



## Public Services Committee

### Uncorrected oral evidence: Role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Wednesday 12 May 2021

4 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; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pinnock; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

Evidence Session No. 5

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 34 - 41

### Witnesses

I: Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Lead Member for Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association, and Cambridgeshire County Councillor; Jenny Coles, Immediate Past President, Association of Directors of Children's Services, and Director of Children's Service, Hertfordshire County Council.

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## Examination of witnesses

Councillor Lucy Nethsingha and Jenny Coles.

**The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to our second evidence session this afternoon in our inquiry looking at what we can understand about child vulnerability through our public services. Two very important organisations are represented by our next two witnesses. Local government holds the centre of the field in services for children. We have been discussing how much everyone else is involved, but the central importance of local government is reflected by our next two witnesses. Welcome to both of you.

Lucy Nethsingha is a councillor in Cambridgeshire. Congratulations on your re-election last week. Jenny Coles is from the Association of Directors of Children's Services and is the immediate past president. What a year for you to be president of the organisation. My heart went out to you when I realised that you have just had to give up and that, when you started, the pandemic and lockdown were already with us. We are really grateful to both of you for coming. The first question in this session is from Lord Hogan-Howe.

Q34 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** Good afternoon, Lucy and Jenny. First, I declare my interest as a non-executive with the Cabinet Office. Secondly, may I remind Jenny and Lucy to introduce themselves when they speak? We all know who you are, but it would be helpful to people who are watching.

My first question is this. How do your member organisations define child vulnerability and assess the number of vulnerable children in their local plan, and consequently identify the support they need? What is the definition? How do they count, and how do they arrange the support?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I am a councillor in Cambridgeshire, and on this occasion the representative of the Local Government Association. The way in which our organisations define child vulnerability varies to some extent according to which bit of the organisation you are talking about. The most fundamental one is about children in need, and relates to children and social care. We all recognise that the definition of child vulnerability is extremely difficult and complex, but for most of local government the social care element is the most important element of child vulnerability in the way we assess children.

One of the issues with that is that it misses out quite a broad sector of other children who are vulnerable. I would particularly highlight children with special educational needs, who are not always picked up in the child in need or social care category but are obviously vulnerable children in a variety of different ways.

There is quite a large group of children who are vulnerable at a level that does not meet social care thresholds. They are probably some of those we are most interested in for this meeting, given the previous conversation. Clearly, once you have met a social care threshold and have a label, as it were, you are in the system, but an awful lot of

children are outside the system and do not necessarily receive the support they need. If they then come into the system at a high level of need, we are trying to intervene at a stage when they have quite high and complex levels of need, and that is sometimes very expensive. Is that a sufficient answer for now?

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** I think so. I may come back to you, but thank you. I would like to hear Jenny's answer now.

**Jenny Coles:** To build on what Lucy said, local authorities work within the legislative framework of the Children Act. Section 17 of the Children Act is where we talk about children in need. This is, and was originally intended to be, a broad definition, and could include children with disabilities, young carers, and children who are homeless, or whose families are homeless.

In practice, over the years—partly to do with resources—that has been interpreted as a narrower group, and, as Lucy said, in relation to broader vulnerability, it has changed over the years. It could be young people who are on the margins of being excluded from school and getting involved in criminal activity. Local authorities and their partners try to support those children through their early help offer and various other projects. Funding has been a lot tighter, particularly over the last 10 years, and has reduced. The ability to support those young people has become increasingly challenging and, therefore, can lead to an increase in their vulnerability and need for specialist services. I am sure we will pick that up, and I am more than happy to talk about it as the hearing goes on.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** It seems to me that you are confirming one of the things we have heard, which is that the definition can change. There is a core definition under Section 17. I suppose the danger is that, if it is inconsistent, it does not help counting. The Children's Commissioner said that there is a lot of undercounting of vulnerability and, if it is too broad, almost anyone at some time could be drawn into it. Do you think that will be resolved any time soon?

**Jenny Coles:** This is a really important area to look at, particularly because of the pandemic and what we see emerging with the impact on children, young people and families as we move through different stages, and their varying vulnerability in the impact on them. It would not be true to say this is new and that the debate was not going on before the pandemic. We have seen in particular young people on the edges of exploitation and vulnerable to that, and we have seen a whole range of new criminal and sexual exploitation over the last five or six years, so it is a really live debate in local authorities and their partners, particularly on funding issues and how we can better work together to spot vulnerability early and reduce it.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Lucy, if you agree with Jenny's point that it has been going on for a while, and that the Covid period has probably amplified the need for some certainty, what would you see as the catalyst

for concluding that debate, even if it changes in three years' time?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** To conclude the debate about what counts as vulnerability?

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** The definition of vulnerability and who you count in and who you exclude.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** There need to be some decisions about what you are trying to achieve and whom you are trying to target. If you want a broad definition, you will manage to reach more children and do more early intervention work, which would be helpful in stopping the current level of need and the complexity of those cases increasing.

To add to what Jenny said, it is important to recognise that children move in and out of vulnerability. There needs to be a certain amount of recognition that children move in and out of those situations. For example, we have a system with free school meals and the pupil premium where, when you have been counted once, you count for a certain period of time. You might want to have some mechanism like that, because sometimes children move into a category and are then lost in the system, and nobody checks whether or not they are still vulnerable. That is just a further point, but it does not necessarily answer your question.

Q35 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** That is fine. It is helpful. I want to move to a second area. The Children's Commissioner told us that a culture of mistrust and risk aversion impedes data sharing within local authorities, and that front-line staff do not understand what they can share. Do you agree? Whether or not you agree, do you have examples of where data sharing is working really well?

**Jenny Coles:** There are always challenges put to us about the sharing of data and information. We know that comes out of serious case reviews, but on the whole it is not something that local authorities see as impeding their work. They share data across a whole range of partners. *Working Together* is very clear about sharing data, and we understand data protection.

Given what we have all been through in the last 12 months, and the sort of information that has had to be shared, and shared quickly, to support members of our community—health data, financial data and all sorts of things—that has made us work more closely together and moved forward confidence and belief in sharing data. When I meet families and the public, people expect us to share that data, to do the best we can to support people, whether they are adults or children. Without getting caught up in individual worries about sharing that data, we just have to move on with it. I think the last year has really helped with that.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Jenny, if you are right—I am not saying you are wrong—why do you think that, even in the evidence we have heard from witnesses in a relatively short time, we hear people say constantly that there is a problem?

**Jenny Coles:** I think we have to get underneath that and find out what the problem is. Are we sharing big amounts of data? I think we are. We are certainly sharing data when it comes to our guidance on working together and safeguarding children. It is important to get under the detail of that. Are we sharing the right data, and are people understanding what they are sharing, as opposed to thinking that they cannot share it? That is often the issue. People know that they can share data and information. Sharing the right valuable information is sometimes the area we need to work on, but we need the detail on that. The legislation that supports us sharing information and data is there.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** There is an issue about whether it is large data or private personal data.

**Jenny Coles:** Yes, absolutely.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** I think it is the latter that people get worried about. They do not want to breach privacy and do not want to be held to account for it. Lucy, do you have anything to add?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I absolutely agree with your last point. I agree with Jenny that the sharing of high-level data between large organisations is much, much better than it was. Sharing between local authorities and health is much improved, and sharing between local authorities and the police is also probably much improved in a number of areas.

I would not be at all surprised if that message and those better arrangements did not always filter right down to the front line. Front-line workers are often worried about what they can and cannot do. There is a huge problem of recruitment and pressure in social care services, in particular a high turnover of social workers, which makes it more difficult for people to feel confident about what they are and are not allowed to do.

The fragmentation of the school system into lots of different academies has made it much more difficult for local authorities to share data and have the close relationships with schools that they had in the past. That issue needs to be tackled. Some of that data sharing is better with other partners. The data sharing and relationships with schools are perhaps less good than they were some time ago.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Thank you both.

**The Chair:** Do any of my colleagues want to come in on this? I see that Lord Bichard has joined us. He has some experience in lack of data sharing on children, but he is not tempted at the moment. Our next questioner is Baroness Wyld.

Q36 **Baroness Wyld:** Good afternoon, witnesses. I remind everyone of my interests as a non-executive of Ofsted and at DCMS.

Can we go back to the children and families we were talking about who

do not meet the threshold for statutory support? Jenny, you started to touch on preventive programmes and early intervention, and talked about funding. Could both of you point to some examples where you see success in preventive programmes? Jenny, would you say that it is just funding that is the barrier, or are there wider cultural issues that we need to be aware of?

**Jenny Coles:** I will start off with the wider issues. It is a bit like safeguarding; there is a whole range of people's responsibilities on options for early support and intervention, right from universal services to health visitors and the early years settings that are particularly important. We all know that the first few years in life are very important in supporting new mothers, and often a little help goes a long way.

There are new ideas around family hubs, which I have to say were built on Sure Start and children's centres. Many places like my own in Hertfordshire now have broader family centres, but funding has been reduced in that area. Local government has had a reduction in resources, and increasingly across the country it has had to look at non-statutory services. In that space, what is also important is the troubled families funding, now thriving families. That is essential. In a lot of areas, it is the mainstay of the early help and early intervention offer. It is a multidisciplinary offer. It has been evaluated. There have been some good returns on its impacts. It has another year's funding. I cannot miss this opportunity to say that I hope that in any spending review that funding goes on for longer. It is really important, and that multidisciplinary approach has had an impact across the system.

There are various ways of supporting. Local areas are hanging on to their early intervention and prevention. Increasingly, public health is involved and is helping to steer that. If ever a time was needed, it is absolutely true now. It is very important. There is increasing evidence of impact. The Early Intervention Foundation has done a lot of work gathering the impact of early intervention, and it is important to show that.

**Baroness Wylde:** I am delighted that we have come to family hubs again. I think a number of us on the committee, if not all of us, were very surprised by the lack of pace from the centre when we talked about this in a previous session. Do you share that observation? Do either of you have any reflections on why that might be, beyond funding? We see successful examples of family hubs in different areas, but a lack of pace in the wider national rollout.

**Jenny Coles:** Yes, absolutely. It is really important that there is an integrated approach. It is a great opportunity. There is quite a lot of good practice where public health commissioning, children's commissioning and health commissioning have come together to create similar models to family hubs, particularly for public health nursing, child development centres and so forth. This is a big opportunity. If we brought our resources together, a real cross-government push in the early years space could make a real difference, including for children with special needs.

**Baroness Wyld:** Lucy, do you want to give your reflections?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I agree with most of what Jenny said. To go back to your original question, funding is critical in this area. Family hubs are being rolled out in lots of places, and I think all councils are very aware of the real need to try to rebuild after so many children's centres were closed and so many universal services have been shut. Funding is one of the issues that is slowing that down.

In my area, for children and families who do not reach the threshold, even accessing a family hub is quite difficult. There are restrictions on who can access them. Universal services are absent in large chunks. There are universal services available for up to five, but for lots of the school age there is very little at a universal level, and family hubs are not necessarily providing that, even when they are available.

I reiterate that funding is absolutely critical. The willingness and desire of councils to do it is 100% there, but if the funding is not it is very difficult for us to do it.

**Baroness Wyld:** Thank you very much, Lucy.

**The Chair:** Does anyone want to ask anything to follow up Laura's points? No. We will move on to Baroness Pitkeathley.

Q37 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** I want to follow up what has been said about integrated services. Jenny, you mentioned that, and Lucy very much agreed. I do not know whether either of you was present at our previous session. We asked the panellists what a good joined-up local service looked like and what the essential elements were. You mentioned funding. I am sure we all absolutely understand that, but beyond funding what are the essential elements of a joined-up approach to child vulnerability in a local area? Lucy, could I turn to you first on that, and ask you to add what you think is the members' role in ensuring that it happens?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** That is an interesting last question. One of the critical things about proper joined-up services is making sure that there is no wrong door and that there is a way into the service, whichever bit of it you come into, and that you are not told, "This is the wrong bit of the service. You've got to get on the waiting list for another section". That is absolutely critical and quite widely recognised, and people are doing what they can to try to make sure that happens. It is one of the key aspects in making sure that there is a good joined-up service.

To come back to the point I made about schools, they have a crucial role to play in picking up children at risk of becoming vulnerable or who may be vulnerable children but are not yet known to services. I think the relationships between local authorities and schools had deteriorated. Interestingly, certainly in my area, the pandemic improved those relationships; there is a much closer relationship between schools and local authorities than there was pre-pandemic. We need to make sure that that continues and is supported, and we do not go back to the "us

and them” approach felt sometimes, where academy schools did not want any kind of local authority role. That is a crucial part of making sure that there is an integrated approach.

The relationships between health, local authorities and the police service are not dreadful. Obviously, they are better in some places than in others, but there is real recognition that we have to work together and share data. It comes back to the data-sharing thing. The relationships with schools had been going in a different direction. That has changed as a result of the pandemic, and we need to make sure that that change stays, and that relationships continue and all sorts of contacts between them continue.

As for the role of members, there is a very clear role in scrutinising our councils and making sure that we are asking the right questions in meetings so that the right things are happening, that we are checking that that is how it feels to people out there, and that we are keeping in touch with the public. One thing is having good relationships with schools in your area. The relationship between any kind of local accountability and the connections between councillors and schools are again less good. It is important to try to have those conversations so that we can see whether schools are happy with what is being delivered by local government.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** I will come back to you on that, if I may. Can I first ask Jenny what a good joined-up approach looks like? What are its essential elements?

**Jenny Coles:** I totally agree with Lucy that a good joined-up approach is about the school base. Schools operate a whole range of support services for young people. Indeed, there are some trials going on at the moment with social workers in schools as part of the research of the What Works centres. Building services that support schools, where children spend so much of their time, or should spend so much of their time, is really important. The areas that do that successfully have a much greater chance of picking up young people who are on the margins of education and supporting them back into education, which is really important.

As for other markers of a good joined-up approach, I mentioned the troubled families, or thriving families, programme. That is a multidisciplinary approach. You do not all have to be in one team, but you are supporting a plan about the family with very clear outcomes and shared aims. That is a good example. Another example of a joined-up approach is in my own authority, and is about family safeguarding, where domestic abuse and mental health workers sit alongside social workers, all working together in a whole-family approach.

Those are key elements that are developing. We have evidence that they are working. It is about scaling them up, which is important. It is not just about having pockets of good practice but about finding ways to provide them on a much bigger scale.



**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Is leadership important in that? If so, is it important where leadership lies in a collaborative approach?

**Jenny Coles:** I certainly think it is in the partnerships. The two that come to mind are safeguarding partnerships, both adults and children, and shared responsibility across the key partners of police, integrated care systems and the local authority, similarly for adults. Within that broader general support, there is the role of health and well-being boards. There is still no clarity in the development of ICS arrangements. That has to be clarified, because they have great potential. They bring all partners together and could provide the leadership that safeguarding boards do in the safeguarding arena.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Lucy, perhaps I could come back to what you said about relationships between local authorities and the police and NHS. I think we could also mention it in terms of the Section 17 accountabilities. You used the word "dreadful". I do not think you said that they were dreadful, but you indicated that there was room for improvement. Are the difficulties in those relationships some of the reasons why children are still slipping through the gaps, perhaps particularly those in danger of sexual exploitation or abuse?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I did not intend to say that the relationships between those three were dreadful. In fact, I think the relationships between local authorities and health and the police often try to be very good. I know that they do not always succeed, but the intention is there. There is huge willingness and desire for those organisations to work together. What I was trying to say is that that was not always the case with schools in the recent past. I think it is much better. After the pandemic, schools and local authorities have recognised that they have to work together and collaborate in a way that two years ago was less good. I am not quite sure where I said "dreadful", but if I did say that it was not what I intended.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** It will be stricken from the record. One of our earlier witnesses said that, above all, the most important thing you have to do with vulnerable children is keep them in school. Do you think children's services should have greater powers to prevent excluding children—I think the term is "off-rolling"—and would additional local powers in that regard help you to safeguard children more?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** My instinct is to say yes. I will be very interested to hear what Jenny has to say. We do not want to force schools not to exclude children; we do not want to force anybody to do anything. Equally, if you have no teeth, it is difficult to have the constructive conversation about keeping children in school that we need to have. It is about needing to have the tools to make sure that a constructive conversation happens, even though it is not necessarily what the school might want. I hope that is a sufficient answer.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you. Jenny, what is your view about off-rolling?

**Jenny Coles:** I definitely agree that local authorities need those powers, and in many cases they work collaboratively with schools, but we have a duty on standards and holding schools to account on vulnerable children. That is a really important role for local authorities and fits in with our broader role with regard to vulnerable children.

Discounting the past year when so many children have not been able to go to school, we know that exclusions were rising. Inclusion of all pupils in school is really important. It is the backbone of our local education system, is it not? The fact that exclusions were rising means that it is an area we all need to concentrate on, education settings as well as local authorities. It is very important.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you very much.

Q38 **Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** It has been a very interesting set of questions. I would like you to say a bit more about the whole area of cross-agency co-operation, and perhaps the role of councillors. My own background is in the health service.

Looking at the various mechanisms to get health and local government in particular to work together, it has been pretty disappointing. I would have thought that the failure of health and well-being boards was a very good example. What mechanisms do you think could come from central government to help and encourage the kind of collaboration that we wish to see?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** You talked about the failure of health and well-being boards. I do not think they have delivered what many people wanted them to do, but some of them have been effective. We need to look again at why some of them have been so effective and others much less so. I do not think we should necessarily dismiss that model on the basis that it has not been successful everywhere. We need to look in more detail at why that is. They were introduced at a time when everybody was struggling with very severe cuts to their budget, and an awful lot of what has gone on between local authority and health over the last eight years has been squabbling over who is responsible to pay for what. That does not lead to very helpful, collaborative or constructive relationships.

Interestingly, in this pandemic year, quite a lot of that conversation has been very different, and some of it has been because the budgets have been managed in a different way. I do not know that we will necessarily be able to continue to manage them in quite that way, but the relationship is currently a bit different because it is not all to do with squabbling about who pays for a particular pound's worth of care. I think it is worth pursuing and continuing the health and well-being board model and looking at why it has worked well in some areas and not in others.

**Jenny Coles:** I certainly do. There may well be the opportunity to regain ground as integrated care systems settle down and we get confirmation on what footprint they all have, which may well have impacted on the ability of health and well-being boards to move forward in the way they

wanted to. Any central encouragement about having a partnership board and the expectation of people to co-operate on responsibilities is helpful and will be really important coming out of the pandemic. My local members would completely support that, to go back to the previous question, because it gives a framework where everybody has to co-operate, instead of just sticking in their own silo.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I agree with that.

Q39 **Lord Bichard:** I apologise for being late. My slot in a debate coincided with this meeting, so I am very sorry about that.

In the time I have been listening to this discussion, I have been struck by the fact that it has been very dominated by the statutory sector and the partnerships and working between statutory agencies. This is an area, is it not, where the private and voluntary sectors have a hugely important part to play, yet we have hardly talked about them today? Yesterday, I was talking to a councillor, who shall remain nameless, who said that the relationship between the local authority and the voluntary and private sectors was not good, and it was having a damaging effect on the way in which they were tackling the issue of child vulnerability.

I know it is very difficult to generalise, but do you want to say a bit about where you think the relationship between the statutory and the non-statutory sits at the moment? Is it good, bad or very variable? Could we do something to improve it?

**Jenny Coles:** I think you are absolutely right. I was just reflecting that I had fallen into that trap, so thank you. The voluntary and community sectors do masses of work in this area and in many places have stepped into the gap where local authorities have had to pull out funding. We must acknowledge that because it is absolutely true. Many of them struggle for funding from one year to another, sometimes from six months to another, because of variable funding streams. They often operate at a level where just a bit of help can assist a family and young person get back on their feet and then they do not need any more help, which is really important.

As for relationships, we keep talking about the last year, but probably over the last year, not only in the children's sector but in the adult sector, close working in a crisis has brought those relationships together across the country. The challenge and the trick will be maintaining those relationships, and local authorities being as supportive of that as they can be. I am sure you have had evidence from Barnardo's about See, Hear, Respond, which was a time-limited funded programme doing a lot of work to support families that did not meet any threshold for other help and needed only a bit of help to move on. It was a really good model. If we can pick up some of that good practice and build on those relationships, it will be important going forward.

**Lord Bichard:** That rather depends on whether local authorities in particular have, in some cases, changed their attitude; in a crisis you can

work in a particular way, but there is then strong pressure to go back to how it was when the pressure is off. Are you optimistic about that change of tone, and optimistic about the future of the statutory/non-statutory partnership?

**Jenny Coles:** There are many good examples across the country where local authorities and the voluntary sector work closely together. The voluntary and community or charitable sector delivers a lot of family and children centres across the country. That is just one example, but I have to say that part of the reason for that relationship not being there any more is that local authorities have had to cut funding in areas that are not statutory. Unfortunately, that is often where the voluntary sector has been delivering.

**Lord Bichard:** I see Lucy nodding. This is your chance.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** That last point is critical. Local government has had to cut back so much. We can only just about manage to afford our statutory functions. Nearly all non-statutory functions have been cut right back to the bone in most authorities. One of the first things to go were the small grants to voluntary organisations working with children.

Many voluntary organisations working with children have carried on doing that work really well and we are incredibly grateful to them, but because we cut their funding we no longer have the close relationship with them that we had before. It is not that the work they do has stopped, although there may be less of it; it is that their relationship with local government is now different because we are not involved in the work they are doing, in that we do not make a financial contribution to it. It is not just the financial contribution; it is also about staffing. Those relationships take staff time, which is at a premium. We have cut back staff numbers enormously and do not have the time to keep relationships with organisations that we are no longer funding.

I am afraid that funding is a main driver of the fact that our relationships with those voluntary organisations are not as good as they used to be. It is also a major factor in why people like me and Jenny focus on the statutory stuff, because that is what local authorities are doing now. It would be very nice to be doing other things.

Youth services are an interesting example of where that is missing. There is so much that would be really good for local authorities to be doing again. There is some good, interesting evidence on the benefit, the protective quality, for a young person of having a trusted adult to talk to who is neither someone from their family nor someone from their school. The Cubs, the Guides, football teams, netball teams or whatever can provide that, and often do, but those people no longer necessarily have a connection with the local authority or the school. They are operating in a separate category and, therefore, sometimes we do not hear.

**Lord Bichard:** I am probably going to be told to shut up, but I cannot

help but challenge you a little bit. Should not the relationship between the statutory and non-statutory sector be driven by the needs of children rather than by funding? As you said, there are lots of voluntary organisations that have lost funding and have carried on doing work. Should we not be building the relationship around the needs of children rather than whether or not there is some money involved in it?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** It is not that it is not about the needs of children; it is that in the past, when we were contributing to the funding of those organisations, it was considered to be obligatory in a way for somebody from the local authority to be involved with those organisations at least to keep a check on, or have some kind of conversation about, how the money was being spent and what they were doing. There was a relationship.

When that financial relationship is no longer there, it is quite difficult to have the structures and justify the staff time to go and talk to dozens of different voluntary sector organisations when you do not have to, and when every hour of staff time is being counted. It is not that we do not want the relationship, or that it was based only on funding; it is just that, in a situation where you are counting every penny, that also includes hours of staff time.

**The Chair:** Thank you. This raises a very significant issue about children who are falling through the net and are not coming in front of the organisations that need to step in to help them. Let me give you an example.

I have been working quite a lot recently mainly with small voluntary sector organisations—and one larger one—that work with young women and girls who are being groomed and sexually exploited. During the pandemic, this has developed because of the ability of perpetrators to use the internet, and blah, blah, blah. It is really horrendous stuff. Several of those organisations have talked to me about referring girls, specifically a 14 year-old, to the safeguarding board. The girl was still coming to them every day but they heard nothing more. I said they should write to the local authority. It is a good local authority. When they took it up, they got the list of what was commissioned, and therefore where the local authority has the responsibility to engage with the voluntary sector because it has commissioned the work.

This is not an area in which local authorities commission, because they cannot afford to. They are busy using their statutory money on all the things where they have no option but to be involved, but that means a significant and dangerous loss of visibility for particular groups. Do you recognise that?

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** Yes. I am sure Jenny will answer in a minute. In the case you are talking about that was referred to the safeguarding board and they did not hear anything, clearly that should not happen. However, I absolutely recognise the issue that if it is not on the list of things we are commissioned to do, or it does not meet our

threshold or fall within a category, we do not do it. It is also quite widely recognised across the sector that that is a problem, but the solution is difficult because of the money.

**Jenny Coles:** For young people who are clearly very much at risk, the opportunity to work with them and divert them away from that is being lost because of having to focus on a high-level statutory element in so many areas, given the funding issue.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I do not think any of us want it to be like this.

**Jenny Coles:** No.

**The Chair:** I will stop taking advantage as the Chair. The next questioner is Baroness Tyler.

Q40 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** I want to pursue one of the points Baroness Wyld was asking you about. I declare my interest as a board member of Social Work England.

A little while ago a senior official from the Department for Education, whom I will not name—he has had enough publicity from us already—told us that there was no cross-government strategy on vulnerable children. It probably brought us up a bit short, to be honest. With that as the context, I have a two-pronged question.

First, what support would you like to see from central government to enable you and your members to tackle child vulnerability in your local area that you are not getting at the moment?

Secondly, would policy development and thinking on vulnerable children and families benefit from a cross-government common outcomes framework that could be used at both national and local level?

**Jenny Coles:** My very quick answer to both is yes. It is no secret to my colleagues in central government that I have spent the last year saying exactly that. Certainly, this is a great time to deliver a common outcomes framework.

There were a number of good elements of the policy emerging before the pandemic and they have now come along. They are in separate departments. There is mental health transformation on emotional health and well-being in DHSC, work on serious violence and child sexual abuse coming out of the Home Office, and funding streams for domestic abuse coming from different places—short term, and so forth.

All those things support vulnerable children and families, yet they are in different strategies and funding streams. We do our best at local level to bring those together, but if there was cross-departmental working and a common outcomes framework, it would drive improvement and work at local level as well, and would be very much welcomed.

**Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Could I go back to the first bit of my question? What additional support would you like from government to

help you in your work, over and above a joined-up strategy and outcomes framework? Is there something that would really make a difference that you are not getting at the moment?

**Jenny Coles:** I do not think we are getting the best value out of the different funding streams. I have spoken about domestic abuse. The old troubled families money is in MHCLG. There are different funding streams that often have similar outcomes. Joining those funding streams together would make a difference, and that support would be really helpful.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** Yes and yes from me as well. To Jenny's list of things that government departments need to be involved in, I would add the DWP and childcare elements of universal credit and the way in which that works, which has a huge impact.

On your question about government support, there are two things I would mention, one of which I know will be supported by my colleagues in the local government sector very broadly, and one of which might be slightly more controversial. The first is backing for us to have a better relationship with schools. That is crucial. I know it is something for which the LGA has been arguing for some time.

The other thing is that at the moment there is no statutory requirement for any kind of universal service. That means that it has been cut. When budgets are under huge pressure and there are requirements for everything else, it is difficult to provide that universal service. It is one of the things where there is access when people need it, so looking at where that fits in would be helpful.

Q41 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** The point about better relationships with schools has been quite a key theme in today's session. I want to pursue the point Baroness Wyld made about family hubs, which are a particular interest of mine. Do you agree with the recommendation in Andrea Leadsom's review of family hubs that they are the best model for interagency work, and help to address underlying causes of vulnerability, and how would you like to see that developed?

**Jenny Coles:** The family hub model is not new. Local areas have been developing them, and they certainly have a lot of merit. The documentation says that the family hub does not always have to be in physical space; it can be in a virtual space in an area. I would support that, and I know that a lot of areas would support it. Alongside that is the joining up of commissioning. It fits into what Lucy said about a universal offer and thinking about how that can be supported nationally. They certainly have a lot of merit in bringing early years services together, building on a pretty strong foundation, even though it has been reduced.

**Councillor Lucy Nethsingha:** I agree with that. I think they are rolling out quite broadly, and a lot of people are using that model. My one reservation is that if you just say, "Everyone has to do it like this", you slightly limit the opportunity for somebody to find something even better. That is all I want to add.

**The Chair:** I think we are just about at the end of everything today. No colleagues are asking to come in, so I will not extend the session beyond the allotted time.

Thank you very much. It was important to hear from the organisations involved at local level in having responsibility for delivering services for vulnerable children, so we are really grateful to you for coming along and giving us your views and ideas. I thank my colleagues, too. I now formally finish the meeting.