Office, Ashley McDougall, Director, NAO, and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 1-109

Witnesses

[I](#): Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; Ed Cornmell, Executive Director, Youth Custody Service, Ministry of Justice; Siobhan Jones, Director, Supporting Families Programme, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; and Rebecca Wyse, Director, Tackling Exploitation and Abuse, Home Office.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General
Support for vulnerable adolescents (HC 800)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Susan Acland-Hood, Ed Cornmell, Siobhan Jones and Rebecca Wyse.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 21 November 2022. Today we are looking at supporting vulnerable adolescents, something that covers very many Government Departments and agencies in local areas. They are a very important cohort who need a lot of support. This is triggered partly by the increase in the number of young people entering bits of the care system. We have seen big increases in adolescents particularly—nine to 17-year-olds—in care. As I say, a lot of different Government Departments cover this. We have some in front of us today, but we recognise that it does cover more Departments than we could possibly have in the room. We would have had pretty much every bit of Government in the room if we had gone to the full extent of the issue. I thank the National Audit Office for doing this Report, because it is really important that we look at these cross-cutting issues across Government.

I welcome our witnesses. We have Susan Acland-Hood, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education; Rebecca Wyse, appearing for the first time in front of us as the director for tackling exploitation and abuse at the Home Office; Siobhan Jones, the director for the supporting families programme at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; and Ed Cornmell, who is the executive director for the Youth Custody Service at the Ministry of Justice. Of course, we looked at youth custody a few weeks ago with the Ministry of Justice, but we are covering a slightly different subject today. Before we go into the main session, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown will come in on a point about social media.

Q1 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Good afternoon, Ms Acland-Hood. What work is your Department doing on the impact of social media on adolescents? You may be aware of the report produced by Ofcom that says that using video-sharing platforms such as YouTube or TikTok is the most popular online activity among children aged between three and 17. There are a lot of other very worrying statistics about how many hours they spend online, and how they wake themselves up in the middle of the night to see the latest iteration of their online games. That must have a deleterious effect on people's education and their mental health and wellbeing. What is your Department doing, and are you aware of any other activity in the rest of the Government to study the impact of this?

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you. It is certainly something that we have looked at, and it is also something that the Office of the Children's



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Commissioner has been looking at quite extensively. Interestingly though, it is often in combination with other factors. In the first “State of the Nation” report we looked particularly at the impacts on mental and psychological health. We found, really interestingly, that experiences of being bullied and sleep were the two factors that had the greatest impact on mental health. Interestingly, if you controlled for those then social media did not have a particularly strong association independent of them, so a lot of it is about how much time you are spending on social media and what is happening on it—if it is effectively compounding those experiences of being bullied, or as you say if it is interrupting and affecting sleep. Quite a lot of the work that we do is integrated into both the work that we do to encourage schools to educate children about the effective use of social media and some of the work that we do on the home learning environment and the advice that we give to parents about how to support children in their earliest years—effectively, not to encourage too much screen time early on, and so on.

- Q2 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Is there not a case for putting out stronger guidance from your Department about how children can use safe platforms to save themselves from getting into difficulties? A very high percentage of children watch things that give them cause for concern. Stronger guidance from your Department would help, wouldn't it?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is certainly something that we know schools cover through PSHE programmes. It is also something that we have covered in some of the “Keeping children safe in education” guidance for schools. We have also been working really closely with DCMS on the work that it has been doing on the online harms Bill to try to make sure that we are supporting the creation of a safer environment. It is certainly something that we can take away and look at to see whether there is more that we could be doing.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you very much. Would you excuse me? I have to go to the Chamber, but I will be back.

- Q3 **Chair:** You are multi-tasking today, Sir Geoffrey. Thank you very much. We will see you later.

I wanted also to just pick up on the announcement made last week by the Chancellor, on the autumn statement. There was some extra cash for schools, but that still only gets schools' per pupil funding up to about where it was in 2010. Can you remind us of the numbers and tell us how you are going to pay that out from the Department to schools themselves? What is the impact likely to be on their budgets?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. We were really pleased to see that and we were grateful to the Chancellor. What the autumn statement change means is that, compared with a run of figures in the original SR 2021 statement, which was £49.8 billion of direct schools funding going out to schools through formula rather than what is sometimes referred to as the kind of unprotected bit of school funding that sits in the Department's budget—£49.8 billion in 2021-22, £53.8 billion in 2022-23, £55.3 billion in 2023-24 and then £56.8 billion in 2024-25—this effectively adds another £2.3 billion



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to each of 2023-24 and 2024-25, but £0.3 billion of that is compensating for the clawing-back of the NICs addition. The total run of figures becomes £57.3 billion in 2023-24 and £58.8 billion in 2024-25. As you say, that effectively restores the spending power of what was a good and strong increase at the SR 2021 settlement. The IFS have said, as you said, that takes schools' spending power back to the point promised successively by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. The one thing I would say about 2010 is that it is a point of comparison, but it is also the highest figure ever. It is a comparison back to the high-water mark.

Q4 **Chair:** Was the figure for 2010 the highest ever?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. This restores spending power to that 2010 level by the end of this period.

Q5 **Chair:** But that is the end of this period. What is the impact going to be and what conversations have you had with the schools sectors so far—obviously, some goes through local authorities and some directly to academies—about how this will impact them coming up?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have not yet announced exactly how we will distribute additional funding and we are in conversations—both inside the Department and externally with partners—about how we will do that, but it is highly likely that it will go out through a version of the main—

Q6 **Chair:** The main funding formulas in existence today?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, and that is what schools tell us they would prefer.

Q7 **Mr French:** Looking at some of the concerns that have been expressed by headteachers across the country about the challenges that they face financially, one of the biggest ones has been the increase in teacher pay—you have already referenced that—but also the prices that schools are paying for their energy bills. Can you highlight the kind of discussions the Department are having with school leaders about how they can save energy and help reduce their bills this winter?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. Certainly. Of course, the schools are part of the energy support until March and then part of this addition is intended to help ease that pressure after that. But, as the Chancellor said last week, it is important that, as well as compensating or looking at helping with energy price increases, we also help people to use energy as efficiently as possible across the school estate. There are a number of things we have done to support schools in doing that, including through some of the schemes that are held and run by BEIS—which support public sector energy efficiency measures where we agreed, relatively recently, that we would increase the share of those going into the education estate. We also have a lot of work going on as part of our sustainability strategy, which was published at Easter and looks at both how we can support that in some of the central work that the Department does on school building and how we can support individual schools to improve energy efficiency.

Q8 **Mr French:** Will there be proactive messaging going out with guidance to help schools with those concerns? Because I know that chairs of governors are always quick to write to me.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. There is some guidance that exists already, but we are always looking at how we can strengthen that.

Q9 **Olivia Blake:** I wanted to ask about FE and colleges because nothing seemed to be highlighted in the statement last week about spending on that. Will that spending increase in line with school spending?

Susan Acland-Hood: Additional spending for skills was not announced in the statement last week, but, of course, there was a significant increase in SR21. That £3.8 billion went in at that stage. The Chancellor has also asked Michael Barber to work with him and the Secretary of State, focusing on effective implementation. He is not being asked to design a new skills strategy but to focus on how we kind of really push and effect implementation. That was the other element of the announcement last week.

Q10 **Olivia Blake:** Will you be having the same conversations as you are with school leaders with colleges on how they can— **Susan Acland-Hood:** Yes.

Olivia Blake: Thank you.

Q11 **Chair:** On the actual funding, though, we all have headteachers contacting us about the challenges that they face. Even with this extra funding, as you say, it only gets things back to 2010. Do you recognise the scenario where, still, headteachers are having to make decisions about staffing, and whether they keep the teacher or heat the school? That is still a reality, even with the extra funding.

Susan Acland-Hood: The IFS assessment was that, for this year, even with the increase in teachers' pay, there was enough funding in the system to cover that reasonably without people having to make those significant decisions. That was because of the amount that had gone in already, as part of the spending review settlement, and the fact that we had heavily front-loaded the spending review settlement.

The fact that we have then got additional funding next year and the year after should significantly ease that position. However, there will always be schools—again, we have talked about this before. One of the challenges is that every school is in an individual position, so the exact shape of the pay bill, and the difference made by the pay settlement, is slightly different in every school. Of course, different schools are in different energy positions.

I think there are very few circumstances in which you can imagine being able to sit here and say, "No headteacher will have to make difficult decisions". However, we hope that there are many fewer headteachers having to make those difficult decisions than there were before—

Q12 **Chair:** Going back to my point about the formula for allocation, because you have a formula, but then there are schools—as you say, small schools,

rural schools and all sorts of different categories of schools—that will have particular pressures. Are you looking to weight any support towards the schools that have financial challenges, but just because of the nature of their size, location, or whatever?

Susan Acland-Hood: Those are the kinds of conversations we will have with Ministers as we look at how to put the money in. Again, I need to reserve those decisions for my Ministers, but my expectation is that they would use the formula, because it is quite a flexible formula and is what schools tell us that they would prefer. However, certainly, we will discuss with Ministers the options for how you would put that out through the formula to recognise some of those different circumstances, including things such as weighting towards disadvantage, which, again, we know is really important.

Q13 Chair: When will schools know what their budget is?

Susan Acland-Hood: We would hope to stick to the usual timetable that schools are used to.

Q14 Chair: So will that be November?

Susan Acland-Hood: December.

Chair: December, okay. We will leave it there for now, but I am sure that we will have more feedback on that as the money rolls out the door and people see what it actually means on the ground. One last point before we go into the main session—back to Ms Blake.

Q15 Olivia Blake: Further to my previous questioning, has Department taken any more of a view on expanding free school meals? Also, are there any particular plans, given the cost of living crisis this year, to implement anything on holiday hunger over the Christmas holidays, in addition to the usual funding?

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you. We have spoken about this before. I have not got a new policy to announce, so the position is much the same as it was the last time that we spoke about it. However, as I said when we last spoke, when we advise Ministers on this, we regularly advise and discuss it, and we look at the balance between, for example, extending eligibility and trying to ensure that we are giving intensive support to the most vulnerable.

However, we do also try to look at the balances across Government. So, again—I think I am allowed to say this—I think that, in the run-up to the autumn statement, looking at those kinds of choices and trade-offs across Government, I would have been found arguing quite hard for benefits uprating as the best way of ensuring that we get money into the hands of those most in need of it. Typically, we are always seen to argue for our own bit of budget, but if I had to make that choice, I think that would be a better route for helping some of those people than mechanisms that go through bits of our system, if that makes sense.

Q16 Olivia Blake: So, mainly on having it in line with the inflation rises in the past week, are you happy with that policy as it is? Is it a fair mechanism?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think it is much better than not having done it.

Q17 Chair: Thank you very much. Before we enter the main session, I want to thank the many people who gave written evidence. We have had a real slew of evidence, as you might expect, because this issue covers a lot of subject areas. I thank those who have given that, as it is very helpful to the Committee as we prepare.

As I touched on at the beginning, Ms Acland-Hood, the subject covers a wide area; no one Government Department is totally responsible for it. Do you think that, overall, there is an understanding across Government about the needs of vulnerable adolescents? If so, where would that sit? Who do you think has the best grip on it in Whitehall?

Susan Acland-Hood: I do think there is an understanding of it. It is a shared grip, although if you pushed me and said, "Who's ultimately responsible?", I think that my Department and I hold the ring on this, because of the age range of the people we are focusing on, and I feel that we as a Department have a responsibility for children and young people. But it is quite a complicated picture, and the NAO Report was really helpful in challenging us to think about where it is right to deliver services individually to meet individual needs, and where we need to pivot to a really wraparound approach.

What we try to do across Government—I am sure we will talk about this more in the rest of the hearing—is to share data as well as we possibly can, in order to build a rich picture of where it makes sense to do things and in what way. The approach of quite a lot of our more universal services, starting with meeting one particular need well, is reasonably well supported by the data we have on how vulnerable adolescents live and the needs they experience. For example, the 2020 report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner, which looked at teenagers falling through the gaps, looked at the incidence of a set of different individual needs and found that about 77% of the 13 to 17-year-olds they looked at—a slightly different age range—had none of those needs. Another 16% had one, another 5% had two, another 1.5% had three, and another 0.5% had four or more.

The data supports an approach whereby your standard approach is to serve the key presenting need. I am channelling Chris Wormald—we don't have Health here, but he would say there are circumstances where siloes are good. If I have broken my leg, I do not want a multi-agency team; I would like an orthopaedic surgeon, please. It is about trying to make sure that we are meeting the individual needs really well, but then looking at that place where you have people who have multiple needs, who are the most vulnerable, and wrapping services around them in a different way.

To me at least, the heart of the Report is about how you make sure you are doing that well for the people who have those needs.

Q18 Chair: So you are saying that, ultimately, DFE is responsible.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Q19 Chair: That is easy to say but hard, with all the best will in the world, for you or DFE to deliver. What mechanisms do you have to work with colleagues in this room, but also with the many who are not in this room, to make sure that this is a high enough priority for the Government?

Susan Acland-Hood: We have some mechanisms that we originally set up during covid, such as the vulnerable children and families programme board, which was set up during covid to pull together all the work that we were doing around the most vulnerable. We have just evolved that into a vulnerable children and families strategy board, which has broadly the same set of people around the table but is less focused on pandemic response, and more on how we are joining up our work around the most vulnerable.

Q20 Chair: Who chairs that board?

Susan Acland-Hood: It is chaired from the Department for Education.

Q21 Chair: That is made up entirely of officials.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is an officials' group, yes.

Q22 Chair: Obviously, we have a Children's Minister, but how does it mirror the political structures?

Susan Acland-Hood: We do not have a ministerial group that perfectly mirrors that one, but we will bring Ministers together when we need to, in order to address particular issues.

Q23 Chair: We will touch on a lot of these things in more detail, but the care system itself is obviously your responsibility, and some of the numbers coming through are quite big challenges for you. In our preparation, we were comparing notes—particularly those of us who have been in local government—about how the care system at different stages has coped with this cohort, and there have always been challenges. Do you think there has been any significant improvement in the care system with this cohort, for whom, as I say, there have been long-standing challenges? We have seen the numbers in the NAO Report, which highlight the challenges that it is facing now.

Susan Acland-Hood: I would say that there has been improvement. In the care system we tend to talk about both the needs of adolescents and particularly extra-familial harms, which I appreciate is a bit of jargon. It highlights that to quite a large extent the care system was originally set up with, at its core, helping to address the very difficult circumstances that arise when there is harm originating from inside a family and the family are finding it difficult to look after their child, or in the worst cases are actively harming them. It was not designed so much around the set of phenomena that are about extra-familial harm—involvement in gangs or child sexual exploitation. You absolutely can see both a growth in the numbers of

children in the older age groups and an increasing preponderance of those extra-familial harms.

Q24 Chair: Societal harms, I suppose you could say.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. It is also partly a good sign in that it is a sign that we now look at those things much more as a harm to the child. I can remember being in conversations about what was at that stage described as child prostitution, which carries a colossally different implication about who has agency, and was framed as a criminal justice—

Q25 Chair: It is interesting that you pick up on that phrase, because it is something that I remember from when I was a local councillor. Even though sometimes the phraseology may have been different from today, there was still a complete recognition that those young people were very vulnerable—that they were in care, and were being exploited because they were in care and vulnerable. Short of locking them up, which was not really appropriate— Well, there was an element of secure accommodation, but most of them were not at that level. We have known about this for longer than I want to admit, having been involved myself as a councillor, so why are we still having problems? Basically, children's homes became a magnet for people who wanted to do harm to children, and there is still a problem about people who find the vulnerable children and harm them.

Susan Acland-Hood: There is certainly still a challenge of people identifying vulnerability. I would say that the thing that has changed, though, is that we are more likely to identify extra-familial harm as a reason for putting protection around a child who is not currently in the care system than we used to be. We are bringing more children into the ambit of the system because, for example, we think that they are vulnerable to exploitation, even if they are quite safe in their family. That needs a different kind of activity. There has been quite a lot of work to try to help local authorities to think differently about this.

In the 2018 report "Working Together to Safeguard Children", our core bit of guidance on this included some really specific things about responses to risk outside the home, including modern slavery and child trafficking, peer-on-peer abuse, radicalisation, and child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation. Then, in 2021, we provided £1.5 million to 20 local authorities across seven regions to develop their approaches to safeguarding adolescents at risk of extra-familial harm, to look at how they can strengthen their arrangements and—a little as we talked about in the September hearing, when we were talking about our wider strategy on children's social care evaluation—to try to do that well, evaluate and then spread the good practice to help people to do it better. I think practice is still variable in this area, not because people do not care about it or do not want to do it but because it is relatively new and it needs different techniques and approaches from some other things.

Q26 Chair: Before I move on, I want to come to you, Ms Jones, because you have particular responsibility for housing. As Ms Acland-Hood has highlighted,



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traditional children's homes, foster care or other care are for very specific cohorts, but there are sometimes families where they know that if they are removed from the local area to be housed somewhere else the issues around gangs or exploitation are taken away. We know that it is an imperfect system in social housing. What is your Department doing to try to support that, so that actually when a family needs to relocate for the safety of the child that is easier to do?

Siobhan Jones: I am afraid that that is slightly outside my area of responsibility, so I may have to take that away. I can say that homelessness is one area that the Supporting Families programme focuses on. That includes the risk of homelessness. As you will be aware, the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 provides for a specific duty. In the circumstances where they have a realistic prospect of being made homeless, the local authority is under that duty, and has to work with other local partners to identify the potential risks. I am very happy to ask my colleagues on that.

Q27 Chair: It would be helpful if you could. We know the duty that they are under, but my local authority area is one of the most challenging in inner-city London. It is a 15-year wait to be allocated a three-bedroom council property if you are bidding. If you are not in that category, the Homelessness Reduction Act means you are rehoused in a borough a long way from where you are, or the whole family is put in one or two rooms in a hostel. That is normal.

What is your Department doing to stop that, because it can contribute to even more harm, not just for the cohort we are talking about but for the whole family? Is your Department tracking how many adolescents are in very difficult housing circumstances? This is a very difficult subject to cover, because where does the cycle start? Very often, it is with the housing. Most people wouldn't think it is a DLUHC issue, but inadequate housing can lead to many of the other challenges. Has your Department got a grip on that?

Siobhan Jones: I am aware that there is quite a lot of work, particularly on the social housing side. They are bringing forward some legislation and there is further work planned. Rather than give you an inaccurate answer, I will ask my colleagues to come back to you.

Chair: Okay. Legislation only goes so far. If housing isn't available, people can't deal with it.

Q28 Mr Djanogly: I will come back to some of the aspects that you have just been speaking about to understand the data. We see from the NAO Report that there was a 26% increase of nine to 17-year-olds in care in 2014 to 2021, which is a very large figure. Then, as was said, for adolescents it suddenly shoots up to a 34% increase. I think, Ms AclandHood, that you said that there had been a recategorisation, but however you categorise it, the numbers have gone up dramatically. Are you able to address why?

Susan Acland-Hood: I do think this is partly about us addressing things that might in the past have been seen as a criminal justice issue with a criminal justice response, in relation to the choices the child is making, more as safeguarding issues where the child is at risk of harm. That brings it into the social care system. There are also some real challenges about the incidence of some of these things.

Becky might want to come in on this, but on county lines we know that there are some patterns of gang behaviour and offending that involve almost consciously trying to recruit young people who don't look "suspicious". That may be an element of it. We work quite hard to use the data to understand the characteristics of those coming into the system. The causal links are, in truth, harder to get underneath.

Q29 Mr Djanogly: We have now recategorised into the care system. I am still not sure whether you are saying the system is designed to deal with these extra-familial risks, older children and so forth. Does it need a reset?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think it is evolution not revolution. It increasingly is designed to deal with those needs, but those aspects of the system are, in my view, less secure and less mature than some of the other aspects. That is why we have been investing a bit in trying to build practice and learn more about what really works in dealing with these cohorts. We are spreading that around the system more effectively, as well as strengthening the guidance to make sure people have that set of frameworks. The next step in that will be the work following on from the independent children's social care review, which includes the commitment to set some clearer national care standards. I think there is a real opportunity in there to set out expectations and a framework for this group much more clearly.

Q30 Mr Djanogly: Thank you. Paragraph 12 of the NAO Report states: "Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, the number of children cautioned or sentenced reduced from 85,300 to 15,751 (82%) and the number of first-time entrants to the youth criminal justice system reduced from 46,012 to 8,848 (81%)." Of course, this is all happening at the same time as the numbers entering care are dramatically rising. Mr Cornmell, why don't you have the data to understand that dramatic fall?

Ed Cornmell: There is a good understanding as to what is happening. It is the evidence and certainty around what our insight and understanding is—the emphasis from the NAO in terms of fully understanding. There's a good news story here of diverting and not seeing children enter the criminal justice system, which is obviously really positive.

There was some detailed analytical work done in 2017 in a publication that was focused on first-time entrants into the criminal justice system, which indicates that we have seen that drop in first-time entrants. The drivers are a change to police activity and offences being brought to justice as a measure—a change in the numbers, dropping from 2007-08, of entrants to the criminal justice system—which has moved into closer focus on serious offending. We have seen through that analysis that that change in activity

is a potential driver to that reduction, alongside a really good amount of focus work on early intervention and diversion. We are in a positive place in terms of investment in the youth system to divert people. The indicators of that as a clear driver are in the report. There was a further independent report in 2019 from Crest Advisory—

Q31 Mr Djanogly: May I stop you there? Are you saying that the lower level of convictions and cautions is because the police are pushing these cases towards social care rather than dealing with them? Is there a policy on that? We have many police forces.

Ed Cornmell: There is a flow in the system on the catchment of young people caught within and potentially brought into the criminal justice system. There is the investment in actual intervention itself through youth offending teams and identifying people on the cusp of criminality, engaging earlier and picking them up at that early stage. It is two things working in concert, really.

Q32 Mr Djanogly: Because if someone is cautioned, it doesn't necessarily mean that police are going to refer them on to other services, either education or social, does it? They might just be lost.

Ed Cornmell: Sure, but the positive work by youth offending teams at that local level to identify vulnerable individuals to continue with that level of activity is where we have seen some real improvements. That is the area in which we have invested quite heavily. We are currently investing—

Q33 Mr Djanogly: Is this measurable?

Ed Cornmell: It is measurable in terms of the investment. The analytical work identified that first-time contact with the criminal justice system was a key driver. The analytical work in 2017, which, as I said, was validated independently in 2019, indicates that that is the key element. There is a danger of trying to prove the negative, really, which is the solid certainty of evidence to say that that is absolutely what it is. Obviously, some of those individual children have not gone on to commit crimes. It is very hard to prove that.

Q34 Mr Djanogly: I noticed that there are statistics on cautions and sentences. What about the numbers of arrests over the period? Do we have information on that?

Ed Cornmell: I'm afraid I haven't got any information on that.

Q35 Mr Djanogly: My point being that if the number of arrests has increased but the number of cautions and sentences has reduced, then there is a question as to what is going on.

Ed Cornmell: Sure. That stat of first-time contact includes contact at the point of arrest, so that is included within the dataset of an 81% reduction. That is contact with the system since the comprehensive reduction. It is that contact itself.

Mr Djanogly: I see; that is an 80% reduction of arrests as well.

Ed Cornmell: Yes.

Q36 Chair: To pick up on the point about the policy of the police forces, there is some anecdotal evidence—it is difficult to assess it across 43 forces; I only cover one—that the police have sometimes been reluctant to charge a young person because they are young, but it is difficult to tell whether they are routinely diverting to other support, because of course they are aware of what the impact is. Just to be really clear, is there no policy or guidance to police forces not to charge because of someone's age?

Ed Cornmell: Our investment as a Department has been in that intervention and in support of the youth offending teams to make sure we are as effective as possible at diverting and engaging with young people. Certainly nothing from my Department—

Q37 Chair: To unpick that a bit, is it possible that if a police officer fines a young person, there will be information and guidance for them that they can divert to the youth offending team?

Ed Cornmell: Yes, absolutely. The police are active partners within that youth offending team. It is a multidisciplinary, multi-partnership approach. There is that level of engagement locally, so there are clear avenues and options for diversion.

Q38 Chair: Do you do any assessment of how many reoffend, or go through the process more than once—getting referred to youth offending teams over and over again?

Ed Cornmell: Youth offending teams are actively engaged with local children and adolescents. They manage those case loads. In terms of available data, I am afraid that I do not have anything that I could point to that would evidence that, but that awareness and engagement locally is very much their driving force. That is very much what the teams do.

Q39 Chair: You see what I am driving at. It is one thing saying that you are diverting young people, which is fantastic, but if the same person keeps coming back again and again and not actually getting the normal sentencing for what they have done, there is no disincentive to keep acting for the bad actors—not the ones who are perhaps caught and are vulnerable. How can you be sure at your level that there is a differentiation there?

Siobhan Jones: If it is helpful, I can come in specifically on the Supporting Families cohort, which I appreciate will not be the wider cohort. As the Committee is probably aware, it is a programme that identifies vulnerable families, which will often include adolescents who might have had contact with the criminal justice system. The evaluation that was conducted in 2019 did show a drop-off of people coming into contact again with the criminal justice system. Some of that was through the family survey, so family-

reported outcomes, but there was a drop-off. I will see whether I can find the number.

Chair: I think all of this rather underlines some of the things that we were saying at the beginning about how complicated it is.

Q40 Mr Djanogly: It is complicated, and I am going to try to underline that once more by addressing a question to Ms Wyse this time. Paragraph 12 of the Report says: "By contrast, the latest demand analysis forecasts a long-term increase in the number of children in custody with the number of 15 to 17-year-olds in Young Offender Institutions now projected to double by 2025, compared with 2021." How do we make sense of that?

Rebecca Wyse: Some of that will be linked to the justice system and the processing that is going on with the Ministry of Justice, so this may be a shared answer between Ed and me. The police are focused on identifying and bringing people to justice where crimes have been committed. The data tells us that with regard to some crimes where we have, for example, hidden harms, which are my responsibility in particular, we are focused on driving reporting up. Some of that will be people coming forward. For example, with some of the hidden harms like child sex abuse, we are really focused in our Department on making sure that people are confident and feel able to come forward. To some extent, an increase in reporting is a good news story for us. We want to bring more people to justice.

Q41 Mr Djanogly: Maybe I'm missing something, but on the one hand we have falling numbers of people entering the system. On the other hand, you are explaining how a lot more people are going to end up within the system.

Rebecca Wyse: To some extent, but we also have work happening on violent crime, for example, where we are consciously working with partners at a local level—partners represented by the Departments present and beyond—to reduce violent crime. We know that we are having an impact there. Both our own data from police recorded data and hospital admissions say that we are having an impact in reducing violent crime with young people. It is a complex picture. I do not know whether Ed wants to say something about the element of the criminal justice system, which is a shared responsibility.

Ed Cornmell: To pick up on Siobhan's point from before, the data showed a 38% reduction in youth custody and a 15% reduction in conviction from the Supporting Families programme, so that was the link referred to. The data within the NAO Report is an internal forecast for children potentially coming into the youth offending estate in terms of youth custody. The drivers in the figures were very much about police officer recruitment—the additional 23,000 police officers increasing the number of police officers out there, and potentially increasing, therefore, the number of people entering the system. Within the data as well was a consideration of the effect of covid and post-pandemic activity, the reopening of society more fully, and a change to the way that our system is working judicially.

Q42 Mr Djanogly: Is that just less stuff happening?

Ed Cornmell: Absolutely—expecting a ramp-up and a change, and then more police officers in terms of that contact. I have to say, though, that actually in terms of those forecasts it is, as ever, analysis across the spectrum. This is a very complex area, as you will appreciate. There are many societal factors at play, as we have touched upon, and many other levers in this space. Currently, in terms of that forecast position, we are beneath the low level that was analysed. In terms of that statement of a doubling for youth offender institute numbers in that timescale, we are well beneath what the forecast position was. Again, we obviously welcome that, and it is a positive indication of the work that is being done. It is indicating to be lower than what was expected.

Q43 Mrs Drummond: Does that mean that there is less low-level crime, which can be easier to budget for, and that there is more serious crime coming forward, such as knife crime, county lines and that sort of thing, whereby people have to be put into youth offender institutions?

Ed Cornmell: In terms of the population that we see move forward, and certainly in terms of my focus on custody, we have seen the serious offending group grow by proportion. Again, as we have touched on, there is a reduction in the number of people convicted of lower-level offending coming into the system. Proportionately, the system, particularly within custody, is really dominated by offences against the person and levels of violence, which is a driver. With the increased volume of police officers in the community, I guess the question for us is whether there is a potential net widening and further contact to identify other offending, but the positive work done around intervention and diversion is bringing lowerlevel offenders to alternative, non-custodial outcomes. We are investing £300 million over the next three years. It is a once-in-a-generation peak that we are at, and there is some really good investment. The new Turnaround programme of £60 million over the next three years is really focused on trying to provide other means of intervention and modelling them on the Supporting Families programme from DLUHC colleagues in order to get an early help model in place, so that we prevent escalation and offending does not tick up to a higher level.

Q44 Olivia Blake: I would like to start with a couple of questions for you, Mr Cornmell, if that is okay. I want to ask about some specific groups—the first being minority ethnic adolescents—and your concerns about the rise from 32% to 53%, as a proportion, in the last 10 years. How concerned are you about that?

Ed Cornmell: Very. There is a disparity when looking at the data. Proportionately, the shift revealed in the report should give us all due attention and focus. The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities identified the challenge that we have. There are a wide number of complex societal factors in play here, so the complexity of the criminal justice system—custody, which is my own area, is very much downstream from those range of factors—brings a real challenge for us. Ultimately, there are

different points of intervention where there is potential for disparity, and areas where we have had due focus with Home Office colleagues, such as stop and search, our own departmental focus on decisions to remand people into custody, and work that has been done to really ensure that we get a greater sense of clarity around decisions such as remand to custody. We have put in place a clearer test and mechanism to make sure that we are explaining why that decision is taken, because we see some disparities in the data, particularly in remand to custody. A high proportion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are coming into custody through that route.

There has been a very recent His Majesty's inspectorate of probation review in the last 12 months, which was a thematic inspection of the experiences of black and mixed-heritage boys in the criminal justice system. It is a very important report for us and calls out the fact that it is 2.8 times more likely that a young black boy will come into the youth justice system. It is a very clear and stark figure for us to consider, and we need to make sure that we are taking action. We are preparing a response to the thematic inspection with other colleagues, to make sure that we have identified all appropriate actions.

As I touched on, there is some central work that we can do in that space—for example, the identification of the decision making around remand, increasing the uptake of legal advice when children are in police custody, and looking at a more representative magistrate group in terms of judicial diversity, which is another forum. There is a range of different measures, but, particularly in my world of custody within HMPPS and the Youth Custody Service specifically, we need to identify and understand what is happening with the data, and there is a duty to fully explain, or to reform and to change.

We have to ensure that we are upskilling and developing our staff group, working with young people to make sure that we do not build on any disparity that is there. There is a lot, though, at that local level. Youth Justice Board colleagues are particularly focused in this area and are leading very strongly in this space, and credit to them for the work they have done to develop tools around racial disproportionality and tools to make sure that the data is collected locally. There is support from us as a Department to push and ensure that the local partnership is identifying the right dataset, so that any disparity is identified locally and that local multiagency partnerships can take action to address it. There is a national and local response to this, but it is definitely a systems issue that we have to be relentless in focusing on.

Q45 Olivia Blake: There has obviously been a lot of review over many years on this point, and the situation is getting worse. Do you feel that your organisation is able to react to and implement the findings of many of those reviews? Do you think that the learnings are trickling down through your organisation? Can you explain why there has been such a dramatic rise in your view?

Ed Cornmell: It is not easy. There is a relentless focus to make sure that we do better, and we have to maintain that focus at all times. It does not mean we stop; we continue to do that work, and there is a commitment to do so. I go back to the earlier point that there is a range of different societal factors here. There is a range of different levers, and it is the challenge of being able to impact on all those areas. It requires us to act in concert to address that disproportionality. We, as an agency and as a Department, are focused on responding to previous criticism and identifying disparity.

To some degree, there is a disproportionality within the dataset that is built by that overall change. When we look at the data on serious violence and the decision making on remand in custody, they are some of the levers that are building the population that we have. There is a concerted effort and downstream position within the system. We have to show leadership in this space and make sure that we are working together with colleagues, as I have touched on, but there is a collective effort from all of us in this area. I am sure colleagues would support that, across all programme and policy areas, we need to work collectively to address that disproportionality.

Q46 Olivia Blake: It is clearly not working at the moment, and more needs to be done to tackle this issue. How confident are you about what you are planning to do in future around this issue? Do you feel you have the resources to tackle this issue head on?

Ed Cornmell: It is an absolute challenge. We have to hold ourselves to a high standard in this space. The commitment is there. The drive to make that difference is there. The complexity of the issues that are causing the disproportionality makes it difficult to give an absolute guarantee saying, "Yes, we've got this." It goes back to that point about continuing to make sure that we use the data appropriately to identify disproportionality and disparity, that we call that out, that we look to explain the circumstances and that we make sure that we have targeted action. Because of the complexity, it requires concerted action across many different policy areas to make sure we get this right. I am sorry that it is a qualified answer, but I have to speak to the complexity of the challenge.

Q47 Chair: Can you give examples of interventions that have worked? We have had lots of evidence from people claiming lots of things. It would be interesting to hear what you think about that.

Ed Cornmell: Absolutely. I take the basic kind of upskilling and training within custodial staff and the focus on making sure that we are clear in building that sense of understanding of the right level of support to different communities that come into custody. It is a core element of training for our youth justice workers and prison custody staff. I take us to earlier points in the system—

Q48 Chair: As Ms Acland-Hood will tell you, we have recently been looking at the evaluation of programmes designed to support children in care. In your Department, you are intervening at a critical point at which young people are very much in your hands, and you have different partners, not

necessarily in the MOJ, delivering this work. Can you highlight a couple of examples of third-party partners or different approaches that have delivered tangible results?

Ed Cornmell: Through the Department's funding for youth offending teams, that investment is targeted to ensure that we identify disproportionality locally and that we increase the focus from the existing targets to make sure that data is exchanged locally so that there is clear identification. Other partners are working in this space, and I call out the excellent work of the Levelling the Playing Field initiatives. The London Marathon Charitable Trust invests in sports, and intervention is targeted on BME communities.

There are individual initiatives under way. I would not wish to point to a specific initiative—I do not know whether colleagues wish to call out any particular programmes. I will talk to our internal race action programme in HMPPS, which has a dedicated focus on race equality and disparity. It is a three-year programme that is due to conclude in March 2024 and, as I have touched on, it is heavily focused on training to make sure that we have the best level of intervention.

Q49 Olivia Blake: In other settings, if we look at the workforce in an area where a disproportionate number of people end up in decision-making roles because individuals do not want to take decisions, people end up going through a system that is quite punitive in the workplace. Is that happening here? Do you think that people do not feel emboldened enough to make the decisions that are in individuals' interests and that is what your training focuses on? Is that the issue? I am trying to understand what you mean. Has the wrong decision been made because of an underlying prejudice or because someone does not want to make decisions themselves—or are there other things outside the interactions and programmes that you have pointed to that are not reaching the right people?

Ed Cornmell: It depends on what level of the system we focus on. Forgive me, because I talk from a custody end of the criminal justice system spectrum. I guess where I started is the place that matters the most—entry into the criminal justice system in the first place, with diversion through other services and interventions. We need to understand disproportionality and disparity in some of those other sectors and services—that is probably why I called out stop and search, for example. Once people enter the criminal justice system, particularly custody—I am in receipt of a disproportionately over-represented group of black and mixed heritage boys—they are in the system. How we treat them and the level of decency, fairness, care—what we do while we have got them—is a really clear focus to me, but the focal point is what we do upstream. Where else potentially are there disproportionate outcomes? That is the complexity that we have to keep focusing on, which requires other colleagues to work collectively. It requires local partnerships to be effective, particularly local youth offending teams, to make sure that we identify people who are at risk and that we do not act in any way to add to that disproportionality.

Q50 Olivia Blake: Can I ask Ms Wyse similar questions? How concerned are you and what role do you think the Home Office can play in trying to reduce that number?

Rebecca Wyse: We are very clear that absolutely nobody should be targeted by the use of any police power on the basis of their race, their ethnicity or any kind of factor of their background. We are working with communities to ensure that they have a framework of scrutiny for the use of police powers where they feel that that would be useful and necessary for them.

Q51 Olivia Blake: There are other groups who are affected, and numerous reports are published every year about who they are, including careexperienced people and young people with ADHD. How sighted is the Department of individuals' journey to get to the criminal justice system? There is a likelihood on each child's head of whether or not they end up in the criminal justice system based on their identity. How are you trying to break that link? How are you trying to intervene into those pathways for young people with ADHD or who are from a minority ethnic background?

Rebecca Wyse: Forgive me, I do not have the data with me on things such as ADHD, but I am happy to take that away and come back to you. As a Department we are aware that this speaks to the overall position—

Q52 Chair: I think the data on ADHD would be helpful, but there has been some work done that looks at the pathway of young people going into the criminal justice system. For instance, care is a factor—there are certain factors that come up often. What Ms Blake is trying to drive at is at what point do you notice the pathway, and when do you intervene to stop a young person going down that pathway?

Rebecca Wyse: We are aware that there are certain risk factors. Being a looked-after child is a really key one—I am sure that Susan will say more on that. Part of the work that we are trying to take forward—a good example of this is the violence reduction units at a local level—is bringing partners together who do understand those risk factors in a local area, whether that is health partners, education, social care or justice. We want everybody represented there and more to come together and identify the young people who are showing those risk factors, be that a looked-after child or somebody exhibiting issues with mental health, for example.

Susan Acland-Hood: I wanted to add one thing, which is that we do know something about the patterns of risk, and we try to use them to design programmes that respond to the risk patterns. We could talk about the work that we have done with the Home Office on the safe task forces, and the work that we have done through alternative provision, because we know that children in alternative provision are at an increased risk. We are constantly trying to improve our understanding of the data. We have both got the DFE-MOJ data share, which has produced some really good reports this year that have informed the development of those programmes.

We have got a dedicated piece of work we are doing with the youth endowment fund, which is the What Works Centre for Serious Youth Violence. They are doing a programme of research answering the following question—forgive me as I read it out, as it was a bit long to learn. “How does a young person’s journey through different systems of support, and the different qualities of the experiences along the way, serve to protect or expose them to involvement in serious youth violence as victim or perpetrator?” That is specifically looking at detailed journeys through the systems. It has got three lenses. It has a lens around access—how easy it is for young people to get access to the services in question. It has an engagement lens—how are young people engaged in a particular system—and then a lens about navigation, which looks at how young people move within or between systems, how provision escalates and how might they exit. Again, it is a slightly different lens because it is serious youth violence, rather than any contact with the system. But it will give us some really detailed and granular patterns of traversing the systems, which help us understand those risk and protective factors. We would then expect to use that to inform the dedicated programmes we are running to try and make them even more effective.

I think the point that Becky made about ensuring that we are also looking locally, and supporting people to look locally, is important. We might talk about this later, but as part of the work that we have done on data across Government there is a dedicated strand on supporting local government’s data capacity and capability as well. It is not an either/or. We think it is important that we both have the national picture really clear, and that we are supporting good quality understanding locally.

Q53 Olivia Blake: There are lots of “how” questions there; I was wondering if you ask “why” questions about whether certain programmes work for certain children but for other children? Is that something the work would look at as well?

Susan Acland-Hood: I expect that it will, although I agree with you that it is not the core focus of the question asked. But we ought to be able to put that together with our quantitative picture of who goes through which programmes to help us unpick the question about whether some things work better for some people than others.

Q54 Olivia Blake: On girls, obviously there is a very startling figure about mental health. You know that I have been doing a lot of work on eating disorders post-pandemic, the majority of which affects girls. However, it is staggering to see the impact on girls in figure 6, which shows the interactions with secondary mental health services. They seem very difficult to get into at the moment, so I wondered whether you had any reflections on why the situation is so stark for young girls seeking mental health support, and how joined-up is that support with your own view of what could be done to support these young women?

Susan Acland-Hood: We work really closely with the Department of Health on this. I am conscious that we do not have a Health witness here, so you might get to the limit of my detailed health knowledge after a bit.

However, we certainly try to work very closely together with DH on this and it was really positive that we have seen the extra £2.3 billion a year for mental health services overall by 2023-24, which should allow about an extra 345,000 children and young people to be able to access NHSfunded mental health support.

As part of that, there is also the additional £79 million to expand children's mental health services, which went in this year, in 2020-21. Part of that is particularly focused around eating disorder services, because we have seen the waiting lists for those rise and I think there has been a pandemic-related impact, particularly on young girls and that kind of prevalence of eating disorder. There will be about another 2,000 places in eating disorder services as a result of that investment this year, we think.

Q55 Olivia Blake: Another issue that is emerging is access, and delay in access, to assessments for issues such as autism and ADHD. How concerned are you about the delays in access to some of those services impacting on these numbers because of the pandemic, and how will you make sure that there are programmes that take into account the high proportion of girls in particular in this cohort?

Susan Acland-Hood: On autism assessment, it is certainly something that we have been working on really closely with the Department of Health, including as part of the work on the SEND Green Paper, and it is one of the things that sits behind the proposal for much clearer local dashboards on SEND, which are not just about what local authorities are doing but are also intended to show things such as local waiting times, in order to try and bring that transparency and help to drive improvement. Of course, it also means investment, and again it has been good to see the overall support across the NHS increasing, and we continue to work with it to try to make sure that we can get those pathways right.

There is some really interesting work that we are doing on how we try to get the right referral routes and pathways as well, including, for example, some work that was done in the Bradford opportunity area that looked at using the early years and foundation stage profile as a sort of first-stage screening tool that identifies some characteristics that might make autism assessment a sensible path for some of those children, which helps to make sure that we are identifying issues earlier. It continues to be something that we want to work on with the Department of Health. Then, regarding how we make sure that the particular needs of girls are built in, again we really just try to make sure that all the work that we do with DH on this is built on the data, so as we see those patterns come through we try to make that part of the conversation.

Q56 Olivia Blake: We have seen a massive spike in referrals to mental health services. Do you feel that all the Departments are doing enough on preventive work when it comes to mental health?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think it is always hard to say that you are doing enough when there is obviously still a problem. What I can say is that we have been working really hard to try to do as much as we can. Again, there is both the work we have been doing on mental health support teams in schools—trying to bring earlier-stage help closer to people—and then the mental health and wellbeing training for a lead in every school that we have been rolling out post-pandemic. There is encouragement to use some of the recovery funding on that kind of wellbeing support.

Then there is the broader set of proposals around increasing opportunities for things that we know drive wellbeing in schools. We have got a sort of staged strategy around that where we try to focus as much on that positive wellbeing as on the kind of responsive mental health end. We have certainly seen the take-up for that training for leads in schools, who can lead on both mental health and wellbeing, being really good, and the response to the training is really positive as well.

Q57 Olivia Blake: There seem to be quite big disparities locally on that. I just wanted to know if you feel that you are sighted on the makeup of that—the people who sit underneath the top-line figures of that spike in girls—and if you feel that you have got enough data from the health side of things to understand that fully, and to make sure that all the access is available for people in schools. If mental health support in schools is not accessible and specialised, how will that help a child who needs it?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am always in the market for more data; those who have seen me in front of the Committee before will know that I am a deep data hound. Again, I can talk about this in a minute, but one of the next stages of the cross-Government data and information work is a big data share with the Department of Health called the ECHILD database. That will give us a lot more not just on understanding paths through the health system but on connecting paths through the health system with paths through the education system. Because I am a massive data nerd, I am really excited about that. It will give us a lot more that helps us drive our activity.

On mental health, we completely understand and appreciate that there will be lots of young people whose need is not well met by a generalist in school with a bit of training, but we do think that investing in that is positive for prevention and for lower-level need, and that that can help to make sure that those who have the most acute needs are funnelled. The other thing we have been encouraged by, and have been supporting DHSC on, is the consultations, which I think closed earlier this year, on setting out much clearer service standards for access to mental health services: 24-hour standards around urgent care and clear standards around community access times for those with mental health needs. As those come in, we will be keen to work with them to ensure that we have a rich picture of the places where

that is being met easily and the places where there may be more of a challenge around meeting it.

Q58 Olivia Blake: Finally, do you feel that ministerial oversight of the specific interplay between all the different issues you have outlined is sufficient? Could there be a role for Ministers that currently is not being played in trying to piece some of this together in policy terms?

Susan Acland-Hood: I would actually say this is one of the areas in which there is strong ministerial interest and good, close joint ministerial working. It certainly does not hurt that my current Secretary of State was previously Minister in the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health. By her account, she had a very good experience of working back into the Department with—I think—the then Minister Quince on this issue when she was mental health lead. She continues to be interested in it and to understand both halves of it. She had a positive experience of joint ministerial working on it, which we are keen to build on.

Q59 Chair: No one is knocking the fact that the current Secretary of State has that interest—that is great—But that is not systemic, is it?

Susan Acland-Hood: I didn't just say that she had that interest; I also said that she had a good experience of joint ministerial working when she was in that role. I think we have a set-up that can endure—

Chair: Changes of personnel.

Susan Acland-Hood: The interest helps.

Q60 Chair: Thank you very much. You talked about data. We are also data fiends. The MOJ and the Department for Education had that data sharing exercise back in 2020. What does that mean you are now doing differently? What have you learned from that? We will start with Mr Cornmell. Bullet points would be good.

Ed Cornmell: Absolutely. It was a very positive exchange. There was an initial pilot in 2015, actually. In terms of the data exchange that is quoted in the report, and led to the publication in March '22, there was very clear data in terms of the interaction between the Department for Education, Ministry of Justice—

Q61 Chair: Were there any surprises for you?

Ed Cornmell: The surprises are in terms of the weighting of some of those datasets: those with specific characteristics entering the criminal justice system, the level of serious violence of certain cohorts, and prolific offending. There are crossovers to—no surprise—what we have talked about in terms of special educational needs, or people who are persistently absent from education.

Q62 Chair: Did it tell you something you didn't know before?

Ed Cornmell: It shone a light, it would be fair to say.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am not sure that it told us any completely shiny new thing; I would have been a bit worried if it had, in some ways. It has helped us change our emphasis in a couple of places. Interestingly, the overlap with persistent absence is rather stronger and more pronounced than the overlap with school exclusion. It is not that we do not care about exclusion, and not that there is no link: there is. However, for example, there is only about a 15% overlap between those involved in serious violence and those who have been excluded from school, which is lower than, I think, lots of us expected. For quite a lot of those children, the exclusion was because of the serious violence, not the other way round. They were excluded from school because they committed a serious violence offence, which is—

Q63 **Chair:** That is interesting. Your Department has had a drive to drive down exclusions, which a number of our headteachers have raised with us, because of exactly that point: if a child has done something very serious, the exclusion is to protect the whole school.

Susan Acland-Hood: Correct. We defend headteachers' right to exclude in those circumstances. The critical thing for us is that exclusion from school does not lead to exclusion from education. The work of the data share, for example, has helped us to design the work we have been doing through the SAFE taskforces and our targeted work with groups of children in alternative provision, to ensure that we are focusing on that persistently absent group as well as those who have been excluded and are at risk. It has helped to design the shape of the programme around the risk profile.

Q64 **Chair:** There is more data sharing that you will need to do, so where do you think the biggest gaps are? What would you like to know that you cannot see right now?

Susan Acland-Hood: As I said, I am really excited about the work we are going to do with DH on the extended ECHILD database, which is going to put together hospital admissions data, mental health services data, community services data and maternity services data with education data—

Q65 **Chair:** For people listening, this is anonymised presumably—in aggregate—

Susan Acland-Hood: I was going to go on to say not only that—also, the data will go back to 1984; it is about 20 million records, so it is huge—but that it will be hosted by the Office for National Statistics and part of their secure research service, so again, quite right, just to reassure people, this will be very carefully kept data. It will not be sprayed out around the world; it will be carefully managed.

Q66 **Chair:** Who will be able to interrogate it?

Susan Acland-Hood: That secure research service is a trusted research environment and, in the first instance, it will be analysts from the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. It will be kept really tight and guarded. Then we will look at whether we can safely expand it out to allow more access potentially to other Departments—



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but careful steps on that, because we appreciate that people need to know that their data is being handled sensitively and carefully. What it will allow us to do, however, is not just to make links between individual experiences, but to start to do some of that tracking of journeys, and understanding things like sequencing quality of experience and so on. Because it is a large group of records, it will allow us to drill down and to get more granular—

Q67 Chair: How quickly will you be able to do that? You have to analyse it and then act on it, and that is across different Departments. How quickly will you have enough data so that you can draw up a strategy?

Susan Acland-Hood: I suspect that it will be a bit like the DFE-MOJ data share. What we have done is ask different questions over a period. We have published, I think—I might get this wrong, sorry—11 reports this year, in 2022, using the DFE-MOJ data share, as we took different slices through it and asked different questions. As we get the ECHILD database work stood up, I don't think you will see a single, giant thing; what you will see is us able to ask and answer better questions over time as we work our way through the data.

Q68 Chair: For all of this, you still need money at the local level to deliver on things. We were quite alarmed by figure 8: the difference in outcomes is very marked across different areas of the country. The middle column is the England average, and the highest and lowest rates are markedly different for all those systems. May we canter quickly through the panel, starting with you, Mr Cornmell: why are the rates for juvenile first-time entrants into the criminal justice system so different in North Tyneside and in Nottingham? What is going on, and is there anything that should be happening that is not, leading to those huge disparities?

Ed Cornmell: I am afraid I do not have the local data to give a clear answer, Chair.

Q69 Chair: But you have read the Report and seen figure 8.

Ed Cornmell: Yes, I have.

Q70 Chair: So can you explain why that would be?

Ed Cornmell: I don't have that information available. I might misspeak the quotes. I would prefer to write, if that is okay, to explain what we know about that disparity.

Q71 Chair: You must know—this is not your area of expertise, but we were talking earlier about people coming into the system, so is this something that is happening well anywhere? We asked you to give examples; if you cannot talk about those examples, can you give us an example of somewhere that is doing it really well and keeping the numbers down?

Ed Cornmell: Not off the top of my head, I am afraid. I wouldn't choose to do so. I can come back to you more clearly.

Q72 Chair: Okay. Well, we don't have anyone from Health, so we won't go into hospital admissions unless anyone wants to—I don't think anyone wants to have a stab at that; we probably don't want to go down that route. On NEETs, Ms Acland-Hood, Hammersmith and Fulham seem to be doing a fantastic job compared with Nottinghamshire—or maybe not; maybe there are other, local factors. Can you explain those differences?

Susan Acland-Hood: There are certainly some socioeconomic drivers that sit underneath quite a lot of these dimensions. Again, we know from data, and the understanding we already have, that if you map that against some of the underlying known markers of disadvantage, you find a reasonably good line of best fit. In some ways, what is interesting to me is the places that don't quite fit that pattern and that effectively do better than you might expect, and how we identify the things they are doing that help them to buck the trend and—

Q73 Chair: So you map this against socioeconomic deprivation. What else? How do you map these results? When it comes to Hammersmith and Fulham and, for example, children in schools, there is a high percentage of children in private schools in that borough, just because of the nature

of the borough. That might have an impact—I don't know—because they are perhaps not counted in the same way as they are if they are in the state school system.

Susan Acland-Hood: For NEET rates, we would look at background socioeconomic status, performance of the school system, and the labour market—the other thing that really significantly affects NEET rates is that if you have a very buoyant local labour market, the NEET rate will be lower, and if you don't, the NEET rate is highly likely to be higher. Understanding the places where somebody is doing something that helps them to—

Chair: Overcome the—

Susan Acland-Hood: Overcome those underlying trends helps us to pinpoint practice that can shift the dial.

Q74 Chair: And when it comes to the rate of adolescents in care per 100,000, there is, again, a hugely stark difference between the lowest rate and the highest rate—Wokingham and Blackpool. Can you explain that?

Susan Acland-Hood: The care review looked at this in some detail, and there is a set of publications from spring last year that looks at those kinds of variations in children's social care rates and outcomes. I would say this is partly driven by some of those underlying factors, but it is also driven by quite different frameworks and thresholds for decision making, which is one of the reasons why the care review recommended, and we have agreed to the recommendation, that we should have a clearer set of national standards for children's social care. We know that, in different areas, there will be significantly different practice. You can absolutely identify areas in the care system where all the background demographics that we know are associated with difficulty can be controlled for, but you still see very wide variations in

rates, which do look a bit more like they are driven by different assumptions and different thresholds in practice.

Q75 Chair: “In care” covers quite a number of different settings.

Susan Acland-Hood: It does.

Q76 Chair: And there is a difference in outcome for those in, say, foster care, compared with those in secure care or in residential care. So, underneath these figures, do you look at those as well?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Q77 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Acland-Hood, we often tend to be critical in this Committee, but we don’t give you credit when things are going marginally better. We know, from the House of Commons youth unemployment statistics, that youth unemployment in June to August ’22, at 372,000, is the lowest since records began in 1992. We also know, from paragraph 1.22 on page 21 of the NAO Report, that the percentage who are NEET, which presumably the figure for employment influences, was progressively coming down from the year 2000 to the year 2021. Does that give you an opportunity, in the education sector, to really concentrate on those who are still not in education?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, it certainly does. We were really pleased to see those figures. The reduction in the NEET rate—again, it varies a little bit, depending on whether you look at all the over-16s or at the 18-to-24 group, which we do look at, but the last published figures are really positive. We are all waiting with bated breath to see whether the next set of figures goes back a little way, because we know that the extremely tight labour market is the biggest contributor to that—it’s more young people in employment more than it’s more young people in education. But yes, it does give us an opportunity to focus forensically on those young people who are still not in education, employment or training. They are an increasingly complex group; they tend to have other, overlapping needs or vulnerabilities. That allows us also to think really hard about, for example, the targeted work that we do on supporting children in care and helping them to avoid becoming NEET, because they are still disproportionately more likely to do so than children in the population at large.

We know that there is a set of protective things that we can do, including all of the work that we have done with virtual school heads, to try to drive up the educational attainment of children in care. We know that is a protective factor that helps them avoid ending up NEET.

Q78 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you for that answer. We do not have anybody here from the Department of Health and Social Care, but I will ask the next question anyway because it is such a concern for my constituent. That concerns CAMHS. It may be that will want to take this away and give me a proper answer, but, in the supplementary brief that was given to this Committee, on hospital admissions per 100,000 for



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under-18s with mental health conditions, for some reason—I think I can get to that in a minute—Gloucestershire has by far the worst figures. It is 83 per 100,000 for males, and a staggering 197 per 100,000 for females compared to a national average of 139 per 100,000.

Having seen those figures, I got an update from David Noyes, the GHC chief operating officer, this morning. He told me, “There are currently 750 children and young people waiting for treatment from Gloucestershire core CAHMS. The wait for routine treatment is longer, and some young people have now been waiting for 18 months.” I had an adolescent who came to see me the other day who threatened to commit suicide—it has been six months, and I still cannot get him any treatment. This is an extremely worrying situation.

I would be grateful if you could maybe comment in general, but perhaps one of you could go away and give me an answer in specifics.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, I am not sure I will be able to add very much to what I said in answer to the previous question on this, so we are happy to make sure—

Q79 Chair: I think we all have constituents—adolescents—who are really struggling, and when they get to the support that they need, it is often for six weeks or is time-limited. That causes them challenges when that is not enough. We are aware that money is an issue, but it is about getting a foot through the door in the first place, and then they have to go back through the queue to queue up again for it.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, and I spoke earlier about the new standards that have been consulted on. For urgent access to a community care team—if you are in that kind of urgent crisis moment—that is within 24 hours, and four hours if it is very urgent. For a face-to-face assessment, it is within one hour of arriving in A&E, then, for children and young people whose needs are non-urgent, there is a four-week standard in the community.

I think that lots of people have welcomed the setting of those standards but have recognised that meeting them will be a real challenge. I think the setting of them is important too because it sets that yardstick that allows us, working with DH, to really try to ensure we know what was meant.

Q80 Olivia Blake: Just on waiting lists—going back to eating disorders—I know that there is a control for under-18s, but not for over-18s. What happens in transition as young people go between children’s and adult’s mental health services? I guess that would be a question I would ask to Health if they were here.

Susan Acland-Hood: My understanding is that there are also standards for adults, but I wrote down the children’s ones for this hearing, because obviously—

Chair: There is certainly a divide between them. Children's care is paid for nationally in the health service, and adult care is paid for locally, so the transition point is a very big issue. That might need a separate discussion, maybe with the Department of Health and some others. It is always difficult to know which witnesses to invite; we certainly could not have invited everybody.

Q81 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Again, possibly in a similar vein, and I am sorry if this has already been covered in my absence, paragraph 1.4 on page 13 outlines the cost of the consequences of not giving adolescents timely intervention—from £23 billion, which it then breaks down. What more do you think could be done, in terms of timely intervention and particularly early intervention, for those at the youngest age spectrum of adolescence?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think that £23 billion is a figure from the independent social care review. It is certainly a figure that we recognise, and it brings together quite a few things. It brings together a sort of assessment of wellbeing loss to the individual, with costs to services and with a couple of other pieces.

If it is helpful to the Committee, I can send our analysis of that, but, in a sense, the big, broader point is that I think we all share the view that, if you can intervene earlier and more effectively, you can, in many cases, reduce the risk of a more severe problem presenting itself later, which would be more costly to the state and more challenging for the individual.

A huge part of the analysis of the independent children's social care review was about how we try to invest more in early help—in earlier intervention wrapped around families. We are doing work through the Supporting Families programme, which we invested more in at the spending review. It is DLUHC-led, but it is a beloved, adopted child of the DFE, I would say to Siobhan.

I debated whether to say this, because our considering doing something else was probably not our best moment, but there was a time in the runup to the last spending review when we considered whether the DFE should bid for an early help programme, for the reasons set out in the review. We concluded that it would be much more sensible to endorse the DLUHC bid for more funding for the Supporting Families programme—to back a single successful thing, rather than trying for a proliferation of things.

Chair: Non-silo working.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. I am not expecting a gold star, but that is what we did.

Q82 Chair: There are very few joint bids by Departments at spending reviews; we have looked at that. Was it a joint bid, or were you backing a DLUHC bid?

Siobhan Jones: I think that the paperwork technically came from our Department, but at all stages, it was joint, and there were joint conversations with the Treasury. As a result, we have a joint governance

structure. We have a shared board—we are meeting tomorrow—and I ensure that the chair alternates between DFE and DLUHC.

Q83 Chair: If it works, it saves both Departments money, and gets better outcomes for young people.

Siobhan Jones: Absolutely.

Susan Acland-Hood: The next stage is how we learn from that for the implementation plan for the care review, which looks at how we can do more work on investing earlier. The evaluation work on Supporting Families is really strong on the saving per pound spent. That saving is a result of investing upstream, and of wrapping the support around the family. Technically, the programme is not just for vulnerable adolescents; it covers families and children of all ages—and indeed families without children, in some cases. There is strength in an approach that looks at the whole family's experience, and that tries to support the family.

Siobhan Jones: One of the risk factors for children and vulnerable adolescents is an issue with the parents; it might be parental mental illhealth or worklessness. By intervening with a family, you might get ahead and prevent a vulnerable adolescent becoming vulnerable.

Q84 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Siobhan Jones, figure 11 on page 35 shows that the statutory bit of local authority spending on children and

young people's services in England between 2011-12 and 2020-21 has gone up, but spending on preventive services—perhaps the most important bit—has gone down. Is there anything that we can do to increase spending on the preventive side, which must be of benefit to adolescents?

Siobhan Jones: I very much recognise that, and we all share the view that getting in early has to be better for the individual, the community and the taxpayer; it will save the costs that we have been talking about. As the Committee will be well aware, the majority of funding that comes via local government is not ringfenced. That has always been the clear principle wherever possible, to allow local areas the flexibility to identify what is right for them. Local governments want to prioritise prevention and early help. That is challenging in the circumstances, given all the demands that we are talking about, and the need to balance that desire with the provision of statutory services.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of some of the choices. That is partly why we took the decision, working with DFE, to maintain Supporting Families. With my local government hat on, I would always say that I do not want separate programmes, and that we should not have ringfences, because they are the wrong thing for local government. However, it feels right to maintain Supporting Families as a distinct programme, so that we make sure that there is that early intervention. As Susan said, we secured a £200 million uplift at the last SR. That takes the funding to just under £700 million over the SR. That aims to help 300,000 families. There is shared continued commitment on that front.

More widely, as the Committee has probably picked up, last week, the Chancellor recognised the pressures on local government. That was another area that came in for extra investment; there is new grant funding, and extra flexibilities on council tax. There is an extra £2.7 billion going in next year, and £4.8 billion the following year. There is more money going into local government, which will hopefully mean that it is a little bit less challenging to make some of those decisions.

Q85 Chair: You talked about the Supporting Families programme being ringfenced. Is all the rest of it ringfenced?

Siobhan Jones: The additional money that I just spoke about, from the autumn statement? Some of that is going through social care. The social care grant can be spent on adults or children's social care. Some of it is not ringfenced. The council tax flexibilities can be spent on anything.

Chair: Ms Blake and I just exchanged looks as people formerly responsible for this in local government, because that is the budget that gets squeezed when there is a funding cut. I just wanted to make that observation before I pass back to Sir Geoffrey.

Q86 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: To reinforce the point, paragraph 2.31 on page 44 says that your Department's Troubled Families scheme—I give you a pat on the back for that because it was very successful—returned £2.28 for every £1 spent. This is really well spent money, and it is helping families and troubled young people at the same time. It must be producing a really good outcome. Which bit of the pot of money that you just referred to will replace the troubled families scheme, and how much does it amount to?

Siobhan Jones: When I talk about Supporting Families, that is the same thing as Troubled Families. Just over a year ago, we changed the name because we got feedback from local areas that "troubled families" was seen as very stigmatising.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I understand that.

Siobhan Jones: It is the same programme. The just under £700 million over this SR that I referred to is going into the Troubled Families/Supporting Families programme.

Susan Acland-Hood: The £200 million increase that we got at the SR was about a 40% uplift, so it is a significant uplift and it was jointly argued for. How we get to the point where we don't have to artificially ringfence the money in a programme in order to help people spend it on preventative services is exactly the sort of question we are seeking to answer through the next stage of the work on the care review. That comes partly back to the discussions we have been having about setting some clearer standards. That should set out what you can expect not just at high-level intervention but at a lower level. It also needs to draw on the things that we spoke about when I was before the Committee in September on the outcomes from all the work we have done to test and rigorously evaluate programmes in

children's social care so that we help people invest in things they can be confident will effectively prevent.

One of the challenges for local government—this is closely analogous to conversations I am sure you have had about health investment and the balance between preventative and acute spending—is that acute, high-end spending is very hard to avoid, so to successfully pivot to prevention you have to be really confident that it will be effective in preventing the more acute need from arising. Otherwise, there is a risk that you end up spending too much.

Q87 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is precisely where my next question is going. On this extra ringfenced money, have you done what I quite like from Departments and set targeted outcomes for what you expect from that money with the Supporting Families scheme?

Siobhan Jones: For the Supporting Families scheme, we have developed an outcomes framework, which we agreed across Government. It has identified 10 areas and risk factors that families may face. Many of them are the sorts of things we have been talking about today—mental health challenges, school attendance and contact with the criminal justice system. There are 10, and they cover a range of factors. That helps you identify the families in the first place, because local authorities will share their data with other local organisations, and try to identify families that meet three or more of those criteria. It is really about the most complex families. As part of that work across Government, against each of those 10 outcomes, you have something about what a successful outcome looks like. That is in the guidance and the practice, and that was agreed with colleagues here and in other Departments.

Local areas get some of the money up front, and some of it is a payment-by-results scheme. Some of it they get only if they achieve a successful outcome with that family, and it has to be a successful enduring outcome. It can't be that a child went back to school for two weeks. It has to be that that is maintained six months later.

Q88 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am not quite getting the answer I want. Given that the NAO has been able to identify the positive money outcome—£2.28 for every £1 spent—it must have some fairly good data on how many families that has helped. That is what I would really like to see from the Supporting Families scheme. Is there any such outcome targeted?

Siobhan Jones: Yes. Over the SR period—the three years—we are aiming to help 300,000 families. The data that we got from our evaluation, in case it is helpful to the Committee, showed that between 2015 and 2021—

Q89 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That's fine. The 300,000 is what I wanted to know. I am sorry if this has been covered before, but paragraph 2.26 on page 41 says that there is no clear lead to ensure a coherent policy. Is there a single board or team that has visibility of all boards and different programmes supporting adolescents?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am going to give a slightly annoyingly long answer to what was a very short and clear question. There is not a single board that literally has oversight of every possible programme that might touch the life of a young person aged between nine and 19. I will say that unashamedly, because I do not think that that would be a very sensible board to run. What we do have is a vulnerable children and young people's strategic group that focuses on the most vulnerable children and young people who have those overlapping needs.

We spoke about this briefly earlier, but I am happy to go through it again. We set that board up as the vulnerable children and young people's programme board during covid, and we have repurposed and are continuing it as the vulnerable children and young people's strategy board. It met in its new guise in September, and the next meeting is in December. It has cross-Government representation and brings together our understanding of those most complex children and young people.

As I said at the beginning, when you look at the profile of need of children and young people in this age group there are more who have none or one identified need by far than there are who have multiple, overlapping needs. We think that it is sensible to meet the needs of many young people through focusing on whether individual programmes are delivering against their individual needs really well, then focusing our join-up on those who have those complex and overlapping patterns of need.

Q90 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Can I probe you on that? In figure 13 on page 42 there are at least a dozen Government Departments and organisations that one way or another have a bit of influence on this whole programme. Reading the whole report, the Office of the Children's Commissioner has a bit of an overseeing role, but it does not seem to me that there is one Department really keeping an eye on all of this. Each of the seven Departments listed at the top have a bit, but who is the one person in Government who says, "Is this problem with adolescents getting better or worse"?

Susan Acland-Hood: I would say that it is the Department for Education that takes the overarching responsibility for the experiences of children and young people across the system as a whole, but I do not think that that sensibly translates into us trying to run every single programme or activity that might touch the life of a child or young person. It is important that we have a sense of the co-ordinated picture, which is what we try to do through that vulnerable children and young people's group and the data shares and other work that we have talked about. I cannot remember if you were in the room—

Q91 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I probably was not, but I am probably now getting a note from the Chair to tell me that I was not.

Susan Acland-Hood: As I say, I went through some of the data that we have looking at the proportion of children who, when you look at multiple needs, have just one at a time. That is the majority of the cohort. I will

briefly channel Chris Wormald who, if he was here, would say, "Sometimes silos—"

Chair: You do not need to repeat that; I will fill in the gap. There are certain things that need to be done by silos, but it is about that overarching responsibility, and you have various mechanisms now—the officials board—that will oversee things. I think that Sir Geoffrey's point is still well made, and it is a bit that has puzzled us in our preparation. I have no doubt that this is a knotty issue. In figure 13 there are six Departments, and there could be even more, plus the local partners. There are a lot of moving parts. If you are dealing with one issue and you discover that a mental health professional is dealing with someone that has a problem with families, how easy is it to get that referral nationally and locally?

Q92 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Could I follow the Chair's question before you answer? Would it be possible to have a report to Parliament once a year, incorporating all of the Departments in one report on the Government's progression with vulnerable young adolescents in the preceding year? It would then at least get all of those Departments working together, because they would have to report to Parliament.

Susan Acland-Hood: It would be a challenging thing to do. We rightly try and see some of those children and young people who have one main presenting need; they are still vulnerable, and rightly dealt with better by one person really focusing on that than by everybody together. The challenge that the NAO found in putting together this Report is not because the Government are particularly incoherent around it, but because of what happens if you start to look at every possible difficulty experienced by a very large cohort of people—the Report looks at children aged between nine and 19. You could equally ask whether it was sensible to have a single report to Parliament that tried to deal with all the challenges felt by adults. I think the answer is that it would be possible, but I am not sure that it would be as illuminating as focusing on either individual issues or clusters of issues that often co-occur.

Chair: Each Department will do it individually. I think Sir Geoffrey was just asking whether it could be put in the same document. Then everybody would be able to see the read-across.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The National Audit Office, with great respect, is not going to be able to do this every year. This is a terrific Report. It has brought together a huge amount of information, but the NAO is not going to be able to do it every year. If we had a discipline that all the Departments had to do it once a year, it would surely focus minds, but I think we are not going to get anywhere with this. I am sure that the Committee will want to reflect carefully on your answer and see where we go.

Q93 Olivia Blake: Just on this point, which is highlighted in the Report, would one way around the difficulty be to have a joint definition and a joint outcome for what vulnerable young people look like? You could narrow that

definition. Then maybe we could understand the numbers that we are talking about within that definition, rather than it seeming like a very broad number of people, depending on which Department you are talking to.

Susan Acland-Hood: Again, this may well be something that the Committee wants to reflect on as it writes its report, but my question would be: to what purpose? I think it is important that in the context of running an individual service you understand what vulnerability looks like in relation to your service. Who are the people who are at risk of being ill served by the thing that you do? They may be different service to service, and it is important that people understand that and can recognise it, and continue to care about the people who are vulnerable in relation to their service.

Q94 **Chair:** There is also a Venn diagram.

Susan Acland-Hood: It absolutely is a Venn diagram, but what we learn from all the work that has been looking at overlaps is that it is quite a complicated Venn diagram. It is not one of those Venn diagrams, if I can take that really helpful interjection, with a really obvious big overlap of loads of people in the middle. It is a really complicated Venn diagram in which, for example, there are some clusters and patterns of overlapping need that lend themselves well to particular moments of coming together. For example, I talked a bit earlier about the SAFE taskforces that we are working on jointly with the Home Office. There is an identifiable and clear cluster in the Venn diagram around persistent absence from school, school exclusion and involvement in the criminal justice system. That is a stronger association than with a whole set of other multi-agency things that may affect some of those young people.

There was a good case for a targeted piece of work around that cluster, but if you put that into something that said, "We've got to have one consistent single definition of vulnerability across the whole of Government," there is a risk that you would miss those overlapping clusters of need, or that you would wrap a whole set of things around those young people that did not actually meet the key presenting needs that they have. Although it is messier, I think there is value in making sure that we keep properly interrogating and understanding the richness of the whole Venn diagram, which is what we try to do through the vulnerable children and young people steering group, and the work that we are doing on the data share, identifying where we see clusters that are strong enough to merit a different approach to a particular overlapping set of needs, if that makes sense.

Q95 **Olivia Blake:** I am not sure that I necessarily agree. I think that the purpose would be to try to improve outcomes for some of these young people, and for MPs to know what the issues are for vulnerable young people and what we mean when we say that.

I have a few questions on gaps as well. With there not being an overarching committee—the organisations are set out in figure 13—who has responsibility within the system to identify gaps and overlaps? I know from personal experience in my city, when a child unfortunately has died, many



of those people have met with several organisations. That often comes out in the inquiries that follow such tragedies. Who is responsible for overseeing those gaps and overlaps, and for what is and is not working?

Susan Acland-Hood: I would say that the committee that we have on vulnerable children and young people holds that responsibility for understanding the complexity of the Venn diagram and identifying the gaps and overlaps where we need to act. Then the question is whether you want a single group that takes all that action together or the ability to identify the right partners for the right action, depending on where people fall on the Venn diagram.

On the second point that you made about where individual children fall through gaps, there is a particular focus through the multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. We have three statutory identified partners: the police, health and local authorities. They have a shared and equal duty to protect children and young people. There are 135 safeguarding partnership areas in England. Continuing to strengthen and understand—when something goes wrong, what has not gone right in the partnership arrangements and how have those things happened—is something where there is a shared and equal duty on all the partners, but we also have the national safeguarding review panel, which looks in detail at exactly what went wrong, and that comes under my Department's responsibility.

Again, there is a balance here. You want everybody to think it is their business; the risk of saying that one person is solely responsible is that everybody else thinks they can stop thinking about it, which we know does not work well for those children. But again, we are trying to get the balance right between everybody having accountability and also having someone who knows it is their job to identify those gaps, look at what went wrong and report back.

Q96 Olivia Blake: Couldn't the reverse be true, though—by no one having the responsibility as a single responsibility, everyone can pass the buck on it?

Susan Acland-Hood: I really do not think that is how people feel it. I think the statutory safeguarding partners do feel that responsibility powerfully. There is work, though, in response to the national safeguarding review panel's most recent reports, including on some of the cases people will be familiar with—such as those of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson—to look at what else we can do to continue to strengthen those arrangements.

One of the reflections on the back of that was that we needed to make sure we were modelling at a national level what we were asking partners to do at a local level. There is a new child protection ministerial group, which met for the first time on 17 October and effectively brings together the national representatives of those safeguarding partners to make sure we have that working at every level.

Q97 Olivia Blake: I have just two final points on this section. Why is education missing from that conversation? Secondly, on the feeding in of this

information, how are lessons learned from when the investigation of an incident finishes, and how are those lessons then pushed out? To me, that is not clear.

Susan Acland-Hood: On education as a partner, we have placed an expectation on all the safeguarding partners to set out how schools in their area will be engaged in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, and then, in turn, schools have a statutory duty to co-operate fully with all three of the safeguarding partners when they are asked to join the arrangements. It is framed like that partly because the way the school system is organised means that you need locally to agree who is best placed to be part of that arrangement, whereas for the other three, you have an obvious lead. But there is a recommendation in the independent review of children's social care that schools be named as a fourth safeguarding partner, and that is something we are actively considering as part of the implementation plan in response to the review. We want to consult the sector and partner agencies about what that might look like and whether it is the sort of legislative change that will make the difference. It is a core question. What I will say is that my experience of how schools operate is that they take this incredibly seriously and they are very active and responsive partners in those safeguarding arrangements. We see schools really trying to do their best for the children in the school and thinking about that really hard.

On the point about how lessons are disseminated, when a serious incident happens, there is a process for the immediate notification of the panel. As soon as you know something has gone wrong, you tell the panel. There is a process—

Q98 **Olivia Blake:** When you get to the end of the process, what happens then?

Susan Acland-Hood: When you get to the end of the process, the national panel will write a report that is public and that people can see, but they also take and disseminate shared lessons that they have learned from multiple reports. For example, some really important work has been done recently on the under-ones and on the role of fathers, which is sometimes overlooked. They take, effectively, not just individual lessons from individual reports but collective lessons that they have seen across groups of reports, which they then disseminate into the system. There is recent guidance on the bruising of non-mobile infants, for example, which I will mention at every possible opportunity because I think it is really good and I want people to know about it. That comes out of the national panel and is then circulated around the system.

Olivia Blake: That is great, but how does it get implemented? Do you know what I mean?

Q99 **Chair:** I can think of a case: the death of Paul, who died in a urine-soaked cot—this is about younger children than adolescents, but it addresses the point—and it was the school's education welfare officers that picked up the issue in the family. With Victoria Climbié, some of the same issues that had not been picked up with the death of Paul had affected that child too, so



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there are lessons that are theoretically learned, but just not disseminated. Also, there are systems that are creaking: maybe more money goes into one scheme, but there are many other bits of the system that are creaking.

Overall, you have a system where, when something goes wrong, everyone gets around the table and asks, "What's gone wrong across the board?", but in advance of it going wrong, you've got your silos and no one agency really in charge. Would it be appropriate to nominate an agency in charge of that young adolescent when they are having difficulties, so that you have the multi-agency process but with one agency taking the lead and having the clout to make the other agencies do what they need to be doing?

Susan Acland-Hood: The first thing I would say is that this is a system in which our tolerance for failure has to be, rightly, incredibly low. However, the challenge is that you only need one person to have missed the lesson learned, and you can have the risk of a really serious failure.

In general, I do think people take these reports incredibly seriously and try to learn the lessons. As always, the challenge is getting to 100% consistency and treating these things as never events, where we should be seeking the means that make it almost impossible to not have heard the lesson and implemented it. Again, I think there is something here for the implementation of the children's social care work and setting some kind of clear national standards to make it easier for people. At the moment, our system does rely a bit on disseminating lessons and asking individual authorities to build them into their practice. With some national care standards, we can do a bit more work that is about saying, "We can build them into the national care standards as those lessons come through and make that clearer for people."

On whether we should have a single agency in charge, it is very often the case that there will be an individual lead professional working with a child. I think that is a better model than saying that one of the three agencies should always lead in all cases.

Q100 **Chair:** Sorry, but there was perhaps a bit of sophistry there. The individual lead is the equivalent of an agency—the person that the young person or their family know they can talk to. So many parents come to see us at our surgeries just desperate to know who to reach out to: they reach out to one agency, then another and another, and it just does not join up. Sometimes it is quite a simple thing that needs to be done, but they cannot find who will do that because it is not the responsibility of the person they have found or the next person they have found or the next person they have found. There are gaps that young people fall through.

Susan Acland-Hood: Again, the supporting families work we have talked about—the development of that early help bit of the system—and some of the lessons coming out of the children's social care review say that people sometimes feel as though the response is assessment and gatekeeping, rather than straightforward help. There will always be bits of the system where there are more people who want a particular thing than we can

sensibly provide, but trying to make sure that where there is a relatively straightforward way of offering a bit of help, the emphasis is on trying to get that help to the family as quickly as possible, rather than repeated assessment, is a huge part of where we are going with the care review.

Q101 Olivia Blake: I wonder if the lack of a definition sometimes causes problems not only across but within Departments. For example, at the moment, the pupil premium in your Department does not cover young carers, who obviously have a need. There isn't an individual in schools responsible for carers—there isn't anything there, really. I was in a room with some young carers on Friday, and not a single one of them had had their statutory carer's assessment. Why is this happening? How is this vulnerability not being picked up by the system?

Chair: Why?

Olivia Blake: Yes, why? How hard is it for people to advocate for themselves within it? Why is there a lack of access to those things for certain children?

Susan Acland-Hood: When it comes to young carers as a group, quite a lot has been done, but there is a lot more we can do. There are also real challenges. I was actually sitting with a group of young carers in a school in Newham, where they have done a lot of work on making sure that young carers—I know this sounds ridiculous—know what a young carer is and understand that. Lots of people do not self-identify as a young carer, so they do not get past the first layer of knowing that there are things available that they can be helped with. I think there is a lot more that we can do on signposting and help and support.

Q102 Olivia Blake: I guess the point I am trying to make is: how do we join up local and central Government understanding of young and vulnerable people, what that means, what the priorities are, what we should be working on, how you identify the risks within that and the problem areas that are causing you all a headache? Does Ms Jones have a view on that?

Siobhan Jones: There are elements there and I totally agree that there is a complexity, and what supporting families does is bring together some of that complexity. There is a really strong connection between the local and the national as part of the supporting families programme, and there is that information sharing. While we formally collect data on the outcomes, there is also that more regular conversation of the things that are coming up: where are the issues? We try to take the feedback of what is causing them the problems locally and then try to facilitate an answer.

One specific example would be local areas saying, "Actually, in order to identify some of the people we want to work with, we really need access to some of DWP's data on universal credit." We have brokered that sort of data-sharing agreement to try to help make some more of those connections locally that they could then use to try to target their interventions—even to the extent of identifying people who they think are at risk but are nowhere

near services and have not even got to that point of knocking on your door to try to find out what services are available. So there is actually quite a lot they can do locally.

A key underpinning principle of the supporting families programme is that you have to sign up to data sharing between local agencies. I totally recognise that different local authorities are at different stages of that, but that is a core principle. The police have to share data with the local council to try to identify people. There is quite a lot of work we are putting in to try to improve those systems. I will keep it short, but there is an earlyhelp system guide that has a data maturity model, so there is quite a lot of work going into supporting local areas to try to improve that data. Also, we operate a very light-touch delivery team that supports regional clusters so that local areas can learn from each other as well.

Q103 Olivia Blake: How far do you think we are from a universal system that could do all that, no matter where you are, so that there is not a postcode lottery? Are the resources available across the UK for this work? Is there enough money in the system to allow this transformative work on data, which is obviously so important, as you have just said?

Siobhan Jones: There is a question about whether universal is the right approach, given the variety of challenges facing different local areas. That is not to defend some of the differences between areas, which the Chair called out, but there are genuine differences between how Bristol wants to solve its problems and how Sheffield wants to. There are even differences within Bristol. I was talking to them recently, and they have a very different approach depending on which ward you're in, because, as you will appreciate, the challenges are so different. There is a question about the extent to which universality would be appropriate, although it does come back to the care standards, as Susan said.

There are general things that you could set out at a universal level. In terms of the investment in the data architecture, we set out the data maturity model. There is a self-assessment tool that all councils have to assess themselves against. They have to identify areas of improvement, to make sure that they are getting better at sharing the data.

Susan talked about the data improvement across Government. One aspect of that is a pilot, a data accelerator programme, which invests in 10 local areas to get them to do really exciting and interesting things with the data, so that they spot people early and then share that learning more broadly. This is a journey, and not everyone is at the same stage, but in the programme, we are trying to invest in improving that.

Q104 Olivia Blake: What is the timeframe for this work? When do you think we will get to a place where it is good?

Siobhan Jones: It is good in many areas. I do not want to put a clear date on it, but given the additional investment in Supporting Families, I would very much hope that by the end of the SR period you would see a

much stronger data infrastructure.

Q105 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will come to you first, Mr Cornmell. I refer you to paragraph 2.12 on page 37. It concerns the horrific murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes—I hope I pronounced his name correctly—and Star Hobson. They were two very young youngsters. Arthur was only 6 and Star was 16 months old. The very critical Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel said in its most recent report in May 2022 that multiagency safeguarding arrangements “are not yet fit for purpose everywhere”, and are more fractured and fragmented than they should be. Given that these multi-agency protection panels were set up precisely to spot this type of problem, what are your three agencies doing? I know the Ministry of Justice does not sit on these panels, but the police do. What are you doing to liaise with the Home Office? It has landed up as your responsibility in this case. Education is represented on these panels, as is the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in terms of social care. What are the three Departments doing to make sure these arrangements are working properly, so that this can never happen again anywhere?

Ed Cornmell: The short answer from a Ministry of Justice perspective is that we are an active partner and have been actively involved. We have responsibilities in key areas. My own area is custody, in a safeguarding role. Lessons have been learned from some of these very difficult cases. Some of the learning is reflected in different settings. We have a responsibility on, for example, probation and contact. A range of parts of the Ministry of Justice have active involvement. We take obligations really seriously. We have appointed people as safeguarding leads. We have a direct relationship with the local authority. We have designated officers, and physical facilities such as young offenders institutions. It is about active participation and learning from the review panel. I think Susan spoke well about the dissemination through our different Departments to make sure we are taking that learning into action.

Q106 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Ms Acland-Hood, further on in the review’s report, it says that there was limited direct work with the families. For example, in Arthur’s case, it was often the voice of his father that was heard by professionals rather than his own. Pictures of bruising were not passed to the multi-agency safeguarding hub. Perhaps most worryingly of all, in terms of structure, under the heading “Leadership and culture”, it says that the panel identified a weak line of sight between the leadership and the frontline practice. There aren’t many of these multi-agency panels. What is being done to review each and every one of them to ensure they are working better, so that this horrific series of events can never happen again?

Susan Acland-Hood: There are 135 safeguarding partnerships across the country, covering 151 local authority areas. There is a set of things we are doing across the whole system to try to strengthen the arrangements. A lot of that comes back to pulling the findings from the panel reviews into the work we are doing on children’s social care reform. That includes looking at

some of the recommendations. For example, there is a recommendation from Josh MacAlister's review around the expertise of those involved in child protection. There are a set of recommendations around the operation of the multi-agency panels. We also do a lot of work on intervening in the places where there is weakness. There was also a joint targeted area inspection, which followed the report and looked at the issues in the locality.

We effectively have a ladder of intervention. The work we have done on intervention and support, as well as our work with children's social care departments across the country, has resulted in significant improvements. A little more than a third of children's social care departments were rated "good" or "outstanding" in 2017; that is now just over half. We would like that to be higher still, but we see the results of that improvement work starting to come through.

I have of course read the full reports on the deaths of Arthur and Star. They are really hard reading, because there are sets of things identified in there. We have to, as a system, continue to challenge ourselves and do better. The multi-agency arrangement was originally set up through the Children and Social Work Act 2017—that is that three-part arrangement between the police, the health authority and local authority. The Wood reviews said there is good practice there, and there is strengthening, but we clearly need to keep working on how we can ceaselessly identify the things that aren't working as well as they should, including some of the things around professional curiosity—making sure that no one person's version of the truth is taken without really heavily triangulating with others, and so on. A lot of that goes to the heart of good-quality social work practice, but it also means really good-quality leadership across the three systems, through the children and social care review work, and looking at development of more early career framework training and the recommendations around more specialist work on child protection. We also need to continue to work area by area to understand where we have risks of difficulties.

Q107 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will finish with one final question to you, Ms Jones, on the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership yearly report. As you will know, Gloucestershire has been subject to Ofsted inspections. The independent reviewer, Kevin Crompton, said: "Overall, I can give reasonable assurance that the Partnership is working effectively however there are a number of areas for improvement that the Partnership is aware of." This tells you that in Gloucestershire things aren't 100%. There must be a number of other such partnerships around the country in the same position. Gloucestershire is a reasonable area; it doesn't normally have a great amount of problems. That gives us a clue that the system is not working terribly well. What is your Department doing to make sure that all these independent reports are properly studied and acted on?

Siobhan Jones: I might ask Susan to pick this up.

Susan Acland-Hood: Children and social care is my Department's responsibility. The money is funnelled through Siobhan, but we are



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responsible for children and social care. I described a piece of work earlier; we have recently had a small reorganisation of children and social care, SEND and education, to try to bring our regional-facing teams together. Our regional teams will know, and work with, those on their patch; when there are concerns, they will go up the ladder of intervention that I described earlier. That is the process of intervening and acting. The first stage is support, including brokered support from other stronger local authorities.

If we have serious concerns about the performance of a local authority when it comes to children and social care, such that we think they can no longer successfully deliver the service, we will go as far as creating a trust to do it for them. We try not to go there too often or too quickly, but if there are sustained and significant failings, we are prepared to do that.

As I say, the aggregate result of all that intervention over time has been a significant increase in the number of local authority children's services that Ofsted judges to be good or outstanding, and a significant decrease in the number being judged inadequate, but there is still further to go on that. We shouldn't be satisfied with a system that is just over half-good.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Exactly. Certainly not. Thank you.

Q108 Chair: Just before we finish, I want to bring up another issue for Ms Wyse. The forced marriage unit has been quite popular with schools. Headteachers tell me that they make a call, and action is swift. Often, the issue is picked up through pupils who are friends of the person. The evidence that we have had from Dr Rowland Seymour and Dr Helen McCabe is interesting, in many ways. They highlight that the way the statistics from the unit have been published has changed in 2019, 2021 and 2022, so it is not possible to compare statistics over these years and understand the characteristics that make individuals vulnerable to forced marriage. Do you know why that was?

Rebecca Wyse: Forgive me, Chair, but it is not an area I am briefed on. I am happy to take that away and get an answer to you. I agree that it is an interesting question.

Q109 Chair: We have talked about data a lot today. That is an inconsistency. As I say, this system works in real time to challenge an issue, and it has been quite a success story with this cohort, but the data is important to make sure that prevention is perhaps not just swooping into school on the day a child is about to go on summer holiday.

Rebecca Wyse: We'll come back to you on that.

Chair: As you don't know, we'll leave that one there. I thank our witnesses very much for their time. We will publish the uncorrected transcript—thank you to our colleagues at *Hansard* for that—in the next couple of days on the website. We will produce a report; that is now likely to be after the Christmas break. Thank you very much.



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