



Public Services Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: The role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Wednesday 26 May 2021

4.05 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. 9

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 68 - 72

Witnesses

I: Annie Hudson, Chair, Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel; Mark Douglas, Strategic Director of Children's Services, Bradford Council; Dr Andrea Cooper, former Director, Cabinet Office Policy Lab.

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Examination of Witnesses

Annie Hudson, Mark Douglas and Dr Andrea Cooper.

The Chair: Good afternoon to our second panel this afternoon. We want to welcome all of you and thank you for giving up your time to come to this session of the House of Lords Public Services Committee. We are going to move to questions straightaway. When the first question is asked and you come to answer it, can you very quickly say who you are, what your organisation is and so on? That will help other people watching fit your face to what you are saying and your answer. We would be really grateful if you would do that.

Q68 **Lord Young of Cookham:** A warm welcome to our three witnesses. In the session that we just had, one of our witnesses complained about the amount of time teachers spent filling in forms from government. A strong theme of our first evidence session on public services was that we are overcentralised as a country and this impedes the delivery of high-quality services.

One question that arose is this: if we go down the road of giving local authorities more autonomy, what is the role of central government in intervening when things go wrong and promoting good practice? How can other bodies, be they review panels, professional associations or local authority associations, also promote best practice? Can we go first to Dr Cooper, who sees the problem from both ends, having spent time in Cornwall Council and the Cabinet Office? How do we get that balance right?

Dr Andrea Cooper: Thank you to the committee for inviting me today. It is an honour to give evidence. As you said, I have seen both ends of the spectrum, if you like. I am currently director of design at the Connected Places Catapult, which is part of the innovation ecosystem. Before that, I spent six years at the Cabinet Office overseeing about 100 projects that really looked at these kinds of social issues and how we might innovate more by joining up the system. I had a brief stint during the pandemic leading adult social care transformation at Cornwall Council as well.

The question is a really important one. I heard in the previous panel about how a systems approach is needed. In the Policy Lab, we would often start with the policy agenda but would quickly get out on the ground to understand what was going on and what the lived experience was. We would then move into a process of convening. A few people have written about this. Christian Bason, for example, in his book on public service co-creation, talks about the importance of moving from a management mindset that is a little bit over the fence to one that is much more about system stewardship.

In the Policy Lab, we spent a lot of time thinking about what kind of practical tools we might generate that would help that system stewardship. One that got translated into multiple languages, which we found worked extremely effectively at all levels of government, was our Government as a System toolkit. Perhaps later on I can talk a little about

that and why it worked. That was very effective at creating that common language, and sharing different levers and actions that different parts of a government system might use to make a difference.

Annie Hudson: Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me today. I am the chair of the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. This is a relatively new body that was implemented following the Children and Social Work Act 2017. We have oversight of all the reviews and notifications as a result of serious harm, and sometimes death, to children. That is our quite narrow perspective on these issues that you are talking about today. We look at situations in which things have gone drastically and tragically wrong for children.

Some of your question is about a balancing act, with local areas and safeguarding partners—that is, the police, health and local authorities working with schools, as we heard earlier this afternoon—working together to develop the right kind of service response and help for vulnerable children and families. At the same time, in the area of safeguarding it is crucial that there are clear national standards and there is consistency in the quality of approach, so that you do not have what might be framed as a postcode lottery in the quality of service and response. Central government has that role of setting the strategic framework and defining the standards in concert with those key local stakeholders.

One of our roles in the panel is to have oversight of how local areas are learning from the serious incidents that have happened in their areas, so that there is a continuous improvement cycle in terms of those serious incidents, whether a child has died or there has been significant harm to a child. Our role is to have that broad look at, and analysis of, those reviews that are taking place right across the country. From that, we generate the learning and a sense of where the system needs to improve.

Sometimes, that may be at a national policy level. For example, if you look at our national review about children who had died as a consequence of criminal exploitation, you will see in that report some very clear recommendations to government. It may be that we make recommendations about how local practice needs to change and improve. That would be about recommendations to the police, health colleagues, schools and the local authority.

It is about that balancing act, working towards a clear national strategic framework. That is particularly important when you are talking about vulnerable children. We certainly see this in the work we do. Families and children move across area boundaries. Until recently, I was working in London's 32 plus one boroughs. Children go to schools in different boroughs; they live in one borough and move across—sometimes, their families may move. You need those national standards and policy frameworks, but with the local areas having the agency to implement as they best fit.

Lord Young of Cookham: I want to come back to you, Annie, on

whether the Government have produced the national strategic framework that you just mentioned. First, can we hear from Mark?

Mark Douglas: Thank you for inviting me along today. I am the strategic director of children's services in Bradford. I have responsibility for all of the social care services plus the relationship and delivery of education to our schools in the district. I listened to the earlier session with some interest and would make some very similar points.

I would agree with Annie that central government should set the framework within which the local authorities should deliver services for vulnerable children and families. However, the delegation of how that looks in each of the local authority areas very much should be left to the place to determine. Bradford is very different from other parts of the country; we have our own issues, challenges and strengths, and we know our communities really well. I reminded myself when I was listening to the question that there is a child at the centre of this. We need to think about how we give them the best possible start in life locally, when they grow up in a place such as Bradford.

One challenge is about how we can demonstrate, as a whole system in a place, that we are joined up and thinking about and promoting best outcomes for children. There is a raft of indicators that I am required to submit regularly to the DfE and other parts of central government, which show how different parts of the system are supporting those children and families. It is a challenge when the system is not joined up as well as it should be. We heard a lot of evidence in the previous session about the need for different agencies within the system to work much more closely together.

That national policy framework should be set by local government. There should be some freedoms to determine how that looks in place. The various inspectorate frameworks should work with and challenge local authority areas to show how they are protecting, safeguarding and promoting very good outcomes for children in their areas.

Lord Young of Cookham: Annie, I hope you have had time to think about the question I mentioned a few moments ago. You said it was important that there was a national strategic framework. We are particularly looking at child vulnerability. I wonder whether that national strategic framework is in place.

Annie Hudson: It is an interesting question, which I heard you asking the previous witnesses. In terms of safeguarding, there is a very clear framework. It is expressed through *Working Together*, which is the bible for safeguarding. It is much more diffuse and less apparent for that broader group of children. Sometimes people say that vulnerable children are about 20% of the child population. There is an issue about definitions, and we do not have a clear, agreed national definition of vulnerable children; it has ebbed and flowed, certainly over the last 15 to 20 years—but there is no national framework.

We have different pieces of the jigsaw. In the child protection system, there is a very clear national framework, but it is less clear when it comes to early intervention and prevention, which arguably, as I have heard other witnesses saying, is a crucial aspect of our collective endeavours to support children who have additional needs. Within that, it is much more open to local interpretation, subject to resources, by local leaders, whether political or professional. In that bigger picture, we do not have that very explicit strategic framework or policy. I suppose that that is part of what you are considering.

Lord Young of Cookham: We are going to have to make difficult decisions about priorities. There is demand from across the spectrum for improved services for vulnerable children. In your view, what is the top priority, given the limited resources that are available, for improving services for children who are vulnerable?

Mark Douglas: The priority for me would be to join up the different parts of the system. I am particularly thinking about some key partners: health commissioners and providers, schools, and children's social care systems. If we could bring those together to create a single vision around how we work with and support vulnerable children, we could get some efficiencies at scale. The fragmentation of the system at the moment means that we do not always get the best out of the resource that we have. That would improve outcomes for children.

There should be a challenge to all parts of the system to think about how we develop and deliver early help and prevention services. In many parts of the system, they have not been statutory. When we went through austerity, it was often the first part of the system to go. That had unintended consequences elsewhere, when children would appear in more acute, high-cost, complex situations. The priorities are early help and prevention, and joining up of the system.

Dr Andrea Cooper: I cannot speak specifically for vulnerable children, as that is not my area of expertise, but I would like to pick up on that previous point about the strategic framework. When I was at the Cabinet Office—I left last year—the former Cabinet Secretary started work in this area on a strategic framework. It was a really interesting piece of work, and they established a systems unit.

The thing that was most telling about the strategic framework activity was that it had three priorities. One was starting with the citizen customer and their lived experience. The second was collaborating across the whole system, joining up and co-designing both the policy and the delivery. The third was about a place-based approach. Whether it would be applied to this area or other areas—and they did have a number of priority areas they were looking at, including reflecting on the Munro review—a strategic framework approach is the right way forward. I cannot comment on where that work is now. That was my experience when I was at the Cabinet Office.

Annie Hudson: I would concur with what Mark said about join-up. I would particularly focus on the connectivity and join-up between services for adults and children. At the moment, we are nearly finishing a large piece of work about non-accidental injury to children under one. We are particularly focusing on the role of men and fathers. One thing that has come out of it is that a quite significant proportion of those men who have gone on to injure and sometimes kill children have had low-level mental health issues, but not of sufficient severity that they would have reached the threshold for adult mental health services. That illustrates how we need to be able to flex our services to meet the needs of children and families better, rather than always sticking to the very absolute criteria.

The other thing is about tackling the perennial problems and stubborn challenges within safeguarding work. Something like 60% of the children referred to us have been deemed vulnerable children. They have not necessarily been involved with children's services, but they have had some element of vulnerability. When we or local areas have unpacked those situations, we have seen in something like 40% of those cases that there has been weak risk assessment, risk management and decision-making. Part of that is the issue you were talking about earlier: weak sharing of information. There are some real perennial challenges that we need to tackle about how the system works, shares information and seeks information about children and families, so that we have a rounded picture of children's needs and how they change over time.

Q69 **Lord Bichard:** Thank you for coming today. We value that. Can I address a couple of questions initially to Annie? The first is to encourage you to carry on with your last contribution. I am interested in the common failings that you are identifying through the work of the panel. Does your panel have enough power or clout? Is it being listened to sufficiently to make a difference or achieve change?

Annie Hudson: To continue what I was saying, I have relatively newly joined the panel, but the other panel members who have been working since its inception, about three years ago, have been really struck by how there is a Groundhog Day feeling about some of the issues coming up in the local reviews. We are seeing really improving quality in the local reviews. People are generally asking the "why" questions, trying to get underneath the story of what has happened to a child and understand what got in the way, in how the whole system helped, supported and ultimately protected, or otherwise, a child.

This stubborn theme or challenge around weak decision-making has come through in that, when people have not shared information in a timely way or gone and sought information from a GP, or are sometimes too optimistic about risk in a child's life. If, like me, you have been around for a long time, you will know that that theme has come up in inquiries from Maria Colwell through Climbié, et cetera. It struck us that we cannot keep saying the same thing.

We are just embarking on a major piece of work and working with our stakeholders. This is about working with the sector and government departments to take a forensic and deep look at the things that get in the way. Is it different professional cultures? For example, we see sometimes, and I have certainly seen it in previous roles as the director of children's services, that the thresholds of concern for a teacher, for example, may be very different from a social worker, which may be very different from a GP. Unless we have a common culture of working together, we are not talking the same language. That is something that one of the previous witnesses talked about. We are not going to get to that place where we can risk assess together.

Those are very difficult issues. We know that, certainly in child protection, we can never eradicate risk. It is about managing risk in a proportionate way. It is not about being averse to risk or being over-intrusive in the lives of families; it is about being proportionate and, as Mark says, keeping children and what life is like for them at the heart of it. In our recent annual report, we set out a number of practice themes, which we will look at in much more detail as we do this piece of work, about how, together, we can better manage risk in the lives of the most vulnerable children.

That was the answer to your first question. On your second question about power and clout, the work of the panel is evolving. In the first couple of years, the panel was very much part of the new architecture of safeguarding. The parameters of safeguarding have changed as a consequence of the Alan Wood review. We now have shared accountability and responsibility between the three safeguarding partners at a local level, and that is really important.

The panel works through influence, and we are building that influence. This is one of the reasons why it is really positive that you have invited me to talk about our work today. We need to up our game in influencing across government. We are based in the Department for Education, and we are having conversations across government. We need to be clear about what we think are the priorities and how they need to be addressed, and make sure that we maximise those opportunities, so that we have power through influence and the authority of the work of the panel.

Lord Bichard: You are not looking for the committee to help you by suggesting that you have more power or new responsibilities. You are happy to carry on.

Annie Hudson: Yes. It is not about having new responsibilities; it is about using the responsibilities and making sure that we are listened to and that our recommendations are heeded or taken into account. That is the way I would see it working. There is more work to be done there.

Lord Bichard: You mentioned Groundhog Day. I have Groundhog Day moments on a regular basis. I suspect it would be very easy for us as a committee to conclude that some of the problems that we face are down

to poor multiagency working, lack of data sharing and not enough early intervention. Everyone has been saying that. I would like to feel that we could go beyond that and start making some innovative recommendations about how you address each of those. Earlier today, someone mentioned joint training, which could be life changing. Mark, what practical things could we recommend that would address those particular barriers? I am not looking for a definitive, exhaustive list, but what are some practical things that would improve multiagency working, data sharing and early intervention?

Mark Douglas: I will pick up on your previous question, then come on to this. From a local authority perspective, we value the role of the panel. We have engaged positively with it. I see there being a really critical role in the safeguarding space for some national learning so we can, as local authorities, take that and think about our local arrangements. I hope I can give you some assurance that the role of the panel is valued.

I am going to give a little example of something that happened in Bradford during the Covid pandemic. All the things you said, Lord Bichard, about Groundhog Day are absolutely right. As somebody who has been a social worker for nearly 29 years, it is depressing that the same key messages come out of serious case reviews about poor multiagency working, weak social work, decision-making by managers that is not firm or strong enough, and not looking at a child in their whole family circumstances. We continue to repeat all of that. When we went into the lockdown in Bradford, it forced the partnership to think differently about how we make sure that we remain sighted on vulnerable children. Like all local authorities, we saw our referral rates drop off quite markedly in that first period. That caused me some concern, as the DCS, that there were children in the system who at any other time would come to our attention because of concerns about their safety or well-being.

In a very short time, six or seven weeks, we brought some key parts of the system together, such as health and social care professionals. It included staff from midwifery and health visiting services. We put them together as a single team with a single risk assessment process and shared information system. We overcame many of the barriers that several witnesses in the previous session said were impeding their ability to look holistically at the child. Through that process, we risk assessed and considered the circumstances around thousands of children across this district, and we were able to identify much earlier and much more preventively children who were beginning to emerge as being vulnerable or at risk.

That team looked at those children. It had a shared risk assessment and a database for information sharing, and we had a shared response where children were identified. I can cite a number of cases which involved a health visitor or a midwife, or we included information from dentistry services. Where children were thought to be becoming vulnerable, there was either a single agency or a joint social work and health service visit to that family. We were able to work preventively and supportively with

families. We overcame a lot of the barriers that, in other circumstances, have impeded that multiagency working.

We have decided as a partnership within Bradford to continue that approach and that team. It is a different, innovative and really flexible way of working that has safeguarded large numbers of children across Bradford district during a national pandemic.

Lord Bichard: That was just the sort of example I was hoping for, but I am conscious that the Chair is about to tell me I am running out of time. I would like to encourage you, Mark, to give us a bit more detail about that particular initiative. I would like to encourage Annie and Mark to bring us some other practical initiatives and changes that you would like to see that would address those three big issues.

Finally—Chair, I am really trying to help—I would have liked to ask a bit more about co-production and co-design involving parents and children. It is pretty difficult to do. Andrea would probably have something to say on that. Again, perhaps if we could ask the witnesses to give us a bit more information after the meeting on that, it would be really helpful.

The Chair: I have other colleagues who want to come in, but I am going to be very strict. Those who have questions later need to slip their supplementaries into those questions.

Q70 **Lord Davies of Gower:** Good afternoon to the panel. My question is directed at Mark, but the other panellists are very welcome to come in, should they wish. Mark, your children's services were judged in 2018 by Ofsted as being inadequate. The follow-up inspections have found improvements and you are now judged as requiring improvement. I am interested in what brought this situation about. Was it one particular thing or a number of issues?

Mark Douglas: On a point of clarity, we were judged inadequate in 2018. That remains the overall judgment because we have not been fully inspected yet. The Ofsted inspection framework was suspended during the Covid period, and it is just starting up again now. You are correct that the monitoring and assurance visits we have received have identified an improving picture and a strengthening system in Bradford.

A number of factors can lead to a local authority becoming inadequate. Some of those are national issues. Many of them are local and particular to that local authority. They are things that you have heard couched in slightly different terms today. There is no doubt that, as local authorities contracted due to austerity and the reduction of funding available to councils, some key services were cut. I come back to the point I made earlier about early help and prevention. That often is where local authorities have taken money out of the system because they are not statutory and there is much more discretion about what you can provide. For me as a director of children's services, that leads to unintended consequences elsewhere. Children are not being supported earlier. They

are often being presented at the statutory front door as requiring social work services. You get increased pressure and demand in that system.

In terms of the local issues that affect local authorities, I have worked in a number that have been either "inadequate" or "RI" and moved to "good". You see particular challenges around inability to recruit and retain qualified and experienced social workers. You see challenges around having strong and assertive management within the systems. Very seldom do you see a children's services department rated "inadequate" where there are not challenges in the broader system.

It is about the strength of relationships, the quality of provision around health and schools, and relationships with the police. All these are key factors, which means they feed into an overall judgment that a local authority children's services department is inadequate. Typically, in a place such as Bradford, if you cannot create the conditions—and I will use a term that was used some years ago—where good social work can flourish, you struggle to provide the stability and a place where staff who are of good quality want to come and work. I would come back to one point that Ofsted made in a number of its publications. A critical element of this is good leadership and management in the system, and I mean at every level of the organisation.

In short, there is not a single thing that leads to children's services becoming inadequate. It is a combination and interplay of different parts of the system and local and national challenges in being able to create conditions within which we can deliver good social work practice. Bradford is a very large local authority with the largest children's population as a local authority in the country. When you overlay that with issues of poverty and deprivation, it provides a very challenging environment within which we can attract, retain and develop our staff so that they can provide a good or better service for children.

Lord Davies of Gower: That is a very honest and comprehensive answer. Thank you. Why has neighbouring Leeds been able to secure an "outstanding" judgment from Ofsted, given that the same sorts of conditions perhaps apply?

Mark Douglas: If you look at the history of Leeds, it has not always been outstanding as an authority. Maybe nine or 10 years ago, Leeds went through a process where its services were not seen to be outstanding. It had some very challenging Ofsted inspections. Leeds made a shift of resources into early help and prevention. It built its whole social work model on being able to work with families sooner and prevent children coming through to more acute, high-cost and high resource-intensity services, such as social work. It could then divert some of the funding released into more preventive work.

Building its model on prevention allowed it to make a step change. It had fewer children who were looked after and fewer children in the child protection system. Those children could get a much more intensive, supportive service from the authority. It was holding children in its early

help services and doing lots of work to support and prevent the escalation of need. That step change, which took a number of years, resulted in that “outstanding” judgment.

I came to Bradford about 22 months ago after the “inadequate” Ofsted judgment. When I was engaging with members here, the chief exec and the council’s senior management team, I was very clear that an improvement journey for an authority the size and complexity of Bradford would take at least three years. You cannot effect change or embed the sustainable change that you need quickly. It was about whole-system change. We will have another letter published by Ofsted next Friday following a recent monitoring visit. I am pleased that it is seeing the improvements coming through the system, but it is a step change. We need to do it systematically so that it is embedded and sustainable beyond any one individual being in the role that I currently hold.

Lord Davies of Gower: On your road to improvement, what effect has the pandemic had on your work?

Mark Douglas: I was clear with my management team at the outset that the pandemic could not be used as an excuse to stop the improvement work, not that they tried to suggest it should. We were all committed as a team to making sure that we continued to deliver improvement work in Bradford during the last 12 to 15 months. We have done that. We have done a lot of work on putting in place appropriate systems and processes; setting very clear service standards, which we now monitor and assess our staff against; and being clear with staff about what the expectations are of them in terms of quality and the work ahead.

Of course, it has had an impact. When we went into the pandemic, as in all places, I suspect, many of my staff started to work from home. I had a dispersed workforce. In any other times, I would have been able to bring those staff together to do training and development, and to upskill them so that they could work to the very exacting standards I was setting for the service and understand what was expected of them. We have been able to do some of that remotely, but not to the level or extent that I would have liked. As we are coming out of the pandemic, we are really accelerating our training and development programmes, and engaging with staff on standards and quality. It has had an impact, but it has not stopped us making progress during that time.

Q71 **Lord Filkin:** Andrea, could you speak to us about your experience at the Cabinet Office on human-centred design and give us your thoughts on its relevance to services for vulnerable children? No doubt you will touch on co-production as one component to that.

Dr Andrea Cooper: When we set up the Policy Lab back in 2014, it was really an experimental space to try out new techniques that might inform policy-making. Seven years on, there are some quite strong lessons that are probably applicable way beyond the Policy Lab itself. The Policy Lab was set up to put people first and take a human-centred approach. That has been quite a crucial through-line, because the thing that is consistent

regardless of different departments or levels of government is that human experience. As a measure of effectiveness, that was really crucial.

I carried that work forward into my work as director of adult social care when we did the transformation strategy there. We took a cohort-led approach in asking what social care might look like for a digital-first generation, thinking again from a human-centred point of view. I am struck particularly by what Mark said about the Groundhog Day challenge and how we break through that with some practical ideas. The key lesson I would take from the Policy Lab is that, too often, innovation is either fringe—sometimes people call it “innovation theatre” because it is just there to look good—or outsourced to management consultants and others. This does us a disservice at the heart of our organisations.

There is a real need for us to increase the legitimacy of social innovation and do so in quite a structural way. We have a target for 2.4% R&D for private sector investment in new ideas and innovation. Why do we not have the equivalent or any target for social R&D? That in itself would give us some infrastructure. You could have social innovation bonds that would fund that, or even levies within departments.

We can get very practical, but this is the lesson I would draw from the lab. You can do small-scale experiments, but the scale of the challenge, if we are not to repeat the Groundhog Day problem, is such that we have to be quite significant in our investment in resources and legitimising that innovation. We have spent billions of pounds on innovation infrastructure in this country, but we have not given the equivalent to social innovation. As a result, public services struggle from solving yesterday’s problems, and in part, walking backwards into the future. We are fixing failure rather than turning to the future and anticipating what services we want for the 22nd century when that comes. We need to be bolder. That would be my key lesson from the lab.

Lord Filkin: That is extremely interesting and useful. Because time is tight, would you mind dropping us a page or two about what a social investment target, fund and learning mechanism would look like, and how it would work? Would that be possible?

Dr Andrea Cooper: I would love to. Could I add that I am looking with real interest at Stoke-on-Trent City Council? It is trialling Family by Family, which came out of the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, TACSI, as a really amazing programme. Investment in organisations such as TACSI, and we saw it also Australia’s recent Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health, puts co-production and co-design at the heart. Yes, I would look to Stoke-on-Trent as a really interesting test case that is relevant to this committee.

Lord Filkin: Illustrate that in your note if you could, because it is not just a headline figure: “Spend 2% of your budget on innovation”. It has to be more granular and clearer than that. That would be really great. Do you have a word on co-production and its relevance to vulnerable children’s services?

Dr Andrea Cooper: We did a lot of work with Alok Sharma on the social housing Green Paper. It was the first time we were able to put residents' experience and voice in a Green Paper in the way that it was done. The lesson I draw from co-production and co-design is that you always discover something new by getting on the ground. It is a move from the positive, paternalistic management of professionals who have lots of answers, and a paradigm shift, to say, "If I have a curiosity, a question and a willingness to collaborate, I will get more". That policy, the social housing work that we did, changed as a result of the co-design.

Lord Filkin: That is very interesting. Again, it would be good to get a note on that. It brings back echoes of work 30 years ago and thinking it was a good idea to listen to tenants rather than just provide services to them.

Could I put the same question to the other two panellists? Do you have a single recommendation about how to improve system learning relevant to services for vulnerable children?

Mark Douglas: In terms of system learning, we have our local safeguarding arrangements where we bring the partnership together and that should drive learning. As I mentioned earlier, we value the role of the panel. That can take that local learning and feed it into a national learning culture, which is really important.

To your point on co-production, it is something we need to improve on as we develop strategies and services in local areas. Often, the solutions come from within those communities. We can learn from them what their issues are, what challenges exist and how we can best meet their needs.

Lord Filkin: Annie, in a sense, this is your day job. How do we improve system learning?

Annie Hudson: I am going to quote from Atul Gawande, a doctor who gave some of the Reith Lectures recently. He talked about how, in the context of our infallibility, we have a fear of looking. Particularly in the safeguarding arena, it has been very difficult for people to be really honest and transparent about how the system has or has not protected children, partly because of the public and media censure, and all of that. The new architecture we have is creating a much better and healthier culture of looking deeply at when systems have failed children. We need to go with that, but we also need to be honest with ourselves about where we are making impact. It is all very well identifying learning. It is then about implementing that learning so it really makes a difference for children.

The comments about innovation were really important. We need to be more innovative and get out some of the tried and tested, but not always very efficacious, ways of doing things. I am also nervous of spawning lots of interesting boutique service projects. We need to be quite rigorous with really testing out the evidence about making a difference. The work of the What Works centres, the Early Intervention Foundation and the

What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care is helping us be more disciplined, so that, when we do stuff, we are asking, “Does it make a difference to children? It may be interesting. It may feel like it is groundbreaking, but it is really making a difference?” Focusing on making a difference to outcomes for children is crucial.

Lastly on co-production, we have made huge inroads in children’s services in listening to children who are looked after and children in care councils. They have a much stronger voice. There is much more to be done. We are less good at listening to and heeding parents and children who, for example, are caught up in child protection and safeguarding systems. We are not so good at co-producing with them, partly because sometimes we are in a very difficult relationship with them, between the state and families. They do not necessarily want intervention. They experience the intervention as coercive and oppressive.

We need to find ways of finding out from them about the kinds of interventions that help them with their parenting, and help children feel that they are listened to and their lives are understood. That is the area where we still have a lot more to do.

Lord Filkin: That is very helpful. Again, what you have just said is not exactly new. Kent was doing it 20 years ago and trying to listen to the voice of children in child protection cases—goodness me. Send a note, if you could, and be quite specific about how we can take some of that forward. Innovation without evaluation just generates excitement without much usefulness, does it not? I am sure that Andrea will want to pick that up as well in her development of a note on that.

I thank all three of you for your excellent input on that question. It was most helpful.

The Chair: You have all been given your homework. We are nearly at time, but we have one other question for you.

Q72 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** I will be very quick and encourage the witnesses to be very quick too. First, I will declare an interest as a non-exec with the Cabinet Office. Secondly, I was going to ask a follow-up question earlier, but I encourage the support team for the Public Services Committee to help. The scrutiny panels for serious events that Annie Hudson has talked about would have vital evidence on this. Has there been any increase in serious events during Covid? Where there have been data-sharing failures during serious events, it would be really helpful to get that data.

My question is this. In evidence to the committee, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission acknowledged that they had no shared definition of child vulnerability. Sir Alan Wood’s recent review of the new multiagency safeguarding arrangements found that inspectorates and regulators have still not developed a model of analysis of what causes good outcomes or what is best practice. How can the regulators get better? It is a simple question to answer in only a few minutes. I will start with Andrea.

Dr Andrea Cooper: This is probably not my area of expertise.

Lord Hogan-Howe: All right, then, that is fine. Shall I move on?

Dr Andrea Cooper: I was just going to say this. I mentioned at the start the Government as a System toolkit. I know the Food Standards Agency has found that really valuable in thinking about when it is a department and when it is a regulator. It is a whole-system approach. That might be something to look at.

Lord Hogan-Howe: Mark, this is your chance to give some clear direction to a regulator.

Mark Douglas: We have talked already about there not being a nationally understood definition of a vulnerable child. If you go back to the Children Act 1989, it talks about a child who, without the provision of services, might otherwise not meet their needs and potential. It is very vague.

I find in engagement with Ofsted that, if you look nationally, there is often some variability in the approach of individual inspectors. That perhaps is inevitable, but they should be working within a framework. This is my plea. Ofsted clearly has an inspectorial role. That is quite right and proper. An Ofsted inspector recently said to me that they would make a judgment without fear or favour, and that is absolutely right. But an approach whereby it had a role to work alongside authorities such as Bradford that have become "inadequate" to support the improvement work would be a real benefit.

Annie Hudson: I echo what Mark has just said. If you work in a local authority, you can be inspected by at least three, if not four, inspectorates. They do not necessarily operate to similar standards or approaches. In the same way that we talk about central government and local areas needing to be very joined up and provide joint collective leadership, the same is probably true across the inspectorates.

On your question about the impact of Covid, we have done a report about Covid and serious incidents. I could provide that information and analysis separately if that would be helpful.

Lord Hogan-Howe: Do the regulators keep a measure of the amount of burden that they put on the organisation they are regulating, in terms of the expectations of the information they require and all the other things in the inspection process? Do you know of any regulator that does that?

Mark Douglas: The demands of an inspection are significant.

Lord Hogan-Howe: Yes, but do any of them actually measure it?

Mark Douglas: I think they would say that was not their issue. They will come and inspect. How a local authority resources the need to respond is back to the local authority.

Lord Hogan-Howe: Yes, I get that. Of course, they could increase their regulatory burden by 100%, without any definite outcome that would

improve things, and no one would know.

In terms of a proposal for trying to help, is something such as NICE, which the NHS has to create best practice, required in this area?

Mark Douglas: I will come back to the point that Annie made. Some join-up, or at least some strategic interface between the different requirements of the inspectorates, would be really helpful. I will give you a very tangible example of this. The police are inspected under a framework whereby how they deal with domestic violence referrals will be considered in terms of safeguarding. The response of the police is to put everything into the local authority for the local authority to decide. Many of those referrals will not meet the threshold for a response from us, but we have to triage, assess and determine a response. It creates a huge burden. Ofsted will then say to me as the DCS, "You're taking too many referrals from the police which lead to no further action". There is that disjoint between different parts of the inspectorate system. If we could work those things out, it would be hugely beneficial.

Lord Hogan-Howe: It sounds very unfair that one regulator is causing one organisation to hand over its queries and risk assessment to another. It does not sound very helpful, does it? Annie, do you have anything to add about whether a NICE-type organisation might help?

Annie Hudson: NICE is a bit like the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, as it is for the Early Intervention Foundation. They are all quite focused on a particular profession or organisation. I suppose we are talking about having a common approach or set of standards on, using that instance, the response to domestic abuse where children are affected. You would have inspectorates working to a common set of standards, whether or not they were looking through the lens of a police organisation, local authority, health or whatever. It is about bringing those things together. Whether that is through a NICE-type organisation I am not sure, but you certainly want that joined-up set of expectations about what is good practice for children.

Dr Andrea Cooper: If I were creating an institution, I would probably go for a What Works centre for innovation across the whole of public services and not just this area. There is also an important role for the public leadership centre in building this knowledge in our leaders right across the system, from fire through to schools and beyond. That body already exists.

Lord Hogan-Howe: Thank you to all three of you for such succinct answers and helping us to get back towards time.

The Chair: Thank you to all of the witnesses. I am really sorry; there are colleagues who want to come in, but we have already gone over time, so I am going to have to finish this session. I am really grateful. You have already agreed to send us anything in writing. If there are things that you have not been asked and would have liked to be asked, or that you want to add to, please write to us. Thank you enormously, all of you.