



Education Committee

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

Wednesday 20 November 2013

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Members present: Pat Glass (Chair); Neil Carmichael; Bill Esterson; Siobhain McDonagh; Ian Mearns; Mr Dominic Raab; Mr David Ward; Craig Whittaker

Questions 111-186

Witness: **Edward Timpson MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, Department for Education.

Q111 Chair: Good morning, Minister. Welcome back. It is actually quite an opportune time for you to come back to the Committee to talk about our Children First report, given the stuff we have seen in the papers this morning and on the BBC. So many of the Committee's recommendations were reflected in the Hamzah Khan serious case review. Can I start off by asking you: do you think it is now probably a good time for the Department to look again at the Committee's recommendations, particularly in relation to older children, who were an issue in the serious case review but were not necessarily picked up in your letter to the Chair of the Safeguarding Board?

Mr Timpson: First of all, thank you for this opportunity to come back and talk further about this hugely important issue. You are right that in recent weeks and months we have had a number of very serious child deaths that have hit the headlines. As ever, that prompts questions about the state of the child protection system in England. Just to differentiate out the letter that I have sent to the independent chair of the local Safeguarding Children Board in Bradford, it related to specific questions that I had deep concerns were not answered in the serious case review about a deeper analysis of understanding why certain procedures did not take place when there was contact with the Khan family. Those questions are specific to that case and do not fully cover some of the wider lessons that these cases are showing and the similarities that we see on too many occasions.

If we are going to really get to the bottom of where there are problems, whether they are cultural or systemic, within the child protection system, we need to get a better understanding right at the heart of those on the front line as to why some of the basic practice is not happening as a matter of routine. The work that the NSPCC is doing to put all of the serious case reviews into one repository is going to be a very helpful way of bringing together all of that learning in a way that is going to be more beneficial to social

workers and others working with children in children's safeguarding so that they can start to embed that in the work that they do.

Following the Munro Review, even though we implemented 11 of those recommendations and are making good headway with the others, we clearly recognise that this is a long period of change that is required. I know you heard evidence from the new Chief Social Worker for Children and the Chief Executive of the College of Social Work, as well as from Professor Munro, about how they believe—and I agree—that there is the architecture now in place to make that step change. However, we obviously still have work to do.

Q112 Chair: Thank you for that, but it does not answer my question about whether you will be looking again at the Committee's recommendations, given that so many of those recommendations were reflected in some of the serious case reviews that we have seen recently.

Mr Timpson: Of course, we have accepted some of the recommendations of this Committee as prudent and sensible approaches to improving the system. They are ones that we will refer to as a way of looking to improve that system further. The last thing I want to come to this Committee and say is, "Thank you for your recommendations. They are now no longer of interest to us." Of course they are of interest, and I will continue to reflect on them as we continue the progress of reform that we have under way.

Chair: We are particularly concerned about the recommendations on older children. You will be aware that the Public Administration Select Committee yesterday was told by senior police officers that policemen are ignoring serious crimes like rape and abuse of older children. In order to massage the crime figures, they are not being investigated. Clearly, that is of real concern to us and we would be very keen to see you look again at those recommendations on older children.

Q113 Mr Ward: Could I just ask you if you believe that the recent review in Bradford was rubbish?

Mr Timpson: They are not the words that I would choose. I made it clear in the letter that I sent to the independent chair of the local Safeguarding Children Board in Bradford that I had deep concerns about the serious case review. That was not about what was in it in relation to the factual elements of that case, but getting down to the very deeper analysis as to why there were certain assessments and interventions that did not take place by social care and other agencies. Rubbish is not a word that I would use, but I do have deep concerns and it is important that that is put on the record.

Q114 Mr Ward: You would not agree with any rumours about alleged comments coming out of the DfE that it was rubbish or a whitewash.

Mr Timpson: They are not the words I would use. I put the letter out in the way that I did to make it clear exactly what my views were. It is important that we concentrate on the core issues in relation to that case and not get distracted by events that surround it. I am very clear that my focus is solely and completely on making sure that we get to the bottom of those questions.

Q115 Mr Ward: Before coming back to that review, can we just talk a little bit about social workers and recent comments by the Secretary of State about the “counter-productive temptation to load more and more responsibility on to the shoulders of social workers”? From the recent case review, is there anything you can take from that in terms of the other agencies as opposed to the social workers’ involvement in that? Are there any indications in that review of something to support the Secretary of State’s comments?

Mr Timpson: I do not want to go into the specifics of each individual review because they are an ongoing process, particularly the one in relation to Bradford. There are wider lessons, though, that we can draw from serious case reviews that we have seen recently and in the last few years. Part of that is reflected in the new statutory guidance we have on Working Together. It is not just social workers who should know what their clear responsibilities are and that, where they have a concern about a child’s safety, they need to take the appropriate action and make the appropriate referral, but all other professionals and agencies who are working with children. That responsibility is a responsibility that they all share, albeit on an individual basis. They should be much better—this is a theme that I know we keep returning to—at sharing that information in a way that is both timely and accurate, and results in the best possible action being taken.

Q116 Chair: There are a number of recurring themes through these serious case reviews. Poor attendance at school is one of them. I know it was about specific issues, but your letter seemed to be directed solely at social workers. What are you doing to look at the other agencies? Some of these children have been badly let down by other agencies, including education and health.

Mr Timpson: If we look at other case reviews, we will see whether there are questions being asked of other agencies, whether that is in health, education or the police service. This is by no way a restriction to looking at social care. This is a closely linked and interactive workforce who should be working as a unit around a child. That is reflected in some of the failings that we see in passing that information about.

Q117 Chair: I guess what I am asking is what are you doing with your colleagues about those wider agencies—the Department of Health and the Home Office?

Mr Timpson: I will take the example of the Home Office and look at some of the recent reports from the Deputy Children’s Commissioner about child sexual exploitation. There was a real lack of good data-sharing between the police and local authorities, who had different ways of gathering that data in relation to children who go missing, who are some of the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. We are working with the Home Office to come up with a commonality of data collection so that we do not see children falling through the gaps as they move from service to service.

The reason we have set up the national group that sits in the Home Office on children who may be at risk of sexual violence as well as vulnerable adults is so that we draw together all those different Departments—including mine, Health, the Ministry of Justice and many others. We are thinking about this collectively and coming up solutions within both our own Departments and something on a national level that can be disseminated to a local level.

I will give you another example in the Department of Health, where, in order to understand some of the early signs where a child may be at risk, domestic violence is seen as an indicator of that. They have put together some practice guidance for health visitors so that they know what signs they should be looking for. Sometimes that guidance is something that does not spread as widely as it should across the workforce, so it is important work that is being done.

Q118 Mr Ward: Can I just finish on the social worker part before you move on? I just want to know what the current thinking is within the Department towards social workers. Another recent comment by the Secretary of State was that, “In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice.” I know quite a lot of social workers, and I have been married to one for 39 years. I must say I do not recognise that. Is there evidence in the Hamzah case of social workers who have failed through their training because of these idealistic views that they have? What is the evidence to support that? Is that the Department’s view of social workers?

Mr Timpson: If you read the Secretary of State’s speech last week, he sets out in great detail his and the Department’s analyses of the current state of social work training and, therefore, the quality of those going in to social work. I spent 10 years before coming into Parliament working very closely with social workers in their capacity as those bringing care cases to court. I have also in my role as Minister spent time on the front line with social workers, so I am not divorced from the experience that they have.

Q119 Mr Ward: Would you make that statement?

Mr Timpson: We have Sir Martin Narey undertaking a piece of work looking into the veracity and the quality of social work training. We know that there are some local authorities who have concerns about the calibre of some of the courses that prospective and newly qualified social workers are undertaking. The fact is there are some brilliant and fantastic people who are going in to social work. We see that through the Step Up to Social Work programme, which has been hugely successful, and we want to push that out even further to get the top graduates into social work through the frontline programme. That mirrors much of what Teach First has managed to do for teaching.

It would be wrong of us not to look at the quality of the learning that social workers are gathering both as they train to be a social worker and as they then continue their professional development. We want to get that right. We have heard too many concerns that it is not as good as it should be. If we want to raise the standard of social work as well as the status, we need to improve the quality of the training that they are receiving.

Q120 Ian Mearns: I have a question about the different Departments working together and the people who work for the different Departments working together. Quite often the person who comes across very bad examples of vulnerable children, or children who are clearly being abused or being neglected, will not be a social worker. It will be someone else. The trouble is the cultures within those organisations that those people work for are very different. We have already heard evidence in the last couple of days about the way in which many police officers treat vulnerable older youngsters in particular. When are

we going to see some sense of urgency around starting to get some heads together in doing something about this—about making sure the different cultures and different organisations start to take this very seriously indeed? It is all happening out there now.

Mr Timpson: This is taken very seriously. One of the reasons I came into politics was that I was frustrated that, in my role in trying to protect children, it was much further down the line before I could make an impact. I wanted to make an impact much earlier in those children's lives. Interventions made earlier have a greater prospect of preventing them from suffering any harm and potentially actually giving them a better start in life. My motivation is absolutely clear that we need to do all we can to improve that culture.

Part of that is getting the architecture in place, as you were given evidence about by the Chief Social Worker, the Chief Executive of the College of Social Work and Professor Munro. They believe that that architecture is now in place. A key component of that is the new Working Together statutory guidance that came out in April this year. That is a piece of work that we did not do in isolation at the Department for Education. It was a necessary cross-government piece of work and was done in particularly close collaboration with the Department of Health and their own safeguarding guidance to health professionals. We are providing crystal clear statutory guidance on what the responsibilities are of all professionals who work with children. That has to be in place in order to help turn the culture around.

Part of doing that is also the answer I was giving a few minutes ago to Mr Ward. It is making sure that the quality of the training that is being provided matches the need that is out there, hence the work that we are doing with Sir Martin Narey to really get to grips with what works and what does not work; why it is that we have some social workers who are match fit when they come into front-line child protection work, which is some of the most difficult work that any professional can do; and why there are others who find it difficult to cope and to manage. There is a whole host of reasons that sits behind that, but I think if we get the architecture right and make it clear what the responsibilities are of all professionals, we make it easier and better for them to work more closely together. That is working in many parts of the country, whether it is through co-location, through multi-agency safeguarding hubs or other forms of better sharing of information.

There is some good work, but we need to do more, and my motivation remains as sharp as it has ever been to put everything in place we can to make that happen. There are leaders at the local level who can help support me in doing that. Chiefs executive as well as directors of children's services, the political leaders and also the independent chairs of local safeguarding children boards have a really pivotal role in bringing all those agencies to the table and making it all of their priority, not just those individual agencies who happen to come into contact with children on a more regular basis.

Chair: Just before we move on, we have a lot to get through, so sharp questions and even sharper answers, please, Minister.

Q121 Bill Esterson: You started to get to the nub of the issue at the end of your last answer. Everything else you had said was a bit remote, talking about architecture, structures and high-level elements of these programmes. You mentioned multi-agency teams and co-location. What I think we need to hear is what does it look like for support for children on the ground? How do somebody working in the NHS, somebody working in the social

services, a police officer, somebody from the voluntary sector and a teacher work together? How do they share information? How do they make sure that the individual child is looked after?

Mr Timpson: One of the questions you asked earlier in this update Inquiry by this Committee was exactly around that: how do you ensure that there are good relationships between each professional who is working with a child, albeit within their own professional capacity? Part of that is that we have much closer working through the co-location of multi-agency safeguarding hubs or similar models. Rather than them all living and working in remote parts of the council district, they are literally sitting in the same room, coming together when cases come in and talking to one another about what role they can each play to make sure that the best response to that referral is made.

It is also about some of the leadership that I was talking about before at a local level. The reason we have beefed up the role of the local safeguarding children boards is so that they do take on that role of setting the standards of sharing information, ensuring that the right thresholds are set and that there is much closer working between different professionals and agencies. There has to be the will to do that, though, and one of the reasons why the Munro reforms are so important is that it is moving the focus away from an obsession with systems and processes to a much stronger and clearer focus on the child and what the responsibility of each person is who comes into contact with a child. That is not just within their professional capacity, but in bringing other professionals in to provide support.

That is the architecture that I am talking about—I know it sounds a very abstract phrase and it was one that I picked up from the evidence that was given by those eminent professionals who spoke to you in that session. It translates to giving professionals the opportunity to make those relationships and make those connections. We have much easier ways of sharing information. It is also about making sure they understand how that information is being interpreted by other professionals. I know Professor Munro gave the example of a simple email being sent from one professional to another, CC'ing in a third professional on the assumption that they would read it, but the practice of the recipient was simply, "I've received an email; I've been CC'd into it. That's very interesting," without taking any further and closer look as to actually what the purpose of their role was in that case. That is a very small, but good example of how we need to change relationships so people understand exactly what it is that they are asking of each other, as well as challenging each other in the process.

Q122 Bill Esterson: Just on the point about teachers—because teachers are not going to be sitting in the same room as other professionals—how does that relationship change to address that? Effectively you have described something you might call Every Child Matters, which is an established theme and approach. How do teachers get involved in doing the sorts of things you are talking about when they are not going to be sitting in the same room?

Mr Timpson: It is what I call a child-centred system, which I think was what Professor Munro was putting at the heart of where we needed to concentrate our efforts. I think that is right. The role of teachers is clear both in the statutory guidance in Working Together and the responsibilities they have. We are in the process, have consulted on and will soon be looking at publishing the updated safeguarding-in-schools guidance, which will give real clarity to teachers about the role that they have to play in the safeguarding of children.

The reality is that where there is outstanding safeguarding practice in a local area, schools are already well plugged into the social care services that are in their area.

Q123 Bill Esterson: So it is about sharing existing good practice.

Mr Timpson: It is about sharing existing good practice; it is about being clear about what each professional's responsibilities are and that they all have a shared responsibility for the safety of children in their care.

Q124 Bill Esterson: Can I ask you about responsibility for children's services? Who should be responsible for running children's services?

Mr Timpson: Most local authorities have a director of children's services. Some have a role that includes that element; some will combine adult and children's services together. I have been clear, and this is why I was talking about leadership a few moments ago, that it is not just the director of children's services. It is the highly trained management that sits below them; it is the chief executive that sits above them as well as the leader of that council and the pivotal role that the independent chair of the local safeguarding children board has.

It is more often than not the director of children's services who is making the important day-to-day decisions, and we have improved that in for instance making sure that they sign off any child who leaves care before the age of 18, whereas before it was signed off at a lower level. We have also recognised that leadership has to come from the top. For instance, we have changed the appointment of the chair of the independent local safeguarding board to be an appointment made by the chief executive rather than the director of children's services to amplify and recognise the importance of that role and where the buck stops.

Q125 Bill Esterson: You are proposing some changes to what you have just described there, and Doncaster is imminent, where you are going to allow independent third parties to take over that responsibility. Can you tell us what the evidence is to support that change of approach?

Mr Timpson: If we are looking at Doncaster specifically, we know that over a long period of time there have been serious failures within Doncaster children's services where the ratcheting up of intervention had not achieved sufficient or sustainable progress. We commissioned Julian Le Grand to go in and discuss with the council and provide us with both that evidential base and recommendations as to what would be the way to break that cycle of failure. There is a model, which we saw in Hackney, in terms of the education services of an independent trust; it was run in that way for 10 years and we saw significant improvement. Clearly, this is not education, but it is in the realm of children's services. It provides the ability to address continuing failures in the structure that have led to failures in the system and therefore in delivery. It will bring about a way of regaining confidence in the children's services that are being delivered in Doncaster. We are still in the stages of setting up the trust.

Q126 Chair: Will this trust be given time? I do not know anything about Birmingham, but I do know something about Doncaster. I was there for a while—not

working there, but from the Department. When I went there, they were good people in Doncaster. There were some really good people in education. Yes, there were problems in children's services, but there were some really good people in education and it was doing well. Those people got out as quickly as they could because of the pressure and because of the publicity. Who would work in Doncaster? You just got out as quickly as you could. Are you going to give this independent trust time or is there going to be another incident all over the press where the Secretary of State intervenes unhelpfully?

Mr Timpson: This trust is being set up as a long-term sustainable solution to turning around Doncaster children's services in the same way that we had the 10-year intervention in Hackney. This is not a quick fix. This is a real commitment by my Department to work with Doncaster. That is the model we have come up with. It still has very close links with the council in delivering this necessary change. The response I give to whether you would want to work in Doncaster is "Yes". If there is anywhere where we need to do more to provide a better child protection system and to do more for children, it is Doncaster. If that is what your calling is, then this is a great place to try to make that difference.

Q127 Chair: Will you try to attract some of those good people back?

Mr Timpson: Absolutely. Just very quickly on that point—the fact is there are some fantastic people working there. There is absolutely no doubt about that, but I believe they have been stymied and suffocated by the constant failure that has sat around them and prevented them from being what they are capable of being.

Q128 Bill Esterson: If you look at Birmingham, which Pat briefly mentioned there, I was listening to some of the comments about Birmingham last week. The point being made was there is a relatively small number of highly experienced social workers who have stayed there a long time, but many good social workers live in Birmingham and choose to work in other boroughs because they just find the prospect of working there so difficult. Birmingham therefore relies on large numbers of agency workers and has very high vacancies, putting huge pressure on those staff who are working there. It is the same point as Doncaster. Why would an independent trust solve the problem where a local authority has not been able to?

Mr Timpson: The first thing to say is there were some media reports last week that somehow we had already decided what we thought was the best way forward for Birmingham children's services and it would be run as an independent trust. It is right to say that there has been no decision made about where Birmingham goes next. To just be absolutely clear, there has not been a ruling in or ruling out of any of those options. What we have asked and what we need to see is more information about the progression within Birmingham and what the best way will be of transforming children's services in Birmingham. Once we have that information, we can then make the right decision about what intervention is going to have the best effect, not just in the short term but over the medium and long term. Birmingham is the biggest council in this country, working for 1.1 million people. In many ways it is a specific case that brings its own specific problems. It would be wrong to have a direct comparison between Doncaster and Birmingham because they are very different situations, areas of the country, demographics and sizes of population. We need to look at Birmingham as its own issue and come up with the right solution for Birmingham rather than trying to find a one-size-fits-all.

Q129 Ian Mearns: Can I just briefly check one point with you, Minister? Did you or your officials see the report of the case review on Hamzah Khan before it was published?

Mr Timpson: We see the report, but ultimately it is a matter for the local Safeguarding Children Board for when they publish that report and what they publish.

Q130 Ian Mearns: Before you sent the letter to Nick Frost, did you contact them to express your concerns immediately before you sent the official response?

Mr Timpson: I had no personal contact with Mr Frost. Officials were in contact to discuss what the process would be for publication, but ultimately it is a matter for the independent chair.

Q131 Chair: Can I just come back on that? You saw the report before it was published and you did not raise any concerns then. There is a feeling that it is a bit like the former Secretary of State's rhetoric around Baby P—that if there is a public outcry, then there is a response from the Department. Why did the Department not raise these concerns at the point at which they saw the serious case review?

Mr Timpson: We did raise some of the concerns and it was right that they were put in the public domain. That is why I wrote the letter that I did. It is also important to note that we made the response in the same way as for the Daniel Pelka case in Coventry. This was not about finger-pointing; this was about a serious attempt to get a deeper analysis as to why this happened. I know from evidence that you heard from Professor Munro that she felt that that was exactly the right response from me and the Secretary of State in attempting to end up with a serious case review that provided us with the best possible prospect of learning from what happened in those dreadful cases.

Q132 Craig Whittaker: Minister, just for clarity, you clearly saw the case review before publication. Did you or did you not raise the concerns that you had publicly prior to publication of that report?

Mr Timpson: Some of those concerns were raised, but ultimately it was a matter for the chair of the independent local Safeguarding Children Board as well as the independent author of the report as to what they put in that report.

Q133 Craig Whittaker: I understand that, but I just wanted clarity around whether, prior to publication of that report, your Department raised the same concerns that you raised in your letter after the report had been published?

Mr Timpson: My officials raised concerns that are reflected by the content of the letter about the lack of analysis as to why some of the actions were not taken by social care.

Q134 Ian Mearns: Minister, the number of children in need has increased by 2.5% from 2012 to 2013. What do you think has caused the rise in the total number of children in social care work? Is there anything that you can point to in terms of the trend? Do you see this as a positive or a negative trend?

Mr Timpson: We have seen a rise in children in need. We have seen a rise in the number of child protection plans and the number of children going into care as well. There are a number of reasons, and we need a better understanding as to how these all play off against

one another which could explain those figures. One is the simple suggestion that there are more children who are in need. There is also evidence to suggest that there are more local authorities that are looking through their early help offer, which is set out much more clearly. In the Working Together statutory guidance, it is their responsibility to do that. They are identifying families at an earlier stage who would not otherwise have been on their radar. That has resulted in their having to take some form of statutory intervention, and in some cases having to take some quite severe statutory intervention.

Across the country, we see some councils where there has been a fairly significant rise in the number of children going into care and there are other parts of the country where we have actually seen a fall. You could argue that, by having a greater emphasis on early help and intervention, that could be responsible for both those scenarios. If you help a family at a much earlier stage, you can support them to the extent where the situation does not deteriorate sufficiently for you to have to take further action, which includes a child protection plan or taking that child into care. Similarly, if you are using early help as a much better way of triaging what support is going to be required to turn that family around and you make a better assessment of that family, then you may come to a conclusion much earlier on that you need to make a more robust intervention in that family.

Q135 Ian Mearns: I listened to what you said very carefully then. You are saying that one of the reasons that you have identified for the rise in the total volume of children's social care work is that there is a greater number of children in need.

Mr Timpson: I am suggesting that may be one of the explanations, but we need a clearer understanding of how all those factors are playing off against each other as to the level of intervention, the early help that is being offered by councils and how that is affecting those statistics. We cannot escape the fact that the numbers are rising and we have to meet that challenge.

Q136 Ian Mearns: Given the fact you have identified that there is a greater number of children in need, is the Government still monitoring the impact of the current economic situation and cuts in local authority services to child safeguarding as this Committee recommended?

Mr Timpson: Of course we have to factor in the surrounding economic circumstances. I know my predecessor, Tim Loughton, spoke to you—I think you asked the question—about the correlation, direct or otherwise, between the economic situation and the impact that has on families and their ability to cope. It would be churlish to suggest that there cannot possibly be any connection whatsoever, but we do know that there are still some communities, irrespective of the state of the national economy, where there is embedded deprivation or cyclical/generational poverty, and that is borne out by the number of children who come into care whose own parents were in care. Although we can try to find linkages in all sorts of other external areas, we do know where the majority of these problems lie. It is right that that is where we concentrate a lot of our effort.

Q137 Ian Mearns: There is a huge range of questions in behind that about the linkages between the state the children are living in and the general economic situation. Of course, you have identified that there are significant regional and local variations on those

impacts. Given your overriding concern for the welfare of children within the country, do you actually make any overtures to other Departments about what they can do to help that situation?

Mr Timpson: Absolutely. You have to remember that my Department is not some sort of desert island when it comes to trying to understand what drives poor parenting or what drives neglect and abuse within families. For example, we have the Troubled Families Programme, which is run by the Department for Communities and Local Government and is tackling head on where there are entrenched issues with families who, for a whole host of different reasons, are struggling. We look at the work that I have been doing around care leavers, who fall in the older children category and are particularly vulnerable. We now have for the first time a cross-government care-leavers strategy, which has almost every Department playing their part in looking at how their own policies affect vulnerable children, particularly those who are moving into adulthood. There are a number of examples where there is cross-Whitehall recognition of how this has an impact across other aspects of society, not just within child protection.

Q138 Craig Whittaker: Minister, you have been at great pains today to talk about putting the architecture in place for various things. We know from the stats that the number of children in need from the core assessments is up; we know workloads in these safeguarding departments are up in local authorities; we know the cost base of providing the level of care needed is also up. However, we also know that nationally the budgets to local authorities are being reduced. I would be quite interested to hear what safeguards you are putting in place with regard to oversight, with the exception of Ofsted, that is monitoring what is actually going on out in the field. You can put as much architecture in place as you like, but if the tornado above you is whirling around, it is going to wreck everything. It would be interesting to hear what your thoughts are on monitoring how local authorities are allocating those reduced budgets for their increased workloads.

Mr Timpson: You have been able to quote those figures because we have the Children in Need Census, which provides us with that important information. We are also in the process of for the first time collecting much better data on the number of social workers and vacancy rates across the country. That will be a very helpful way of establishing both where we are on those figures, but also how they directly cross-fertilise into the quality of work that is coming out of those councils from the Ofsted inspections, and whether it is simply about the quantity that we have. That also relates back to the quality of social work training that is coming through.

In fact, the latest figures we have on vacancy rates are that those rates have fallen, but clearly I am the first to understand completely the huge pressures that there are on councils to make their budgets go further than they have ever had to before in many cases. Many of them are up for that challenge and they have established lots of ways of keeping that money on the front line. The vast majority of local authorities have protected their safeguarding and child protection budgets—about £3 billion is still being spent on children's services. We have the Section 251 returns, which help give us a good picture of that. There are additional data sets that we are looking to collect that give us a better picture.

Ultimately, though, there is nothing better than actually speaking to social workers themselves as well as parents, foster carers and others who are helping deliver and are the

recipients of those services to understand how well they are performing. We do have a new Ofsted inspection regime that has started this month. It brings together for the first time both child protection and looked-after children services in a single inspection. The focus in the past was too much around some of the processes and systems and the quantity of recording, but it is now looking much more about the quality of the work. The evidence I know the Committee had from Professor Munro was that in some councils—not all—that is starting to change the way they are operating so that they are very much focused on the child and the child's journey, rather than simply on ensuring that they have complied with all procedures.

Q139 Chair: Minister, you have said there is nothing like talking to social workers. We have heard this morning from the social work survey that social workers feel under phenomenal pressure. They are worried about cuts in budget and they are worried about thresholds going up. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of safeguarding?

Mr Timpson: I am optimistic because I think there are some hugely committed, hugely dedicated and hugely professional people who are working in social work. As I do, they understand the pressure, but also the importance of doing all that we can to protect children. That is their overriding mission. As I said a few moments ago, I am the first to understand that they are under significant pressure. It is a very difficult job, as anyone will see who goes out and spends, as I have, a day with a social worker doing house visits, having to go to court to give evidence and having to deal with some of the hardest situations that any professional has to face. We should never forget that; we should never underestimate that. That is why the Prime Minister made a point of singling out social workers for praise in his speech to our party conference and why the Secretary of State gave a speech at the NSPCC last week to set out his support for social work. It is why he wants to do more to provide that support. We are under no illusions about that.

In relation to the particular survey that is out today, against that backdrop and understanding those pressures, I do not think it gives a complete picture. It is a self-selecting online survey by those who have made a decision to partake in it. I do not want to shy away, though, from the fact that there are pressures, which I am acutely aware of. We believe that the best way to deal with those is to improve practice, to improve the quality of training, to use some of the newer and more creative ways of working to drive up much of that quality and use the best practice that we know is out there.

We look at how Hackney was transformed through the Reclaim Social Work model to try to bring down casework load, to improve outcomes for children—which should always be at the centre of our work—and ultimately bring about a reformed children's service that is now high-performing. That has been done in quite a short period of time. Some of it is cultural; some of it is simple, practical changes that can be made. I believe, however, that there are enough people out there. The huge response we have had to top graduates wanting to come into our Frontline programme—over 4,000 have applied already—is an indication that there are people who see that vocation as the career that they want to go into, and we want to encourage more of that.

Q140 Ian Mearns: Minister, I am very glad that you are optimistic, but I am not convinced that your optimism is shared by everyone who is working out there. The BBC

report on the survey this morning reflects some of that. I take on board that you are saying that it is a self-selecting survey, but at the same time we have hard data that show that local authorities in the period of 2010 up to 2015 are experiencing cuts of around 26.6% in their overall budgets. There are regional variations where the cuts are actually much greater than that and some where they are less. I have talked to local authority leaders in my own vicinity in the north-east of England: they understand the mantra of doing more with less, but they find it very difficult to do more with bugger all in some cases. From that perspective, is there anything that you can hold out in terms of hope for local authorities in terms of the resources that they need? You have talked about an innovation programme to fundamentally rethink the way in which children are protected. Will there be any resources to go with that programme?

Mr Timpson: The innovation programme is not just about child protection. It is about all children's services. Part of it has been driven by those who already work in children's services wanting to do things differently but being frustrated by barriers that are being placed in their way. That may be bureaucratic barriers; it may be legal barriers; it may be financial barriers. Therefore, to answer your question about resources being made available, I made it clear that if one of those barriers that they find is financial—they have a new way of working, but do not have the ability to scale up that model because of the limitation of resources—then we stand behind them to support them. If that includes a financial barrier, then we will look at that and see what we can do to help alleviate it.

This is not a soft offer. This is a real attempt to look more creatively at how we deliver children's services. We have seen some of that already rise to the surface despite some of those barriers that are in the way, but we think there is a huge amount of latent potential, as we have seen in other parts of public services, to draw in the voluntary sector particularly, who in the area of child protection and safeguarding are particularly strong at delivering programmes in ways that within local authorities it is harder to do because of some of the strictures that apply. They are well placed to help local authorities innovate in the way that we want.

Q141 Ian Mearns: It is a difficult conundrum because many of the local authorities that are taking the biggest cuts in terms of their overall budgets are the same local authorities where the level of children's need has gone up because of economic circumstances. That is a difficult conundrum to get around for those localities.

Mr Timpson: There are going to be different situations in different parts of the country that require different solutions. That does not mean that they cannot learn from where it has been done differently and see whether that is something that would help alleviate some of those pressures for them. To just assume that the system that we have had in place for a very long time is the only way that we can solve those problems I think is missing a huge opportunity to look at how we can do things better as well as, in many cases, help to reduce cost.

If we take residential care for example, it has some of the highest unit costs of any type of care that local authorities spend—sometimes over £200,000 a year per child. The differentiation between local authorities on both unit cost and residential care-unit cost—foster care, for example—is vast. There is tremendous scope for different commissioning arrangements, or rather than placing all children out of area, to look at, as they do in the north-east, having a more regionalised approach to commissioning children's homes.

There are lots of different ways of providing a better service as well as of reducing some of those unit costs and overheads in a way that is far more efficient but, more importantly, is delivering better outcomes for children.

Q142 Mr Raab: Minister, you mentioned earlier talk about a shift towards earlier intervention and earlier help in these kinds of cases as a model. What is the Department doing, what has been done and what progress has been made in terms of altering the pendulum in that direction?

Mr Timpson: One of the first things we did as part of the Munro Review was to fulfil one of the recommendations around revising the statutory guidance on Working Together. Having looked again at the legislation on early help, we were satisfied that we did not require an additional duty because under the Children Act there was sufficient legislation in order to make it clear about the responsibilities of local authorities to deliver that. In the Working Together statutory guidance, albeit reduced from over 700 pages to around 70 pages, there is for the first time a much clearer aspect to it that focuses on the early help offer. That is backed up by not just my Department but across Whitehall with a similar mantra. It is demonstrated by some of the work that we have done, as well as drawing in from some of the academic research that backs this up. It is the false-economy argument—that if you do not invest your resources and time in early help and early intervention, then in the sorts of cases I was talking about a few moments ago around children in residential care in their teenage years, the cost, both financial and societal, is vast.

Part of the new Ofsted inspection regime will be looking at how local authorities are fulfilling their statutory duties and that guidance. Early help will clearly be a much greater part of their inspection than it has been in the past. It is trying to shift behaviour within local authorities. Those that have successfully started to do it already have already seen the benefits of doing so. We just need to continue to push it, both from a legal and statutory perspective, but also explaining that that good practice can have huge benefits.

Q143 Mr Raab: Thank you. If I have understood correctly, you are saying that a more intensive early intervention can save the externalised costs when things go badly wrong. What is the risk in that, though, with the budgetary pressures that all councils are facing? You have the obviously electorally sensitive things like roads and schools, and then you have this very vulnerable area, which, unless things go very badly wrong and there is lots of media attention, is not so politically sensitive. How do you stop this vulnerable area being salami-sliced with those budgetary constraints up against the statutory guidance that is asking them to focus more on earlier intervention? How can the Department encourage that they do not go for what is otherwise a soft target around this area?

Mr Timpson: As I have already said, the encouraging aspect around this is that local authorities have taken by and large a responsible approach to this in protecting their safeguarding and child protection budgets. They are clearly going to feel that that is going to be coming under increasing pressure, as we know. Part of the reason they have done that is they have statutory duties and they have discretionary elements to services they deliver. Quite rightly, they are prioritising those that they have a statutory responsibility to fulfil. In order to underpin that decision so it does not start to dissipate over time, we

must continue to make the case for the longer term benefits that it has not only to the quality of their service delivery but also the impact on costs further down the road, highlighting examples of councils that have already done that and made significant savings in the process. That is something that some council leaders and directors of children's services have done instinctively. There are others that sometimes, with the financial purse sitting behind them, are still trying to get to grips with it.

Q144 Mr Raab: I am interested in this idea of externalising costs and early resourcing of early intervention as a way of saving money later down the line. I do not expect you to have a specific figure, but if the social services and local authorities invest a bit more in early intervention, I can see it saves a lot of money for wider agencies outside the council when things go wrong. Are you saying that for the local authorities themselves, as well as the human issue, which is of course first and foremost, it is actually in their financial interest as well? Is there evidence for that?

Mr Timpson: There is absolutely evidence. I think it was Julie Selwyn at the University of Bristol who did some work on this. I know this is predominantly about child protection, but Children First is the name of this Inquiry. You can cross-reference this to some of the most vulnerable children who find themselves on the edge of care or needing additional support from the local authority. They often also have a special educational need. We know from some research that has been done that, if you have an early identification of that need and you get a good quality assessment and plan in place that incorporates education, health and social care much more closely together, the long-term savings can be around about £1 million for that child over their lifetime. Part of that obviously will be savings for the local authority.

When it comes to children who the local authority ends up taking to care because they have perhaps not intervened early enough and have had to take more drastic action, we can see the consequences in that through the numbers of children who end up in residential care and the huge unit costs of that; those who end up with a severe mental health problem and the cost that has to the health service; and those who end up in prison, of which around about half of those who are in a young offenders' institute have had some time in care. They all demonstrate the cost to society of not taking action earlier where it could prevent some of those actions having to be taken.

Q145 Siobhain McDonagh: Do we not all instinctively know that is true? Do we not all get told that by constituents constantly? "If you did this earlier, it would prevent future spending." The problem is we have to meet today's costs today. Therefore, people in local authorities are continually under pressure to worry about their budget lines today and they will kind of worry about the day after tomorrow the day after tomorrow. Is that not reality?

Mr Timpson: There are always going to be cases that require immediate action.

Siobhain McDonagh: Yes, they will always come first.

Mr Timpson: However, that does not and has not prevented many local authorities from taking that approach through their early help offer, through early years support and through the work that they do with families in conjunction with some very good voluntary agencies as well—such as Home-Start working with new parents who are struggling to

cope—and doing that work in parallel, sometimes as part of their first involvement with that family. They are preventing things deteriorating to an extent where they have to take more drastic and more costly action further down the line. I do not see why they should be mutually exclusive from each other. It is part of good practice, good assessment and good delivery of service.

Q146 Chair: I did some of this in a north-east local authority around SEN, looking at making provision for children with SEN so they did not have to go to very expensive and usually independent residential placements. It took a huge amount of work; it took time, but it also took pump-priming. I had to get the director of finance to lever in funding because you have to have the services first before you can start bringing these children back. Are there going to be any additional resources around helping local authorities get the pump-priming to get the services in place?

Mr Timpson: I have indicated to Mr Mearns that, as part of the open offer to all those who both work in children's services and who work around or are interested in working in children's services, if they think they have new ways of delivering services better but there are things stopping them doing it, then we want to know about it. We want to work with them to try to help bring it to fruition. If there are ways that we can help, including financial support, then we stand ready to do that.

Chair: We have spent about half the time we have with you, Minister, on the first section, which is the overall picture. I think it will cover lots of the things that we want to talk about later, but we do have three other sections to consider. Therefore, if we could have sharper and shorter answers, that would be really helpful.

Mr Timpson: I will do my best.

Q147 Mr Ward: One of the three areas that we focused on in the 2012 report was the issue of neglect. The problem of early intervention had been thwarted by a clear definition of neglect. My understanding is that they currently use a very old criminal definition dating back to 1933. What is your view on the definition? We had suggested that the whole issue of definition should be looked at. This was rejected by the Department, and are you still of the view that there is not a need to update the definition of neglect?

Mr Timpson: We have the definition of neglect set out in the Working Together statutory guidance. I would tell you the page number, but I cannot remember it and do not have it to hand. That has a very clear definition of neglect set out in a box in about 10 lines. What you are talking about is the criminal definition of neglect under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933. We have looked at this, as you have quite rightly said, and we have been careful to consider it against the backdrop of the concerns that were raised. We were satisfied that the legislation that already exists under Section 17 and Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which has obviously been a seminal piece of legislation that has held firm for almost 25 years, is sufficient and sets out clearly enough the responsibilities that there are.

There is a really good question to ask about how we ensure that those who are working with children understand what neglect is and what the early indicators of neglect are. If you look at some of the evidence you have already heard, it is a recurring theme that is sometimes also reflected in the serious case reviews we referred to earlier, where it is not

so much the issue of referral that is not happening in the way that it should, but more about the interpretation of what professionals are seeing happening in a family and whether that constitutes neglect or not.

There are a number of pieces of work that I think will help inform this. Ofsted is doing a thematic review on thresholds and how they are interpreted by social workers. Hopefully, that will be coming out soon. Within the Department, we have also set up a panel of experts who are looking at neglect and how we make it easier for practitioners to understand what the early indicators of neglect are so that we can have more consistency of approach. That will go a long way to starting to unravel what is actually a very complex area. How we define neglect is not easy. We have done it in the statutory guidance, but it is then how it is interpreted in what are sometimes quite complex family situations.

Q148 Mr Ward: The statistics do show that there seems to be an increasing prevalence of neglect. Do you think that that is as a result of more neglect or simply growing awareness of the existence of neglect?

Mr Timpson: It is hard to say. I would hope that it is because there is a growing awareness of neglect. When I was practising, in many of the cases of neglect that I was involved with there had been quite a long history and pattern of interaction between the family and different agencies. In too many of those cases, there had been a pattern that had developed that had been allowed to carry on for too long before appropriate interventions were made. That suggests to me that there is still more and better understanding needed amongst practitioners who are working with these sorts of families. The work we are going to be doing will help inform that, but with 41% of children on a child protection plan being so because of neglect, the prevalence would not appear to be diminishing. Therefore, it makes it even more important we understand what lies behind it.

Q149 Mr Ward: You mentioned family work there. There is some evidence of a deterioration in parenting skills, and that has been cited as one of the causes of the growing incidence of neglect. Do you think that the wider family context that you have referred to has been dealt with adequately through child protection services?

Mr Timpson: There is a recognition that there is a shortage of parenting skills in some parts of society. It is also worth remembering it can transcend into any part of society; it does not have a level of exclusivity in one part or another. It is not just in child protection where the help to support those families that are lacking parenting skills should be sitting. For instance, we have the Family Nurse Partnership, with a strong evidence base of about 20 or 30 years in care in the United States and is now starting to flourish over here, including in Crewe more recently. It is a proven programme of support to young parents who may lack those skills and getting in early to provide that support. We have the CANparent trials that we have been carrying out through my Department to offer parents who feel they may be struggling the opportunity to improve their parenting skills. There are different avenues through which we can capture those parents who, if we do not try to beef up their parenting ability at the earliest possible stage of their time as parents, can then start to be harder to reach as the years go by. That is when you sometimes get cases that can fall from lack of parenting skills to early indicators of neglect.

Q150 Chair: Many of the parents who have poor parenting skills when their children are going to school were secondary school children in our schools five years earlier. Is there any consideration within the Department to look at parenting skills as part of the curriculum? These are the same people with a couple of years between.

Mr Timpson: As you know, we have recently conducted a full review of the curriculum that included looking at PSHE and all the other areas of debate that there were around what should and should not be in the curriculum. We have had that review. Decisions have been made, following consultation, as to the content of the curriculum. There is nothing to stop schools, particularly secondary schools, where it is part of the statutory responsibility of the school to teach sex and relationships education for example, carrying out a form of parenting classes in their schools. We think that they are best placed in knowing their pupils and whether that is going to be effective or not.

Chair: I just simply ask whether, for some of our young children, Latin or child development will be more useful to them. We have a captive audience here.

Q151 Siobhain McDonagh: In response to the Committee's report, DfE said it would be working with the Home Office to develop more effective responses to domestic violence and child protection. What action has resulted from this partnership?

Mr Timpson: As I have alluded to earlier, we now have the National Group on Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People. Part of that work is looking at where their vulnerabilities may be, including around domestic violence. That is bringing together and building on the child sexual exploitation plan that we had within our Department. I also talked earlier about some of the mismatch of data sets between the police and local authorities in trying to identify children who may be at risk—for instance those who go missing—and making sure that they are much more closely aligned to one another, so that where there are concerns, they are flagged up more readily. It is building on much of the recommendations made by the Inquiry by the Office of the Children's Commissioner. That is why it transcends into both the Home Office and the Department for Education to ensure that we have a joint response.

Q152 Siobhain McDonagh: Recent high-profile cases often seem to feature certain common elements: child neglect, domestic violence and substance misuse. What is being done to specifically address these elements?

Mr Timpson: I spoke a few moments ago about child neglect and the work Ofsted and my Department are doing to try to provide the best analysis and then guidance to professionals working with children so that they have an understanding not only of what the early indicators of neglect are, but also often where they are missing opportunities to intervene where they have not formed a view that this may be a sign or an indicator of neglect. That is going to be an important piece of work once it is completed. Can you just remind me about the other aspects that you mentioned?

Siobhain McDonagh: Domestic violence, substance misuse, child neglect and non-school attendance.

Mr Timpson: I have just talked about child neglect and I spoke a few moments ago about sexual violence as well. On substance misuse, we are seeing a reduction.

Q153 Siobhain McDonagh: Can I give you a real example? In my case Tia Sharp was my constituent. Her family was raided twice for drugs early in the morning, and on those days the police took her to school. Neither the police nor the school thought it was a problem. Her mum regularly told various health services that she herself was a drug user and this was why she did not want to take up some of their services. Nobody ever got together to talk about it.

Mr Timpson: We know from the case of Tia Sharp that it is an example of where various services that were meant to be there to provide protection and support were not exchanging information in the right way. They were not interpreting it in a way that was focusing on the child, and that is what we are seeking to address.

Q154 Siobhain McDonagh: The child never came into it. It was always the parents who were the people that were being considered.

Mr Timpson: Precisely, and that is the point I am making. That is why having the child-centred system that Professor Munro speaks about is so important.

Q155 Siobhain McDonagh: Do you think today that, if parents acknowledge their drug taking to a midwife or in a post-natal situation, somebody would say to social services, “I think there’s a problem here”? I am not convinced that is the case.

Mr Timpson: The statutory guidance makes it clear that, in all situations where any professional has a concern about a child’s welfare, they should be referring and reporting that to the appropriate agency. We know that does not happen in every occasion, because that is borne out in some of the Ofsted inspection reports that we see. That is why we have revised the statutory guidance to make it abundantly clear what their responsibilities are. It is also why, for example, we are trying to improve cross-agency sharing of information. For example, the Department of Health is setting up a system so that, where a child comes to A&E who is on a child protection plan or is or has been in care, that is then flagged immediately to social services, so there is not that loss of relevant information that needs to be transferred across. That is a good example of where we can improve how agencies talk to one another and provide the right information that is going to make a material difference.

Q156 Chair: Do you think that the Department could send out some stronger messages on this? On things like attendance, if a child’s attendance is between 80% and 98%, that is an attendance issue, but if it falls below 80%, we really should be looking at this as a child protection issue.

Mr Timpson: There are clear guidelines on attendance.

Chair: They are not that clear, Minister.

Mr Timpson: That is also with the new Ofsted inspection of schools, with one of four pillars around behaviour and attendance being a key aspect of that. I know from schools that I visit how many of the “outstanding” schools in particular place attendance as a key indicator of how well the school is performing. There is a direct link between attendance and success in reaching educational attainment.

Q157 Chair: There has been a really good job done on that. I think schools really now do get that there is a strong link between attendance and attainment. What I do not think we are sending out strongly enough is that there should be an issue that, if attendance drops below a certain point—it is a cultural thing—it is not attendance; it is a child protection issue. Could the Department do more?

Q158 Ian Mearns: It is developmental neglect if a child is not getting to school on a regular basis.

Q159 Siobhain McDonagh: It is not okay if a child displays some sort of injury or bruising, or something like that, but in a way, that is an easier trigger, isn't it? What happens when the child is well behaved, enjoys being at school and is a good pupil while they are there when they are there, even though police and the health services are getting information about the behaviour of the parents that may affect the child?

Mr Timpson: In terms of the indicators of neglect, it is precisely why we are doing the work that we are with the experts that we have brought together to bottom out where we can be clear about what those early indicators are. There has to be a level of professional judgment involved in this as well. We cannot rely on simply going back to the approach that we had previously, where as long as you had ticked all the boxes, that child was going to be safe. I would be nervous of moving back towards simply having the blunt instrument of, "If you reach this level or that level, it is either okay or it is not okay." It can be something that is factored in in making that professional judgment, but I am not sure it is the answer to everything that is being proposed.

Q160 Siobhain McDonagh: Do local authorities adequately scrutinise their choice of interventions against evidence of their effectiveness? Whose responsibility is it to undertake impact evaluations and improve the evidence base on the effectiveness of interventions?

Mr Timpson: It has been acknowledged by some of those who work within child protection on the front line at the contact and referral stage that the analysis of the problem has not been as good as it can be in too many cases. The reason that is so important is because unless you have that the decisions that then flow about what you assess and what plan you put in place will be directly affected by that initial analysis of the problem. This was something that Professor Munro was very hot on in her review. It is why in the initial assessment process, rather than simply having a truncated assessment process of initial assessment within 10 days and then the core assessment for 35 days, we have brought those together so that there is a continuum of assessment. As a consequence of that, you can make a better analysis of what it is in that family that has gone wrong and how we fix it.

Q161 Ian Mearns: We recently, in October, had a memorandum from the Department to this Committee. Within that memorandum there was no mention of older children, nor was there mention of older children in the Secretary of State's speech to the NSPCC. Do you think that the omission of a mention of this group reflects a low prioritisation of this group and a subsequent lack of attention in the DfE and on its policy agenda? I just had a little quote this morning. Within the survey that we talked about earlier that was publicised by the BBC, one respondent told the survey, "We were told if you have a teenager on your case who is 14 to 16-years-old, then they cannot have child protection plans

anymore because they are either deemed ‘capable of voting with their feet’ or ‘able to self-protect’.” That is a worrying little anecdote or piece of evidence from an individual. That is a worrying reflection of the fact that the DfE itself does not seem to be prioritising older children from that perspective.

Mr Timpson: The answer to your question is absolutely not. There is as much priority on older children. We were at pains in the statutory guidance to move away from calling them “young people” to calling them “older children” for the very reason that Isabelle Trowler, the Chief Social Worker, said to you when she gave evidence, which I think was absolutely right: they are older children, but they are children. They can be just as vulnerable then as they are when they are much younger. That does not mean that the response should be any different. The ADCS has done some interesting work on trying to establish how we can change the services we provide around vulnerable adolescents.

We have too many who come in and out of care. They will come into care for a short period of time, be returned home, and around about one-third who return home are back in care within two years. That is far too high. We need to do much more on the planning process of any child, particularly the majority of those who are older children who return home, to make sure that is not a failed rehabilitation. Otherwise, they end up just being on that conveyor belt. We need to do more and we are doing a huge amount around residential care, which is predominantly older children. There are some amendments to legislation we are putting through the Children and Families Bill to improve the transparency of children’s homes, the quality of the workforce, having less of those children moved out of area and having greater oversight from a higher level of official within the local authority at DCS level to sign that off. That is as well as the care-leavers strategy that I told you about a few moments ago.

I know from my own family’s personal experience at the moment. My parents have some teenagers who were in care, have come back and are living with them temporarily. They require just as much attention, and in some cases, because of the long history that they have had of poor care, they are potentially the most vulnerable at all. When I was answering questions from Mr Raab earlier in this session, we know the consequences to them if we do not take that approach. I want to be completely and utterly clear that there is no let-up on ensuring that they remain very firmly in the spotlight.

Q162 Craig Whittaker: That is interesting because we know that one of the reasons we as a Committee put in our report a recommendation on older people was that we have particularly high levels of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, and alcohol and drug abuse; well over 40% of our prison population comes from the care system; 16% achieve five A* to C; 6% go to university; and there is an incredibly high level of NEET. That is why we as a Committee put a huge focus on that in our recommendations and our report. The response we got from your Department, though, was quite woolly, to be quite fair. Does the answer you have just given us mean to say that you have now changed direction from what your answer to our recommendation was? Just to refresh your memory, what you said was the Government “expect local leaders to consider whether their child and family social work services are appropriately configured to meet the needs of all vulnerable children and families”. It was a very woolly response to our recommendation. Does that mean to say that you have now taken our recommendation and are doing something about it?

Mr Timpson: I do not necessarily agree with your interpretation of the response. It would be remiss of me not to say that. It is getting at a point made in the evidence that you

have heard from the Chief Social Worker and others. They are children, and the most important thing to get right is the support that is being provided to them and their family so that they get the stability that is necessary to then achieve rather than fail. Whether that requires in their individual case some specific and different interventions that can only be decided at the local level should not detract from the fact that there is the overarching framework in place that we have put there in order to enable that to happen.

Q163 Craig Whittaker: To be fair, the outcomes for children coming out of care are incredibly appalling. These are not just poor outcomes; they are disgraceful right across the board. There is something within that mix—whether it starts from early intervention, whether it is through the schooling system, whether it is the amount of placements that they have or whatever it is—that means without question the most vulnerable time for these young people is when they are in their teenage and adolescent times. Surely, we should be looking at targeting them then rather than later. One of the things that we have spoken about personally is about extending social care for children or young people that have left care up to the age of 25, which I think we should be doing. There is no evidence, though, from when they leave care and beyond, that they get the support that they need, and they incredibly get these awful, disgustingly poor outcomes. Surely, we should do more for this cohort.

Mr Timpson: You know as well as I do, Mr Whittaker, how much I have highlighted the outcomes of children who have been in care and leaving care. That is why we are tackling it at every stage in terms of trying to prevent children coming into care unnecessarily. We are trying to improve their experience in care so they have more stability of placement and to ensure their education is better. We have the new Pupil Premium Plus, which I brought into Government as a recommendation that I made whilst chairing the All-Party Parliamentary Group that you now chair, so that every child in care, including those teenagers, is getting £1,900 per year in addition to other money spent on their education, specifically for them to achieve rather than fail. It is why we are doing more to try to keep young people who are in a good, caring environment in that environment for longer. We have discussed that on numerous occasions and I want to see what more we can do to support that further.

It is why under the Care Bill and the Children and Families Bill we are trying to reduce that gap between adult and children's services. For example, often many of these young people, through no fault of their own, may require mental health services. We want to ensure the transition from children's services to adult services is much smoother than it has been in the past, so that there can be an assessment of them whilst they are still a child for access to adult services. Similarly, they can stay in children's services beyond the age at which they become an adult to make sure that they do not fall between the gaps.

There is a whole host of work being done that, when it is brought together collectively, demonstrates a strong commitment to this cohort of young people. We have seen a small reduction in the last year of the number of young people in care leaving care who are not in education, employment or training. Again, though, there is still a lot more work to do. As I said at the start, I think you know very well my strong personal commitment to this area.

Q164 Ian Mearns: Minister, can I draw a comparison? The Secretary of State is very keen that we should be moving up the league table in PISA rankings. However, UNICEF has drawn up a league table of where we stand in terms of the well-being of older

children. We have been ranked 16th in a table by UNICEF for the well-being of older children, putting us below places like the Czech Republic and Portugal. Teenage pregnancy rates continue to be high: we are ranked 27th out of 29 developed countries. The UK ranks poorly in terms of under-19s not in education, employment or training: 24th out of 29. If we had the same focus on improving our place in the UNICEF table as the Secretary of State places on improving our PISA rankings, do you not think there would be a great deal more attention within the Department paid to trying to improve things for this group of young people?

Mr Timpson: In the most recent statistics we have, teenage pregnancy rates continue to fall, drug use is continuing to fall and we have seen a fall in the number of young people not in education, employment or training in recent months as well. The trends are starting to move in the right direction and that is extremely welcome. Of course, though, they are all still far too high. You could not possibly be satisfied with the status quo.

Ian Mearns: I am not.

Mr Timpson: You in the plural, and I am sure you in the singular as well, Mr Mearns. Where we are on the ranking is one measurement, but the measurement I am most interested in for those individual children is whether we are selling them short and whether there is more we could do to improve their situation. The trends are embryonically encouraging, but that does not mean that there should be any taking the foot off the gas.

Q165 Ian Mearns: There is an awful lot of this that becomes chicken-and-egg-ish, because we are talking about an awful lot of youngsters who are living in very difficult circumstances. The figures for the number of youngsters living in very harsh home circumstances show that 2.6 million children are living with parents who drink hazardously; 705,000 are living with parents who are dependent on alcohol; and 130,000 children are living in homes with past or present domestic violence. The statistics follow on, and they are from the Ofsted report. Overall as a Department, and you as a Minister, are you satisfied that this group of children are being adequately served by the child protection system that we currently have? If you are satisfied, what evidence do you have to back that up?

Mr Timpson: No, I am not satisfied, and the Secretary of State was at pains to point out in his speech last week that he is not satisfied either. That is why we need to be relentless in pursuing what we have already set in train through the Munro reforms in what we are now doing to improve social work training and what we are now doing to improve accountability within child protection and children's services more widely. That is as well as all the other areas I have touched on around children's education whilst they are in care, the services and support they get as they are leaving care, and trying to ensure that early help is having more of an impact across a greater part of the country.

In addition, there is everything we are doing to provide better permanency for those children who cannot live with their own family, whether around the rise in adoption to its highest figure since 1992, which is hugely welcome, or the work we are doing to improve the situation for those children who remain in long-term fostering. For instance, we are looking at giving it a legal definition for the first time, trying to improve the delegated authority that we give to foster carers in that type of placement, as well as understanding what the still fairly new—albeit not as new as they were—special guardianship orders are providing for children who have to find a family other than their birth family to live with.

Q166 Ian Mearns: Does all of that add up to a commitment from you that the UK is going to rise up those UNICEF league tables?

Mr Timpson: I would expect that, if the reforms that we have under way, as Eileen Munro said to you two weeks ago, start in the next two years to have a more apparent effect and get more embedded, that can only help us improve both our child protection system in its entirety and those other services that are intrinsically connected to it.

Q167 Chair: Minister, what will you be doing as a result of the evidence given to the Public Administration Select Committee yesterday that police are not investigating child sex abuse and exploitation in order to massage the crime figures? What action will you take as a result of that?

Mr Timpson: As you know, CSE is a Home Office lead, and I am sure you are all aware that the national group that is set up is there for precisely this reason: to try to grapple with these types of issues. I have no doubt that my colleague, the Minister for Policing, Damian Green, will also have taken note of the report from yesterday. Clearly, I will want to satisfy myself that that is the case.

Chair: There will be ministerial stamping of feet over that.

Q168 Siobhain McDonagh: Children are normally ahead of adults with regard to social media and mobile phone technology. What is the Government doing to improve professionals' awareness and knowledge of these issues?

Mr Timpson: We have seen this week, with the latest push from the Prime Minister to improve the response from the industry, that there has been more done than ever before to protect children from the side of social media that is potentially damaging to them. The progress we have made has been really significant. We are seen not only outside Europe but also in America as being at the forefront of bringing about the necessary safeguards and protections for children without preventing them from using the power of social media in a positive way; we know it can be. There are still emerging concerns. We all have to accept that we are all trying to grapple with this in a fast-moving world. There are elements of social media that are having an impact on children's lives in a negative way outside of the protection from inappropriate material. Cyber-bullying, for instance, is one of those.

Q169 Siobhain McDonagh: What is your Department doing to make sure the professionals who deal with these particular cases and these particular young people are aware and knowledgeable about the issues?

Mr Timpson: I was just going to come on to explain precisely that. We understand that every child now from an earlier and earlier age is coming into contact with the internet and social media. It is important that there is great responsibility on parents to protect their children online as they do offline. We should not try to diminish the importance of that role. However, in order that they have those building blocks in place to know both the power of the internet and the dangers, in the new curriculum we have put online safety into all four Key Stages. That is the right approach so that children from Key Stage 1 are starting to learn not just from home but also from school what it is that they can and

cannot do in order to protect themselves. In particular around cyber-bullying, we are also helping BeatBullying and a number of other charities through funding to spread the good practice guidance that there is out there to as wide an audience as possible so that they know exactly how to deal with it.

Q170 Siobhain McDonagh: You spoke about guidance to schools, but sex and relationships education contains no mention of the internet or other technologies. Will the Department revise this to ensure that guidance and hence teaching keeps pace with the new risks faced by children and their access to pornography particularly, which skews their attitudes towards relationships, and peer-to-peer abuse.

Mr Timpson: We did look at the sex and relationships education guidance as part of our wider review of the curriculum. There was a consultation, and the clear view was that the current guidance was fit for purpose, but we are adding online safety into the curriculum at all four Key Stages. The schools that I have been to where they have a strong ethic on ensuring their children are safe in all environments have this already naturally embedded into their own curriculum. I go back to the answer I think I gave the Chair an hour or so ago: we think teachers and head teachers are best placed to decide how they teach that within their school.

Q171 Siobhain McDonagh: Are you comfortable that the provision of sex and relationships education is at the discretion of individual schools?

Mr Timpson: We have no plans, having looked at the guidance, to revise it. In secondary maintained schools, sex and relationships education is a mandatory aspect of their curriculum. In primary schools, it is discretionary, but of course there is the guidance the Secretary of State has issued that they must follow as part of that aspect of their teaching.

Q172 Siobhain McDonagh: What is your argument against extending the obligation of sex and relationships education to primary schools?

Mr Timpson: As I have already said, we have done a review and taken a view that the current arrangement works and that, at primary school level, we think it is better for head teachers, in collaboration with their wider staff, to make those decisions. Of course, parents always have the option to remove their child from that aspect of teaching if they so wish.

Q173 Mr Raab: Minister, we have touched on this already. We have had witnesses tell this Committee that there needs to be a cultural shift towards seeing older children as children first, rather than young adults. You have talked a little bit about the Department's view. Is there anything further it is going to be doing on this? Would you agree with that social diagnosis and, if so, what further is the specific role of the Department?

Mr Timpson: I do agree with that diagnosis and I have tried to flesh that out in the answers I gave to Mr Whittaker. I am not sure it is helpful to the Committee if I repeat precisely what I have said, but I am always happy to write the Committee if that would be helpful just to give that detail in a systematic way.

Q174 Mr Raab: Very good. The Government rejected the recommendation that the DfE take overall responsibility for child welfare. I think it has defined its role as to support and challenge other Departments. There is one recent example that comes up, which is the Home Office decision not to give 17-year-olds in police custody the same rights as those aged 16 and under. I wonder what role the Department had taken in the formulation of that decision, whether it was consulted and what view it took.

Mr Timpson: There are a number of different levels on which we have engagement with other Departments. There is what you would call the highest level, which is where there has to be clearance across all of Whitehall for a change of policy, which each Department then has the opportunity to either support or raise issues that they may have with that policy, all the way down to meetings with Ministers that I have on a bilateral basis on issues as they arise but also on a regular basis to update each other on our different work. That is as well as some of the intermediary levels of communication, such as the Social Justice Committee, which has looked carefully at a lot of these issues across the whole of Government. There is no hard and fast rule on where any issue would sit within that, but clearly it is important that where there are cross-cutting issues we have as much involvement as possible. There is a whole host of inter-ministerial groups on various issues; whether it is violence against women and girls, whether it is on female genital mutilation or whether it is the national group I was talking about around sexual violence against children and vulnerable people. There is a whole array of different opportunities for us to interact together both at ministerial level and elsewhere in Whitehall.

Q175 Mr Raab: On this specific issue of 17-year-olds and the rights that they get in custody, at what level did the Department intervene and what was the view, to the extent that you feel able to inform the Committee?

Mr Timpson: Rather than try to drag up from my memory the precise nature of that specific issue, I think if I could make some further inquiries to make sure you get an accurate response, that would be a more appropriate approach.

Q176 Mr Raab: Another case that tests the bespoke role that the Department has in this area came up in relation to evidence from the Refugee Council and the Children's Society about the two-way understanding of social workers but also immigration officials about how we treat children, particularly when they have been trafficked or there is a risk of trafficking. How does the Department get involved at a granular level of detail operationally and at policy level in making sure that children who either trafficked or at risk of trafficking are not just treated as a bog-standard immigration case, but also as a child welfare issue of the highest importance?

Mr Timpson: We have an inter-ministerial group on human trafficking. That brings together the Home Office, DfE and a number of other Departments both at ministerial and official level. That is a forum where any concerns or ideas can be shared with one another so that we are not simply ploughing on in isolation. Through the Children and Families Bill, as well as the current draft of our report set against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we are engaging with Departments right across Government to establish on exactly these sorts of issues how we are performing both as individual Departments and collectively as a Government. The likes of the Children's Society and others have good relationships both with my Department and the Home Office. They are

not shy in coming to both of us to share any evidence they have, which we can then discuss as an item as part of our inter-ministerial group.

Q177 Mr Raab: Do you think you have the balance about right or are you still concerned that the welfare aspect of children subject to trafficking is not adequately catered for? Where do you think we are on that balance?

Mr Timpson: I think we have the balance about right. The work that we do across both my Department and the Home Office is a fairly constant dialogue. I have had a number of meetings with the Minister for Immigration; I have spoken to the Home Secretary. At the Social Justice Committee, when we were talking about the anti-slavery Bill, that was a discussion we were all involved in. There is certainly no sense on my part that there is a disconnect.

Q178 Mr Raab: Just taking it from the Whitehall level to the local authority level, what guidance is in place to make sure that trafficked children are placed in the right kind of accommodation?

Mr Timpson: There is guidance available and there is good practice that we know exists, particularly in parts of London where there is a high propensity for trafficking. For instance, I know in Hillingdon they do some fantastic work. One of the ways that we are trying to explain the type of approach they are taking is to involve as many Peers and Members of this Committee, if they so wish, to come and see and look at that work to establish exactly the impact that it is having. Ultimately, this is about the very essence of this session, which is around spotting the indicators and understanding where those children may be most vulnerable. The legislation is clear as to what the responsibilities are of councils should a child or a young person in that situation fall within their remit. There are obviously different levels of expertise across the country, which is often based on the prevalence and therefore the need to have that expertise. We want to try to spread that best practice we find in Hillingdon and other parts of the country, particularly cities, much more widely.

Q179 Mr Raab: When you look across the piece, whether it is the Home Office issue or the trafficking issue within immigration and then you obviously have all the issues at local authority level, do you see, based on that evidence and looking at it as a whole, any case for revisiting this Committee's recommendation that DfE take overall explicit responsibility for child welfare?

Mr Timpson: I am the Minister who takes overall responsibility for child protection. Child welfare is obviously a key element of that. It goes back to reflecting what is actually in the statutory guidance we send out to local authorities and other local agencies. Rather than say there is a single Department that is responsible for children's welfare, this sits right across Government both at local and national level. One of the reasons that we have managed to develop the care-leavers strategy is that, by my putting that challenge out there to other Departments and saying, "What are you doing to help support children's welfare?"—and in this instance care leavers—it has elicited a response where they have stepped up to that and looked at how their own policies affect that particular cohort of children. I would not want the message to be that we are the only Department with that responsibility, because that

would not reflect the reality. It is important to make sure that is a shared responsibility that is then borne out by activity.

Q180 Mr Ward: I have a couple of questions on multi-agency arrangements with local authorities and various models such as the multi-agency safeguarding hubs. Is the Department doing anything to support local authorities in the creation of these arrangements?

Mr Timpson: We have seen an increase in the use of multi-agency safeguarding hubs. I know the Home Office has done some work around multi-agency working to look at how many Councils are using that type of model. The hub is one good way of bringing together different agencies and co-locating them. I have seen this for myself: I went up to Nottinghamshire when they started theirs either at the beginning of this year or late last year. Devon was the pioneer and Haringey is another good example. Not every local area will necessarily require exactly the same model, and so it would be wrong for us to say, “You have to have this type of multi-agency safeguarding hub.” What we do is reflected in the new Ofsted inspection and will be further reflected as they move towards a multi-agency style inspection in the future. We say it is clearly a good way of working, whatever your model is that brings together agencies into the same arena. We do not want to be prescriptive, but it is likely that, as we have seen elsewhere, it will improve information-sharing and responses to referrals, and it is something that independent chairs of local safeguarding children boards are well placed to try to push within their local area.

Q181 Mr Ward: Going back to an earlier theme, there is a concern that the increased multi-agency work will generate additional work as more information is shared. That is a concern that the local authorities seem to have. Is there likely to be any support or provision if that is the outcome of multi-agency work?

Mr Timpson: I would like to see the evidence for that, because I would take the opposite view. I think it can actually help reduce work because you do not have different agencies all duplicating each other. Rather than all going off on their own tangent and working in parallel with each other, by having those conversations much earlier and working more effectively as a unit, they can help reduce the workload. We see that in a microcosm with the way that Hackney reorganised its own social work through the Reclaiming Social Work model, where by having teams working on cases, they were able to reduce the individual casework load on each social worker and at the same time bring about more effective and targeted interventions on families. It ultimately saved time and saved money. The whole point of having a multi-agency approach is not to create more work; it is to try to be more efficient in how they are dealing with the issues that come across their desks.

Q182 Neil Carmichael: The Home Office has been talking about the high level of turnover as an obstacle for setting up multi-agency arrangements. Do you think that is problem, and how do you think we can overcome it?

Mr Timpson: Are you talking about turnover of staff generally?

Neil Carmichael: Yes, staff and particularly leadership.

Mr Timpson: It is a worry. For instance, we know that in the last six to 12 months there has been a turnover of directors of children’s services that is much more than we would

wish to see. There is a whole host of reasons that sit behind that. Some are a certain group that are coming to the natural end of their time in that position. Some of it is changes through the fact that there has been a change in political leadership that has generated a change at the top of the local authorities. We need to be careful that we do not jump to conclusions as to exactly why that may be. We do know that leadership is a crucial component to providing an effective children's service, and we see that reflected in those councils that have had stability in leadership as well as strong leadership to go with it driving up the standards of care and protection within that local authority.

It is also about staff turnover on the front line. We have a whole spectrum of examples, from those local authorities that have very low staff turnover. To use Hackney as an example again, before they brought in their Reclaiming Social Work model, their turnover was far too high. They had too many agency workers that they were employing to fill those positions. Now they have a much more stable workforce and much reduced sickness and absence levels, and that in itself breeds confidence and increases morale. As we know, we have too many examples at the other end where there is a level of turnover that is far from helpful, not only for those who are working in that team, but more importantly for the children and families who are coming into contact with them. When you hear stories, as I have done, over the last five years or so of children who have seen seven or eight social workers within a very short period of time in care, that is anything other than conducive to providing them with the support and the ability to find someone they can trust to help them through what can be a very difficult time in their lives.

Q183 Neil Carmichael: Turning to Ofsted, which obviously has an important role here, how do you think that role can be developed to tackle some of the problems we have been discussing this morning?

Mr Timpson: The change in the Ofsted inspection is going to be a real catalyst for changing behaviour in children's services, partly because there is now going to be a joint inspection that brings in child protection and looked-after children's services together; it looks more at the child's journey through care rather than looking at the system sitting around that child. It is also partly because it is going to be and is more focused on the interaction between the child, family and social workers, the quality of that interaction and the quality of the assessment and planning that is in place, rather than simply what has been recorded and is sitting in a filing cabinet. That is starting to filter through, and the evidence the Committee has already heard suggests that it is starting to change the culture, albeit in its early stages, that we all know that we not only want to see but have to see.

Q184 Neil Carmichael: Turning now to the question of alternative solutions to adoption, we as a Committee were quite keen that they should be developed. How far has the Department got in doing that?

Mr Timpson: I assume you are talking about other routes of permanency. I touched on it in an answer I gave to Mr Whittaker. Both the Secretary of State and I, when we have had the opportunity, have used it to make it crystal clear that there is no hierarchy in care. It is about finding the right placement for each child at the right time. For some, and we think for more than there are now, that will be adoption. As I say, we have had the biggest rise in adoption since 1992, but we still have well over 4,000 children currently in care whose plan is for adoption that we still cannot find stable and loving family homes for them to go

to. That is why there is a real focus on driving up adopter recruitment and doing what we can to restructure the way that we go about recruitment to give them every prospect of doing so.

That does not mean that we cannot also focus on other routes to permanency, including long-term fostering. I have explained that we are looking at how we can define that better and provide better support for those who want to be long-term foster carers. For instance, that is around delegated authority, which means that as a child spends more time with them in that long-term foster placement, they get the authority to make decisions on a day-to-day basis. In the past, they would have had to get consent for that either from the social worker or through the birth family.

It is also around special guardianship orders, which are continuing to grow in number. We have a piece of work that is being done to understand the impact that has had, the sorts of children who are going into special guardianship placements, and whether the support they are getting is sufficient. There is an attempt to try to understand for each child what that route to permanence should be and then establish whether we have done enough to provide the right support to make whatever that decision is work all the way through to adulthood.

Q185 Neil Carmichael: That is obviously the important thing: to understand what the child needs and to interpret that in the right way. The Children and Families Bill is currently before Parliament. It says here that it is going to introduce a legal requirement to secure an adoption order from a court within six months of taking a child into care. Is that consistent with what you have just said?

Mr Timpson: It is not actually an adoption order. It is around the care proceedings having to be completed within 26 weeks. Part of that would be, if the plan is for adoption, there would also be a placement application, which should run alongside the care application. The good news is that even before the legislation has come in, because of the good work of the President of the Family Division and Mr Justice Ryder, who have been working with the judiciary to try to bring down the length of care proceedings, we have already seen a reduction from an average of about 65 weeks to around just over 40 weeks with the new public law outline they have brought in. That shows that there has been huge scope for reducing the delay for children whilst care proceedings are ongoing, including those children whose plan is for adoption. That has been a significant success and one that, when the legislation becomes enacted, I think will bring those figures down even further.

Q186 Neil Carmichael: That is good, but there is a risk that some situations might require more thought, less haste. Is there scope to accommodate that?

Mr Timpson: There is discretion for the judge hearing the case to extend the 26 weeks in certain circumstances for eight weeks, and then another eight weeks. There will always be cases—and I know having done them myself—that are extremely complex, have a high number of siblings involved, or will have some quite profound needs of the children involved that need to be properly understood before a decision can be made. There will always be cases where it is hard, despite everyone's best efforts, to stay within those 26 weeks, but we believe—and this is borne out by the progress that has already been

made—that there have been too many cases that have dragged on unnecessarily. The one person who benefits least from that is the child.

Chair: Thank you, Minister. It has been a full session. A real outcome for us would be if the Department would agree to look at our recommendations again, particularly in relation to older children. We look forward to having from you some details about how that society-wide cultural shift is going to take place. Thank you very much.