



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Children First follow-up](#), HC 715

Wednesday 30 October 2013

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair); Neil Carmichael; Alex Cunningham; Bill Esterson; Pat Glass; Siobhain McDonagh; Ian Mearns; Chris Skidmore; Mr David Ward

Questions 1-110

Witness[es]: **Professor Eileen Munro**, Professor of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science; **Isabelle Trowler**, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Department for Education, **Annie Hudson**, Chief Executive, The College of Social Work, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning. Welcome, Professor Munro, to this meeting of the Education Committee. We are pleased to have you with us again today. It is a couple of years since your review came out. Do you think it is time the Government implemented another progress review of what has happened since your report?

Professor Munro: That would be a good idea, but I would like somebody else to do it.

Chair: Is the Government proving reluctant to undertake such a review?

Professor Munro: I have no idea what their attitude is to it. The kind of recommendations I made were about the Government freeing up the sector to take more responsibilities. You cannot hold the Government accountable for the entire progress of recommendations. It is also about how the sector then uses the changes to make improvements. It is very much a shared responsibility between them.

Q2 Chair: Public discourse tends to be dominated by particular cases, whether it is Daniel Pelka or others like that. What is your overview of the overall position since your review? Do you think things are moving in the right direction? As the authoritative voice, what is your take on where we are at?

Professor Munro: There are lots of small signs of progress, but we are trying to enhance the skill of the whole profession. I am talking specifically about the social work dimension of child protection. It is going to snowball, but you have to go slowly at the

beginning to help more and more people to have expertise and also to work in organisations that encourage them to practise well. That is an important change. The priorities now are about showing Ofsted whether you have been useful to children or not, rather than whether you have good records. That is a very big culture change that takes time for people to get through.

My impression is that authorities vary a great deal. Some have leapt in with enthusiasm because they have always wanted to keep a clear focus on children. Then you see that they are putting a lot of time and effort into making the work conditions and the support for front-line workers such that they can enhance their skills, that they can spend time with children and that they have the skills to talk to children. My impression is about one-third of authorities are being quite impressive.

Q3 Chair: Which means two-thirds are not.

Professor Munro: Yes.

Q4 Chair: Birmingham is enormous and not easily taken over by a neighbouring authority, so what is the solution to raising standards there, where problems seem to have persisted for such a long time?

Professor Munro: It looks as if Birmingham has got to the bad place from which it is very, very hard to come out of, when you think of all the efforts that have been made. It must have a lot of similarities with Doncaster, which was also repeatedly inspected and was parachuting people in.

Q5 Chair: But on a much greater scale. Notwithstanding the persistent problems of Doncaster, from a scale point of view it looks a more plausible site for intervention than Birmingham does, as it currently stands.

Professor Munro: It does. One option is to look at trying to make it into smaller units where the person in charge can have a knowledge of the whole service. The leadership at every level in these services is really crucial. A good team leader can transform a team, and a good social worker can transform a family.

Q6 Chair: Given the situation, do you think there is any alternative to breaking it up?

Professor Munro: So many efforts have been made by very good people. I would have thought its reputation is now such that a lot of people would avoid working there, which makes it even harder for them. It is also about allowing them time to turn around and improve. I noticed with Doncaster that they kept being inspected every year or so, which is destabilising, and you cannot realistically expect to transform the culture and the skill level within a few months, starting from where they are.

Chair: Back to Birmingham, and breaking it up.

Professor Munro: I am afraid my geography is not good enough to know what would be a natural way of breaking it up—either side of the motorway or something.

Q7 Alex Cunningham: I just wanted to pick up your expression, “small signs of progress”. You are saying one-third of authorities are doing good things. Are you disappointed with the lack of progress that has been made since your report? Is it reasonable that we have made some small progress over that period of time, or will we see the snowball effect that you referred to? Will we see a massive improvement over the next three years?

Professor Munro: It is only last April that the Government revised “Working Together”, which has allowed a lot more flexibility to authorities so that they have a lot more freedom in redesigning the way they provide help and where their priorities are. The new Ofsted framework, as well, is relatively new and that prioritises how well you are helping children. It puts the emphasis on the quality of work, rather than on the quantity of recording. Those changes were not very long ago.

Q8 Alex Cunningham: So your expectation is probably greater for the next two years than the progress made in the first two.

Professor Munro: Yes. If I did not see substantial areas of very good practice in the next year or two, I would feel very disappointed.

Q9 Alex Cunningham: Is the framework right for that to happen now?

Professor Munro: I think so. The ones that are making rapid changes are working with a very clear practice model, instead of saying, “Our job is to complete this series of forms”. The two dominant ones that I know of are the Hackney model and the Signs of Safety model. They both offer a whole organisational set of theories and practices for engaging well with families and exercising good critical thinking about the safety of children.

Q10 Alex Cunningham: You keep referring to “one-third of this” or “some of them”. You keep using expressions like that. What about the overall picture? Are we going to see that overall picture? The expectation out there in the world is that it is all falling apart because of some of the headline things, but can you expect that improvement across the piece to be reasonable?

Professor Munro: Yes. In the way that you expect most health care to be reasonable, you should certainly expect that of social care. It is achievable as long as it is not hijacked. The recent spate of serious case reviews is of cases that I have no defence of. If you get too vitriolic a media reaction and the public reaction, then you may encourage authorities to creep back into defensiveness, which means you are more concerned with covering your back than with protecting children.

Q11 Chair: What will stop that happening?

Professor Munro: I was very impressed that neither the Secretary of State nor the Children’s Minister leapt on the bandwagon in condemning the people involved in those cases. That helps to keep the blame down. People are quite rightly deeply distressed by what happened to those children. Paradoxically, it is not helpful to blame professionals as if they did not care. They do care.

Q12 Pat Glass: We return to inquiries, reports and recommendations after about a year, which is why we are holding this session today. Has the child protection system improved since we published our report, and are you broadly optimistic about the direction of travel?

Professor Munro: I have had people emailing me giving examples of good practice because they have previously told me about bad practice. They have been saying that there are actually some signs of change. Partly optimism is a matter of personality isn't it, so I am optimistic. The front line and their managers—the people who have direct contact with families—are totally in agreement with the direction I want them to take. To me, that is an enormous strength. Giving them the skills and the time to do the work well is giving that to a willing set of people.

Q13 Pat Glass: Ofsted has reported that 13% of local authorities' child protection systems are inadequate and 43% are just adequate. That makes the majority of local authorities in this country either adequate or inadequate. Is this good enough?

Professor Munro: No, of course not. Is that the new framework inspections? That has only been done on a small sample, and they specifically chose the ones that were functioning poorly under the old inspection framework. You would expect them to be on the lower side of rating. Also, because Ofsted is looking at different criteria, I always predicted that they would find a lot of poor practice. When they start looking at the quality of practice, they can see that it is poor, but that is what you want them to do. That is then driving the message to the most senior people that what really matters is the quality of the contact with the family, rather than any other misguided idea that developed in the past.

Q14 Pat Glass: I do not know Birmingham at all, but I do know a little bit about Doncaster. I was involved there some time ago, but in terms of education rather than social care. What I saw there, certainly in education, was that they were good people. What was happening in social care almost infected the rest of the council, and those people got out as quickly as they could. It was really sad to see. What can Government do? We know it is about leadership and good practice, but what can Government do to help authorities like Doncaster and Birmingham, where they get into such a bad cycle?

Professor Munro: The experiment in Doncaster, which is giving the role to a semi-independent organisation, is an interesting one to try. My colleague, Julian Le Grand, is the brains behind that scheme and that may be the kind of big step that helps to alter the basic culture. There is something rotten in the state of Doncaster that is very hard to shift. Something like that, which is a very clear and visible step change, may be a good starting point. It is also about allowing them the time and being realistic that in a couple of years' time you should see progress, but not in six months. The more that you go along and look at them critically, the more you will destabilise it.

Pat Glass: We used to call it weighing the pig. It does not get any heavier the more you weigh it.

Professor Munro: It may go off its food.

Q15 Pat Glass: Two of the recommendations from this Committee's report were that the Department for Education should take overall responsibility for all children and that we need to review practice in relation to older children. Do you think that there has been any progress made in relation to older children?

Professor Munro: Part of the progress in relation to older children is about the whole of society, as well as professionals, recognising that youngsters may feel grown up, but they are not. They need our protection and they are not choosing to live in very reckless ways. That is a very big culture change for some people, when you think of some of the evidence we have of people just accepting girls of 13 being involved in sex rings as if it were a responsible, mature choice for anyone to take. I would like to see much greater recognition across society—parents, in particular, and schools have to give that message about the dignity of everybody. They are valuable and not to be misused in that way.

Q16 Pat Glass: In a system where responsibility for things such as child protection is everyone's, is there a risk that no one actually does take responsibility? Is there someone who clearly holds the reins for it?

Professor Munro: In this country there is a very clear message that everybody who works with families—both with the children and with their parents—has a responsibility if they see evidence that gives them cause for concern. I know that there is a continual storyline about people not sharing information, but I have not come across the scenario where somebody like a doctor or a teacher has said, "I think this child is being abused and I am going to do nothing about it." It is almost always that they see something ambiguous and interpret it as benign or, as in the case of Daniel Pelka, they see it as a health problem, rather than a protection problem. You may say child protection is everybody's business, but it is the individual's business when they are faced with a particular child or parent and the possibility that the child is being maltreated.

Q17 Pat Glass: I have not come across professionals saying, "I think there is something going on, and I'm not going to do anything about it", but I have come across a lot of professionals, particularly in health, where they say, "I think there is something odd in that family. I have said it to you now, so you need to do something about it." That is almost, "It's not my responsibility."

Professor Munro: Yes, it can be like that.

Pat Glass: It is not their saying, "I think there are child protection issues; I think there is abuse going on." It is, "I think there's something very odd there. Now I've told you, it's your problem."

Professor Munro: That is not a really helpful kind of referral to get. One of my recommendations was about people having the chance to have a conversation with a social worker. In an instance like that the social worker needs to have a conversation with the health professional to say, "What the Dickens do you mean?" and to then talk to them about what they can do to find out more. It is a two-way thing. I think the local safeguarding children boards have a responsibility there to monitor how well each professional group is pulling their weight in the whole process, and for the senior managers to pull up people who are reported as offloading. On that point, I would say that

I see a lot of child protection services in other countries, and in this country we do the shared responsibility better than anywhere else.

Q18 Pat Glass: I think that is something we do not shout enough about. Things do go wrong, but we do have one of the best child protection systems in Western Europe.

Professor Munro: It is certainly a great deal better than America.

Pat Glass: And lots of parts of Europe.

Q19 Bill Esterson: Although looking at the information, we sit somewhere in the middle. Just on this point about social workers and the professionals taking the responsibility to ask questions of the person who is making the referral, is there a cultural issue here generally across lots of professions that really needs addressing? You are almost making a call for assertiveness training for social workers and others.

Professor Munro: The more confident you are in your skills, the easier it is for you to have a difficult conversation with a doctor. One of the things that does help is when you actually know each other. In some places, they have a particular social worker assigned to a set of schools, and that means that anyone in that school knows who they are going to phone up and talk to. That personal knowledge tends to make a conversation much easier.

Q20 Bill Esterson: So it is the relationships that are key.

Professor Munro: It is. Also if you have a very eminent paediatrician making a referral, it might be sensible to ask the team leader to speak to them, rather than the newly qualified staff.

Q21 Neil Carmichael: The other thing on Bill's point—I am referring to our session with you some time ago. We talked a lot about judgment and you talked about judgment as being something that we need to see more of in the sector. Do you feel that things have moved on in the right direction?

Professor Munro: Yes, in many respects I do. One of the concerns I have is that people interpret it as that we want to see individuals making judgments. That is certainly part of the process, but what you also need is an organisation that then helps them critically reflect on their judgment. The individual who has got into close contact with a family is caught up in their emotional dynamics and likes some family members and does not like others. It is very hard for them to be objective and to stand back. We can see from many of the case reviews that that kind of dynamic led to distorted reasoning. It is about the agency attempting to have good critical thinking about their judgments but not expecting individuals to be able to avoid all of the typical biases that human beings are prone to.

Q22 Neil Carmichael: In a sense, it is encouraging a culture of support, communication and valuing judgment.

Professor Munro: Yes, so that people know that talking about their work and being challenged on whether they got it right is normal professional practice. It is not a sign of being a bad worker. It is what a good worker is willing to hear, and will then think again.

Q23 Neil Carmichael: Do you think we have made any progress in joining things up—the more holistic approach that I think we also wanted to see a year ago?

Professor Munro: Again, there are local authorities and areas where people have developed very good ways of working around lower-level problems. There is an element about the personalities involved actually knowing each other, respecting each other and being willing to liaise with each other. My fear is whether, with the continual cuts in funding, people are going to want to retreat more and more into their essential work only. It is important for central Government to somehow reward people actually giving attention to early help to families and preventive work; otherwise, it is always the thing that can be cut today—you cannot stop doing the reactive serious end. It is quite vulnerable unless it is quite clearly prioritised by the Government.

Q24 Neil Carmichael: On the subject of local government, you have basically said that two-thirds of local authorities are not really doing a good enough job. What are the trends in those two-thirds of local authorities that are not doing a good job? What are the common features that might be the barriers to doing a good job?

Professor Munro: I do not have enough contact with 152 local authorities to be able to say. I suspect the ones I have most contact with are the ones that are most dynamic. That is why they invite me along to talk, or they let me know what they are doing. People send me their plans and things. I suspect I get a distorted view. I may be maligning the other two-thirds, and actually they are secretly doing brilliant things, but it is just not visible to me.

Q25 Neil Carmichael: Do you think there are any barriers that are holding back the progress of your recommendations and general thrust, apart from the obvious, which you have already referred to, which is resources?

Professor Munro: Money is one of the barriers. The other one is the availability of enough skilled people to spread their skill to other people. That is why I think progress will snowball as more and more people become quite robust workers. They can then take on a team and help that team to improve.

Q26 Neil Carmichael: Do you see any sign that the skills base is getting stronger?

Professor Munro: Yes. There are lots of authorities now that are putting their coaching and training into improving people's ability to engage with families and to talk to children, rather than their ability to complete assessment forms. The form comes after the work with the family. There is lots of evidence of people putting effort into that and valuing it, and saying, "This is a priority." That is the way that you build up skill; it is not just that you give somebody a training course of a week and then they are okay. It is something that throughout your working life you get better at.

Q27 Chair: That was true, of course, before your review, and local authorities would have complained that they had limited resource, they had huge caseloads for their members of staff and, therefore, although there was training and coaching going on, it was not on the

scale required to change the culture. All those pressures are in place now. Why should we believe that it is going to be more of a self-improving system than it was?

Professor Munro: Most of the training courses provided before were about bringing them up to speed on the latest Government change of policy, rather than on professional expertise. The Ofsted framework has changed, so priorities are different. From a senior manager's point of view, if they want to get a good judgment they have to up the skill level of their workforce, so there is a much bigger priority to it.

Q28 Chair: We are coming to the end of an inquiry into partnerships and co-operation among schools, and one of the things we were looking at there was trying to look at the framework and the incentives for schools to share their expertise, and to have peer-to-peer review both in schools and between schools, so you move to a genuine self-improving, reflective professional culture. If you look that way at social work, do we have the right framework to encourage that self-improving, reflective profession?

Professor Munro: You are absolutely right that that building of networks and helping each other is one of the really important features that needs to get more robust. If you are going to move away from central Government telling you every step that you have to take, then it is about sharing and developing expertise. People in the sector are doing that. There are regional networks developing and also networks around those working in a particular way. The College of Social Work has communities of interest, which become a mechanism for people to be able to share. The principal social workers around the country have a network based at the College. It creates the opportunities for shared learning and critical thinking, and there does seem to be an appetite for doing that.

Q29 Chair: Is the framework right? We focus very greatly on the incentives within the systems we look at, because although you will get great practice and you will get great people who do good things, especially if it is fashionable or topical, you have to see whether you have created systemically sufficient incentive to make that become more than just a short-term positive move in a direction but actually a fundamental change. Are the incentives right for the individual practitioner, the Department head and more senior people within councils? Do we have the incentive framework right to encourage this to become a snowball effect, to use your term? If not, what would it take?

Professor Munro: One incentive I would like is that the media report good practice as well as bad.

Siobhain McDonagh: There isn't an area of public policy where that isn't true.

Professor Munro: That is a serious impediment, because building up the reputation of social work is part of it. When I joined it in the 1970s, you were proud to be a social worker and people admired you for doing it. We have lost that, and in some respects we deserved to lose it, but it is a part of what needs to come back. It has to be justified as well. I do not want them to have a good status when they are incompetent. It is about somehow getting a more balanced picture out there. The College, and Isabelle, as the Chief Social Worker, will play an important role in giving a more positive image, but also of conveying why the work is difficult. When you only read a case review after a child has died it is so dead simple to work out that this child was in danger, but it is not that simple with foresight.

Q30 Mr Ward: I doubt there is a social worker in the land who would not like to operate on a more child-focused approach. You have mentioned in your review the bureaucracy and the target-setting that accompanies so much of social work nowadays. I know social workers who are focused very much on the child-centric approach and are absolutely petrified that this is not reflected in their notes, because they have not been able to keep up with their notes. How do we get that balance right?

Professor Munro: Give them an iPad so that the child can make notes on the iPad for them. There are all sorts of ways you can help children record their views, so that you have evidence that you have been engaging well with them, and that you are understanding what the world looks like from their point of view. Thinking about what you mean by recording it and the idea that it has to be the social worker in an office who does that, rather than the social worker and child together, needs to be changed.

Q31 Mr Ward: A culture change is obviously necessary, because we are talking about the development and enhancement of skills, which can only be developed by doing. If that is constrained or restrained by an over-emphasis on the bureaucratic side and the form-filling, it is a failure of the system to develop those skills. You mentioned the change in the valuing of social workers. How much is that reflected in the well-publicised cases that have occurred and, if so, how much does that act as a constraint on social work?

Professor Munro: Sorry; I don't quite understand what it is you are asking.

Mr Ward: I think you are right there has been a change in the attitude towards social workers, but over the years there have also been some well-publicised cases over which social workers have been castigated.

Professor Munro: Yes, there have been an awful lot of serious case reviews where social workers have not been castigated, and, indeed, are often praised for the quality of their work, or even within some of those cases where there is some criticism, there is praise for others. It is what the public pick out of it, which is just the negative side of it. That is so disheartening for a profession. In the recent Keanu Williams one, there is reference to a very good report by a social worker, but we hear no more about it. They go into detail about the poor quality practice, but they do not tell you what this good practice looked like. The public do not get a balanced view of what is going on. Being much more articulate about good practice and giving examples of it is really important for the profession—to be confident to say, “This is good practice.”

Q32 Mr Ward: Is there an element of trust that society has to have?

Professor Munro: Yes, there is trust, and you have to earn trust. You need to have a degree of trust, but then you come to trust them more when you see that they can handle that trust and deal with it properly. That is why I think some of the loss of status of social work has been well-deserved. The quality in many places had become very poor. People in the general public are so aware of the cases where a child dies, but there are a lot more families that come into contact with children's services who have had a really nasty experience that possibly could never be a particularly wonderful experience, but need not be quite so nasty. There are so many horror stories about the insensitive way that they have been treated. There is a need to change what we do as well, to be given trust, and it

is iteration. You have to build society's confidence. It is worth saying to a social worker, "I am struggling with my children. Can you help?" and for them to be confident that they might get helped.

Q33 Mr Ward: There has barely been a serious case review that has not resulted in people saying, "How could this possibly happen?" There was the Hamzah Khan case recently in my patch in Bradford recently, and everybody is looking at everybody else, saying, "How could this possibly happen?" Is there evidence that there is a transferring of understanding from the reviews, and that learning is taking place?

Professor Munro: The two I have read recently were the Daniel Pelka and the Keanu Williams ones, both of which seemed to me just to describe what went on and not to analyse why it happened. We do not really know from it how to change anything or whether, in fact, if you had understood why it happened, why it was quite reasonable at the time to act the way they did. The systems approach that I recommended is increasingly being used. Again, the limitation is that you have to have training to be able to do it, so you cannot just ask everyone to do it immediately.

Those types of reviews do start to show up the minute detail of why a case got misunderstood or whether it did get misunderstood. The reality is that a family can be operating in a mildly inadequate way, but then something new happens that changes the level of that inadequacy. If you think of the Daniel Pelka case, the woman had had two boyfriends, where the two adults had been very violent to each other. Then she got a third boyfriend, where the two of them stopped hitting each other and started hitting Daniel instead. That is not a particularly predictable change. The past pattern of behaviour was changed quite radically with the new boyfriend. There is always an element with human beings that they go and do the unexpected.

Q34 Mr Ward: But closer contact with the child would have identified that.

Professor Munro: Yes, but looking at the pattern it was not obvious that it was going to change at that point.

Q35 Siobhain McDonagh: Is the child protection system too incident-focused?

Professor Munro: It has become like that, and that is why the more effort you put in to understanding what life is like for a child, the better you are at moving away from just that one incident, and looking more generally at the quality of their lives and the problems within it. It is a very difficult balance, because what you see around the world is that people keep swinging from being focused on the broader family functioning and not investigating the incident well enough, or investigating the incident so thoroughly and not noticing that the child is severely neglected at the same time. It is a tricky balance of combining the two, and people seem to start to veer one way or the other if left alone.

Q36 Siobhain McDonagh: What gets in the way of social workers achieving a more holistic understanding of a child's circumstances, which might result in earlier identification of neglect or abuse?

Professor Munro: Partly it is the time to sit down and talk to the family, and having the confidence to ask them difficult questions. Inexperienced workers have trouble with being

challenging and authoritative about what is acceptable and what is not. You can end up with a rather nice, friendly kind of conversation. You certainly want to be respectful and to listen to what they say, but you also want to be alert and willing to say, “That does not sound very nice for the child to experience.” Time and skill, and then the other important dimension is that they do need a team that helps them emotionally, because some of these families are living lives that are very painful to hear about; to realise how awful a child’s life is, or how full of pain and fear, is not something you can just take at an intellectual level. You do react to it in the way that the public react to the story of Daniel Pelka. It stirs up very strong feelings in us, and so part of a good organisation is that it recognises how intensely emotional the work is. Then, if you support the worker, they are able to get close to that child, because they know they can get help to say goodbye to that pain and not carry it home with them when they are looking after their own children.

Q37 Siobhain McDonagh: On the point you make about some children’s lives being so awful and challenging, Tia Sharp was my constituent and from reading the serious case review and being involved in that particular case, I just became aware that we all, MPs included, get to see so much dysfunction that our threshold gets so much higher than the average person, if they exist, would accept. It seems to me that adults always come first.

Professor Munro: The trouble is it is the adults who tend to talk to you, and the adults demand your attention. That is where the good supervision is so important. It will say, “You have told me all about the mother’s problems. What is the impact on the child?” The individual actually in the dynamic of an interview in the family home is going to get distracted by the person who has the loudest voice. That is why you need to be aware that that is a vulnerability and to compensate for it. The secret of good practice is to know that you will make mistakes and that your supervisor helps you pick them up.

Q38 Siobhain McDonagh: The adults coming first is not just a social work issue. It is a police issue; it is an education issue; it is all the agencies, including the NHS. The adults always come first.

Professor Munro: Yes. It is about having to have a conscious, deliberate bit of the brain telling you to think about the children, because you will not instinctively. Intuitively you go with the flow, and speak to the person who is often very persuasively demanding your attention, either through charm or through intimidation.

Q39 Bill Esterson: Yet the professionals that I have talk to over many years, from all the different agencies that Siobhan has mentioned, have recognised the long-term damage and effects of neglect, and the fact that neglect can be more damaging than individual instances of abuse. Do you think there is a particular reason why there is that understanding, and yet there is still this approach that you have described?

Professor Munro: The risk of a serious injury or death from physical or sexual abuse is much greater than from neglect. You occasionally get a direct death from neglect; it is more often an accidental death due to lack of supervision.

Bill Esterson: So it is immediacy.

Professor Munro: The immediacy of the danger is one of the factors. Another one that I head a lot is that the courts will not listen to you if you go with a story of neglect. Once

you have a broken bone, you can put together a stronger case. That is perhaps a reflection that people need to have much more skill in building the meticulous case of the evidence. It is being able to describe what is happening at the moment to this child. It is not that you are just wanting to predict that in 10 years' time he will be dysfunctional; it is saying that at this particular time his developmental needs are not being met in these ways.

Q40 Bill Esterson: You mentioned the courts. Do you think it is also the public reaction and the way the media treats serious cases? There just would not be the attention given to issues of neglect.

Professor Munro: Issues of neglect tend to become open to the public more when those children become delinquent, antisocial and problematic in teenage years. They are not seen as victims of poor parenting, but as “menaces to society”; that was Tony Blair’s name for them.

Q41 Bill Esterson: Coming on to early intervention and prevention, which the Committee has commented on, there is no statutory requirement to provide these services. Do you see any shift in the culture, given that there is that absence of statutory requirement?

Professor Munro: The reason I wanted a statutory requirement was so that it was on a par with the statutory requirement around the heavy end of child protection. Otherwise, at a time of economic difficulty, it is the bit you can cut. There is a very strong case, both financially and morally, for trying to provide help so that children do not have a dysfunctional level of care in their development, but a lot of the forces are against it. I would still like to see a statutory duty.

Q42 Bill Esterson: You have mentioned the fact that there is not a statutory requirement, and you would like to see it. Obviously you have mentioned money, but is there anything else that stops that concentration on early intervention?

Professor Munro: There is also a need for skill. You do not just say, “Let’s have a service.” You have to have people who can then work. In the services that have quite good evidence of being useful, like the Family Nurse Partnership, it is a very, very high level of skill that those people have in engaging constructively with a family, and helping them develop better parenting. It is not just a case of giving people a manual and saying, “Go off and do this.”

Q43 Bill Esterson: So it is designing the services by whom we train and the numbers we train.

Professor Munro: Yes. The really tricky thing with early help is to find a way of offering help that does not disempower the family and make them dependent or feel powerless. A sense of control over your life is one of the crucial features for healthy well-being. If you were to become very coercive and bossy, saying, “I know what’s best for you”, you would potentially do harm to them. Having to invite them to take help and persuade them that it would be constructive is quite a skilled thing.

Q44 Ian Mearns: On that issue, a lot of years of experience as a school governor has seen me in situations where I am trying to discuss with school staff things like regular non-

attendance at schools. When you are looking at education welfare staff working in conjunction with that staff in the school, or looking at an individual child's case, and we think there is enough, from our perspective, to say, "Look, can somebody have a real look at this?" when we actually pass it to children's social services, it nowhere near meets their thresholds for intervention. In the last couple of years, the Government has set up special funds for local authorities to help to deal with families with particular problems. Within that, there is this requirement that the family, before intervention by these specialist teams, has to meet five of seven criteria. That seems to go against the sense of early intervention, when a family is already meeting five of seven negative criteria before they can be a focus of attention.

Professor Munro: Yes. You also have a much better chance of finding them wanting to be helped at the earlier stage. By the time they have got that dysfunctional, they are into a hardened pattern that they may be quite content with.

Q45 Ian Mearns: From my perspective, the fact that even very young children are not attending school on a regular basis, or have erratic attendance patterns, constitutes a form of parental neglect. For social workers, they say that is a matter for the education welfare team to deal with, rather than for some sort of social worker intervention.

Siobhain McDonagh: That is exactly what happened with Tia Sharp.

Professor Munro: The other side of it, from a social work point of view, is they just do not have the resources to take that expansion in referrals.

Q46 Ian Mearns: Therefore, we are looking at resource-based interventions as opposed to needs-based interventions, which is the whole meat of the debate that we are talking about.

Anyway, I am meant to be talking about serious case reviews. The Government is considering what more can be done to support organisations in learning from serious case reviews. Is there anything in particular you think needs to be done or anything extra that needs to be done?

Professor Munro: I worked with SCIE developing the systems model that is based on the root-cause analysis of the aviation and health sectors, so I have a very biased prejudice of thinking that is a good way of digging deeper into why the practice was as it was. It could be helpful for the Government working with the sector to try to create a crude typology of the kind of areas of difficulty in practice that you see, so that it becomes easier at a national level to pull together the findings and explore somewhat similar findings around the country. That also helps to bring out where a problem is actually a local issue or where, if you see it in several parts of the country, it suggests it is a deeper issue of professional behaviour. The other thing to remember is that even with the most brilliant people in the world, we do not actually know how to solve every human misery.

Q47 Ian Mearns: Indeed, I am afraid you are right. Has enough been done to bring the serious case reviews in line with the systems approach that you have recommended?

Professor Munro: In the experience I have had of working in that way and doing case reviews with a team of local people, there seems to be a common pattern with people of saying, "Oh yes, I understand the systems approach." Then when they finish doing the

case review with you they say, “Oh, I see what you mean.” There is a tendency for people to believe they know it, but it is actually very difficult to get your head around it because it is a big paradigm shift in where you put your focus. My anxiety is that you will find people doing case reviews that comply with working together, which they will say are a systems approach, but which are not. They do not have to use the model I developed with SCIE, but the basic principles that you see common across the health, aviation and engineering sectors are the ones that should be visible within it. The essential thing is saying, if somebody has made a mistake, “Why did it happen?” That is what you are trying to explore, rather than just concluding that they made a mistake.

Q48 Ian Mearns: Do you think, therefore, that when inspectorates are going in to local authorities they should be looking at how a serious case review should be managed?

Professor Munro: My belief is, as well, that when you fully understand what a systems approach is you also see it as a good approach to take for managing your organisation. It is the same thing. It is about understanding human performance in its context, what helps and what hinders, and the unexpected ways that things can end up contributing to a serious outcome. In one case I looked at, one of the factors that led to the social workers not hearing the problems that the paediatrician was seeing was that the paediatrician wrote to the GP and copied in the social worker. To the paediatrician, copying in the social worker meant they expected the social worker to read and act on the letter. In the social work office, receiving a letter that was just copied in on a case that was closed meant it just went on the file, because they thought it would be addressed to them if it was asking them to do something. Just clarifying that they had different rules and that they should agree on a shared rule minimises the chances of that happening in the future. I know it is a trivial thing, but these trivial things, if you correct enough of them, start to make a difference.

Q49 Ian Mearns: I wish it was trivial, to be honest. That sounds horrifying. Do you think there are any general lessons that we can learn from the recent high-profile serious case reviews?

Professor Munro: The ones that I have read in detail just do not convey enough analysis of what people were thinking at the time. It is difficult to know what lesson you can draw from it.

Q50 Bill Esterson: We have talked about the high thresholds being a barrier to referral a couple of times already. In our report, we talked about this issue as well, about trusting the judgment of the professionals. Do you think that greater flexibility is what is needed?

Professor Munro: The way the thresholds can operate is more as a barrier. If the organisational aim is to keep cases out, then thresholds are interpreted in a way that is looking for a reason not to accept a case. I would like to see the sense of a referral being a passing over to child protection actually being modified, so that it is much more of pulling child protection into the existing team that is working and knowing the family, so that there is a much more co-operative level. When a school refers, and a child is not reaching the threshold, there should be a conversation about what else could be done, or at what

point the school should get concerned and re-refer. There is a sense of responsibility for managing what happens to that child even if you are not accepting the referral.

Q51 Bill Esterson: The other side of that issue is the rule of optimism. Do you think that sometimes neglected children are being overlooked because of that feeling that it will be all right in the end, and it is better to keep the family together—that whole approach?

Professor Munro: The important thing about the rule of optimism is that it came from research by Eekelaar and Dingwall, and it showed that it was an organisational problem: that the organisation had a rule of optimism to keep down caseloads. It is not about an individual social worker being wildly optimistic. It is that the general culture is, “How can we avoid getting too heavy?” People are already struggling with the caseloads they have, so finding a way of minimising referrals becomes endemic. That is why one of the ways of tackling it is to try to make it a less either/or boundary, but much more of an opportunity where you could take some advice and some ideas from the social workers, without just getting a, “No, we are not going to do anything” letter.

Q52 Bill Esterson: When we heard from Loughborough University that almost all professionals did everything they could to keep families together, that comes from the institutional approach.

Professor Munro: It is also in the Children Act 1989 and the human rights convention. There is a bias towards the birth family. Other things being equal, the birth family is better than any alternative.

Q53 Bill Esterson: It is a question of what you mean by “other things being equal.”

Professor Munro: That is right; it is. Some of the qualities of the birth family are the more nebulous aspects about self-identity and links that last through lifetime. A child in foster care who says goodbye at 18 is bereft in the world, in a way that most of us are not. There are some sound reasons for it. There is a point at which the benefits of alternative care outweigh the benefits of home care. I suspect that if we looked much more deeply at the quality of care in some of these neglect cases, we would be taking away more children.

Q54 Mr Ward: There have been criticisms and some controversy about east European children, for instance. You mentioned earlier on that you welcomed the fact that the Secretary of State and the Minister had not overreacted to the various cases that have taken place. We have talked about the estimation of social workers. What more do you think can be done? Is there a role there for politicians to improve the status of social workers?

Professor Munro: David Cameron congratulated social workers at the conference, didn't he? I think politicians taking a balanced view of mentioning positive factors about the work as well as negative would be helpful, so that they do not just see it as an opportunity for catching the limelight.

Q55 Mr Ward: In terms of the public reaction to recent tragic cases, there seems to be more of a shock about the system, as opposed to individuals who may have committed errors of judgment. Do you pick that up as well?

Professor Munro: I thought in the Daniel Pelka case review, the public were very harsh on individuals. The school teachers were picked out quite deliberately by the media reactions.

Q56 Mr Ward: Is there a link to sharing of information, or lack of sharing of information?

Professor Munro: It was labelled as sharing information, but when you look at it, it was that they had not seen it as signs of maltreatment and therefore quite reasonably did not share it with the child protection system, because they were told it was a health problem. It was a misunderstanding of the information that led them not to share it, it was not a question of what they understood it to mean and that they should have shared it.

Q57 Mr Ward: What would progress and success in the child protection system look like in this country now?

Professor Munro: That more families came away from the experience saying that overall it was actually helpful. Most parents do want to do a decent job in parenting. I know that they also have a lot of problems in living, so they make a mess of it. The kind of parent who actually wants to harm their child is very small in number. The basic message of good quality is that children benefit from it and experience it as having been helpful.

Q58 Chair: Can I just ask about the steps that have been made to improve the calibre of those involved in the profession, both by better management, motivation and training, but also by attracting the right sort of people into it? What are your thoughts and reflections on the direction of travel in terms of the workforce?

Professor Munro: Yes, it is the right direction of travel. Moira Gibb's taskforce has led to a higher status of people coming in. Step Up to Social Work and Frontline are both really interesting developments that are potentially going to have a big impact. It is also conveying the message that it is a job that requires people with high IQ. It needs people with emotional wisdom too, but it needs a good IQ.

Q59 Chair: You need people with high IQ in teaching, but it is possible to imagine that you could deliver a class on a certain subject in a planned way, even if you were not of that calibre. During our inquiry, one thing that struck me most was when somebody said every piece of social work is a piece of research. You cannot go in with a lesson plan to a social work interview; you have to go in and you have to evaluate.

Professor Munro: You have to go in with your eyes and ears open to what you might see. Even though something looks very innocent and small-scale, when you look closely it may be that there is something really nasty going on.

Q60 Chair: You said you think we are going in the right direction. Could you expand on that a little, explaining the changes that are happening as you understand it, and the positive and negative aspects of that?

Professor Munro: The negative is, of course, that it takes quite a while to get a new cohort to be trained. We have actually got a lot of well-trained social workers in the profession, and it is about harnessing the skill that has been a bit submerged by a bureaucratic culture. With Frontline, which is the most adventurous, it is going to hinge a lot on the quality of the ongoing teaching they get while they are in practice. It is potentially a fantastic way of training a social worker, and it is potentially unable to give enough robust intellectual content, but I do not know which it is yet.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence to us this morning.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Annie Hudson**, Chief Executive, The College of Social Work, and **Isabelle Trowler**, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q61 Chair: Good morning. Welcome. It is a pleasure to have you both appearing before us today. Of course, you are both representations of the changes happening in the system, because neither of your posts existed when we started our inquiry some time ago. Perhaps I ought to start with you, Isabelle; congratulations on your appointment. You have just listened to Professor Munro; what are your reflections on what she had to say and the challenges ahead?

Isabelle Trowler: I have been in this post for about eight weeks, and as part of that I have been taking a look at everything that has been happening. My view is that the amount of activity there has been in the last two years or so to help this reform agenda is actually quite astounding. In preparation for this Select Committee I have been looking at all of that to make sure that we do justice to the amount of activity that has gone on. That would be my starting position.

What Eileen talked about is that things take time and there are a lot of things are in place. What we are all waiting for is what I would describe as the tipping point. There is a whole system change going on here, and we need to get things to a point where we are seeing really dramatic change in the frontline. My expertise is about that interface between social workers and families and that is what is most important. We now have to see a step change in that interaction. That is very much about implementation of the reform agenda on the frontline.

Q62 Chair: Is it your perception that there is broad acceptance of the direction of travel? If we went back to Victoria Climbié and the inquiries after that, you would have said then that there was an intense period of change, and you are waiting for the changes to come through and bear fruit. I have sat on this Committee for a number of years now, and it sometimes feels as if you get a new bunch of people sitting in front of you, telling you that things were not very good five years ago, they are improving now and they are all going to get better. Just five years on you get a different bunch of people sitting in front of you, optimistically telling you the same thing. One of the jobs is trying to work out when we

really are on the right track and when there is just that optimism bias that involves people on the frontline; it is not that they are not genuine, but it is about whether they are right or not.

Isabelle Trowler: One of the really significant changes is that we have a structure now and an opportunity to bring the professional voice into play. Over the last few years, at those times that you referred to, employers, academics and politicians have had huge influence on what happens to the profession. Since the Munro Review, we have an architecture in place that enables the professional voice to come to the fore. We have been given this opportunity to bring ourselves to the table and be influential in decision making, and we now have to step up to the mark and act on that. We have the College of Social Work; Annie Hudson has recently come into post. The Office of the Chief Social Worker is open for business. We have two social work reviews going on at the moment about social work education, and looking at how much progress has been made to enable the skill set and the knowledge that we need to come through the qualification route. This is our moment, and we have to grab it.

Q63 Chair: I suppose, in a way, one role both of you would be expected to play is to defend the profession and that space, in order to allow that progress to happen. Ultimately, if the profession does not step up then some politician or other will come in with some alternative idea, a good one or otherwise. In the meantime, you need to defend the space, so that bad headlines and new Secretaries of State do not just overturn the position we are in now. Would you agree with that?

Isabelle Trowler: Not entirely, no. I love social work; I think it has a huge contribution to make to public service. I have seen jaw-droppingly brilliant practice taking place that really changes families' lives. I absolutely support social work; it is all I have ever done, but I am also probably its harshest critic as well. Too often we do not do the job that we are meant to be doing. I see my role as very much about championing the potential of the profession and sharing excellence and good practice, but also being able to offer some challenge. Implementation is a real issue, and it requires attention to detail. You do not change local or national systems by not paying attention to real detail and that real day-to-day stuff that goes on.

Q64 Chair: Do you see your role as also to stand up to Ministers and sometimes say, "Hey", when they are getting driven by headlines, or the Chamber is going mad here, and they are under enormous pressure to be seen to be doing something? Is it your role to say, "Actually, you need to see this in perspective and you need to give the profession the space to carry on making improvements, which are there, even if it is not publicly perceived as yet"?

Isabelle Trowler: Absolutely. My role is certainly about advising Government on what I think might be the most sensible way forward. When Professor Munro gave evidence when the Committee sat last, she said, "Let's hope Government holds its nerve." It is absolutely right that we give the reform agenda time, but we have to have a sharp focus on improvement, and we have to see signs of things moving in the right direction.

Annie Hudson: I would concur with a lot of what Isabelle has just said. In terms of the passage of time since the publication of your report, there is real consensus within social work, but also amongst employers and academics, about what the problem of social work is. There is less consensus and less consistency, as yet, about how we make that real and

how we address those problems. As Isabelle has just said, it is about realising some of the ambitions that are behind the reform agenda.

We do have a number of levers there to make the reforms happen, to be really embedded and to be consistently embedded. That was a very important theme with what Professor Munro was saying about the one-third of authorities versus the two-thirds. We do have some of those levers; the College of Social Work is but one. Clearly, we also have the Office of the Chief Social Worker. An important shift is that in pretty much most authorities we now have a principal social worker, who is the local professional leader whose role is to champion high standards of practice, which involve support but also challenging practice. We have the social work reviews going on, and obviously we do not know the outcomes of those. A number of the key levers are there.

Q65 Chair: Do we have the political buy-in? Local authorities are ultimately run by councillors. Elected councillors either support early intervention, the long-term approach and the importance of this area and its priority, or they do not. What is your take on that?

Annie Hudson: In my experience, local politicians do get what good child protection is about, and they know that it is a really important priority, particularly in these very difficult spending rounds. The issue about the protection of early help is trickier, and clearly in some areas that is much more under threat.

There are also additional risks currently. Following on from what Eileen was saying, we do need to have some stability of leadership, in terms of driving these reforms through, and we do know that in some local authorities, particularly in the wake of difficult Ofsted inspections or difficult serious case reviews, there is a lot of turbulence in terms of the leadership. That does not make it easier to embed some of the reforms that we have been discussing.

Q66 Neil Carmichael: Good morning. Before, we were hearing from Professor Eileen Munro about the supply of skills in social services. Annie, how do you think the College is getting on with addressing that?

Annie Hudson: There are many aspects to our role. One of our roles is to endorse initial qualifying training programmes. That is about making sure that the standards of initial qualifying programmes are good enough. There continue to be some concerns about the variability of quality of people coming off social work courses. That is obviously why some of the recent initiatives are important. We do not know the outcome of those in Martin Narey's review. There is a much clearer and more cogent understanding now about the core skills of engaging and communicating with children and with families in a way that is supportive and engaging, but is also inquisitive. I like that phrase about every piece of social work being a piece of research. I have written that down, because I think that is absolutely what good social work practice is about. We do know, and we know this from Ofsted inspection reports, that there is variation.

The biggest challenge is about making sure that every social worker in every team in local authorities, but also in voluntary organisations as well, has the skills, the knowledge and the emotional resilience. One of the things we have been doing since the publication of your report is publishing curriculum guides. For example, in relation to child protection, for social workers at the end of their first year, which is called the assessed and supported

year of employment—ASYE—we have now published a curriculum guide about the child protection knowledge and capabilities people need to have at the end of their first year post-qualifying. We will be looking to develop that for further stages in people's careers. We have done quite a lot of work about publishing curriculum guides on the capabilities and using the professional capabilities framework—the PCF—to help people have a common language about the skills and competencies people need to have to do good-quality child protection work.

Q67 Neil Carmichael: In parallel to all of that, do you think that is helping to increase the status of social work?

Annie Hudson: Part of the purpose of establishing a College of Social Work in the way that has been long-established in medicine and nursing, for example, was to have a centre of excellence where you have a membership-led organisation that is about instilling a strong sense of professional leadership, rather than the leadership coming from Government or employers. Our membership is growing and that does convey a sense in which social workers understand that to have higher status they need to operate in a really professional way, and to in some respects mimic what other professions have done.

There have been blows to the status of social work in very recent weeks. Whenever you have reviews like we had recently, with the Daniel Pelka and Keanu Williams serious case reviews, those inevitably engender difficult political and public debates. When those serious case reviews have come up, we have tried to use that as an opportunity to convey to the public and the media what social work is about. There is this continued issue that because most people do not have direct experience of social workers, they immediately resort to prejudice and stereotype of social workers. We have tried to use those opportunities, partly to explain what has happened and what we are going to be doing following those reviews, but also to convey, through the voice of practising social workers, the authentic voice about the difficult, finely tuned judgments people are making every day.

Q68 Neil Carmichael: Thanks very much. That is a very full answer. Isabelle, turning to your role that you have been in for a matter of weeks—it is of course a new role—is it truly independent from the Department for Education, or is it really an issue of accountability of social work in general?

Isabelle Trowler: I am very clear that there is an expectation that I speak my mind. It is a permanent senior Civil Service job, so I am there to support the Government of the day. I am very clear about that. The last eight weeks has shown me that people expect me to have a professional position in relation to the things that the Department is doing, and that I feel entirely comfortable with working alongside the Department but maintaining my own independence.

Can I just say a couple of things about training, on the back of what Annie is saying? There are a couple of things on my mind. First, I think absolutely there is a sense that the calibre of social work students coming off programmes is getting better. I have two examples. Probably about 18 months ago I was marking a lot of assessments of people coming into a particular authority. I suddenly got this batch of brilliant papers, so I contacted the authority and asked what this was about. They said it was a cohort from

Step Up to Social Work, so we need to acknowledge that there is some significant progress. I was in an authority last week, talking to a large number of social workers, and in that authority they have just managed to recruit 48 fantastic newly qualified social workers. Something is happening out there, and we need to acknowledge that progress.

What I would say, though, is that, in terms of education and training, I am not convinced that we are teaching social workers what they need to know. That might be at qualification level and it might be in terms of continuous professional development. I hope that we will make some more progress on that once the review of social work education comes from Sir Martin Narey.

Q69 Chair: Following up on placements, I remember when we were doing our inquiry, going into children's social work, with all the massive challenges of doing that, in your placement a) you did not need to be supervised by a trained social worker; and b) in order to become a children's social worker, your placement did not require you to have done a children's social work placement. Can you assure us that both of those things have been addressed?

Isabelle Trowler: There is still a debate about how ready you should be once you qualify as a social worker. These are the debates that will come out of the social work education review: do we need more specialist training? What is the quality of placements that we are providing? What is the quality of clinical supervision that is being provided within those arrangements? I would not be confident to say that we have cracked that.

Q70 Chair: At the moment, you could still be sent out to do front line children's social work, every job of which is an act of research, having had a placement that was neither supervised by a professional, trained social worker nor had anything to do with the area that you are now going into the front line to work on. Is that the case?

Isabelle Trowler: The responsibility for that lies with the employer. You will have newly qualified social workers coming in who will have had a range of different experiences, both in terms of the classroom and practice experience. The employer has an absolute responsibility to judge that that person is fit for practice, or else I presume they would not have employed them, and then of course there is the assessed year in employment, which is a further 12 months in which newly qualified social workers are meant to be protected, in terms of case work, but also accessing very good-quality supervision.

Annie Hudson: Theoretically that is possible, but I think in the vast majority of cases, that is not the case. Certainly my experience, when I was in Bristol as the DCS, is that people would come into statutory children's teams having had children's placement experience and having been well-supervised by practice teachers. You are quite right that there is an issue about making sure that we have really good-quality practice teaching available to every single social work student—we know that there are patches in the country where that is not the case—and that people have access to a statutory child care placement, which I absolutely think is a complete prerequisite of getting employment in a statutory childcare team. Most good employers would see it that way.

Q71 Chair: Most good employers would have seen it that way years ago when we were looking into it. It was still the case that you had these not properly supervised

placements and people coming in to the job who had not had a placement relevant to it. You are telling me that that could still be the case after all this reform and effort.

Annie Hudson: Professor Berridge would probably be able to give you a clear answer on this. I would need to check, but I think it is the case that they may have had one placement where they had not had supervision from a qualified social worker, but I do not believe that you could come off a course without having had any placement supervised by qualified and experienced practitioners.

Q72 Neil Carmichael: I want to go back to Isabelle's point when she finished off about local government. We heard from Professor Munro that she thought two-thirds of our authorities were underperforming in some way or another. My first question is about how you are going to tackle local authorities in general. There are a lot of them, so how are you going to interface with them? My second point is about whether you agree with Professor Munro on her analysis, and the extent to which you think that is something you can help with.

Isabelle Trowler: When we are looking at inspection results—and there has been some controversy around this very recently—we have to bear in mind that they tend to be one-word judgments, so within the “adequate” or “inadequate” categories you will have a huge variation. You will have some authorities that are really struggling hugely, and then you will have other authorities with the same grading that will have a pocket of problematic practice in one part of the system. We have to bear that in mind. The headlines of inspections give us an indication of what lies behind, and it is really important that we get the proper narrative about what is happening in practice.

The emergence of the Principal Social Worker Network is really important, and we have a lot of work to do in getting local authorities to help them think about how that position can be used so that clinical practice gets the visibility and status that it needs in local government. I have met with the ADCS president a couple of times; we will have a close working relationship, and it goes back to the point about whether I am here to defend the profession or challenge it. I think it is both. It is about having that professional dialogue around the table, as well as employers, politicians and academics.

Q73 Neil Carmichael: A recurring theme in all of our discussions about child protection is relationships between agencies, so the holistic approach. You are both nodding, so you know that is a recurring and really quite dominant theme. Isabelle, in your role as Chief Social Worker, how do you think you are going to bring that kind of culture, necessary for true, genuine co-operation?

Isabelle Trowler: When I was an assistant director and wanted to really change things, one of the things that I said is that we must stop the war. I think there is a culture of disrespect as well as collaboration. I said to my staff that we had to have high regard for the contribution that partners make. Obvious partners would be schools, who are working with the children that we work with every single day. They know those kids inside-out. We have to offer huge respect and regard for the contribution that schools make. Again, the health contribution in child protection is enormous; we depend on psychology, psychiatry, and child and adolescent mental health services. We have to acknowledge the huge contribution that those agencies make.

The other message that I would want to give is that we must get our own house in order. Too often, where there are problems locally, the tendency is to look immediately to the wider partnership agenda and to look at the fault lines within the whole system. That, of course, is part of the picture, but actually, in my experience as a leader, you must focus on your own business first, and generate the respect and credibility that you need to have in order for effective partnerships to work.

Q74 Neil Carmichael: Annie, from your vantage point it is obviously the training and skills, to a large extent. How do you embed the necessary sense of co-operation that you need to have in social work with other agencies?

Annie Hudson: Yes, it is crucial, and it has come up in both of those recent serious case reviews. Ofsted talked in its annual report about how poor authorities are often experiencing weak support from their partners, so it is absolutely crucial to supporting and safeguarding children. One of the things we have done as a college, partly in the wake of some of the issues out of those two serious case reviews, is to open up a dialogue with the other professional colleges in medicine and nursing. It is very early days, but what we are looking to unpack is trying to understand some of the cultural barriers that get in the way of having high-quality communication; we had an interesting example from Professor Munro earlier on. It is not just that people do not talk to each other, and why they might not. It is sometimes about how they hear information in a different way and they reinterpret it, so it maybe becomes less serious or more serious. Thirdly, to create a really accurate picture of what life is like for a child, it is about how we bring to the table the different specialisms and bits of knowledge, and to do that in a way that the sum is greater than the parts. That is a piece of work that we are looking to do with the other professional colleges.

Also, the College is really interested in the process. I know in your last report you looked a lot at the issue of thresholds and, increasingly, people are seeing thresholds as a bit of a false alley, if we are looking at protecting and safeguarding children. A more important way of categorising this is about the relationship between universal and targeted services. One thing maybe we can do with other organisations is to look at some of the evidence about, for example, some of the multi-agency hubs. I know this is something the DfE is picking up: how well are they helping children to have smooth pathways through services, depending on their needs rather than on some objective thing like thresholds?

Q75 Chair: Will there be common training between agencies, because if everyone speaks the same language and learns to describe the same thing in the same way it will become easier for people to communicate.

Annie Hudson: That is certainly part of the agenda that we will have in our conversation with the other colleges. Training is important, but it is also about daily practice. That is something that Isabelle was alluding to in terms of her work in Hackney. I found, for example, in Bristol that encouraging team managers to spend even half a day in the local children's centre or the local primary school, and vice versa, had great benefit in terms of people understanding what the drivers are between the different professions and agencies.

Q76 Alex Cunningham: The NSPCC told me yesterday that 47% of children returned home end up back in the care system, and 50% who return home suffer further neglect or abuse. Does the Government really have an accurate understanding of the scale of neglect and the number of children in need, and are they aware of the risks being taken in trying to do the best for children?

Isabelle Trowler: There are a couple of issues there. In terms of prevalence of neglect, the NSPCC published a report, which I think is very helpful, in July this year that gives some indication that, overall, child maltreatment is reducing, particularly in relation to physical chastisement and emotional abuse. It is a level playing field in terms of neglect, though, which links to your point, so 47% end up coming back into the system. There are two issues for me here. It is about the quality of assessment in the first place, both at the point of entry into the care system and also the return home. How thoughtful are we in the assessment work that we do with families and also partner agencies? How well do we know the story about what is happening within that family? Equally critically, it is about intervention. What is the quality of the direct work that we do with families? Is there enough capacity in the organisation to do that work effectively and what is the capability?

Q77 Alex Cunningham: Yes, but do we know the extent of it out there? Is Government really aware of the whole picture, and the extent of neglect across the country?

Isabelle Trowler: The children in need census will be published tomorrow, I understand, which will give us a fresh picture of what is happening in terms of social work activity and child protection. We know that huge numbers of families have different problems at different times, and that we have a continuum of service response across the country to support that.

Annie Hudson: There is clearly a lot of documentary evidence about need, including about neglect. Action for Children obviously has a very strong, vibrant campaign going on about that, which has produced a lot of very good and interesting evidence; there is quite a lot of research evidence. Picking up on the Pelka review, that clearly highlighted the issue of children living in households where there is domestic violence and/or alcohol abuse, and we know that the numbers are very, very significant.

The challenging question is how we best help those children. That is where you get into some of the preventive help and help at an early stage, as well as when statutory social care needs to intervene on a stronger footing. That evidence is coming at us at a time when everyone is having to look very carefully at their resources and how they deploy them. My sense is that in very many local authorities around the country, partly because they are having to do precisely that and having to make strong arguments to local politicians about continuing to invest in early help, people are getting better at being clear about need in their local communities and the variations of need, but also about what kind of interventions are going to have most effect. We have moved away from a rather woolly approach to early help, which was perhaps characteristic in some parts of the system 10 years ago, into being much clearer about the kinds of interventions and practice that really will make a difference and where it is worth investing, and where, although people may like the idea of investing in a particular kind of service, there is no evidence to suggest that it is going to have a positive impact. Those debates need to continue.

Q78 Alex Cunningham: If I had not redrafted my questions as I have sat here, I would have thought you were looking over my shoulder, because you have started to answer my other questions ahead. Action for Children is very concerned about the proper use of data, and accurate data as well. The report tomorrow may well help, but what else needs to be done to improve the accuracy of data, in order to make sure that we get the right service delivered?

Annie Hudson: There is a lot of data, and I am not sure that more data are needed. We need more distilled data. For example, whatever the latest survey will say about the percentage of children under five who are experiencing neglect—I think it was 5% from Action for Children—we have to understand at a local level how the need is manifest and what resources are available in a particular area, including the universal services. Part of the challenge of the cuts scenario has been about conversations in local areas on what schools should be doing in relation to children who need early help, and what health services, and health visitor services in particular, should be doing—school nurse services and so on. It is more about having more finely tuned information at a local level about need and pockets of need and how resources can be best matched with the resources we have available, rather than a lot of very global information.

Q79 Alex Cunningham: You have recognised that local authorities are creaking under the cuts and yet you are placing more responsibility on them from that answer. How is it out there? Are you concerned about how local authorities are going to cope with this additional responsibility at a time when they are facing substantial cuts?

Annie Hudson: It is very difficult. The other part of the scenario at the moment is of course that in very many areas in London and other big cities, like my city of Bristol, we have significantly rising child populations: 20% or 25% in many urban areas but not only urban areas. That is also putting pressure on the system. There has been a lot of focus on the need for school places, and I am sure you have considered those issues, but of course amongst those children there will be some who are disabled, who have complex health needs and who also are very vulnerable in terms of child protection needs. All of that is also battering the system. There are questions being asked quite productively about how we get best value out of the money that we have available, and it is about thinking innovatively about different kinds of practice that may be more cost-effective. I will give you an example—I am sorry to keep talking about Bristol, but that is where I had been working until August. We had started to establish something that we called “first contact”, rather than a MASH, which was bringing together police, local authority children’s services and, subsequently, it was going to be health. What that was doing in the first few weeks was highlighting how you could manage better your referral process. You could signpost people more quickly to services, including early-help services. In addition, the referrals that were going into children’s social work teams were better referrals, so they could then act more promptly and in a more effective way rather than spending a lot of time working out what needed to be done.

Chair: We have quite a lot more to cover and limited time in which to do it, so we will try to keep it short and sharp.

Q80 Alex Cunningham: I was going to ask if Isabelle felt as optimistic as that; maybe you just have a short answer.

Isabelle Trowler: Maybe not quite as optimistic. We need to re-look at how we do things, and who does what within organisations. I think there is capacity to make more efficient choices about how we use the resources we have.

Q81 Alex Cunningham: I am going back to Annie, because you have identified domestic violence and alcohol abuse as a key theme of the Daniel Pelka serious case review. Again, the NSPCC was telling me that there are many children returned to families where drugs and alcohol abuse are the issue and yet few families get the support they need, so the wrap-around support is not there. What is the College of Social Work going to do to ensure that social workers are properly equipped to be able to deal with that, and get out there and make sure that they negotiate not just the immediate help that the child needs but ensure that the whole family thing is addressed and that other agencies play their part?

Annie Hudson: Very specifically—and this is an initiative we are taking in the wake of the Daniel Pelka review—we are looking to produce some practice guidance around social work in families where there is domestic violence and alcohol abuse. That is probably the most common problem in terms of families of children that social workers are working with. There is a lot of evidence about prevalence and causes and effects, and we need to support social workers to be confident and, at times, challenging practitioners who will focus on children, but also to give appropriate support to parents who are themselves sometimes victims of domestic violence.

Q82 Alex Cunningham: However, until the parents receive the support the children are being returned to very difficult circumstances.

Annie Hudson: Yes, that is the case. I am obviously aware of that, and there is research, including from Elaine Farmer from Bristol, which has come out with similar concerns. That is about making sure that assessments, plans and the work with families where domestic violence or alcohol abuse is an issue are robust, and that the decisions being made are in the interests of the child.

Q83 Alex Cunningham: Does the College plan to make any changes to the guidance on domestic violence? You have alluded to it.

Annie Hudson: We are working on producing some practice guidance to support social workers in their work where domestic violence is an issue.

Isabelle Trowler: On domestic violence, there is a very useful publication that Harriet Ward led last year, called *Safeguarding Children Across Services*. One of the findings from that is that our evidence base around what is effective when working with families and domestic violence is very limited. One of the things that we must do is to be very clear about what we know and what we do not know. Going back to my comment about efficiency and how we do things, whatever we do, we need to have an evidence base that it is going to work. That is one of the things that I am sure both Annie and I would wish to promote.

Q84 Ian Mearns: Moving on to safeguarding older children in particular, Annie, earlier on you mentioned about publishing curriculum guidance. As recommended by this

Committee, does curricular guidance for social work training now place any greater emphasis on safeguarding older children?

Annie Hudson: That is, in a way, potentially what will be part of what comes out of Sir Martin Narey's review in terms of initial social work training. There is probably a need to strengthen that. That is a personal view.

In terms of what happens following qualification, I have mentioned about the work we have done in relation to social workers when they have just qualified. I would suggest that whilst initial social work training is very important, if we are to retain highly experienced and effective social work practitioners we need to give more attention to continuous professional development. In the same way as any other profession, it is the training that you do to continue to top up your knowledge and skills, and to develop your expertise, that is most important. That is not just in terms of the practice you do with individual families, but because then you can act as a consultant to more recently qualified people. I do think that we need to look at whether or not there is a need for more of a coherent and consistent framework for continuous professional development in social work.

Q85 Ian Mearns: Would you see adherence to CPD for individuals as being a prerequisite to continuing membership of a royal college or a college?

Annie Hudson: That is absolutely something that we are looking at. It is a prerequisite to their continuous registration with the HCPC, which is the registration authority. However, what we have at the moment is a range of approaches and there is a need for a bit more consistency without getting into too much of a strict approach. We do need to have a more coherent framework, and that is something that the College would certainly want to be talking to Government and employers about.

Q86 Ian Mearns: We are obviously constantly being blitzed by statistics regarding young people and the use of cyber technologies, or whatever. Do you think that professionals are adequately trained to deal with the specific dangers related to modern technology, such as cyber-bullying, sexting and risk-taking behaviour online?

Annie Hudson: There is growing awareness of that, but it is an area where young people are mostly ahead of adults. The profession and agencies need to get much more on the front foot in terms of making social workers and other professionals really aware of the dangers and risks. We have seen that in adoption, for example, where children can be quite vulnerable because of the powers of Facebook and other media, and also in what we know has happened in terms of children and young people who have been sexually exploited. We are probably also going to have to be thinking about how we use schools and youth workers to educate children and young people. That is going to be the place. It is about educating children and young people to protect themselves, as well as professionals being mindful of the risks that young people are subject to.

Q87 Ian Mearns: If you do not mind my saying, in answer to that specific question that sounded like a long-winded no.

Annie Hudson: Sorry, it probably was a long-winded no. Thank you.

Q88 Ian Mearns: Do you think older children are adequately served by the child protection system, and what do you think currently poses the greatest risk to older children?

Isabelle Trowler: What I would say about older children is that they are children, and we need to remind ourselves of that. They are part of family structures, whether that is outside of care or within the care system. Also, as Eileen alluded to, we tend to categorise young people in a different way from other children. We need to recognise that while risky behaviours are in part normal adolescent development, in many instances they are more than that, and it is young people coming unstuck. I am very interested in how we continue that family support right from birth to young people becoming adults, and it is a theme throughout all the work with young people.

There is a range of initiatives going on. I know the Department for Education is funding a number of organisations over the next two years to look at how we can better protect young people against sexual exploitation; the role of parents within that; and whether there is specific work that we need to do with young men in relation to sexual health and sexual violence. We have to think about young people in the care system and, if they have been brought up in care, what we are doing to make sure they are well supported into adulthood. There is a range of things going on right now to help support those young people.

Q89 Ian Mearns: To me, the earlier part of your answer is crucial; referring to children as older children is probably an unhelpful distinction.

Isabelle Trowler: In some regards it is. I often think about what the common denominator is here. What are we all in the business of doing? What we are in the business of doing is supporting families, whether they are birth families or substitute care arrangements, and being really mindful of the consequences for children when they are brought up within the care system or in other substitute arrangements. Their sense of belonging and their need for connection and support as they are growing up is really crucial. We probably all have the luxury of that, and it is something that we need to be very mindful of.

Q90 Ian Mearns: Given that the job of this Committee is to make recommendations to Government, is there anything specifically you think that Government should do to minimise those risks?

Isabelle Trowler: For me, it is about working with families. This is a thread throughout all the conversations about the skill set and knowledge that social workers need and the types of intervention that we provide. We have to locate children and young people in the families in which they were brought up.

Q91 Chair: In our report, we specifically talked about peer-to-peer exploitation and abuse. Do you think the system is set up to be able to understand and respond appropriately to exploitation and abuse of one sort or another by one teenager of another?

Isabelle Trowler: Yes, I do. The architecture is in place. Again, it is a skills and knowledge issue. In terms of the front line and what social workers do, we have to make sure that staff have the capacity and capability to think about those risks. The connection it makes for me, in terms of Government responsibility or local government responsibility,

is where we place children. This obviously links with the debates about residential care, the quality of that provision and how vulnerable young people become once they move in to institutional care, so we need to be mindful of that as well.

Annie Hudson: On working with older children and teenagers, there is a need—it is something we want to work on in the College—to have some clearer practice methodologies for working with teenagers and adolescents. There are some specific needs around adolescents that require a different set of skills. The University of East Anglia, with Marian Brandon and her colleagues, have recently produced some very interesting work about working with teenagers who have been abused or neglected, and about the difficulty they may have talking about it, recognising that they are being abused and so on. What that research has highlighted for me is that we do need to do some more work on helping social workers to be adequately equipped for working with teenagers. They are at a different developmental stage, and that is quite an important priority.

Chair: We have a division here—Isabelle says everything is fine in terms of that, and you are saying it is not.

Annie Hudson: I am not disagreeing with Isabelle, of course.

Chair: We always find it interesting when we can get people to express divergent opinions.

Annie Hudson: There is an overlay of working with teenagers that requires some very specific skills in terms of communication and engagement that will be different from talking to a four-year-old, for obvious reasons, because the child is at a different developmental stage. I entirely agree that it is about working with young people in the context of their families, though. That is a universal.

Q92 Ian Mearns: Given the complexities and the risks involved, particularly for those children in adolescence and teenage years, do you think it is enough for Government just to encourage schools to provide a programme of sex and relationship education, or should it form part of the national curriculum for every school?

Isabelle Trowler: I think that schools need to take responsibility for the welfare of their pupils, and that the responsibility for how things are taught is up to the school. My understanding is that there is guidance about sexual and relationship education, but there is some discretion about how that is taught and parents can also take their children out of class if they so choose.

Q93 Mr Ward: In terms of the changing landscape with more freedoms being given to schools, academies and free schools, and the importance of schools in this multi-agency approach, are there any implications at all? If you look at the situation of a social worker performing with the local authority, where the child was clearly the client, to a situation now, if it is brought in at all, the social worker will tend to have the school as the client?

Isabelle Trowler: In my practice experience and with the development of academies in the local area, I have not personally come across a difficulty with that. Generally, the professional network understands its responsibilities in relation to safeguarding, and the legal status of the institution is not a barrier in itself to successful working.

Annie Hudson: I would agree with that.

Q94 Ian Mearns: Isabelle, in answering my question you said that schools should take responsibility. The question I am asking is whether Government should take more responsibility in terms of the guidance that it gives to schools. At the moment, schools are encouraged to do a range of things, but I am asking whether you think the Government should be requiring schools to do particular things, with all of the safeguards that you have talked about in terms of parents having the choice to remove their children. Do you think that needs to be beefed up, because we are dealing with a complex range of issues that are, quite clearly, in many cases not functioning well?

Isabelle Trowler: The guidance to schools on safeguarding is under review, and there are discussions and debates about what that might look like. However, in my experience, guidance is not what fixes it. What makes a difference is what happens within the school environment, so I think the school has to own what it is that they want to do with their pupils to make it the most effective.

Q95 Siobhain McDonagh: What are the main obstacles to proactive information-sharing between agencies?

Annie Hudson: A similar question was asked when I came to give evidence to you on the children's centres issue. I think it is mainly culture and behaviour.

Q96 Siobhain McDonagh: Do you think it is also status? If you have information that other people do not have, that gives you more status.

Annie Hudson: It could do, or it may be that you might have information that you want to dump on someone else, which also happens, does it not? Professor Munro talked about this. Sometimes it is time. This is the worry with people being more under pressure: that they do not take time to stand back and think, "Right, I need to share this bit of information with a social worker", or GP or whatever. It is culture, in terms of, "They are not going to be interested in that", or "That is not for them." That can get in the way. It is also about whether the relationships are there. Isabelle talked about this earlier on. Good relationships make for good information-sharing. It is very important, and it is one of the roles of managers, to make sure that their staff and people in their organisations are sharing information and meeting with other agencies and other professionals, so that they can understand their roles and responsibilities. That is probably the bedrock of good-quality information-sharing. It is not just about sharing information. It is about sharing your analysis sometimes, and your hunches. It is time, culture and relationships that are really important.

Q97 Siobhain McDonagh: Inter-agency communication has been a recurring theme of all senior case reviews. Are you confident that curriculum guidance sufficiently equips social workers with an understanding of their role in relationship to other professionals and the importance of proactive information-sharing?

Annie Hudson: I do not think it is, because the mantra about quality inter-professional, inter-agency communication has been with us for 30 or 40 years. It is about the practice

and about there being good-quality practice that is really important. One of the reasons why we have initiated this work in discussion with some of the royal colleges is that we are concerned to see if there are ways that we can get behind some of the barriers and look at different kinds of solutions about how professions work together.

Isabelle Trowler: I was interested to note that as part of the work by the national group on sexual exploitation there is going to be what is described as a myth-busting guide to information-sharing, which will be published in December this year. That is one of the big issues: misinformation about what can be shared. Again, in my experience, as Annie says, where relationships are good and where the culture of the organisation is right, then people get the information that they need. If there is a particular block, then moving it up through the organisation to make sure that you do get what you need often works as a second resort.

Q98 Bill Esterson: Sorry for missing your earlier evidence. I will just ask you about the threshold issue that you were discussing earlier. Is there enough support for families who do not meet the requirement for the threshold for intervention from social services?

Annie Hudson: It is the early-help debate, I guess, is it not? There is evidence that that is under threat in some areas, but not all, whether that is children's centres or some of the other children's services, including education and welfare. Youth services for young people can be very important when they are well focused. We would have a concern about the threat to that because of resources, but also it is about making sure that the resources are focused on interventions that are evidenced to make a difference. There has sometimes been the deployment of resources on the kinds of services that maybe people feel are good services, but do not necessarily have a significant impact on the lives of children.

Isabelle Trowler: I would concur with that. I suppose it is a question of, "How long is a piece of string?" Most local areas are always having to decide who needs services the most.

The other issue that I would raise about that question—and again it links to efficiency and effectiveness—is whether the expansion of early help has stemmed the flow of need and risk. This is one of the big questions that we need to look at more closely. Certainly children's social care is busier. We have more care proceedings and children in care, and we need to work out what the relationship is between early-help provision and the prevention of escalating risk.

Q99 Bill Esterson: The Home Office found that 64% of local authorities have a multi-agency approach. What are the main factors that prevent other authorities from doing that and are the resources there to enable that to work effectively?

Isabelle Trowler: You are referring to the multi-agency safeguarding hub work. There are a large number of authorities that are introducing different types of models that help collect information and inform decision making about next steps. My understanding is that the report that was published in July this year from the Home Office about MASH systems gives some evidence of effectiveness, but the picture is not clear and we are waiting for their final report, which will be published at the end of this year.

Q100 Bill Esterson: Do professionals who work with children outside of social services have sufficient understanding of the arrangements and of what is needed when it comes to multi-agency working?

Isabelle Trowler: It will vary. Each local authority will have different arrangements in place. Again, in my practice experience, agencies are overall aware of the local system that is in place to manage information and early intervention arrangements.

Annie Hudson: If there is a concern from where we sit, it would be that some of the adult-focused agencies can sometimes not necessarily have a full appreciation of safeguarding issues in terms of at what point they might need to be sharing information or referring on. I was reading a serious case review recently about where there had clearly been some failures on the part of the adult mental health services, which was working with a mother, to identify that she had children and that those children could be vulnerable because of that health problem.

Q101 Bill Esterson: Is it their responsibility or should it be their responsibility to put the interests of the children first?

Annie Hudson: My view is that it absolutely is, and that is very clearly the national policy, but it is to do with the execution in practice of that sense of responsibility and what, therefore, mental health professionals need to be doing.

Q102 Bill Esterson: It is not necessarily happening at the moment.

Annie Hudson: It is not consistently strong.

Q103 Chair: We took the view in our report that we should reinforce the Department for Education as the central agency responsible for the welfare of children. There would be absolute clarity on that and then they would have to agitate and work cross-Government, etc. The Government took the opposite view and said, “A better approach is that everybody needs to see it as their responsibility, and if you embed it in just in the DfE you are not going to get the cultural shift that you want.” They took the opposite view. What do you think about those arguments on both sides?

Isabelle Trowler: I am very clear that the Government’s position is the right one to take. I do not think structure is what matters most. We have to maybe work harder across departmental boundaries and also agency boundaries locally, but that is what we are employed to do. There are real advantages for cross-Government support in relation to children and young people.

Q104 Chair: Hopefully, we will see change over time that does deliver that. At the moment, we are looking at children’s centres. If you want to talk about early intervention, children’s centres in many areas cannot get the birth data, because the NHS says it is not going to give those to them. In other areas, it comes over seamlessly without problem, straightforwardly, under exactly the same regulatory and legal framework. It is an ongoing issue. Billions have been invested in children’s centres, and there are people ready to go and help, and they cannot even identify the kids to go and see if they need support.

Isabelle Trowler: I do not know for sure, but I suppose what I would say about that is that even if all children's responsibilities were, for example, within the Department of Health, as they have been in the past, that certainly did not necessarily assist information-sharing arrangements. The two examples, off the top of my head, where cross-Government working is going really well are, again, the national group on sexual exploitation, where all the key players are around the table, and the care-leaver strategy that was published yesterday is a very good example of that, where it really has brought together a significant number of Departments to hold them to account for what they need to do in relation to care-leavers.

Q105 Mr Ward: On the whole issue of ensuring we have sufficient numbers of right-qualified people in the social work profession, Isabelle, you have already referred in glowing terms to people who have submitted work on the Step Up to Social Work programme. How does Frontline fit in with this and what is the likely success of that, briefly?

Isabelle Trowler: I absolutely support Frontline. I had some personal involvement in the original teaching design and curriculum design. It is a very, very small cohort of students. It will tell us some things that we do not know, like whether work-based learning for qualifying programmes is a good way of supporting social workers; whether the arrangement of having—a little like the old social work student unit model—a small cluster of social work students coming together under the daily supervision of a high-quality clinical supervisor makes a substantial difference. One of the key interests I have in relation to Frontline is what they are being taught. It is a very prescriptive skills-based curriculum that addresses many of the deficits that have been talked about here today. However, I appreciate that there is concern about whether enough can be taught in the timeframe that has been given, and that that is absolutely what we need to test.

Q106 Mr Ward: My wife is a social worker, and I should have declared an interest earlier on. Many years ago, it was a quite arduous two-year programme with assessed placement. I look at the practice learning guidance, which includes 30 days for development, for skills, and for practice. Is that really sufficient for some of the environments that these people are going to go into?

Annie Hudson: That is not the only space in which people will be developing their skills. It goes back to the issue that was raised earlier on about the quality of practice placements. Practice placements should be absolutely a place where people are developing, extending and being challenged about their skills, as well as their knowledge, through good quality supervision. We have to be very clear about what we think social workers should be able to do at the end of their initial qualifying and, going back to the earlier point I made, in my view that does need to be linked into a much more coherent and more robust framework for continuing professional development. We do need to have—the College has a role but so has the HCPC—probably some stronger quality-assurance processes in place, so that we are clear about the courses and the programmes that are delivering consistently good students and those that are struggling, because that has been part of the narrative recently. There are some programmes that do deliver some very, very high-calibre practitioners. Step Up is one of those, but there are many other programmes as well—MA, postgraduate

and degree level. However, there are some that have not been able to do that for all sorts of reasons, and we need to get more of a grip on that.

Q107 Mr Ward: The Ofsted report identifies that one in three local authorities had a change in the director of children's services last year alone. What is going on?

Isabelle Trowler: We had a conversation about that earlier. One of the things that we were saying is how much of that is to do with the changes that are happening at a local level, where we see a creation of people directorates, so portfolios for directors are changing, and that that might have something to do with it.

Annie Hudson: Yes, that is right. An ex-DCS colleague said that the average life of a DCS now is 33 months; I do not know where that figure came from. That is one factor. There is clearly some correlation with some of those departures with difficult Ofsted judgments and, indeed, serious case reviews. There may also be a generational factor around the age of a number of directors and getting towards retirement age. That is possibly another factor, and it is something that we have been aware of for some time. Those three factors together have probably created a very difficult position. The issue about leadership and unstable leadership is important, in terms of taking forward this reform agenda in a rigorous and vigorous way, because there is something about the story of reform and wanting to make sure that everybody is signed up and committed to taking things forward.

Q108 Alex Cunningham: You were very optimistic earlier and now you seem to be rather pessimistic about the future. If we are losing our leadership in such vast numbers and we know that social workers are leaving the profession hand over fist, why the optimism, or is it pessimism?

Annie Hudson: I am not sure that we have evidence that social workers are leaving the profession more than they did hitherto. In some places, in some local authorities, clearly, particularly when people get into a difficult position, you do see haemorrhage out, for reasons that people can probably understand. That does not necessarily mean that they are lost to social work. They may go and work in other authorities, or in the voluntary or independent sector. There is evidence that something like one in four social workers leaving qualifying training do not go on and get employment as social workers, but in a sense they have not even begun their social work careers. There are some risks in the current situation, and there are also some grounds for optimism. It is for us within the profession, for employers and, most importantly, for social workers to grasp the promise of the reform agenda and make it work. If we do not do that, then the grounds for pessimism will come much more to the fore.

Q109 Chair: I must bring this session to a close, but I will give the final word to the country's Chief Social Worker.

Isabelle Trowler: Thank you. Linked to your question, what we must not do is assume that the drive for reform is only held within the post of Director of Children's Services. What lies beneath most directors is the professional services, which are led by very senior people in local government, and it is the perfect example of where we need the profession

and the professional leaders in those systems to step up, own what they are responsible for and drive through the changes in their services.

Alex Cunningham: You are optimistic after all.

Isabelle Trowler: I am always optimistic.

Chair: Thank you very much for giving evidence to us this morning, and we look forward to seeing you frequently in the future.

Isabelle Trowler: Thank you.

