



Select Committee on Public Services

Oral evidence: The role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Wednesday 14 April 2021

2.55 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hogan-Howe; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 1

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 1 - 8

Witnesses

I: Robert Arnott, Director of Strategy, Social Mobility and Disadvantage, Department for Education; Fran Oram, Director for Children's Social Care, Practice and Workforce, Department for Education; Kirby Swales, Deputy Director, Changing Futures and Supporting Families Team, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Mark Davies, Director, Department of Health and Social Care.

Examination of witnesses

Robert Arnott, Fran Oram, Kirby Swales and Mark Davies.

Q1 The Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to our first public evidence session in our new inquiry, which, certainly at the moment, is entitled the role of public services in addressing child vulnerability. We are very pleased to start the inquiry with a session where we will be talking to civil servants who have responsibility across government for tackling child vulnerability. We have four witnesses: two from the Department for Education, one from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and one from the Department of Health and Social Care. We are very pleased to welcome all of you. When we invite you to respond to a question we would be very grateful if you could give a short introduction and say what your responsibilities are. That is probably the easiest way to make sure we differentiate between you.

It is always the Chair's privilege to ask the first question. How do your departments define vulnerable children? How do they assess the number of those children and identify where they live, who they are and so on? Can I ask Robert Arnott from the Department for Education to answer first?

Robert Arnott: For the purposes of this inquiry, the best description of my role is that I am the senior responsible officer for a programme we set up specifically for Covid just over a year ago to try to marshal our collective efforts in protecting vulnerable children. We agreed between us that I would take the first part of this question.

In normal times, government departments think about vulnerability through the prism of their own particular responsibilities. In my area, and that of my colleague Ms Oram, we would think about children who need support from social services or children with special educational needs or disabilities.

We also come together thematically in relation to aspects that run across departmental responsibilities at central government level. For example, many of us are involved in cross-cutting programmes of work to try to avoid children being drawn towards serious violence. The reason for that is that government recognises and believes that the individual particular circumstances of children and families on the one hand and front-line public services on the other are best served by being able to look at the needs of any particular child or family and think, "What are the characteristics of this family and, therefore, what, in terms of state services, do those children and families need?", rather than our attempting to have a single, all-encompassing definition.

For the purposes of the Covid emergency, we recognised very early on that we needed to provide children and families, on the one hand, and in particular education settings, on the other, with a description of vulnerability to help them to plan for attendance in schools and early years settings. We recognised that was both an important protective

factor for some children and a key educational factor for children who would particularly struggle with the task of learning at home. In that case, the ambit we used was children in receipt of social care and children with special educational needs and disability, and we very deliberately gave local discretion for schools on the one hand and local authorities on the other to identify children with wider vulnerabilities for whom the ability to attend and take part face to face was important.

The Chair: Thank you, Robert. Who wants to come in next? Fran, I always like to hear from women.

Fran Oram: I am very happy to add to that. I thought it was unusual that I am the only female civil servant here today. I am director of children's social care at the Department for Education. I should say that in the main we are women, so it is quite unusual that you have so many men here today.

To add to what Robert said, I think it is the first time the Government have aggregated children with vulnerabilities in this sort of collective grouping. I think that is a really powerful innovation we have brought about because of Covid. The Covid experience has been very challenging and, in the main, negative for everybody in society, including children and young people, but there are certain things we are trying to look at increasingly as we move into recovery that might be positives we can take from the Covid experience. The aggregation and broad consideration of the needs and vulnerabilities of children in a range of respects is a real positive that I hope we can build on and maintain as we move into recovery.

I want to talk a little about some of the things the Government have done to support vulnerable children during the Covid period. Would it be appropriate to do that now?

The Chair: Yes.

Fran Oram: Undoubtedly, it has been a very stressful and difficult time for vulnerable children and indeed all children. Of the things the Government have done to try to mitigate those stresses, keeping education settings open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers was one vital thing where we were world leading. Attendance was not quite at the levels we would have liked. We did not entirely succeed in getting all vulnerable children into education settings. None the less, it was a really important protective factor for the children who attended.

Children's social care and early help services continued throughout the pandemic. My team was very busy during the early stages of the pandemic, in particular in ensuring that children's social care services and other children's workforce could get the right protection—access to PPE, testing and all of that kind of stuff—which was no mean feat but was absolutely essential to ensure that those front-line workers could maintain face-to-face contact with children.

We also ensured that we had the right data so that we could understand what was going on in real time and be responsive to the changing nature of the issues we were dealing with. We established the new regional education and care teams, which we abbreviate to REACT, to ensure that we could have staff from the Department for Education and Ofsted working directly with local authorities to be quite nimble and responsive to changing issues as they arose.

Moving into recovery, and keeping to the grouping of children with special educational needs and disabilities and children with a social worker, as well as the concept of broader vulnerability, I know that when Anne Longfield was Children's Commissioner she and her team came up with significant numbers of children they believed were vulnerable. In government, we do not aggregate and pull together numbers in quite the same way as the Office of the Children's Commissioner, but we recognise that there is some real value in the broader context of vulnerability; children with a parent with severe mental ill-health, a parent who has an addiction issue, or a parent who is the victim of domestic violence will be having a hard time. Allowing local discretion for social services, and education and other front-line services, to respond to the issues those children are suffering, and to have some flexibility rather than a very rigid statutory definition as the only concept of vulnerability is a powerful flexibility that it is important to retain as we move into recovery.

I am sure the Committee is aware of the appointment of Sir Kevan Collins and the work the Government are doing to try to help children to recover from the education loss they have suffered during the pandemic, and to help with their well-being and their emotional and mental health needs. As ever, when we are looking at the entire population and the deficits and challenges that they face, we have a particular focus on the children who are having a still harder time than the average, and we try to make sure that we have the right outreach and special support to help them catch up and not get further left behind. The worst thing we could have is an increase in the divide we already have in outcomes for vulnerable children.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Fran. Mark, do you have anything to add?

Mark Davies: Yes, just a few words from the perspective of—

The Chair: Can you introduce yourself?

Mark Davies: Yes, sorry. I am director of population health at the Department of Health and Social Care. I have a range of responsibilities, but for these purposes they include vulnerable children and looking after the work the NHS does on children. I am also responsible for a number of services directed at addressing unhealthy behaviour, such as drug and alcohol services, so I think that is relevant.

As Fran just mentioned, the causes of vulnerability are very complex. I notice that you have looked at the evidence and understood a number of

the factors underpinning vulnerability, which aligns very closely with the work Professor Mark Bellis did on adverse childhood experiences where he not only identified adverse childhood experiences but understood how their clustering leads to different outcomes. We are extremely interested in that work because it gives a sense of how you can intervene early to address later problems. Quite a lot of the work we have been doing on mental health—for example, a programme that we have on children of alcohol-dependent parents—is aimed at addressing vulnerabilities in the family in order to support children to have better outcomes later in life. There is a very complex set of drivers of vulnerability, which I think it is fair to say makes defining a cohort extremely complex.

Kirby Swales: I represent the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but my day job is to be in charge of the supporting families programme that until the end of March was known as troubled families.

On the question of definition, I would add a bit of clarification on how supporting families works. The programme as a whole is targeted at the more complex end. We define that as families that have two or more of six problems, which could be things like poor mental health and worklessness, and includes children who need help. Children who need help are the single biggest indicator that is ticked by local authorities in the box for assessing families, but we do not define that nationally. There is a lot of local discretion, so in a sense the programme allows local areas not to create a new definition of vulnerability, but to have an overlap between different forms of vulnerability to choose the families that would most benefit from targeted family support.

When it comes to Covid, many of those would have a social worker, so would come under that classification, but local areas could also use the category “otherwise vulnerable”. Those were families they chose to bring into the education system despite the restrictions. That is the role the programme plays on the question of definition.

Q2 The Chair: Thank you all. One of the key things that is coming up is that vulnerability is much greater than has been defined in recent years. You have picked up on that through Covid, as the Children’s Commissioner probably did before Covid, and then it was reinforced. It seems from what Fran said that you recognise that there are children who in many senses, because they have not been directly addressed and do not come within the strict commissioning framework that local government has been developing, let alone what government is doing, form a wider group.

Are you trying to assess how many there are? You talked about addressing issues that you have come to know better during Covid. Are you saying that you are looking at ways in which these children, whom the Children’s Commissioner has sometimes called the invisible children, will be included in future, and what will be the things that drive support for them?

Robert Arnott: I think there are two or three parts to our collective answer to that. Eventually, yes, of course we are looking at that. How will we do that? Clearly, Covid is dreadful, but it has had some silver linings. One of them is that it has caused our department and our front-line partners to be even more active together than we were before. It is not that this was a completely barren space before Covid, but it has certainly strengthened the amount of collaborative working we do and the value we see in it.

Part of our task, building on Fran's point, will be to make sure we sustain that momentum, in part thinking specifically about recovery but using that as the foundation for thinking much more broadly about the sorts of things that Mark in his initial evidence described that cause stress in families and difficulty for children, which then cause them and society harm down the track. What are the sensible sets of operational and policy interventions to try to address those? I absolutely foresee that we will want to build on and strengthen the collaboration that Covid has underlined. Indeed, in our preparation for this session, we were talking together about some of the things we want to do to achieve that, and it is likely that later on you will ask us questions about things like spending reviews, so we can see ways of helping ourselves structurally.

The second thing I would call out is the ability to understand what is going on for children and families in the face of their unique circumstances and, therefore, complexity, and thinking through time. We know from reading your initial report on Covid that you spent time thinking about data. That very often becomes a conversation about how local actors make sure that they have a common view of an emerging problem. Equally, we are interested in, and the Government are currently spending money on, a programme of work to try to bring together so-called administrative data in a way that helps us understand the whole child and the whole family, and the flow of children through time to try to understand causality better. While I think that will not give an immediate answer to the challenge you are giving us, it definitely offers the prospect, over the next few years, to understand much better what is the right balance of policy and operational intervention, and prevention that is a response to problems and where best value for the public lies in that.

I do not want to steal your questions from you, but the clerk said you were likely to ask us about family hubs as an example of the kind of structural approach that local actors, with a bit of central government support and encouragement, can take—many of them already are—to take a much more child and family-centred view of what is going on and organise their services in a way that makes the child or family the anchor point, rather than the particular interests of any bit of the public service. That is the third strand: continuing to try to give impetus and encouragement to the things that make it easy for local actors to act collaboratively in a holistic way, and then data comes back in.

Kirby Swales: Very quickly, on a point of clarification, there is a set of services broadly brigaded as early help. I want to make sure that the

Committee understands that just because data is not collected on families for official statistics it does not mean they are not receiving services. The ADCS estimates that almost 240,000 families have an early help assessment every year, but there is no official statistical data capture on those. As Robert said, I am sure there is more we can do to collect better data on need at local and national level, but that is not to say that some families not officially classified as being with a social worker or EHCP are not receiving services. I wanted to add that important clarification.

Q3 Lord Bichard: In asking my question, I want to be sure we are all in the same place as to where we are at the moment and where you hope we will be going. At the moment, I think many people, including the former Children's Commissioner—I also feel quite strongly about this—find it difficult to argue that a child with a seriously mentally ill parent or an alcohol-dependent parent is not vulnerable, but that is not how we have defined it, in so far as we have defined it, in government. Up until now we have been defining it, except through the troubled families programme, in a narrower way around social care and SEN. I think that is where we are. That means that until this moment we have not had an explicit strategy in government for vulnerable children defined in the way most of us would define it.

Robert, I am going to ask you to come in first because you are the SRO on this. Is that the case? Will we change it? Without that explicit strategy it is very difficult to measure whether we are being successful and it is very difficult to have a framework within which you can all operate across government departments. Is that where we are, and is it your intention to change that with some explicit policy and strategy for vulnerable children?

Robert Arnott: You will forgive me, because the second part of your question is properly one for Ministers rather than for us.

Lord Bichard: I remember that, Robert.

Robert Arnott: Did it ever work for you as an answer, Lord Bichard? That is the question.

As to where we think we are currently, as I said at the outset, departments and front-line services have properly been focused on the things with which they are individually tasked or have individually been responsible for, and have known and behaved as if collaboration is the answer to overlapping sets of problems. There are innumerable examples of good sense at both local level and in central government.

The countervailing challenge in peacetime is the one you called out. This is why I am a bit anxious about single definitions and targetry. It is undoubtedly true that, if one writes hard rules about something, it has a behavioural impact on people who have to make judgments about where they should deploy work or how they should spend money. I think that is why all four of us have a shared view about leaving plenty of discretion to the people who lead and work in the services that support the public directly. I am conscious that my camera currently has Lord Hogan-Howe

eyeing me. He and I collaborated many times in the past. This was a key point for the police service.

I think we are all of the view that leaving discretion for people to recognise need when they see it and find ways, for example using the powers in the Children Act, to collaborate in responding to that need is a good way of avoiding the downsides of tightness. Having said that, there has been undoubted benefit in the concerted approach that Covid has caused us to take. I think the question for us, and then for Ministers over the next little while, will be the extent to which we want to give some kind of standing structure, if you like, or way of doing things so that we continue to retain benefit from it. I think the question of whether there should be a cross-cutting strategy really is one for Ministers, but we would all agree that there certainly need to be good ways of having a concerted view and taking concerted action.

Lord Bichard: Before I bring in others, have we excluded many children we should have been including and been concerned about by the way we have defined vulnerability hitherto? In answer to the previous question you suggested that it is defined very much around young people in receipt of social care or SEN provision. That in itself is quite a narrow definition of vulnerability, so have we not done up until this point exactly what you say we should try to avoid doing in the future?

Robert Arnott: Apologies. I certainly did not mean to give that impression. I was more worried about not falling into the trap that you have just described by drawing lines too tightly. The clerks said that you intend over the next little while to take evidence from front-line service witnesses. I hope they will tell you that they look at the child in front of them and use their judgment to work out whether they think there is something going on with that child; and, in the very best cases, on the basis of that judgment, they join up with others in like services to make sure that they provide a rounded response.

I think the question for government is whether we make that easy enough, or whether we inadvertently make it hard for people to collaborate with one another. On questions of data, notwithstanding the fact that the law and the Government say, "You should please collaborate in sharing data, for example on questions of safeguarding", are we in some way still not getting the incentives quite right that make it feel like the right answer for people? What I am hoping you will hear is, "If we think children are in trouble because of what is going on at home, we are interested in it and we will do something about it". I am suggesting that the question for government is, "Are we doing enough to make that feel like the right answer for people?"

Lord Bichard: Fran, do you want to come in? What I am hearing is that we do not have, and have not had, an explicit strategy for vulnerable children.

Robert Arnott: That is correct. We have not had a single strategy. We have had a whole series of programmes of work thinking about, for

example, children who need social care or those with special educational needs, or children being drawn towards the criminal justice system. What we have not had is a unifying single strategy that runs across those, although we have done some good work in that area.

Lord Bichard: I accept that is a matter for Ministers. Maybe Fran or Kirby would like to come in. If that is the case, and you have been meeting, you say, particularly during the pandemic, can I ask a very practical question? How often did you meet as a group—in a way, you are the four people most responsible for this—before the pandemic to talk about our strategy for vulnerable children? How often did officials meet?

Fran Oram: I have always had a terrible memory, so anything pre-Covid is very hard to draw out of the depths of my memory. The short answer is very regularly and in a range of different forums. We have a range of both formal and informal settings where the four of us will get together and talk about issues relating to vulnerable children. We also meet with a wide range of other colleagues. We involve colleagues at the Treasury, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions. In a way, the list is endless. There is very regular dialogue.

What is new since Covid, as I mentioned before and which I think is really positive, is the broader focus on vulnerable children, linking children with special educational needs and disabilities, children with a social worker and the slightly more nebulous concept of the “otherwise vulnerable”. I completely agree that the children you alluded to who have an alcohol-dependent parent, a serious mental health issue or whatever will be struggling in one way or another and will need some form of support, so I think that broader concept is beneficial.

In answer to your question about whether a strategy that seeks to address the needs of the entirety of that population would be beneficial, as Robert said, that is a question for Ministers. From a personal perspective, there are probably pros and cons to that because there is a real risk of aggregating and, therefore, oversimplifying so that everything is a priority and, in aiming to capture the very diverse needs of a very broad group of children, perhaps we fall down and fail to do an adequate job.

The children we are talking about do not really care about our strategy, our meetings or any of those things; they are important only in the sense that they feed through and have an impact on the front-line services that those children are able to access. I guess that what really matters is the funding, the legislation, the guidance and all the parameters and enablers that central government has at its disposal and whether they are well directed to ensure that services are available when children need them.

There are obviously thresholds for accessing mental health services, accessing children’s social care services and getting an EHCP. That is a threshold and so on and so forth. Some of those thresholds are necessary, but what is important is what lies beyond that, and what other

support, if the child or family do not meet the requirements for statutory services, is available in school and so on.

There is a school in London that I visited initially with Anne Longfield and have kept in touch with since where they keep a very active watch on all their children and their vulnerabilities, not just those meeting the statutory definitions. During Covid, they have done a really impressive job reaching out and supporting families. There is some really good local practice, and that is what is most compelling and makes the biggest difference to those children's lives, rather than its being necessarily our meetings or our strategies, not that I am suggesting they are not important, too.

I am conscious that Mark has had his hand up for a while. I do not know whether you want him to come in.

Lord Bichard: Mark, I am very sorry; I did not see your hand.

Mark Davies: It is an invisible hand.

To go back to your original question about what happens to children of alcohol-dependent parents or parents with serious mental health problems, the definition is based on the risk that the child faces in the community and in the home. It is not that anyone will be excluded because they do not have the right definition of vulnerability. There is a wider issue that you have hit upon, which is whether we look at just the children or the family more broadly. That is a really important question that we need to think more about as well. We have tended to think about the presenting child rather than the circumstances in which they present. That is a really important issue and we are exploring it.

There are many negatives of Covid, but there has been some very important learning. One of the things we learned was that, as Fran just suggested, at the front line in communities, schools and local authorities knew who their vulnerable people were. Whether we defined them or not, they knew what they needed to do. That was quite impressive. We need to continue to learn from that. It is a cliché, but Covid has shone a really bright light on inequalities and has made many people's lives much worse. It has both deepened and broadened vulnerabilities, and we need to learn from that.

What we have learned is that what happens at the front door of the school is a really important factor. What we need to do is understand how what we do at the centre can help liberate people at the front line to do their job and assist families and children most effectively. That is what we have as our focus.

Lord Bichard: Before the Chairman, properly, cuts me off, because time is catching up with us, I want to ask Kirby a particular question. I know you have been warned that I would ask this, so you are well prepared. It is about Section 10 of the Children Act 2004. That places a statutory responsibility on directors of children's services to co-operate and

produce some sort of plan of co-operation with other local services, but it does not place a statutory responsibility on anyone else; for example, it does not place a statutory responsibility on health or on the police. That seems slightly odd. I wonder whether you have had a chance to look at that and whether you feel that maybe we could revisit it. Of course, there is no statutory responsibility at the centre.

Kirby Swales: I will start and then I will hand over to Fran, if that is okay.

I just want to pick up on your last point. When we relaunched troubled families as supporting families, we published a narrative. We used some of the language that many areas use, which is the right support to the right families at the right time. The question of how local areas are identifying and responding to vulnerability would be good to pick up with further witnesses from local authorities. Many will have threshold systems, and many will be trying to encourage early help support to any family that needs something extra and will then have a scale of intervention. Even though, as I said, we do not collect formal statistics on early help, local areas are delivering those services and are trying to provide strategies.

I will let Fran come in on the legals. On partnership working, it is of course difficult to measure the extent of partnership working through something like Section 10. In what we call the *Early Help System Guide*, we ask all areas to self-assess the quality of their partnership working for early help, but I know that there is also a system for child protection, which I will let Fran talk about: the wider legislative framework and the child protection partnership assessments.

Fran Oram: It is quite complicated, and I have had a bit of a teach-in from colleagues since having notice of the questions. Thank you very much for the warning about it. If there is anything further that the Committee is interested in regarding the technicalities, we would be happy to follow up in writing.

Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 is known in shorthand as the duty to co-operate. You are absolutely right, Lord Bichard, that that duty was placed on the local authority to make arrangements to promote co-operation between the authority and local partners. It was introduced following Lord Laming's review of the Climbié case. As part of that, things called local safeguarding children boards were established.

It is important to note that, in 2017, the Children and Social Work Act replaced the local safeguarding boards and amended Section 10 of the 2004 Act so that a shared and equal duty was placed on all three multiagency partners. The duty to co-operate was placed on the local authority, the chief constable and health—the chief executives of the relevant CCGs, the clinical commissioning groups.

Lord Bichard: In the context of child protection? That is critical.

Fran Oram: Absolutely, in the context of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, which is quite broad. All three partners are under an equal duty to co-operate, and they have the ability under some 2018 regulations—I can give you their formal title—to compel other agencies, including schools and all sorts of local bodies, also to co-operate. That is a really wide-ranging, powerful duty, we think.

That multiagency partnership working only came into operation in 2019, not long before Covid hit us. We are trying to allow some time for the new multiagency arrangements to bed in, and we are keeping an eye on how they are working. We have commissioned Sir Alan Wood to review the arrangements, and he has given us a report, which we are currently considering, and we will respond to that report and give details of any changes that we think are needed to the multiagency safeguarding partnerships in due course. We also have inspection of local partners, and a range of other levers to keep tabs on whether we think they are working effectively or not.

I hope it is reassuring that health is compelled and fully involved, and that all three partners are taking an equal duty in relation to the safeguarding and welfare of children. Does that answer your question?

Lord Bichard: It does, but we may well want to come back on it, because that defines it more narrowly than vulnerable children. Thank you; that is really helpful. I should hand back to the Chair.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Lord Bichard and the others. It seems to me that there are things coming up on which we may need to ask you to send us some stuff in writing.

Mark, I was particularly exercised by your saying that the school gate or the school door has become very significant in recognising vulnerable children. I had hoped that you would tell us that health visitors were. My experience, when I introduced the family nurse partnership, was that, because health visiting was a universal service, health visitors were the first people to know that a child was being born into a family that would make the child vulnerable, because of all those other things. I wonder if you could write to us about how the Government are pursuing that, and whether you are confident that health visitors are able to take on that role.

I must confess that one of my last tasks in government was insisting that there was a health worker in every Sure Start centre in order to make sure that that connection was made. That is ancient history, and they are not there any more, but I hope that the department still recognises that they have a central contribution to the question of who the vulnerable are.

Mark Davies: Indeed. May I quickly come back on that? When I said the front door and the school gate, I was using a metaphor. I meant health visitors as well—the front-line services.

Yes, we absolutely support health visitor services. There are challenges because of funding issues in local government, which are well attested, but I think you will find that the work that Andrea Leadsom recently produced recognised the central role of health visitors and the healthy child programme more broadly. Absolutely. We completely agree that they are the front line, as are midwifery services, to be honest. If you read Andrea Leadsom's report on the first 1,001 days, beginning with conception, the role of midwives and other universal services such as GPs is absolutely vital as the eyes and ears of society in looking after children.

I am sorry if I gave the wrong impression, Baroness Armstrong; I did not mean to. I remember the family nurse partnership, because I was the official who paid for it in the first programme. I have treasured memories of it.

The Chair: What a pity you did not keep it going, but never mind; it is not your decision. I acknowledge that.

I will quickly bring in Laura Wyld.

Baroness Wyld: I was just going to mention midwives, and I endorse your point about health visitors and antenatal care in the round, especially on the mental health point.

The Chair: Fran, can you hold your idea until the next question and perhaps build it into that? I will be in real trouble if I do not move on.

Lord Davies, Byron, you have the next question. No, you have not. Sorry, it is not you. It is Nick. I am getting my Welsh people confused. Lord Bourne is next.

Q4 Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Thanks very much, Hilary. My apologies to Byron, who will have to wait.

Thanks very much to the panel: there have been some formidable answers to our questions. Clearly, you have come very well prepared; it is a formidable skill, I am sure.

There are a couple of questions that probably worry us. One is the massive number of invisible vulnerable children: over a third—800,000 or something. If I could park that, perhaps you can give us more information on that later.

The question that I really wanted to ask was this. We have talked a lot about collaboration on data and so on, and that is of course important, but I am sure that, as you will appreciate, what will be important going forward is integration. That has been talked about in the context of the family hubs. There is a steer—in fact, it is more than a steer; there is clear policy from Ministers—about integration on the hubs, with intensive, integrated care. How is that going, with the three pilots that were announced? We were going to have three pilots in February. Do we know where they are and how long they will be piloted for? When are we going to get the rest of them? It is important, as I am sure you appreciate, that this is rolled out across the country, so that we have them in every

community. It will clearly be central to moving the dial in this area. An update on that would be useful. I guess that Kirby will probably want to say something.

Robert Arnott: I think that family hubs is me in the first instance, Lord Bourne, if that is all right, Chair. I am afraid, however, that I do not have in front of me lines on where we are up to in identifying and announcing pilot areas, although of course I will be happy to ensure that we write—

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: That is vital, is it not?

Robert Arnott: Well, it is not in my brief, but I will ensure that we write to you.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Do we not know when the pilots are going to be announced, Robert? I find that staggering.

Robert Arnott: I am sure that the officials who lead on pilots absolutely know the answer to that question. I am just seeing whether anybody is helping me: we have the chat function running in parallel. Not yet.

Sorry, Lord Bourne: I do not know the answer to when the pilots will be announced.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: You have no idea?

Robert Arnott: No, I do not. I would be guessing. I know that the Secretary of State cares deeply, so my assumption is that it will be as soon as humanly possible, but I do not want to speculate on something where I am not the lead.

All I can tell you on family hubs is three or four elements. I think that the Government have already announced a new £40 million, pending a future spending review, in addition to or alongside the pilots. I do not think it is written in here: I am sorry if I have missed it. No, it is not. That is to support a national centre for family hubs to provide peer learning, expert advice, guidance and so on. There is also an evaluation fund to help to build the evidence base. Then, there is specific investment in data and digital, which is a theme in Kirby's area, a theme in family hub plans, and a theme, as I have said, in the data improvement across government programme, in particular asking how professionals can be helped to understand and respond to families better by joining up data.

Somebody is now giving me a line. In February, the DfE launched expressions of interest to recruit three local authority partners. The window closed on 14 March. Eleven LAs across England expressed their interest for the first round, and those expressions of interest are currently being reviewed by a cross-government panel. Local authorities have been ranked on the maturity of their local data models and level of need, and the EOIs—the expressions of interest—are being assessed on a range of contextual and strategic factors. Then, there is a wonderful government deadline of, "We expect to make an announcement around the summer", which could mean any time from next month to shortly thereafter.

As I said, if the Secretary of State were sitting here with us, he would be saying, "I am very keen to get on with this", so I do not think that our not yet answering the question should be taken as an indication of foot dragging.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Inevitably, it must cast some doubt on it. It would be really good to know when the appointments are going to be made and when it is going to be rolled out. That is central to the work that we are doing. If you are able to write to us on that, it would be useful.

Robert Arnott: Of course.

Kirby Swales: Those three pilot areas will probably build on areas that are already doing family hubs. In my visits to local areas, I have seen that lots of local authorities are using the family hub model as part of their wider strategy to support families and vulnerable children. Often, areas split a city or an area into a geographical footprint, with a family hub at the heart of it and links with schools within that.

There is some really interesting, excellent practice. I would not want the committee to have the impression that family hubs are not already operational. This project is really about the Government's policy to champion them and to do further research and evaluation. As you say, Robert, the national centre will drive good practice development.

Mark Davies: May I come in? You are going to have all of us answering this question.

There are a couple of things. A number of local authorities maintain the Sure Start model. It is not that there is a completely blank canvas; there are already services in place. As importantly for the family hubs model, Andrea Leadsom, in her report, put her faith in that model, and we will be doing some work to think about how we can enhance work with DfE and colleagues to ensure that the family hub model delivers the commitment in Andrea Leadsom's report. There is a lot of activity around this and a lot of commitment to making the model work.

The Chair: Nick, are you happy with that?

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: Not entirely, as I have indicated, but I am grateful to Robert for saying that he will write more fully, because I think we need more information. I am sure that work is happening, but it is just that it was not at people's fingertips, which leads one to suppose that it could perhaps be given a bit more heft, but thanks for the answers I had.

The Chair: Laura Wyld had her hand up.

Q5 **Baroness Wyld:** I need to declare my interests: I am a non-exec on the board of Ofsted and a non-exec at DCMS.

I am afraid that I am going to labour Lord Bourne's point. You rightly

make the point that some family hubs are up and running and doing very well. Off the top of my head, I think there is one in Westminster, on Bessborough Street, and one on the Isle of Wight. Those are the ones that have come across my radar. As you say, there is a lot of support for the model. Why, therefore, is it taking so long? Why can we not just roll them out?

Robert Arnott: This will sound like a technocrat's answer. The answer is that there is currently no such thing as "them". You have named two of them; my briefing would have caused me to say that Westminster and the Isle of Wight were two excellent examples where local authorities and other partners have come together in shared space to try to do things in a joined-up way. Those are just the two examples that you and I, Lady Wyld, happen to be talking about.

The Government's experience has been that there is a range of different ways in which individual local authorities and partners have done things in this space. Beyond the simple exhortation, "There must be family hubs", it would be difficult for the Government to say, "and the evidence says that ideally they should look like this, or they should do that". The reason that, alongside the three pilot areas, the Government are investing both in the national centre and in the innovation fund is to help local authorities and partners who want to do this to see what some examples of good and effective look like, based on evidence.

We will of course continue to offer local authorities that are interested, "Well, of course, you might want to talk to Bloggs", or "You might want to look at this or that", but the reason why it is taking us a bit of time to work out where the pilots should be is that we, with partners, are having to go round the exercise that says, "What actually is the question that we are trying to ask? How can we actually be most useful to partners in future in this space?"

Apologies, Lord Bourne: the reason I did not have it at my fingertips is that it is a colleague in a different part of the department who leads day to day on this. The reason it is taking its time is that we are collectively having to apply our mind quite seriously to "How do we make sure this works and has the best possible chance?" Otherwise, the risk is that it just becomes worse, and the Secretary of State is very keen that that should not be the consequence.

The Chair: Thank you for that. Can we move on to Lord Davies?

Q6 **Lord Davies of Gower:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon to the panel.

We know that there is a range of initiatives or government programmes that aim to support vulnerable children. We know that the programmes are similar in nature but have separate aims, and are evaluated according to different criteria. Given all this activity across government, how does Government collectively measure progress in reducing the number of vulnerable children?

Robert Arnott: There is a current answer and an over-the-horizon, desirable answer. The current answer is that it uses measures to think in two ways. On the one hand, how many children face vulnerabilities? The sorts of measures that the Government use in that space are things like how many children are eligible for free school meals, how many children have additional needs and how many children receive support from a social worker.

Alongside that, there are “So what?” measures, if you like. What is the experience, or what are the outcomes, for children receiving that kind of support? What is their educational attainment compared with their peers? What experiences do they have during the time when they are being supported in the system? For example, how many placement moves have they had? How ready are they for adulthood? There is a range of indicators.

On the over-the-horizon answer, you will recall that, earlier in my evidence, I talked about the programme of work called data improvement across government—an amazingly boring title—which is attempting, with money, to link administrative data, to link people’s data systems. We have already succeeded in linking education data with criminal justice data, and in the next month or so we are about to sign the agreement that would link that data with health data, in a suitably anonymised and protected way.

What, foreseeably, that gives us, over the next three, five or 10 years is the ability much better to think, “What are the consequences through time for children who demonstrate particular characteristics early in their lives? Do the things that the state does to support those children work or do they not work, and what are the downstream consequences?”

At the moment, there is an okay-ish answer, although it is not great. How many are there, and what are the consequences for them? I think that, certainly for the first time in my career, we are beginning to see the possibility of looking properly at linked data and thinking, “What are the flows through and are we having the sorts of effects that we would expect to see?”

To make a personal point, I am hoping that one of the things that that will strengthen is the desire and the value of intervening early to prevent problems, rather than our country being like all other countries, with an inevitably greater tendency to respond to problems once they are manifest, rather than getting ahead of them. I am making you “jam tomorrow” promises.

Lord Davies of Gower: Thank you, Robert. Who would like to come in next on that?

Kirby Swales: I am happy to come in, to say a bit about how we think about this from a Supporting Families perspective, albeit in the context that we are not talking about all vulnerable children; we are talking about vulnerable children in families identified by local authorities for extra

support. Over the last few years, that has been around 800,000 families, for which about 400,000, or just over, we can measure sustained and improved progress.

For a family outcome to be claimed by a local authority, it has to track the progress of each member of the household it is working with over a significant period. In particular, it must be satisfied that all the children are in school 90% of the time for three terms. Effectively, there is long-term outcome tracking for each child that is part of the family support system. What we are trying to do with that, albeit for a smaller number of families, is to try, at the local level, to create the intelligence about how successful local areas are in improving, as Robert said, the consequences for the families that have been brought to their attention.

This year, we are going to trial collecting data on all children and families in the early help system, so we will be collecting data on more families. We are co-designing a new outcomes framework for those families, which could include different measures of child vulnerability, and would then be tracked over time, and we could aggregate some of that data.

A bit like Robert, there is a bit of jam tomorrow in that answer, but we are trying to get a better handle, nationally and locally, on what the picture is and use data more effectively.

Lord Davies of Gower: How does that come together across government?

Kirby Swales: Effectively, we share the results of that data collection across government. As I said earlier, the Supporting Families outcomes framework is basically an amalgam of different measures that would be of interest to other departments, such as school attendance, mental health, involvement with crime, and domestic abuse. Effectively, we identify a matrix of measures for each family, and we or local practitioners track that over time.

As others have said, we have good data on individual themes of vulnerability, but what the Government and the country do not really have is a cross-cutting family survey that gives us a dynamic picture of the number of children and families experiencing overlapping disadvantage in real time. That does not exist. There are elements that you can do via surveys such as *Understanding Society*, but it is not as full a picture as perhaps you would have from a bespoke data collection, longitudinal or cross-sectional.

Lord Davies of Gower: That is interesting. Thank you. Does anybody else want to come in on this issue? Fran, do you want to come in?

Mark Davies: May I come in as well? Kirby has described the framework that is being developed for troubled families. We have a similar framework in public health called the public health outcomes framework, which has a series of measures, most of which are not health measures.

They can be about the social determinants of health, and one of them, for example, is school readiness, which is a universal measure.

To be honest, I think there is room for some universal outcome measures, where we all understand what the contributions of mental health services or social services are in the achievement of that outcome. I do not think we are there yet but, as Robert says, we are heading in that direction, once we can start to collect, understand and share the data. We are not there at the moment, but we have elements of it that we can put in place. I would say that school readiness at the age of four is a very good indicator of many of the things that have happened in the preceding four years. An optimal outcome would be to have some way of understanding how each element of those complex factors leads to improvements in that outcome. That is what we should be aiming for, to be honest.

Q7 Lord Davies of Gower: I am very conscious of the time, but I have one further point that I would like to put to you with regard to the spending review. Do your departments plan to submit a joint bid on child vulnerability ahead of that?

Robert Arnott: We agreed that I would take this one first. Answering your question directly, it is extremely unlikely that we would want to submit a joint bid. All of our experience—of course, many of you are as expert and experienced as we are—is that the incentives towards joint bids tend to fall away towards the end game of spending reviews that are constructed much more to think vertically.

To offer you some comfort and hope, however, there are two or three things. First, I absolutely think that we will be in the business of making aligned bids. As you have seen, hopefully, the four of us, with our colleagues in the Home Office, the MoJ and elsewhere, spend quite a lot of time with one another on a whole range of stuff. We and our teams have the human relationships and the working practices, as well as the notional intellectual desire, to work together.

Secondly, I think I saw—I am afraid I cannot remember—from your Covid report that you had spotted a thing called the shared outcomes fund. That was a cross-government experiment to try to bring a range of departments together around a problem. As it happens, we four, along with our pals in closely neighbouring departments, have already bid successfully to the shared outcomes fund in a range of areas. The reason for telling you that is that it means that we have learned how to work together, and we have had demonstrable success in creating shared ambition and expressing it well to the centre of government.

The third thing that I would call out—it is deeply tedious and technocratic, so apologies, although maybe Lord Bichard would find it appealing—is the little secretariat team that has been supporting the first daily and then weekly sitrep meetings on vulnerable children and Covid, and the monthly programme boards that we have been having. We have just bolstered it with additional senior civil servant capacity, very

deliberately, to look towards recovery, and strategic planning for that, on the one hand, and on the other to make sure that we are thinking sufficiently coherently and clearly towards the SR. Within the context of how the UK currently does spending reviews, those are reasonable steps towards trying to do things in an aligned way.

Going back to my “jam tomorrow” point, I think it will become much less sustainable not to think longitudinally about prevention and response at the point where the state starts to have joined-up data that talks about consequences. At that point, it will come to light but we are not there yet.

Lord Davies of Gower: Anyone else? If not, over to you, Chair.

Q8 The Chair: Thanks very much. We are a few minutes over, but I want to throw in a curve ball, if you will indulge me. I am very happy for you to say that you will get back in touch.

It seems to me that we have not talked about what you all term contextual safeguarding, which is a fairly new term to me. I do quite a lot of work with an organisation—more than one organisation, in fact—that works with young women, young adolescent girls, who are subject to grooming. That has increased phenomenally over Covid, through the internet. It strikes me that the perpetrators there, the perpetrators of county lines, who know where to find the most vulnerable children, are one step ahead of the agencies, as somebody said to me last week, and I thought they are absolutely right. The perpetrators increase the vulnerability of already very vulnerable children. Do you feel that Government has a handle on how to tackle this and how to ensure that the perpetrators are not one step ahead?

Fran Oram: So—

Robert Arnott: We—

Fran Oram: Part of that—

Robert Arnott: Are you taking that, Fran?

Fran Oram: I was going to, Robert, yes: I think it is more in my territory.

This is something we are very concerned about, Baroness Armstrong, and I completely hear what you are saying. As for whether we think we are on top of it and gripping it adequately, “Not yet” is probably the short answer. We definitely have a way to go, and you are absolutely right: there are certain types of child and young person who are more at risk of exploitation of different types, and contextual safeguarding is the sort of technocratic term for that. We are really looking at all harm outside the home. That is obviously the responsibility of children’s social care.

Historically, people think of children’s social care as children at risk of harm within the home, predominantly, or close familial harm. Increasingly, children’s social care is dealing with children at risk of

sexual exploitation outside the home, county lines activity, as you say, and getting drawn into gangs and serious violence on the streets. Social care is evolving its practice, if you like, and is getting more adept at addressing those issues. There is obviously a significant police responsibility as well when it comes to criminality.

The other type of child who is at particular risk of this is the child with special educational needs and disabilities. You are absolutely right; criminal gangs are pretty adept at keeping one step ahead of the authorities and targeting those vulnerable children, and I know that police partners and children's social care practitioners are very alive to that and are working very closely, both at national level and at local level, to try to keep on top of it. I think we have some way to go to make that more effective. There is always risk when multiple partners are responsible. Where does the buck stop, ultimately? There is more work to do to make sure that practice is as effective as possible and that, wherever we are aware of a child being at risk of harm, the authorities can intervene in the most effective way possible.

The Government launched the independent review of the children's social care system recently, and this is one thing that they will be looking at. It is very much about trying to ensure that children's social care is future-proofed, if you like, and is keeping on top of best practice. There is some great stuff. Pre Covid, I went to visit the Westminster local authority to see its gangs unit, which is a children's social-care-led unit with outreach social care staff out in the streets, working with kids at risk of getting drawn into gangs and trying to remove them from risk of harm. It is not an easy thing to solve. That is for sure.

The Chair: I think it is fair that I let you go now. We have kept you for longer than we promised. We are very grateful to you. There is a host of other questions that I would love to have asked you, so it may be that we will come back to you at some stage. We certainly hope that we can talk to your Ministers, and I hope you can reassure them that we are out to get the same thing as you have been advertising, which is that we really improve the opportunities in this country for vulnerable children and we find the most effective ways of doing that.

Thank you very much for your commitment this afternoon and for the time that you have taken to think about the questions and give us your responses. As I say, if there is anything else that you think we should have heard and we have not had time for, and you can drop us a line, we would be really grateful. Again, thank you very much.

The committee will be having a post-evidence session, but, inevitably, that is on another system, on Teams. Thank you, everyone, for your activity and your contributions this afternoon.

Fran Oram: Thank you very much for having us.

Robert Arnott: Thank you, and good luck with your review.

The Chair: Thank you.