



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Children's Social Care](#), HC 430

Tuesday 18 March 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Dr Caroline Johnson, Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sewards.

Questions 431 - 518

Witnesses

I: Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children and Families; and Fran Oram, Portfolio Director, Children's Social Care Reform.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Janet Daby MP and Fran Oram.

Q431 **Chair:** I welcome members and witnesses to this morning's meeting of the Education Select Committee, for the final evidence session in our Committee's inquiry on children's social care. We are pleased to welcome the Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby, and her official, Fran Oram, to give evidence to us this morning. I will first ask the Minister and her official to introduce themselves.

Janet Daby: Thank you, Chair. I am Janet Daby and I am the Minister for Children's Social Care.

Fran Oram: I am Fran Oram and I am Director of Children's Social Care at the Department for Education.

Chair: Thank you very much. I will begin our questioning. You are introducing a number of reforms to the children's social care system through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is being debated in Parliament at the moment. What engagement have you had directly with care-experienced young people when developing the policies in the Bill to make sure that their voices are heard and used directly to inform the changes that you are trying to make?

Janet Daby: We have got to where we are now through the care review. Fran will say more about the processes. A lot of work on the care review was done with the previous Government.



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Since I have been the Minister, I have had multiple engagements with children and care leavers, listening to their views and their wishes, and really making sure that their voices are always being heard. They have included children who are in foster care, who have been adopted and who are care leavers, as well as their foster carers and other carers. Their welfare concerns remain my paramount concern. The engagement has taken place virtually, in person and in different parts of the country. Now I will pass on to Fran.

Fran Oram: As the Minister said, the process that led up to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill started quite a number of years ago. Engagement with children and young people with care experience was an integral part of all the work that has happened in the lead-up to the Bill. In the independent care review led by Josh MacAlister, he had children and young people with care experience as a core part of his team, inputting on all the measures that went into his report.

The previous Administration set up a national implementation board which was chaired by a Minister and had young people with care experience as formal members of that board, as well as other people with lived experience—parents and so on. Since then we have continued that engagement, so we have a children and young people's board that meets every six weeks or so with officials. We bring different elements of the reform agenda to that board to test them and seek input. As the Minister said, on visits around the country and so on, we always make sure that we are meeting and engaging with people with lived experience, so I think that really has run through all of the elements of the reform agenda.

Q432 **Chair:** The number of children in care has risen quite dramatically over the last decade. That has increased the pressure on the system, particularly for the cohort of older children and teenagers entering the care system, whose needs can be quite complex by the time that they enter care. What plans do the Government have to provide more support for early intervention to enable more children to stay with their families and reduce the numbers who are coming into care?

Janet Daby: You are absolutely right, we face many challenges now that we are in government. One of those is that over the last 10 years the number of looked-after children has increased by 22% and has reached 83,630. There are many challenges, which is why the Bill is so crucial in making sure that we look at early intervention and prevention work, making sure that we get that in place to support children to stay with their families or within other family provision, as well as dealing with other issues to reduce that number and to do it properly.

Teenagers and older children who are already with foster care placements continue to need ongoing support and care. They have the LAC review meetings, which are to do with the arrangements and the planning around the child. That looks at the welfare needs of the child, the long-



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term chances of the child for education, their social relationships, their communication, looking at what provision they will go on to.

You will probably be aware that in the Bill itself we are looking at staying close. Staying close is a provision for children in children's homes or other types of places. We already have a provision in place for children in foster care to stay there longer, but staying close is to do with if they are not in foster care provision. If they want those support mechanisms to be able to stay longer in those placements to get the support they need, they can do that. Obviously there are the personal advisers who are in place for care leavers as well.

Q433 Chair: Those are positive measures for children who are already in the care system. My question was really about the early intervention that stops children entering care in the first place. I wanted to ask about two aspects of that. The Bill is strong on family group decision making and, once a child is identified as being in need of intervention to protect them, involving the wider family group and helping children to stay within kinship care and so on. But there has been an erosion over the last 14 years in the early help and support that prevents families from getting into a crisis in the first place. There are no measures in the Bill that deal substantively with that lack of early intervention and support, so I want to ask about that.

The second thing is the cohort of teenagers. We are seeing increasing numbers of teenagers entering the care system because of extrafamilial harm—exploitation, county lines exploitation, those kinds of things—from which their families are unable to keep them safe. Often the outcomes for those teenagers are really terrible: we take them away from the bit of security that they have within their family because their family can't keep them safe, and we put them into a world that has many, many more dangers and vulnerabilities. I want to ask specifically about those two things.

On the early help and support for families that has been eroded, what are the Government's plans to put more of that in place? Secondly, for the cohort of teenagers who are being removed from their families because of threats outside the home, what are the Government doing to prevent the flow of young people into the care system?

Janet Daby: The early intervention work is key to our whole system approach of making fundamental changes to children coming into care. It is very much about making sure that we have the support systems and mechanisms in place early. That will be done through the family hub-type structures and making sure that we have the more joined-up support that is available for young children because of early years, but also for other children who may be coming into the system.

The way the reform is taking place is that we recognise that early help is absolutely needed. We are putting quite a bit of support and funding into



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the early prevention work that needs to take place, so we are legislating for that.

Q434 **Chair:** How are you legislating for that in the Bill? It is not clear to me.

Janet Daby: In making sure that we have got the early help, the intervention, the family, the family hubs, that is part of making sure—

Chair: But that is not in the Bill.

Janet Daby: I will pass on to Fran for a moment to help clarify while I look for some information.

Fran Oram: The family group decision making is in the Bill, which we think is a really important mechanism to ensure that all families at risk of having a child taken into care have a meeting with the broader community and family to help prevent that. That is a key element of the Bill. There is really strong evidence that that will reduce the numbers of children coming into care, including teenagers who are at risk of the extrafamilial harm that the Chair was referring to. The other element alongside the family hubs that the Minister was talking about is the doubling of direct investment in preventative services. That is not in the Bill, as you said, but it is a ringfenced pot of money, so that local authorities have to spend it on that preventative activity.

You are absolutely right. We estimate that over the last 10 years over £900 million of funding has been taken away from preventative activity because it has been needed at the statutory end of the system. We have seen a ballooning of expenditure and activity in the looked-after children system and a real hollowing out, which means that when families are at risk of a teenager going into care, perhaps through risk of being exploited in a gang or whatever, the support services to prevent that from happening are not there. That is what our reforms are seeking to address.

Janet Daby: The reforms are also seeking to further family group decision making, to look at other provisions for children, making sure that you know the support is there for the family. That is looking at provisional kinship care as well and where interventions are needed to support the families through that.

Q435 **Chair:** Thank you. We heard in our evidence session on the Bill some concerns about the risk of perpetrators of domestic abuse being involved in family group decision making, recognising those individuals can often be quite manipulative. There can often be really distressing power dynamics within families in those circumstances. Do you believe that the proposals set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill contain adequate safeguards against that risk?

Janet Daby: There is guidance for local authorities around family group decision making. There will also be training for professionals in how that is carried out and that information will be available and present. It is very



important that that family group decision making is a safe place for the families and around the decisions that are made for the child or the children. It is very important that the community of that conversation is reducing elements of significant harm and risk. I think that there are provisions there that will endeavour to make sure that that is a safe conversation.

Members will know that I have previously been a children and family social worker. In my days, which was quite a while ago, when I held family meetings, there was a level of—well, it is an entire process where it needs to have consent from the family itself as to who needs to be engaged and be part of those meetings. To deal with potential conflicts or where there is domestic abuse or violence or threats from abuse between the relationships with the parents, that needs to be done in a sensitive way, but it is not that these things can't be managed. The guidance is there to help manage those conversations and that is very key.

Q436 Chair: Will you take forward the recommendation in our report to the Government on the Bill that local authorities should take advice from specialist domestic abuse charities when considering family group decision making? Recognising that there is obviously a degree of professional training across all of those working in local authorities, but understanding domestic abuse in detail and the characteristics of it is a specialist area, and additional training and expertise might be required in those circumstances.

Janet Daby: You are absolutely right about the additional expertise. You need to have the right people in the room who have the right expertise, knowledge and experience of how to deal with these types of complex situations, which can be very scary and very frightening. I think it is absolutely right to make sure that the right professionals are there, are prevalent and those conversations and discussions take place. I am happy to have a look at it and review it.

Q437 Amanda Martin: I am going to ask about out of area placement. In research and in real life, we have evidence from Become that this puts children greater risk. Some 45% of looked-after children are placed outside their local authority, with 22% placed more than 20 miles from their home. Become, which has done some research, found that they are at greater risk of low wellbeing and emotional difficulties, of disappearing from their core provider, and of sexual and criminal exploitation. One care-experienced person described experiencing racism for the first time when she was placed in an area that was very different from the demographic of her actual home. Another had to get up at 4 am to get to school. What is the Department doing to address this?

Janet Daby: Thank you very much for your question. We need to keep children as near to their local areas as possible; within 20 miles is absolutely our aim, which you have quite rightly mentioned. There is a small number, but there will be some cases, where it is in the child's interest to be placed outside that 20-mile area; that could be due to



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exploitation or gangs or just making sure that we are keeping them safe. But on the whole, as you have quite rightly pointed out, we have seen a huge increase. You have mentioned the experiences of the young people. I too met with Become and met with some young people, probably the same campaign group actually, because I remember the experience that you described.

We have a problem with the location of placements, and local authorities have really struggled to place children in foster provision or in children's homes provision within their area. We have a real capacity issue that, as a Government, we recognise we need to work on. We need to work on building our capacity with foster carers, within children's homes and so on. We recognise we need to do a big recruitment drive and we are looking at fostering hubs, local authorities working more together to look at recruitment, all the way through to retaining foster carers. As we build capacity, we absolutely recognise that there will be more flexibility to give children and social workers the choices they need, but we also need to build capacity with our children's homes. We do have some capital money to be able to build homes as well.

Placing children outside of the 20 miles should not be happening. We recognise how serious this is. We recognise how it affects their mental health, their wellbeing, their education, their communications, their socialising, and how this can be quite frightening for them. It is awful to hear about racism or discrimination or any such experience. We are fully aware of this and have an agenda to tackle it. We want to do it and we are committed to it.

Fran Oram: To add a couple of points. Alongside the boosting of the supply, which the Minister has referred to, a core part of the strategy to reform children's social care is to reduce the number of children coming into care in the first place. There is a supply and a demand issue, and the strategy through the Bill and the investment is acting on both of those points. We especially see that often the children who are placed further from home are the children who perhaps have more complex need, so they are really in a crisis, and the local authority is not well placed and does not succeed in commissioning an adequate placement for them that is closer to home. That is why our capital investment that the Minister referred to is particularly focused on trying to secure placements for those children. That is in the secure children's home system, where there are acute shortages geographically. Again, the Minister talked about the location of these placements not being helpful.

There is a real lack in London and the West Midlands and we are looking to build new secure children's homes in both those locations. Also children who perhaps will not ever get into a secure children's home placement often end up in bespoke spot-purchased placements at great cost that are often also far from home. Again, we have capital investment seeking to deliver a new type of provision for them that is in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill as well.



Q438 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you. That leads me quite nicely on to two other questions. First, you both mentioned various initiatives—boosting supply, reducing in-care, bespoke placements and so on. Do you think we need a national sufficiency strategy for children in social care?

Janet Daby: We need to make sure that what we are doing delivers, basically. We have regional co-operatives, where there will be a regional way of working to be able to assess and analyse what is happening around the whole recruitment of foster carers—where we need to recruit foster carers, where we need to do our advertising. It will look at a data analysis and the types of complexities around children's situations to make sure that we are able to identify where those placements and homes are needed, as well as making sure that we have value for money. Where local authorities are really pressed for spot purchases and having to pay exorbitant costs, it will look at some bulk purchases of children's homes or of placements.

It is about making sure that all of our strategies come together, they tie up and they absolutely deliver. We are committed to that because we recognise that children need good quality homes, and we need to make sure they are getting the best care and provision that we can provide. At the moment we are not doing very well and we need to do much better.

Q439 **Amanda Martin:** You said you have met with children in the system and with different research companies. Do you intend to start collecting data on the proportion of children who are placed out of area?

Janet Daby: There are data that we need to do better and that is recognised. I have been raising that since being in Government for data to do with protected characteristics and so on. That absolutely needs to be done better. There is a challenge in data collection for local authorities—not all of them, but some. There are some local authorities that are looking at different ways of collecting data. I have been able to meet with those local authorities to look at their initiatives and the ways they are doing it, looking at how they can share best practice and how they can improve and move forward.

It very much is an area that needs more of a focus. As we move forward with these reforms and reforms requirements, I believe these systems will be better put in place to make sure that the data that is needed is collected.

Q440 **Amanda Martin:** From that point of view it is good to share good practice, but if we are collecting data in different ways, it will not be comparable, will it? That was what the question was. If we, as a Government, are collecting that data, looking at what the issues are of different local authorities and then using best practice, it would mean that we would have a national set of data as opposed to sets from each local authority, which are then not really comparable.

Janet Daby: Yes. You are absolutely right, which is why it needs a level of focus so that it is comparable.



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Q441 **Chair:** I want to ask specifically about the cohort of young people who are placed out of area because the decision has been taken that it is in their own interests for that to happen. Do the Government plan to collect data specifically on that cohort? I think there is obviously a set of judgments that apply in individual cases on why it is considered to be in a child's best interests and there might be a difference, for example, between it being in their immediate best interest to move them to a place of safety and in their wider best interests to sever all connections with family and friends.

We had a very distressing case in my constituency, for example, of somebody who was placed out of area in exactly that way, who then returned to the area and committed a very serious crime against another young person. There is a question about that and it is not clear that the Government's data collection is adequate at present.

Janet Daby: I will pass on to Fran, but before I do I just want to say that when children are placed out of borough, and if they have been moved back in, there needs to be a period of how that will work and the whole reunification.

Q442 **Chair:** The case I was talking about was somebody who just returned of their own volition from their out of area placement. They came back to the area and it did not serve the purpose of keeping them safe. That was the intention but that was not what happened in practice.

Fran Oram: Thank you. We have data on out of area placements. I have a pretty detailed table here that breaks down the types of placements. The question might have alluded to the fact that the proportion of children placed out of area has increased. My data suggests that it was 17% over 20 miles from home in 2014, and 22% in 2024, so it is going in the wrong direction. We also have data on which placements those are, whether they are foster placements. I think placed for adoption is a different thing, so if you are being adopted and starting a new life with a new family that is less of a concern probably to be moving community than if you are in a short-term placement, as the Chair was alluding to there.

I feel as if it is quite complex to really understand the specific context of an individual child and what might be in a short-term emergency best interests versus a long-term new start-type move. I am not sure if data is always the best way of getting under the skin of that and understanding that. The Department monitors out of area placements and, as the Minister said very strongly, we really are concerned about it and that is why the whole strategic direction is seeking to reduce this. I don't think the data is the problem. Too many children in care and not enough placements are the two problems and we are acting very strongly on both of those things.

Q443 **Darren Paffey:** Good morning, Minister. From both our side and your side we have referenced the very important independent review of



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children's social care that was done. One of the conclusions of that was that an additional £2.6 billion needed to be spent over a four-year period to get the outcomes that it was recommending. Do you agree with the conclusion of the report?

Janet Daby: Thank you for raising that. In the autumn Budget, we have seen a real commitment from the Government to the reforms in children's social care. It is going in the right direction and there are some real big step changes with the kinship allowance, family help and child protection. There are some big movers here for moving forward. It does need investment for the changes to happen. We need to make sure that we are doing the preventative early intervention work to reduce the number of children coming into care, but we also need to deal with bringing down the number of children coming into care and deal with profiteering.

It will continue to take a level of investment. We have other spending reviews coming up as well, but the Government are committed to reforming children's social care. We know that we need to do it for the welfare of the child, but we also need to do it because of the impact the profiteering is having on local authorities. We think we are moving in the right direction.

The other thing to say is that there is enough money in the system to do with children's social care; it is just how that funding and that money is being spent. Placements will vary for children but for high-end placements in private foster home or a private children's home, it could be £10,000 a week, up to £63,000 a week. There are huge rates of finances being spent. If we can bring that down, which is our absolute intention—we have to do that and we will do that by the measures that we are taking,—as we bring that back down and as we invest at the same time in children's social care, we should start to see a levelling out.

Q444 **Darren Paffey:** Thank you. I recognise and very much welcome the additional money that has been promised. For clarity, you are saying that we are moving in the right direction. Are you moving specifically towards a £2.6 billion spend on the things that the review recommended or are you saying, if I have understood rightly, that you intend to change what things money is being spent on to ensure that you are able to spend that money on the things that are more expensive and reactive? For clarity, are we moving in the right direction towards £2.6 billion or are we moving in the direction towards an otherwise undefined amount of money at the moment?

Janet Daby: The other thing in response is that we are in a very difficult fiscal financial position as a Government. We are seeing investment from the Government towards children's social care, the reform work that is taking place, but it is difficult to predict how Treasury will continue to fund and support this. We know there is an absolutely strong will to do that from this Government. I am just going to pass to Fran as well.



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Q445 **Chair:** Before we do that, can I ask both of you, and particularly you, Minister, what is your assessment, as the Minister responsible for this area, of policy for delivering for children on the amount of additional money that is needed, compared to the amount of money that you might be able to claw back by spending existing expenditure more effectively? There is obviously a pressure about the wider fiscal situation but, within that, what is your assessment of what is necessary to do this job to the level that is required?

Janet Daby: From my perspective on all of this, what is really necessary is making sure that we reach those families early on, that they get the support that they need and that the finance is there to deliver that. They need the family help, the family hubs, that intervention. Those areas do need to be rolled out and they need to be stronger and further, as well as the support for kinship carers, which is why we are doing the pilot to see how that works. That funding is quite crucial because that is very much part of the alternative to coming into care but also it is what is best for the child, to remain within their networks.

Q446 **Chair:** But you must have an overall assessment, having had eight months to look at everything that is going on within this area of policy, of where we are at relative to where we need to be and the quantum of money that you will need for the Department to be able to get there. I would be grateful for a bit more detail on that analysis.

Janet Daby: Obviously lots of those discussions are taking place. They are spending review negotiations and conversations and they are not necessarily an area that I can share in this Select Committee meeting. But as things go forward absolutely, yes, we will be able to share the outcomes of those negotiation conversations.

Fran Oram: Can I come in on the question about the care review in particular? I was working in this role at that point. The first thing to say is that quite a lot of time has passed since Josh MacAlister's calculation of £2.6 billion. As the Minister says, we are updating our assessment of the funding need and we will have new figures that we will be able to share post the spending review. We have doubled direct investment in preventative services to over £500 million starting from next month for 2025-26. That is really significant investment in preventative activity to keep families together.

Strategically what the reforms are intending to do is to flip the profile of spend. This is what the Minister was referring to before about the quantum of funding in the children's social care system post reform is probably about the right quantum but it is being spent on the wrong things. As the MacAlister review articulated very strongly, there needs to be a period of double running then. You cannot turn off the acute activity because those families and children are in crisis and they need that support to continue until they can de-escalate or go back home or whatever the outcome is or they become a care leaver. For a period you need that double running, but the preventative activity should



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significantly reduce the number of children coming into care so that over time you can change the way the graphs look at the moment, which is completely skewed.

Q447 Darren Paffey: That is true. I have been responsible for doing that in local government and you are absolutely right that you cannot stop reacting while you are embedding the foundations of preventative work. Is it your view that the Treasury is hearing that? That double running period will have to go and therefore we need to ensure that they get that it is not simply about just reducing it now, because that just will not happen, that is just plain evidence. Is it your view that the DFE is sufficiently making those representations to Treasury as part of the comprehensive spending review?

Janet Daby: I absolutely feel that the Treasury is hearing and listening to do with children's social care reform.

Fran Oram: Alongside the Department for Education advocating strongly for this, I want to refer to the fact that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is similarly advocating for investment in children's social care because it is a shared issue essentially. It is causing major financial difficulties for local government, so it is a shared whole of government agenda.

Q448 Darren Paffey: We will have detail on the result of those discussions when, roughly?

Janet Daby: Obviously we have a spending review process coming up but I should think June.

Darren Paffey: June, okay.

Chair: I will bring Jess in for a short supplemental and then come back to you.

Q449 Jess Asato: Any increase in preventative funding is very much appreciated, but the MacAlister review is now a number of years old. If anything, the estimates of the £2.6 billion will have increased, not least because the number of children in care at crisis has been increasing during that time and the number of children coming into the care system has been increasing. At the same time, there has not been a universal rollout of family hubs, so the universality of preventative work is not in place. It is quite difficult to understand how you can replace the incoming flow into the care system without a very significant amount of investment in prevention, which is why, quite rightly, you say that there needs to be double running.

It feels as though that independent review, which is incredibly expansive, came out with quite a big figure but one that most people recognise is what was needed, now seems to have just completely disappeared and somehow we can use the money that is currently in the system to do double running, early intervention and look after children in crisis. None of that seems to add up to me.



Janet Daby: No, to clarify, I am not saying there is enough money in the system to do all of that now. Not at all, no. My point is that as we do the reform work that is taking place, we should begin to see the profiteering come down, because we are building our foster care base, our children's home base, our secure home base. We are working with families early on through family group decision making and we are widening our kinship involvement with families, making sure that we get in early to look at ways in which we can prevent children from coming into care but staying in safe havens.

There will be a time where both of these spends, which is now taking place, are absolutely needed. We feel that we are going in the right direction with this and Treasury listening to where the investment is absolutely needed.

Q450 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have a supplementary to that question. You have been talking about other Departments, in particular MHCLG. I wanted to ask you a question about Health. I am a children's doctor, as you may know, and I—and I know many of my colleagues—find it frustrating how frequently Health is not listened to in the context of child protection. What are you doing in your Department and what work have you been doing with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that Health is not excluded from the various strategy and other meetings relating to children's wellbeing, and that health professionals are not ignored by social care when they raise concerns?

Janet Daby: Health is a crucial part of children's social care and works closely with the Department for Education. It is a huge part of the working relationship and very much for corporate parenting. It already has a significant role to play in children's social care and that was put in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Going forward, Health will continue to be part of the corporate parenting.

We recognise that we need more provision for children with CAMHS support, health visitors, midwives, because of the shortage of staff and the crisis there, but Health are around the table in children's LAC reviews and child protection, and they continue to be absolutely significant. I do not think we could ensure that we are caring for a child within children's social care if Health is not there and participating as it should.

Q451 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** But, Minister, it is often not. It is not uncommon for a strategy meeting to be called without the medical professionals being given due time and awareness of when that meeting is. It is not uncommon for social care to have concerns raised about child protection by doctors and nurses and then to not be properly listened to. What are you going to do to make sure that the ideal that you describe is the reality of the experience?

Janet Daby: The areas that you suggested and what you said are things we need to strengthen. I am happy to go away, have a look at that and to see what is happening in those areas.



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Q452 **Darren Paffey:** On both outcomes and the cost of achieving those outcomes, you have mentioned the measures that are taking place to reform the social care market. You mentioned bringing down profiteering and so on, and other measures. How are you going to be monitoring and reviewing that and making sure that the impact we need to see actually happens after the Act comes into force?

Janet Daby: I will pass that one to you, Fran.

Fran Oram: A range of different provisions in the Bill will come into force at different points and we will monitor implementation of them. There is obviously a need for investment, as the Committee has been asking about too. There is a question of the combined impact of the legislative change and the investment, and the Government will decide how they would like to report to the Committee and the House, inform the public, the children and young people and put into the reforms so far. We will keep implementation under active review.

Q453 **Darren Paffey:** That is how you will report. How are you going to monitor it? I accept that it will be phased, but what resource will go into that? What will you be asking from partners to help you come to the conclusion that these measures are working successfully or not?

Fran Oram: I mentioned the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government earlier and we are working with them on their local government outcomes framework. The intention is for more funding for local government to be pooled into larger pots that give more local discretion for what they are spent on. We have just removed the payment by results requirements alongside supporting of families. The point is for local authorities to employ more people doing the doing and helping families rather than the auditing, reporting back, small applications for individual grants and so on. Alongside that, clearly there is a need to collect the right data to be able to assure ourselves that the money is being spent on the right things and on the right evidence-based activities so that we get the return on investment that has secured the investment to begin with.

We set out, towards the end of the last Government, a new outcomes framework, the National Framework for Children's Social Care, that sets the strategic direction for the system. We will be collecting data under that and as part of the local government outcomes framework so that we can really hold the system to account and assess whether any further reforms or interventions are needed to ensure that we are getting best value for money.

Q454 **Darren Paffey:** Have you yet decided what those things are, what data you will need at what point?

Fran Oram: That is in development and it is obviously part of the broader missions approach of Government that is continuing to evolve.

Q455 **Darren Paffey:** When do you expect to be able to give the first update



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on the impact? When do you expect there to be something at least substantive enough to comment on and give some initial findings?

Fran Oram: I think it would be post spending review, but we would be happy to come back to the Committee with a date.

Janet Daby: Yes, let us take that away and then come back. Obviously we are very much focused on the reform itself and how that works with the local authorities and embedding that. You are absolutely right on asking the question on monitoring, evaluating and data. Let's take that away and then come back to you.

Q456 **Darren Paffey:** On one of the specifics of the reform around regional care co-operatives, what evidence have you seen so far from the current pilots that these are a successful measure?

Janet Daby: The pilots have a really strong evidence base. I visited York and Wolverhampton local authorities and I was really excited to see a lot of the development that had taken place in those two areas. Especially in York where they did not have any agency social workers, which was quite outstanding, and they were really moving forward with what they offer care leavers, it was extremely impressive.

In Wolverhampton it was great with the family hubs and how they have expanded and developed that. They have been very innovative in the way in which they were working with families. There was something about the way in which the regions work—they are working closely together—which was very rewarding to see. I will let Fran tell you a bit more about how those regional care co-operatives are working.

Fran Oram: As the Minister says, we have significant different elements of reform as part of the overall strategic direction. There are two pilots for the regional care co-operatives, one in Greater Manchester and one in the south-east region. We do not have evidence from those yet. The evidence that we have on innovative working, the fostering hubs and so on is looking very promising.

The regional commissioning footprint is very much at the early stages of agreeing how they will work together and how that will solve the problems of poor commissioning, poor outcomes and poor value for money. We have commissioned an evaluation partner to assess how that is working over a five-year period. We will be looking at the results of that in determining how to implement the provision in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which obviously allows the Secretary of State to direct local authorities to work together on a regional footprint. We will be watching how the pathfinders go before we look to use that power.

Q457 **Darren Paffey:** There are clear benefits coming through and we look forward to seeing more evidence of those. Are you alive to some of the challenges around how you define the region? Some of the evidence that the Committee's heard took a supposedly sensible region but then noted that actually parts of it would work with its northern neighbours, some



more with its western neighbours, and the demographics that they were dealing with were quite different. Are you alive to those challenges and how do you intend to ensure that the defined regions get the benefits that you are seeking from the RCCs?

Janet Daby: It is very important that the regions work as effectively as possible because of what they are driving forward. The Department is working with the local authorities. Officers are having those conversations and that communication with the regions to analyse and evaluate how best the regions can be put together and how they function well together. We encourage the authorities within those regions to have conversations themselves as well about how this is working and will work.

Q458 **Chair:** To drill down a tiny bit on that point, the specific example that we heard from was Kent, where the regional care co-operative covers Kent and then south-east England, including as far as Hampshire. Parts of Kent relate very directly to London and there is a significant challenge around the number of out of area placements from London local authorities going into Kent. They were raising some concerns about how you get to a sensible geography. I think that is a problem that you are likely to find replicated in many parts of the country, just because of the very nature of drawing boundaries. We want to know a bit more about what your process is for reconciling some of those challenges.

Fran Oram: We have worked very closely with Kent over recent years, particularly on their challenges of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and some of the real difficulties that they have in providing placements for them, and participating in the national transfer scheme to disperse asylum-seeking children around the country. We know some of the challenges that Kent face with placement capacity.

I guess the challenge with brokering a regional footprint is that you have to draw a line somewhere. I think for Kent to be part of a London footprint probably wouldn't work either. There are risks and disbenefits of almost any footprint you could come up with. It is about how we and the regional care co-operative themselves navigate some of those challenges and gaps. Some of that is about relationships and partnership working that goes beyond the scope of the RCC.

The Department has deliberately chosen two very different regional footprints to test this: the very urban and well-established relationships of Greater Manchester versus a really broad geography in the south-east with a lot of counties and so on. We will be watching those and seeing how they work and what tweaks might be needed in rolling it out more widely. We will be particularly thinking about the Kent example in that.

Q459 **Amanda Martin:** The Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to introduce a profit cap on non-local authority providers if the other measures have not had an impact. How and when will you assess whether this is necessary?



Janet Daby: It is a very key point. We want the IFAs and the private children's homes to take heed and to respond appropriately, as we feel they should, because the profiteering beggars belief, with 20%, sometimes 30%. We can call in these private organisations to be transparent with their accounts and we are developing and building a scheme in the Department to be able to scrutinise and analyse what is happening in the IFAs and private companies. If there is a situation where they are not responding, not being appropriate, the Secretary of State has already determined she will take a strong line on not accepting this and, therefore, putting in a profit cap.

Q460 **Amanda Martin:** There is a scheme being drawn up so that it is a fair process, because what we would not want one provider—

Janet Daby: Absolutely. In saying that, I also want to acknowledge that many IFAs and private children's homes do good work and provide care for children, and good quality care, but we will not tolerate the profiteering that is taking place. Yes, absolutely a fair and transparent process.

Q461 **Amanda Martin:** There have been concerns around the implementation of a profit cap in restricting the supply of children's homes. How will we mitigate the risk of implementing the profit cap, including the risk of restricting the supply of homes, places and the possibility of larger companies being able to avoid a cap?

Janet Daby: We recognise that there may be some ways in which some companies will try to—I am trying to think of the right word—hide or avoid, so that they don't incur a profit cap or come under it. We are analysing all of this and looking at how we make sure that everything is transparent, open and not hidden really.

As I have already said, we will act in a way in which we will do everything we can to identify where there are issues to make sure that we put on that cap, but at the same time we don't want to scare the market. We want places to still be available and on offer for children and for the provision to be maintained and to a very high standard.

Q462 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you. Transparency and fairness have been really key in your answers there, but introducing a profit cap by regulation would reduce the detailed parliamentary scrutiny of the proposals. Will you commit to consulting this Committee on any draft regulations before they are laid before Parliament?

Janet Daby: As we work on this and are building the capacity ourselves and firming up our lines of review, I am happy to share that with this Committee. Thank you.

Q463 **Manuela Perteghella:** Thank you, Minister. We have heard that there is a crisis in recruitment and retention of foster carers because of the inadequacy of financial support and lack of value and respect for the role. Will you increase the financial support available to foster carers to help



them stay in the role?

Janet Daby: Foster carers are like gold dust. They absolutely do a great job with caring for children, bringing children into their life and into their home. We absolutely value the experience, the care, the love that foster carers provide to children. I believe that foster carers rates were increased above inflation in the last increase and we will continue to make sure that they are valued and supported. We recognise the need to support them financially, which is why there is a foster care payment and foster care allowance as well.

Fran Oram: To add the data there, for 2024-25 the national minimum allowance increased by 6.88%, so that is above inflation. There were also tax and benefit allowance changes that we estimate will give the average foster carer an additional £450 per year, as well as simplifying the process for self-assessment for foster carers. But, as the Minister said, we are especially keen to have people come into fostering because they want to care for children rather than for a financial benefit. They need to be appropriately remunerated so that they can do that role effectively but it is not all about pay. The evidence suggests that that is not the predominant cause of shortages of foster carers.

Q464 **Manuela Perteghella:** Thank you. Will you introduce a national fostering strategy alongside the strategies on adoption and kinship care to show how the role is valued and fundamental to a social care system?

Janet Daby: We absolutely value foster carers and we absolutely feel that foster carers have the support from the local authorities and have the support and encouragement from Government as well. It is a space where we recognise that we need to do more and we are always reviewing it as well.

On rolling out the fostering hubs, we recognise that we need to recruit more foster carers but also retain them. We need to make sure that that support continues to be of really good quality. Foster carers already do receive some excellent support with support groups, training and ongoing supervision from their fostering social workers. Having a national strategy is something that we can keep reviewing.

Q465 **Manuela Perteghella:** Thank you. We heard evidence from young people who came to speak to us about the profound and often negative impact of being separated from their siblings in foster care. How will you improve support to allow siblings to remain in contact?

Janet Daby: Sibling contact is extremely important and it should already be that way for local authorities when they are placing children. Siblings should always be placed together, basically, and local authorities have the responsibility to place siblings together unless there is a significant reason why that should not happen.

I recognise that they are sometimes placed in separate placements, so contact needs to be protected and it needs to happen. I also recognise



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that sometimes the contact is more focused on the child having contact with their parent or parents rather than sibling contact. I am aware of that and it needs to happen with local authorities. It makes it more difficult and more challenging especially where the children are placed outside of the 20 miles, but we as a Government are determined to build capacity and for children to be placed within the 20 miles.

On the analysis that needs to take place to do with our regional care co-operatives, the analysis will be around building the foster care base so that foster carers are able to take more sibling placements. It is absolutely crucial that siblings remain in contact with each other and that that contact is encouraged and does take place. That is also when they are placed in children's homes.

Q466 **Chair:** Do you have data on the extent of sibling separation in foster placements?

Janet Daby: No, we don't have data on that but it is a good thing to raise and it is something that we can gain from local authorities, because that is quite crucial.

Q467 **Chair:** You are not going to fix the problem if you don't understand the extent of it and the reasons why it is happening.

Janet Daby: Absolutely, yes.

Q468 **Chair:** The other thing that I will add on sibling placements is that obviously we are in a housing crisis at the moment and the lack of space in foster care homes of an adequate size for children to be placed in sibling groups, particularly for larger sibling groups, is one of the constraints in the system. I am interested in the extent to which you are working with MHCLG around housing policy for foster carers to make sure that—it is good to hear you say, Minister, that children should be placed in sibling groups but the reality and the evidence that we have heard is that that is not happening to the extent that it should be and that it is profoundly harmful for children. The lack of data on this—we can't just say we want it to happen without looking in detail at what the specific fixes might be to enable it to happen more.

Janet Daby: It is a huge concern and it is good that you have raised it. It needs attention. We have cross-departmental ministerial meetings. It has already come up to do with the size of people's homes, temporary accommodation and so on. Also I think there are some priorities for local authorities to do with foster carers needing to extend their homes. I will pass on to Fran in a moment just to make sure I have got that information absolutely right.

There was a scheme that was piloted around some local authorities, where they would extend foster carers' homes to enable more children to be placed or siblings to be placed. There are things that we can look at and work on, but I absolutely agree that we need to start with collecting



the data so we understand the issue and the problem. I will pass on to Fran.

Fran Oram: Thank you. I heard the testimony of, I think it was, Lamar talking about being separated from her siblings and the long-standing impact of that on her relationships. That is incredibly distressing. The first thing to say is that helping families to stay together is the best way to help children to maintain their sibling relationships. The provision in the Bill around family group decision making and harnessing the strengths and the opportunities within the broader family group can hopefully ensure that fewer children are taken away from their immediate family and lose that natural sibling relationship.

Investment in that from the Government and then in the kinship allowance that we are piloting, and just enabling more families to keep their children together I think is the best way that we can help support sibling relationships. When children go into care, as the Minister said, sometimes placements should prioritise keeping sibling groups together but we know that all too often that is difficult.

The scheme that the Minister was referring to is called Room Makers, which allows local authorities to fund some housing extensions so that a foster care family can take a bigger sibling group than they might otherwise be able to. We are interested in pursuing that further and the fostering hubs that the Minister has talked about help to provide support to foster care families who might take a large group of children but that might be quite a challenging thing for them to do.

On the data, as the Minister said, we will have to look at it because, again, data can be very helpful but there is such a variety of different situations applying to all of the different families that I do not think it is immediately obvious what that data would be. We would have to be careful not to overburden the system with trying to count things that are quite individualised, but I think we should certainly look at it, because you are right that having visibility of it is the first point in trying to work to address it.

Q469 **Amanda Martin:** I get to talk about another fantastic group of people, which is kinship carers. It is mentioned a number of times and it is something really close to my own heart, because there is a great set of people in my city working with children in kinship care. First is just a straight question: when will the kinship allowance pilot be rolled out and who will be eligible?

Janet Daby: Thank you for the question. I also acknowledge the great work that kinship carers are doing and they are very good at coming together to support each other as well. The Department offers the peer-to-peer support and some mentoring support as well through family rights groups.¹ The Department has been working on the pilot and

¹ The Minister later [wrote to us](#) clarifying that this support is delivered through the



looking at the eligibility of it, how it would be rolled out, how we would make the decision on which local authority to run it in. There is £40 million and it is to be set across 10 local authorities. Our focus will be on an expression of interest. We are looking to roll this out towards the autumn term. As soon as we have more information and more detail we will absolutely make that known.

Q470 Amanda Martin: An additional question linked to that: we have heard calls to harmonise the patchwork of educational support so that support such as pupil premium plus and priority admissions is available to children in all types of kinship care. Will the Department be looking to do this?

Janet Daby: We are looking at other areas and other ways in which we can support kinship carers, absolutely. We are looking at the adoption and special guardianship funding to enable kinship children to be able to benefit from that, as well as the virtual school head. I am just going to pass on to Fran in case I have missed anything.

Fran Oram: The only thing you have not mentioned is the new kinship ambassador. I do not know if you want to talk about that.

Janet Daby: Sure. I am not sure if you are aware of the new kinship ambassador. We have a new kinship ambassador called Jahnine Davis. She is there to focus on the policies with us around kinship care. She will also be working with local authorities and kinship carers, making sure that there is consistency across local authorities, identifying where there are any policy gaps or areas. She is an ambassador to advocate for kinship carers. She has already been meeting with the kinship organisations, kinship carers, from many parts of the country, and started identifying where she feels that the Government need to focus.

Q471 Amanda Martin: How do we feed into her work?

Janet Daby: As a Select Committee?

Amanda Martin: Yes.

Janet Daby: You could invite her to come and speak to you. I am sure she delighted to do that and she will be able to speak about the work that she is doing, the areas that she is focused on and how she is working with Government as well.

Q472 Amanda Martin: Brilliant, thank you. One final one from me. The Employment Rights Bill does not include any measures to strengthen employment rights for kinship carers, such as paid kinship leave. Why is this? Do you intend to introduce this in the future?

Janet Daby: We have kinship leave within the Department for Education. This is an area that we think is quite crucial. We are looking at and focusing on it and I am sure Fran can say a bit more about it.



Fran Oram: As the Minister said, the Department for Education has recently introduced kinship leave. A number of private sector employers that the Committee may be aware also offer kinship leave—Card Factory, Tesco, John Lewis. We think this is an important way of signalling an employer’s support for kinship carers, who obviously do an absolutely crucial role in supporting children and keeping them within their broader family networks.

One other thing I want to mention is the provision in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, that I am sure the Committee has seen, around a kinship local offer, which won’t harmonise at a national level but will allow kinship carers to see very easily what support is on offer in their local area. We think that is an important step forward.

Q473 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** What kinship care provision have you made in a number of days or weeks? What is the cost of that to the Department? What is the estimate you have of the cost of that to the country if it was rolled out across all employers?

Fran Oram: We can write to you with the exact calculation that went into that, but it was agreed to by the executive committee, the board of the Department. Essentially we have 7,500 people employed in the Department for Education. I do not have the numbers to hand but we have calculated how many of those are likely to be kinship carers and it was deemed an affordable sum to offer kinship leave to our employees.

Janet Daby: People becoming kinship carers will be a very minimal number of people when you think about their employment and would have a very small impact on an organisation or employers. However, we recognise that kinship leave is very important.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I suppose it depends on the size of the organisation that you are looking at, the amount you are expecting people to give and the demographic of the people you employ. I would be interested if you could write to the Committee with your understanding of that.

Q474 **Chair:** If kinship leave is a real benefit for kinship carers, and I agree that it is, and if it is possible to do it in an organisation like the Department for Education and other private sector employers, why have the Government chosen not to legislate so that all kinship carers have the benefit of it?

Janet Daby: I think we are at the first step. We started within the Department with what we are trying to do and have begun to do. Where I feel we have made a big splash with kinship carers is that we will carry on reviewing and looking at what more needs to be done in this space to support kinship carers.

Q475 **Manuela Perteghella:** Minister, the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill does not contain any measures relating to adoption. This is despite evidence highlighting problems, including a shortage of adopters, lack of



support for adopted children at school, difficulties accessing funding, long waiting lists for children to be adopted, especially children in sibling groups and those with special needs. Was this a missed opportunity?

Janet Daby: We have come into Government and we have inherited this situation that you have outlined, where there are areas of focus and areas of need. I believe that these areas can be addressed. I have met with Adoption England. We fund Adoption England as well. It recognises the areas we have suggested where it needs to act and respond. That is on the prospective adopters recruiting and how we can recruit more prospective adopters, how we can do that to make sure that we recruit prospective adopters that could take a sibling group and also children from diverse backgrounds, which you have mentioned. It recognises that and has a Black Adoption project as well.

I met with them and I spoke at their event. It is an area that is close to my heart. I recognise that more needs to be done in this space and I am determined that it absolutely does happen. I also recognise where there needs to be more done within the schools and where that support needs to happen. I will let Fran come in and say a few words.

Fran Oram: We recognise some of the challenges with accessing support through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund that you alluded to there, but that is approximately £50 million per annum fund that offers therapy and support to adoptive families. It is a really significant financial investment from Government that offers some brilliant therapy and helps those children to do well.

I am not sure what the legislative gap is. As the Minister referred to, we know that certain groups wait longer to be adopted and that is problematic but I don't think there is a legislative answer to that. It is about outreach and reaching people who could be successful adoptive families. I do not think legislation would solve that. If the Committee has a legislative gap that it is looking at, we would be happy to look at that.

Q476 **Manuela Perteghella:** There is uncertainty around the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund at the moment, which is causing a lot of distress to adopters and their families. Can you give reassurances to these families that you will continue with that?

Janet Daby: I am aware of the uncertainty and the insecurity that that is causing, because obviously the announcement has not been made. The announcement will be made very soon about the adoption and special guardianship funding. As soon as that information is available, it will be made known. I absolutely understand, I hear, I do get it and I am hearing from organisations as well around this. I am doing everything I can to push this forward.

Q477 **Manuela Perteghella:** We also heard evidence that adoptive children do not always receive the support they need at school. Will you review the educational support available to adopted children throughout, so from



early years throughout their educational journey, and improve the support when needed?

Janet Daby: I have met with a few adoption organisations and the issue around support in school often comes up because of the early years trauma and teachers needing to recognise this and to make sure that the understanding is there for the children in school. I am already looking at this as an area to see what more we can do, where we need to offer support to the school and also to ensure that the child gets the relevant support they need. Obviously, the adoption and special guardianship funding is used to support them. It could be used to support them in school or outside of school but there is also the pupil premium plus that could be used in school. That would need to be made known so that it can be used. There is more that needs to be done in this space and I recognise that completely.

Q478 **Darren Paffey:** Minister, in the autumn Budget, the Government committed £90 million to renovating and expanding the children's home estates. That is a welcome investment but, particularly on the expansion, how many new places are you expecting that money to buy? You will need to staff those. How will you ensure that there are sufficient staff to look after the children in those homes?

Janet Daby: It is a very good question. We recognise we need to build more and we are encouraging local authorities to do that, to identify spaces and places for open children's homes. We are looking at 200 and it would be the local authorities that would identify the areas and make that known to the Department. They will be managing those homes. It will be their decision how they manage those homes and how they continue to facilitate them and to provide that service.

On secure placements, we recognise that if it is, for example, a child in London, we do not have any secure children's homes in London so already it is not appropriate. We need secure homes in London as well. We are looking to build secure homes in London and in other regions, and we are looking for, if my memory serves me correctly, 180 secure homes.

Darren Paffey: It is 200 general homes and 180 homes.

Janet Daby: Yes.

Q479 **Darren Paffey:** Obviously the demand will differ from region to region but overall, do you have data yet from the local authorities as to what their pressures are and how many places they need those 200 homes to provide?

Janet Daby: The local authorities are very energised generally around this because they recognise that they need children's homes and children's provisions. They are working with the Department on that. We have had many local authorities that have already started to put forward their ideas and their bids and ways in which they can be innovative in



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their local areas. I will pass to Fran to give some more detail about the work with the Department and the local authorities.

Fran Oram: I want to clarify that it is 200 places rather than 200 homes. That is £90 million, as the Minister said. The bidding round for that has recently closed and the Department is assessing the bids that we have received. That is for local authorities to match fund; so they would put in half the funding and the central Government would put in the other half. That is particularly for open children's homes but for children with more complex needs, which was the point I was referring to earlier. These are the children who all too often are let down by the system and end up very far from home.

There is an important health dimension to that in having therapeutic support to keep those children well and de-escalate their needs. That scheme is being assessed now and once we have worked through the bids, we will announce who has been successful in that.

The secure children's home placements is an additional 80 secure children's home placements in two new secure children's homes, one in London and one in the West Midlands. We are also investing in and refurbishing and rebuilding, where needed, some of the existing estate that is degrading and at risk of going out of use.

Q480 **Darren Paffey:** What is roughly the split that you are expecting in money for new builds and money for refurbs on existing estate?

Fran Oram: For the open children's homes or the secure?

Darren Paffey: How much of the overall £90 million pot do you expect to go to new and how much to refurb?

Fran Oram: The £90 million should be all new provision. Your question was also about who will work there, how will they be staffed and so on. The different local authorities will come forward with different proposals. Some of them will run them in-house, some might have a partnership with a voluntary sector organisation or a not-for-profit organisation. That is all part of the overall strategy to diversify provision, but to make sure that new entrants to the system are there with the right motivation and the right ethos of caring for the child first and foremost and not profit.

Q481 **Darren Paffey:** Is any of the money announced revenue for staffing costs or is that expected to be absorbed into local authority?

Fran Oram: That is all capital we referred to there.

Q482 **Darren Paffey:** It is all capital, okay. On the basis that we have heard worrying reports about unsuitable supported accommodation, all new placements in much better accommodation will be welcome. But the unsuitable accommodation—and the evidence presented to this Committee was about children living in hostels, B&Bs, barges, caravans, flat shares with people with substance abuse—I think we would all agree



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are utterly the wrong places for care leavers to be. What impact has the new regulatory framework that Ofsted is bringing in for children being placed in unsuitable accommodation had so far?

Janet Daby: What you have described is absolutely right. Ofsted has been tasked with registering provisions that are unregistered but not the provisions like the barges and the unsuitable types of provisions we are talking about. If they are in a children's home that is not registered, they have been tasked with registering every provision so that we have no unregistered provision where children are being placed.

Q483 **Darren Paffey:** In which case, what more needs to be done to ensure that there is no chance of children ending up in the places that we have described, whether registered or not?

Janet Daby: The local authorities make the decision as to where they place children and they find themselves in some very difficult and tight situations. The task is for the local authority to make sure they have the right provision, they place children in the right provision from the get-go, day one. Ofsted absolutely need to make sure that they are inspecting those provisions to make sure they are suitable for children.

Fran Oram: The new Supported Accommodation Regulations are still bedding in. The deadline for providers to register with Ofsted was the end of October 2023. Ofsted has received those registration applications but it is still undertaking the inspections that flow from that, and it is working through a significant volume. It will take some time until all of that provision is entirely regulated and inspected.

It is an important point, as the Minister said, to ensure that some of the very unsuitable provision that you have heard about is no longer tolerated. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill has a power so that Ofsted can fine unregistered provision. All settings that a child is placed in should be supervised and properly overseen by Ofsted so that we can be confident it is safe.

As the Minister said, it is the local authorities' role and statutory duty to secure an adequate placement and the national Government are trying to help them to fulfil that duty, but it is their duty.

Q484 **Darren Paffey:** Just on that, you say that all new places that need inspections have been known about since September 2023?

Fran Oram: October.

Darren Paffey: October 2023, so we are now 18 months later. How many have been done, how many remain to be done, and when do you expect that to be completed?

Fran Oram: We have all that data in the Department. I do not have it at my fingertips now, but more people applied and registered than we had expected. It is a very significant proportion of the system overall. I think



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around 7% of overall looked-after children's placements are in supported accommodation settings. It is a significant volume that just takes some time to get through. but it is an important step to have some regulation because until now there were far too many children in places that were not regulated and registered.

Darren Paffey: I think we would absolutely accept the points you make. The urgency of having places for children to go to that are safe and known to be safe is absolutely of paramount importance. We probably would want the reassurance of the data on how long you have until you have inspected all of those so that we can have some reassurance.

Chair: I will bring Caroline in for a supplemental before I come back to you, Darren. At this point in our agenda, can I encourage greater brevity of both questions and answers to help us to get through all the topics by 12 o'clock?

Q485 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I wanted to ask about children with severe disabilities who often need respite care provision, which they should be getting and many are not getting, or not getting the number of days or hours that are supposed to be available, leaving a huge strain on those families. You cannot just ring up a babysitter because of the profound needs that their child has. What work, Minister, are you doing with DHSC and MHCLG to ensure that respite care is available, is of good quality and that children do not end up in a situation where are being brought to hospital essentially for care over weekends?

Janet Daby: I think you raise a good point and, as a constituency MP myself, I have come up against a situation where respite is needed but respite placement has not been identified. That puts an additional strain and struggle on the family, an unnecessary stress, I think you are absolutely right. We do have challenges, I have to be very honest. There are challenges in foster placements and making sure that the provision is there, which is why it is so crucial that we build our capacity and we recruit foster carers who are able to manage a variety of caring responsibilities, from children to complex needs to disabilities. We need to make sure that happens.

There are also private respites that can be purchased by the local authorities, and that is why we need to make sure that the purchasing capacity is done well. The regional care co-operatives will have greater responsibilities to look at where the gaps are in foster placements and making sure where there are special needs ones and complex needs ones that will identify where that is so that we can—I am trying to go quickly you see—identify where those placements are needed and recruit those types of placements.

Q486 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Minister, have you bid for more money specifically for respite care in the spending review?



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Janet Daby: Of the money that has been put towards foster care, I believe there has been an uplift of around £11 million for fostering. I will pass on to Fran with some of the details around the money but there is a—

Q487 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Have you asked for more?

Janet Daby: Within the previous spending review, some more money has been put towards fostering recruitment and retaining.

Fran Oram: The Families First for Children pathfinder has working with families with disabled children embedded throughout the whole programme of that reform—specialists, special educational needs and disability training, SEND qualified practitioners. The Working Together Guidance 2023 includes an emphasis on ensuring practitioners recognise the additional pressures and challenges that families face when they have children with a disability, and there is a designated social care officer to join up between the social care and SEND services.

I think at the root of your question is that sometimes families can struggle to cope, and what support is available to them. Rolling out these family help reforms nationally is an absolutely key plank of helping them to parent effectively and to cope through the adversity that they are facing.

Q488 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** It is about the lack of availability of respite care and the fact that it gets cancelled on short notice, which leaves people in a difficult situation.

Fran Oram: I can see that is difficult. We are in a difficult point in the spending review where we are in negotiations with the Treasury and we are obviously not able to share specifically what we have requested for any Treasury Minister decisions.

Q489 **Darren Paffey:** Two brief questions on social workers. We have heard evidence that there is a recruitment and retention problem. Obviously the turnover and the instability that results from that is bad for the children that social workers are there to serve. Are you intending to take any steps? I appreciate the comments you have just made about the spending review, but will you be asking for the resource to be able to do things like either increase pay or increase student social work bursaries, for example, to help tackle the crisis?

Janet Daby: We have lots of avenues in which somebody could be trained to become a qualified social worker, but we absolutely recognise that we need to recruit and retain social workers. We have recently had some very pleasing and encouraging statistics on social work and, in sharing that with you, we have had the highest number of family social workers in post than we have had for a very long time. It is up by 3.7, which is very pleasing. We have also had the number of agency workers fall. We have had fewer agency workers in place, and that has fallen by



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9.2%, which is down by 700 workers. We are seeing things move in the right direction

One of the things that I am particularly encouraged about is that as social workers feel more valued in the work that they are doing and feel that they are making a significant difference, I think that encourages workers to commit to become permanent. Also it encourages more people to want to be part of something where they see they are making a significant difference. It is still a challenge, there is still more to do, but I feel that it is moving in the right direction.

Q490 Darren Paffey: We obviously welcome those good signs. I assume you will be monitoring retention of them. Having higher numbers is great but we want to make sure that they are staying in post. Do you have a plan for monitoring that and taking action if anything changes?

Janet Daby: We do need to keep an eye on it, and we absolutely are. We are assessing and reviewing it. We have Social Work England and BASWA, very keen players and organisations in this, who want to make sure that we have the social workforce that we need and that we retain them. That is crucial. We have also seen that caseloads have begun to go down as well on average. All of those things are moving in the right direction, but you are absolutely right, retaining is key to make sure that we are not leaking.

With the reforms that we are doing, I believe that social workers will feel that it is more rewarding, their contribution to what they can achieve through children's social care.

Q491 Darren Paffey: On that point about caseloads, almost half of social workers say they do not feel like they get enough time with the families that they are working with. If caseloads are going down, what is that due to or what more are you doing as a Department to ensure that caseloads can come down for those for whom it has not yet?

Janet Daby: It works, with some of the information we have already shared, that if we are reducing the number of children that come into care, automatically the caseload will come down because the social worker has children as part of their caseload. If they have 15 looked-after children, they have 15 cases. But as we are working on the areas through family group decision making, more families moving into kinship provision or children being supported to remain at home with support, that will also help to make sure we are putting in the right provisions, the right support, enabling families, supporting them to be able to function and to manage well. Did you have anything to add?

Fran Oram: I want to add, to support what the Minister said, that we have a National Workload Action Group that has been set up to look at workload pressures so that social workers can do exactly the work that the Minister was referring to, that they really want to do to support and help families rather than the assessing and the bureaucracy end of the



profession. It is more about helping them to parent effectively. We are seeking to take away any obstacles to that through that group.

Q492 **Jess Asato:** Recognising that we do not have huge amounts of time, I will rattle through these. The Department's policy paper, "Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive", makes no mention of any measures related to reunification, despite the NSPCC research finding that failed reunification costs £300 million each year. If you are looking to make savings within the current spending envelope would it not make sense to issue national guidance to local authorities on reunification?

Janet Daby: Thank you for raising that. I recently met with a family rights group and I met with parents. It was very rewarding because they were able to explain to me about some of the contact they have lost with their children and some where their children have returned home in a planned way but the reunification planning did not take place as it should, and it made it even more difficult for the young person and their experiences of parenting them. It was a really difficult situation.

You are right, the reunification plan needs to work. Family group decision making, I believe, will be a process in where that can help. Family group decision making is before you get to court proceedings, but underneath that—

Q493 **Jess Asato:** I was talking about national guidance, because that is lacking. All of the research shows that local authorities would like to do much more of this but they lack the guidance nationally that would help them to do this consistently. There is a case to be made about it can benefit children, can benefit parents, but all reunification is right and we have to make sure that it is not forced, but it is about the guidance nationally that could help.

Janet Daby: Family meetings can take place as well, but local authorities will obviously have some guidance and national guidance is something that we can take away and have a discussion with the relevant groups.

Q494 **Jess Asato:** Talking about care leavers, your own written evidence tells us what we know, which is care leavers have some of the worst long-term life outcomes in society. In our recent report into the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we highlighted the confusing patchwork of entitlements faced by care leavers backed up by the amazing testimony from care leavers themselves. For example, some local authorities will offer free or substantial bus travel for care leavers but others will not. Will you look at introducing a national care offer to address this patchwork?

Janet Daby: We recognise the postcode-type lottery for care leavers. We are committed to making sure that care leavers have a good experience. You have already highlighted where we are aware of some of the awful situations that care leavers fall into because they do not have the support that they so crucially need. We have a cross-departmental ministerial meeting on care leavers, which is chaired by Secretary of State for the



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Department for Education and the Deputy Prime Minister. It is an area that we are focused on. All Departments have been tasked with coming back with saying what they are doing in this space, and it is being followed through. I hope and believe that something will come out of that. As soon as we have that, it will be shared.

Q495 **Jess Asato:** Some local authorities have made care experience a protected characteristic voluntarily. Have you made any assessment of how this has made any real difference in discrimination against care leavers or any increase in their outcomes and whether it should be put in place nationally?

Janet Daby: I am very pleased that local authorities are prioritising the needs of care leavers and are taking this very seriously. We need to reduce care leavers from having mental health issues, from being in need, and also from moving into criminality. It is an area where local authorities recognise they have a responsibility and they need to do that. I believe that 144 have made this a protected characteristic. They recognise their responsibility in this area. We continue to work with local authorities and to support them in their strategies around care leavers and we recognise there is absolutely more to do in this space.

Q496 **Jess Asato:** Finally, there have been recently tabled amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to Government Departments and other relevant bodies, but why does the corporate parenting extension exempt immigration and the adult criminal justice estate, given the key areas of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children, and the over-representation of care leavers in prison, particularly those from black backgrounds?

Janet Daby: I did not catch all of that question, I am afraid.

Jess Asato: I can repeat it. I think everyone is very pleased to see the corporate parenting responsibilities amendments introduced into the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, but my understanding is that this corporate parenting extension exempts immigration and the adult criminal justice estate. Given that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are an incredibly important part of the care system, and also that care leavers are over-represented in the adult criminal justice system, particularly those from black backgrounds, do you know why these exemptions have been made?

Janet Daby: I am aware that all of the Departments recognise their responsibilities as corporate parents and are dedicated in this space. I believe I need to get back to you on this to give you some more information. I will bring in Fran on this point.

Jess Asato: If you could answer whether you could give us some information about the further guidance on this and how it will be implemented?



Fran Oram: Yes, absolutely. Obviously this was a new amendment that has only been tabled quite recently and, as the Minister suggested, we have been discussing and agreeing this with Government Departments across the whole Government, so it has been quite a lot of work to secure that agreement.

Clearly, any new legislative requirement always brings an element of risk with how it will work and interact with existing duties. For immigration in particular, there are already statutory duties relating to children, for example in section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. Essentially, we have been trying to ensure that this new corporate parenting duty does not overtake or distract from or harm in any way the core functions of the bodies that it applies to.

The list of bodies captured by the new clause, as it will be, can be amended by regulation later on. It is a list that will be kept under review essentially as we see how it achieves its intended effect and any unintended effects that may result from it. We will keep a close eye on it and we will obviously issue guidance on how it should operate.

Q497 **Manuela Perteghella:** I want to talk about mental health. The care-experienced young people we took evidence from in this inquiry made very helpful suggestions for improving mental health support for children and young people in care. These included mandated mental health check-ins by social workers or teachers, fast track access to CAMHS and better trauma awareness among professionals.

I have two questions. Will you consider taking forward any of these recommendations? Also in our report, the Committee concluded that there is scope to strengthen the requirement for the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in care to be assessed. What are your views on that and will you take steps to address these?

Janet Daby: The Government are committed to improving mental health support to children and to young people. It is critical in helping young people and children to achieve and to thrive throughout their life. There are challenges within the NHS and there are challenges that they are addressing in those areas. When a child is first looked after, their mental health is assessed, not by—because I can see you nodding, disagreeing there—necessarily a mental health practitioner but assessed for whether they need further support.

There are still challenges with the CAMHS and waiting lists and making sure those services and provisions are in place. We recognise that more needs to be done. The Government are committed to making sure there are mental health provisions in school and we are also looking at how we can work more closely with the Department of Health to make sure that children's mental health needs within children's social care are being addressed and met. We are working on this with the Department of Health, and I hope that we will be able to come back soon to share that information.



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Q498 **Manuela Perteghella:** We have heard concerns about families being unable to access support for disabled children due to lack of availability, but also difficulty in understanding their entitlements. We have already discussed about short breaks and respite care for disabled children. I want to focus on personal budgets, which we heard are insufficient for parents of disabled children to meet their children's needs. Will you increase personal budgets to address this?

Janet Daby: This would not just be for the Department of Education, is my understanding. It would be across Departments. I will take this away and look at it and come back to you with a cross-departmental perspective.

Q499 **Amanda Martin:** We have heard concerns about parents of disabled children undergoing assessment processes, focusing on child protection concerns when engaging with children's social care, even when there is no evidence of neglect or abuse. Will you take forward the Law Commission's recommendations, while keeping children safe, on improving assessments of disabled children to address this problem?

Janet Daby: Obviously this situation needs to be addressed where that is found. The Law Commission, as you will be aware, is undertaking an independent review of disabled children and social care legislation, with a report that is due in summer 2025. We will review this when it is brought to our attention. We will look at what the recommendations are and follow up with a response.

Q500 **Jess Asato:** The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill contains a number of measures to improve the child protection system. Are you confident that these reforms will be enough to significantly reduce the number of children suffering serious harm?

Janet Daby: We don't want any children to experience any significant harm or to be at risk of harm. The reason why we have brought in the areas we have done within the Bill is to ensure that we have other Departments that are key players playing their part, making sure they are putting all of the protective factors in place and acting as corporate parents. The unique identifier number will also act as an area in which we can—not follow, but have information on the child in one place, so therefore we can easily identify and pick up what types of vulnerabilities and risk factors the child is exposed to.

We are trying to make it seamless so that we are aware of the child's experience and that is able to be picked up in a way that safeguards and protects the child. There is always more that can be done. It will be reviewed and continue to be reviewed, but we need to make sure that various Departments and professionals are all working together with a determined effort so that we are keeping children safe and protected.

On the recommendations that have come out of IICSA, I have met with Alexis Jay and the Home Secretary has also given a commitment that



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those recommendations will be met. There will be more information coming out, which she said will be before Easter.

Fran Oram: Can I add one small point? We think that the provision in the Bill on children not in school registers is very important to ensure visibility of all children so that children can't disappear. We have seen some children fall through the cracks and the system not pick up on them. There is also an ending to the automatic right to home school a child if there are concerns about safeguarding. I think they are two important measures in the Bill to help improve safeguarding.

Q501 **Jess Asato:** Thank you. Obviously one of the ways in which you know whether the legislation has been successful is by being able to measure whether harm has increased or decreased, but NSPCC data suggests that data on child protection plans does not reflect the true prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Do you intend to carry out research to better understand whether the Bill has had an effect?

Janet Daby: We need to review and we need to carry on monitoring to make sure it is achieving its aims. I am due to meet with NSPCC as well, so I will take that up with it.

Q502 **Jess Asato:** Thank you. In this section, neglect is the only type of abuse that increased over the last year. What specifically are you doing to tackle neglect and ensure that social care is set up to respond to it?

Janet Daby: The plan is that where it is recognised by any of the agencies that the child or the family come into communication with—usually the school—they have a corporate parenting responsibility to draw attention to that. This is why the family hubs process is so key in getting this right, to make sure that we can put in the parenting support that is needed and put in any factors of protection that are needed around the child and working with the family to prevent neglect.

It is also to recognise that family group conference decision making or family meetings could have a real impact in making sure the protective measures are there, but where a child is experiencing neglect and there is significant harm other interventions may need to take place to keep that child safe. I will bring in Fran.

Fran Oram: The new data we have suggests that the leading cause of a child coming into care now is parental mental health, whereas previously it was domestic abuse. I think there is a real overlap there with neglect and mental ill health, so the family help reforms that we referred to earlier are key there. A lot of these families don't intend to do a bad job by their children, they love their children, but for various reasons—mental ill health, poverty, adverse circumstances—they are failing to do that. That clearly needs an intervention, but it is not always an intervention to remove the child. More often it is supporting the parents to do a good job to look after the child, so that is what our strategy, through the legislation and the investment, is intending to do.



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Jess Asato: Obviously it makes the case for making sure there is the cross-departmental mental health support in place, otherwise those parents won't get the support they need.

Chair: I will bring in Caroline very briefly on that point.

Q503 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I want to raise the issue of neglect, which is a rising form of child abuse. Some would say that failing to brush your children's teeth—or ensure that they are brushed—or failure to give your child breakfast on a morning is a form of neglectful parenting. The Government have chosen, rather than setting the expectation that parents do this, to bring this in-house and ask the state to do it, with their supervised tooth-brushing sessions and their breakfast provision. We did hear in evidence to this Committee that in Wales the breakfast provision has not achieved the aim of targeting the children that needed the breakfast. Although it may have provided breakfast to children, they were not the children they were trying to provide breakfast to. Are the Government's measures going to work or are they a tacit acceptance or tolerance of a level of neglect?

Janet Daby: We don't want children to go to school hungry.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Nobody does.

Janet Daby: Nobody does. That was the next word that I was going to say. Nobody wants children to go to school hungry. We want children to be able to focus on their learning; neither do we want children to have tooth decay or any issues associated with that. I hear the point that is made and the evidence. This is why education is a key safeguarding partner, to be able to pick up on issues and areas where families need support and intervention. If there are situations—

Q504 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** But that is not what you have done, with respect, Minister. You have not said, "We have children who are not getting breakfast. We need to make sure those children get breakfast." You said, "We have children who are not getting breakfast. We need to feed every child in the country breakfast." You have not targeted support, the early support that you have talked about through this meeting, at those who need it most. You have insisted the state do the job that parents are meant to do.

Janet Daby: What I am saying is that we don't want any child to go hungry, so therefore we have the rollout of the breakfast clubs. That provides an opportunity for families or parents to take their child to school early to be able to have breakfast and therefore not to be hungry. If there is a situation where teachers recognise or pick up that a child who comes to school is not coming to the breakfast club but is still hungry, they need to raise that and have a conversation with the parent. They need to then work out if there is anything further that needs to be done—is there any support that needs to be in place, is there anything



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that the parents need help with—and then that intervention needs to happen and take place.

Q505 **Jess Asato:** I will move on to child sexual abuse. The proposed mandatory reporting duty for child sexual abuse, which is included in the Crime and Policing Bill, has a narrower scope than that recommended by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Are you satisfied that this will be robust enough, especially given that there is no criminal sanction for failing to report the duty? Are you also satisfied that the sector is prepared for the introduction of this new duty?

Janet Daby: These are all still being worked out and looked at. It is still putting all the information together. It needs to be reviewed, we need to look at it and make sure that the protection factors are in place for children. I don't know if you have anything further to say on that. I would like to take away what you are saying and review it.

Q506 **Chair:** Are you anticipating there might be amendments to the Bill, if it is still being looked at? We have had the Second Reading on the Bill, the measures in the Bill, yet you are saying it is still being looked at.

Janet Daby: What I mean is with IICSA and what the Department is looking at and how we continue to work with the Home Office on the recommendations. That is what I mean.

Q507 **Chair:** But Jess's question was about a specific recommendation, about mandatory reporting and the specific version of that recommendation that is in the Bill, which is different from the version that IICSA recommended. Is that still under review?

Janet Daby: That is not something I was aware of, to be very honest. Let me take that away and have a look at it.

Q508 **Jess Asato:** Thank you. On the point as well about the sector, there is the potential for this to have wide-ranging impacts on the sector, particularly on children's social care workers. There have been concerns around, for example, safe spaces for children—like Childline—being brought into the ambit of this in an unhelpful way, leading to children not being able to seek support, knowing that their conversation will be confidential. To what extent have you been having conversations with organisations across the sector that might be impacted by this?

Janet Daby: I will pass that to you, Fran.

Fran Oram: As the Minister said, the specific Bill that you refer to is a Home Office piece of legislation, so as a Department we are consulted and engaged, particularly in ensuring that there are not any adverse consequences from it. In framing any new legislative provision like this, there is always a balance in having the broadest reach possible, but not having the unintended consequences of children avoiding seeking help reaching out and sharing concerns. Absolutely we are working closely with the Home Office to ensure that things like Childline can continue to



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operate in a safe and supportive way for children where they need that support. I guess those are the ongoing debates that the Minister was referring to, just to ensure that the implementation of it works well and does not create any harm that was not intended.

Q509 Chair: Thank you. I have questions on Ofsted reforms now. The Government have committed to replacing the Ofsted single-word judgments in its inspections of children's services and children's social care providers. When will this process start and how will you ensure that the safety of children is paramount as the reform is implemented?

Janet Daby: You are absolutely right, we are changing inspections in children's social care and Ofsted is committing to removing the single headline. Ofsted has not started, but it is in the consultation process.

Chair: Do you have any indication of the timescale for that?

Janet Daby: Not at present.

Fran Oram: My wording is classic government wording of "in due course", so it will happen but I can't give you a particular timeframe as yet. It is an Ofsted consultation.

Q510 Chair: We have heard evidence that many children's home providers are reluctant to accept children with complex needs because of fears that it might affect their Ofsted rating. That is exacerbating problems with capacity of provision. What measures are you taking to address this?

Janet Daby: Information like that is very concerning, because that places, as you are aware, more pressure on the local authorities to be able to find appropriate placements, and that in itself can be very difficult with the impact of driving up cost. It was put in local authorities and we will also be looking at through the Regional Care Co-operatives.

Q511 Chair: Specifically what might you do to address it?

Fran Oram: I am happy to add to what you have said. I guess the whole approach of the reforms that we have talked about today are to reduce the number of children coming into care to begin with, to stabilise the market and to provide alternative placements for children. That cherry-picking that you are talking about absolutely does happen and is very problematic. It is often for the children with the most complex needs who are perhaps difficult to care for and so the home might refuse to offer a place.

Q512 Chair: I suppose the question is about how the inspection framework might be redesigned to de-risk the taking of those children with the most complex needs for the providers, because there will still be children with complex needs in the system even if you reduce the numbers.

Fran Oram: Absolutely. We hear some very difficult stories like that, and I am sure the Committee has heard some of those too, but on the flipside we also hear some very positive stories. I went to Wakefield a while ago,



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which has an in-house provision for children with very complex needs, some of whom have not managed to hold a placement in a secure children's home and have basically been served notice even in a secure children's home. Wakefield has brought them into its locality, set up a placement for them and said, "Whatever happens, you are safe here and you can stay here." Those children's needs have de-escalated, because some of it is a sort of trauma response.

Through some of the investment that I talked about earlier, the capital investment, we want more local authorities to do similar things to Wakefield so that more children can have those needs met and not bounce around the system with growing levels of trauma.

Q513 **Chair:** We have had concerns expressed to us about the use of handcuffs to secure children between care placements, which Ofsted has said is a gap in regulation. Is this something you are looking at addressing?

Janet Daby: We are looking into this, yes. This does raise concerns and it is something that we need to look into, absolutely.

Q514 **Chair:** Finally, we are about to have a statement on the Government's welfare reforms. Can I ask what engagement you have had with the Department for Work and Pensions on the potential impact of welfare reforms on children and on child poverty?

Fran Oram: A fellow director in the Department for Education, Donna Ward, leads on child poverty strategy. It is not specifically children's social care, because clearly lots of families will be suffering poverty but will not be involved in the children's social care system. She is very closely involved. I think she is on the cross-government board that the DWP has set up and is working in partnership on how families and children can be supported out of poverty.

Q515 **Chair:** Is the Department confident that what the Government are going to announce today will not have any adverse impacts on child poverty?

Fran Oram: I don't think I can answer that for you today. I am not sure whether the Minister can.

Janet Daby: I am not sure. To be very honest, we would need to wait until we hear what the announcement is to know.

Q516 **Chair:** But as part of the Government, have you sought any assurances from the Department for Work and Pensions about the impact on child poverty of the reforms that will be announced today?

Janet Daby: In the child poverty area there is a departmental meeting that is chaired by the Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and Education, so at that level I imagine they would have been consulted on this. That information has not been brought to my attention to have those conversations.

Q517 **Chair:** Are you concerned about it?



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Janet Daby: I am concerned because I want to hear the information and whether there is any pending effect on children's welfare needs and families. I am interested to hear what it has to say and, if there is an impact, what that impact may or may not be. I want to ensure that children have the best care, which they need.

Chair: Thank you. That brings our evidence to a close. I thank our witnesses for giving evidence to us today.