



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Residential Children's Homes in England](#), HC 716

Wednesday 27 November 2013

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [The Children's Society \(RCH0017\)](#)

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

Witnesses: **Superintendent Laurence Taylor**, Sussex Police, **Chief Constable Patrick Geenty**, Wiltshire Police, ACPO lead on missing people, **Ms Jane Booth**, Independent Chair, Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, and **Ms Iryna Pona**, Policy Adviser, The Children's Society, gave evidence.

Q85 Mr Stuart: Good morning and welcome to this session of the Education Committee looking into residential children's homes. Thank you very much for joining us today. We tend to use first names; I hope we are all happy with that. Could I start with the police representatives if I may? On 19 November, the Public Administration Select Committee heard evidence from former police officers suggesting that police were routinely manipulating crime figures to meet Government performance targets. Reporting on the evidence session, *The Times* said, "Official statistics recorded by police are regularly skewed, with serious crimes downgraded, sexual offences categorised as 'no crimes' and victims' reports about offending not recorded." Given these revelations about the manipulation of crime figures in order to meet performance targets, how can we trust police figures on the number of children going missing from care and the numbers of children who are exploited?

Chief Constable Geenty: First of all, I understand some of the comments that have been made about police crime recording, but I do not recognise some of the criticism made of police figures. Over the recent past there has been a rigorous enforcement of the crime recording standards by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. Whilst they do find discrepancies between forces and the quality of the recording, overall the standard of recording crime in Great Britain is thought to be the best in the world. I do not quite recognise some of those comments.

Q86 Mr Stuart: When you say you do not recognise it, are you saying that you are confident there is no skewing? That the former police officers suggesting that any manipulation goes on were giving false testimony? What is your explanation of that? We know that accountability drives behaviour and any system, however well designed, can have perverse outcomes. Are you suggesting that the police are uniquely proofed to such perverse pressures?

Chief Constable Geenty: Of course I am not, and of course I would accept that there will be anomalies and discrepancies in any accounting system, wherever it is run. Nothing is 100% perfect. In terms of can you have confidence in the crime figures, is there endemic corruption in terms of police manipulation of figures, I would absolutely refute that. The systems that we have in place, the National Crime Recording Standards set the bar very high for police forces. They are inspected regularly. Any manipulation of crime figures is dealt with very seriously, as you can see from HMIC reports.

Q87 Pat Glass: Are you confident that children are safe?

Chief Constable Geenty: That is what I was coming to. The issues around missing from care and children missing from care, those figures are not just dependent on the police; they come from a variety of sources. Whilst they may not be absolutely accurate, the work that we have done over the last 12 to 18 months in terms of standardising our recording procedures between Ofsted, the Department for Education and the police—whereas we used different criteria before, we now use the same criteria. That is helping us to get the figures right.

I remember last year there was a huge discrepancy between the number of figures missing children from children's homes that was reported by Ofsted and the numbers of figures reporting for missing children by the police. It caused quite a considerable public concern. That led to a number of the changes that you see and some of that is in the report that is in front of you for consideration. I am confident that we are moving in the right direction. We recognise the importance of the data and that the figures are getting more and more reliable as time passes.

Superintendent Taylor: I agree with everything Mr Geenty said. There are two issues for me: one is about identifying the right targets to try and prevent those perverse incentives, so that as a service we are delivering the best quality and service for children and young people as we can. The second part of that is how we share that information. It is not just about recorded crime; it is about incidents, behaviour, and understanding patterns and trends within certain areas so that, as a multiagency, we can deliver that good service. For me, it is about that information sharing: how do we share that information with our partners? How do we understand the real picture alongside the crime figures?

Q88 Mr Stuart: A care home manager said to me that she would go to almost any lengths to avoid bringing in the police if she could help it. This was in the context of a children's home with quite a number of teenagers and quite a history of children leaving that home.

Mr Ward: Or a child getting a criminal record, I think she said.

Superintendent Taylor: Interestingly, in schools there is a protocol linked to the National Crime Recording Standards about how crime can be dealt with in schools. Notifiable

offences can be dealt with by the school. There is good information sharing with schools officers and local links with the police services. It is about providing that information, about understanding incidents that take place without criminalising young people.

I would very much support a similar process for residential care homes where those protocols are developed: the conversation takes place with the police service prior to the crime being formally recorded, and then looking at what is the most appropriate disposal and response to that child and young person. Boundaries have to be set, absolutely. Children in the homes need to understand what is and is not acceptable behaviour, but how we deal with that as a multiagency is really important. A protocol has been written and I would urge pushing that through to get a similar protocol for recording crimes in schools similarly for children and young people.

Q89 Mr Stuart: Jane, you have been involved in this area of work for many years. Is it fair to say that we have a system that is both expensive and has poor outcomes?

Jane Booth: I cannot answer the “expensive” question because I think it is relative to outcome. I will answer the outcome one. Many of these children have very significant needs; they are going to be expensive to care for. The external placements that we have, for example, in Rochdale, are expensive placements. The concern is whether or not they produce a good outcome. If the children in those placements are not well matched, which often seems to be the case, then that can increase the risks they face rather than reduce them. You do not have the good outcome; whatever the price is, that is an expensive placement.

Q90 Mr Stuart: In answer to my question, do you think—looking systemically—that we do have something that manages to be both expensive and ineffective?

Jane Booth: The majority of placements that we experience in Rochdale struggle to provide those good outcomes, but they are working with some of the most challenging young people in the country. I am aware of some very good examples of very specialist homes who provide care that could not be provided elsewhere and do produce good outcomes. In the majority of cases we are often working with these young people at a point where it is very hard to turn them round.

Q91 Mr Stuart: Iryna, have we got an expensive and ineffective system overall in England?

Iryna Pona: First of all, I would like to say thank you for inviting the Children’s Society to be here. The Children’s Society has over 130 years of experience supporting vulnerable children, and over the last 30 years we have focused our work on young runaways and missing children.

In answer to your question, I agree with Jane that it is very important to focus on the needs of the child and what we see very often is that placements are made not on the focus of the child, but on where the placement is available. If the needs of the child are not the central part of the care planning for that particular child, not just needs but also views and wishes of the child are not taken into account, it is very likely that the placement will lead to breakdown and there will be another breakdown after another breakdown. In the end that is very expensive.

Q92 Mr Stuart: I am struggling to get either of you to give me a yes/no answer to what may be a very difficult question. If we do have a system that lets down the most vulnerable children and manages, at the same time, to be extraordinarily expensive, then you would think that reform would need to be fairly systemic in its approach. Would it be a fair criticism, Iryna, that the Government's proposed changes are rather more minor than fundamental?

Iryna Pona: The proposed changes will make a contribution to making residential children's care homes safer for children because they will look at assessment of how safe areas are and some other areas hopefully will improve: notification processes and other things. However, to make these reforms successful there needs to be three key factors.

The first one is that they need to be part of a more comprehensive, wider reform of the care system looking at how the child finds the care system from the very beginning, how placement decisions are made, quality of care, learning process and all the way through to the moment the child leaves the care system and what support they get there.

The second important factor is that there needs to be proper oversight, because there have been very good reforms in the past and we do have quite a lot of good statutory guidance and legislation already in place, but the implementation is very patchy. The quality of provision for looked-after children is very patchy. There has to be very good oversight, not just at the national level from Ofsted, but also at the local level from local safeguarding children's boards.

The third point for me is probably one of the most important: this reform feels like it is done for children rather than with children. It needs to be done more in a way where we bring the child's needs to the centre of the care planning system of responses that we apply when they are missing, and that we listen and engage with young people, rather than try and punish and discipline them.

Q93 Mr Stuart: Criminalise them?

Iryna Pona: And criminalise them, yes.

Q94 Mr Ward: Some of us visited Margate in Thanet yesterday and saw what appeared to be a very impressive example of a multiagency taskforce with a strong police involvement. What seemed to be very important and evident was the local knowledge. Our bus driver, who was a police officer, who I think had been there for 20-odd years, a long time, he knew everybody who we drove past. A broad question to begin with, which is about the multiagency working: across the piece, how well do you think agencies are working together, at present, on this whole issue of children in care and preventing missing children?

Chief Constable Geenty: From the police perspective the landscape is getting better. For example, in my own force area, we have just introduced a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, MASH. I put my missing child co-ordinators into the MASH as well so that the relationship between the care homes and the residential homes in the area is part of the MASH. That helps our information sharing and joint working. That is working really well.

The issue for me is more about a local one for officers. Neighbourhood officers and neighbourhood policing is the cornerstone of this relationship. That is why it is fundamental to, I believe, the improvement of quality in how we manage this whole process. Local officers who know the residential homes and the children have a relationship that is not based on whether it is a matter of enforcement of the law: they know each other, they go into the residential homes, they interact, they know each other on an informal basis. That is beginning to take place. That could come from the way in which we develop, which my colleague might want to touch on, what we call corporate parenting. That is something that is currently sadly lacking in care homes.

Superintendent Taylor: There are a few points for me here. Talking about Margate, I chair a South East Regional Group, so I am aware of the work in Margate. One of the things we have developed in the south-east is a protocol to prevent the criminalisation of looked-after children, which is looking at the principles of how we manage reported crime and the best outcomes, which we talked about earlier. That is something that is really important and we are looking to sign that off in December. Our ambition is that that should become much more of a national protocol because looked-after children, regardless of where they are in the country, should receive the same consistent level of service and the same boundaries in whatever care home.

Corporate parenting is really important. We know that looked-after children in residential care homes are there for all sorts of different reasons. It can be behavioural; it can be because their parents are unable to support them. It is important that we do recognise them as a distinct group and parent them effectively, as you would be parented in a family home. One of the challenges is that there are often levels of behaviour accepted in children's homes that would not be accepted in a family home. When that behaviour is then displaced into the community, it is at an unacceptable level. One of my big urges would be that corporate parenting reflects that: that that responsibility is held by the corporate parents and they take a responsibility for the management of the young people as well as understanding that risk.

That leads on to my third point about multiagency working. Local knowledge is absolutely essential. Yes, we need to build those relationships, we need to have good collaborative working with care homes. One of the challenges for us is where you have an out-of-force placement. With that child coming to an area you do not have the information on that background. Without that, you cannot make a fully informed decision about the best way to manage or support that child. In an ideal world I would like to see children placed within their own area; where that is not achievable, an information pack should be available to the multiagency so that you are properly informed and we can make decisions on that basis, supporting that local knowledge.

Jane Booth: From a safeguarding point of view, the safeguarding board in Rochdale has had to focus on some of these issues, perhaps more urgently than has happened in some other areas. What we have been able to see is that the agencies have responded by coming together to try to reduce the risks that young people who are in external placements face, because we have a lot of external private providers in our authority. What has happened is that the agencies have established a multiagency forum, so the private providers meet monthly with representatives from the police, children's social care, and the youth offending team. They have developed a protocol that is a deficit model, because we do have good information sharing from external places, so that the homes themselves notify

the agencies that a young person has arrived. The agency prioritises resources so that the direct commissioning budgets have been increased for the looked after children's nurse.

Q95 Mr Stuart: Do they always notify them? They are under no duty to notify them, are they?

Jane Booth: There is no duty to notify them; it is done purely co-operatively. We believe they do notify—well, we know they do because the two other elements of the project are that the looked-after children's nurse visits all the establishments so she knows who is there and a dedicated police link visits all the establishments. This is all at the expense of other services; there is no additional budget that comes with it. We do, at least, have some assurance that we know is in the borough.

What we hear from the providers—who are also very supportive of this, because they also want to meet these children's needs—is concern that they are still not getting good information, that the placements are often made in a hurry, that risks are not always shared adequately and sometimes they are told “we need a decision within 20 minutes” about a placement. That is the case even with young people who have come in from environments where you would imagine planning was possible, such as secure psychiatric provision.

What we have done in Rochdale is beginning to sow some seeds of better outcomes for the young people. It links with the work we are doing on child sexual exploitation, where part of the multiagency team, the Sunrise Team, also have access. The times we know are the peak times for children going missing are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. A uniformed officer in a police car literally drives round the streets, identify young people who are known to be at risk and say, “What are you doing here?” They are being very proactive about trying to engage with these young people.

Q96 Mr Ward: One of the things I have found difficult is to distinguish between those things that should be statutory requirements and just really good practice and what should be legislated for and not. One of the consultation areas was on the statutory guidance, and it has been reduced from 60-odd pages to 20, I believe. It has been referred to by the DCS as, “So general they do not add much to existing guidance and knowledge”, and that it was “weak” in addressing issues relating to children going missing from parental homes. What are your views on the statutory guidance?

Jane Booth: Guidance has to be supported by good training. I do not think writing copious amounts of guidance necessarily ensures good practice. Having staff on the ground who understand their core duties and responsibilities, are trained and have the time to work directly with young people is likely to be much more beneficial than writing reams of guidance. We know, for example, that the legislation and guidance around placements requires notification, good care plans, and placements to be matched with the child's needs. The guidance has not delivered that for us. Practitioners need to change to understand that.

Mr Stuart: We have an awful lot to cover and very little time in which to do it. David?

Q97 Mr Ward: The definitions: I know there is some concern among the police about the sheer effort involved in responding to the calls coming through about missing

children. Would you like to make some comments on the need for a tight definition on this? I know the police definition is much more defined and strict.

Chief Constable Geenty: We had a very broad, generic definition of what was a missing person, whether it be a child or an adult. What the practitioners were saying was that the response to a child missing from care had become routine and mechanical: a child would be reported missing, they would be risk assessed and then the response officers would be sent to go and find them. Usually the officers would know where that child was, go and pick them up, take them back to the care home. It was not the officers' fault; it was just the way the system was constructed.

We introduced a new definition of absence so that we could prioritise cases where children had been missing repeatedly. We could identify them in our system; we could give it a different category of response. It is in its early stages and what we are beginning to change is the culture. We now have missing person co-ordinators in the majority of forces, whose responsibility is to look at the information about who is going missing and how often—we can do that through the absent category—and then to put care packages together to make sure we respond effectively. The new definition enables the control room operators, the missing person co-ordinators to distinguish from the 330,000 missing reports that the police service gets every year and to break it down into those areas where we really need to focus our attention. Those that go missing more than three times, for example, set off alarm bells. We are able to look at the signs and symbols. It links into child sexual exploitation. We can begin to give it a different category of response than we were giving before.

The definitions have been very helpful. There is ongoing work about looking at their effectiveness and how they are being implemented across the country. We want to make sure that the safeguarding aspects of it, the way in which we intervene in those cases that need intervention, are dealt with.

Q98 Mr Ward: So you have sorted your side out in terms of your own risk assessment. Is there still a need to bring together your own risk assessment with those that may be carried out by the carers at the homes?

Superintendent Taylor: For me, it links to that corporate parenting again: as parents you should be assessing risk and vulnerability and managing that risk and vulnerability. If a young person within that home is deemed to be involved in behaviour that puts them at risk, that information needs to be shared. Streamlining and understanding that would be really important, but critical to that is talking to each other and ensuring we work together.

Q99 Mr Stuart: When you go to an area like Kent and you find that children are from Suffolk, Peterborough or elsewhere, the parent is effectively the home because it is hard to see how Peterborough Social Services are easily on hand to play that role. Is that your experience? Any thoughts about that? Theoretically it is the people in Peterborough, or it is Suffolk, and there they are in Margate.

Superintendent Taylor: Theoretically it is the home area. If you are placed away, the home has to take that responsibility, because they are the people looking after that child. Accepting that the home area still has their statutory responsibilities in relation to that person, the actual home managing on a day-to-day basis have to have that corporate parenting responsibility, provide those boundaries, do those normal risk assessments that parents would do and support that multiagency response.

Iryna Pona: If I may come in on definitions, I acknowledge that there is quite a lot of work being done to ensure that absence is monitored in the same way that children are safeguarded. We were quite concerned, when the new definitions were implemented, that they were implemented without prior evaluation of what needs to be in place. The evaluation in pilot areas was done, but it was not focused on safeguarding and how absent children should be safeguarded. There are still quite a lot of practical issues that need to be sorted out, so that that initial risk assessment is absolutely right when the child is reported missing.

If I can share an example from practice, we had a case where a young person was reported missing. She was reported missing repeatedly from a children's home and she was categorised as "absent" by the police, despite the fact that the carers were really worried about her because she was going missing to her mum, who had a range of mental health problems, was abusing substances and did not have a fixed address. There were quite a lot of risks involved, but the understanding of risk in that particular area by the police and by the care home were quite different. These situations need to be resolved to make sure that children are not placed unnecessarily at risk.

Q100 Pat Glass: Iryna, the Children's Society said that these proposals are unlikely to reduce sufficiently the number of unsuccessful placements, so what is missing? What do we need in here to make these placements more successful?

Iryna Pona: As I said, placing the child's needs at the centre is one of the key elements, and also listening to a child when they are in a placement, giving them an opportunity to speak. We did a review of advocacy cases from other practices last year; a huge number of cases were related to placement and how placement decisions were made. Very often children are not informed about a placement move, or they feel they are in a settled placement but then the decision is changed and they are moved to a new placement without any explanation made to them about why this decision was made. It leads to breakdown in relationship placement stability and the relationship with a trusted adult. These are two key things for making sure that children have positive outcomes and experiences of care. If it does not happen, there are a chain of events that lead to unsuccessful care experiences for children.

Placing the child at the centre and giving them an opportunity to have a say in decisions is hugely important, as it is when a child runs away or goes missing—they must have the opportunity to talk to someone, to explain the reasons why, to explore what they can do to prevent future missing episodes. We can see from other practices that where there is that communication with the child, it is more effective.

Q101 Pat Glass: Given what you are saying about the initially putting the child at the centre of the discussions around the placement, the Children's Right Directors told us that care planning needs to be improved. This is entirely on an implementation basis. We do not need changes in the rules; what we need is for these local authorities to get it right in the first place. We saw that a little bit yesterday when we were in Thanet: however depressing these places are, they exist. You cannot blame people for satisfying a gap in the market. What we thought was, why can these local authorities—I do not want to just blame London, but it was largely London—not get their act together and put good provision in place locally? Is that

what you are saying: that this is not about changing the rules, it is about putting the focus on those local authorities and getting it right in the first place?

Iryna Pona: It is a combination of things. It is training for staff on how to communicate with children; I do not think all staff working with children feel comfortable communicating with them. As one young person told us, “They are staff. We are kids. They shout at us and we cannot shout back.” That is how the communication goes; obviously it is not good enough. Maybe some things can be changed around access to independent advocacy services, for example, which would help children. Not all children will be comfortable and confident to speak in meetings where there are lots of adults.

Q102 Pat Glass: Why are so many local authorities so poor at commissioning? Why are they not getting together and trying to do this locally? There is enough money splashing around here. Jane, why are local authorities so poor at commissioning?

Jane Booth: Increasingly they are getting there. Certainly in Greater Manchester there are plans going ahead now to look at mutual commissioning. There are agreements about supporting young people who are in placements within the Greater Manchester footprint of 10 local authorities in a better way. Everybody acknowledges that some young people’s needs are so specific that not every authority will provide for that immediate need, but it has to be commissioned nearby.

We are concerned about the placements in our borough that belong to other local authorities, but we are also placing people externally—we are net importers, but we do still place young people externally. There does need to be a push to commissioning. Some authorities, certainly in West Yorkshire, can show some good practice on that. I do share some of the views that you have expressed. If care planning worked, these young people would not be placed in inappropriate situations 200 miles from home.

Q103 Pat Glass: One of the proposals that the Government are suggesting is that children should not be placed more than 20 to 25 miles from home. Given what Graham was saying—and we have all agreed that there is a huge amounts of money going in here and there are very poor outcomes—do we need this severe shock to the system to get local authority commissioning up to scratch?

Jane Booth: It will cut across the Children Act, which says you will have to look at the child’s needs.

Pat Glass: There will always be individual children, but what we saw yesterday were not individual children. We saw children who, from my experience in other parts of the country, would have been placed locally.

Jane Booth: There will be a very small number of children who really cannot be placed locally. It may be possible to identify criteria. Some of those will be to do with some of the young children that the commissioner was reporting on yesterday in terms of those at risk of violence from gangs. However, they are going to be a very small proportion of the looked-after children population. The placement plan needs to be on not disrupting family relationships, maintaining school where it is possible and those sorts of things. To do that beyond the horizon of 20 miles is difficult.

Q104 Pat Glass: Is it not easier to say a child can be placed outside of the area if it is in the child's interest but not because it is in the interest of the authority, as in securing the place that is available?

Jane Booth: I would entirely support that. We have to recognise that there will be exceptions, but those would then be escalated to the highest levels; the DCS would then drive the commissioning process.

Q105 Mr Stuart: Is that a proposal that from now on, if it is going to be out of area, at a distance, then the Director of Children Services has to sign it off? That is the proposal. Is that a good idea? Is that the kind of nudge the system needs, rather than something too absolute?

Jane Booth: I think so.

Iryna Pona: It would add additional scrutiny to how placement decisions are being made and maybe every time an out-of-area placement is considered someone will ask the questions, "Is it really needed? Is that particular placement going to meet the needs of the child?"

The focus of this is on residential care but we should remember that there are quite a lot of children placed out of areas with foster carers and they also go missing; they also have additional needs, but then how are these needs going to be met in those local areas? For example, if a child has special educational needs and some of these needs cannot be met either by the residential home or foster carers, they will need to have access to provision in that area where they are placed. If the decision on when these out-of-area placements are to be made is the subject of discussion, those very important questions should be considered.

Q106 Neil Carmichael: What we are going to be talking about in my question is the local safeguarding children's boards, which Professor Munro, who has recently been before this committee, regards as very important in the process. She has talked in terms of judgment being important, rather than just tick-boxing and so forth, and that would apply to these boards. The boards are multiagency, in a sense, which is important from the point of view of the police force. In general terms, first of all, could you say a few words about your understanding of the position of the boards within the structure that we are talking about and how important you believe they could be?

Jane Booth: I am the Independent Chair of the Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board. One of our functions is to quality assure the work that is done to safeguard children within the borough, regardless of who is providing those services. In the legislative framework, it is written in statute that public bodies, who are member agencies of the board, are accountable and we audit their processes. That is not true of the private sector.

I am fortunate in Rochdale that there is a private providers' forum that I can engage with and have dialogue with about safeguarding, but that is not necessarily the norm. In many areas there will be no interface between the safeguarding board and the private providers. What we would do is interface with the local authority that is making the placements, our local authority. In my area, for example, we have a quality assurance and practice improvement sub-group that scrutinises data from the authority, including the number of

children Rochdale itself is placing out of authority and, for that matter, the number that are in other external provision.

Q107 Neil Carmichael: To clarify, your first point would be that the boards are not effective in the private sector, and they should be?

Jane Booth: Practice will vary as to how far engaged they are with the private sector. The statute does not support that very well. In areas where there has been a necessity to find a way around that, you will find, as in Rochdale, there is an engagement with the private sector.

Q108 Neil Carmichael: But that does not apply to all authority areas?

Jane Booth: It does not apply to all authority areas, no.

Q109 Neil Carmichael: Superintendent Taylor, what do you think could be improved in terms of the boards?

Superintendent Taylor: That is a really valid point, because there are requirements for some statutory bodies to engage. I have talked before about understanding risk and information. If we do not have the full picture, it is very difficult to make informed decisions, so ensuring that everybody who ought to be engaged in that process is so, and if that were a mandated thing, would make the work of the boards an awful lot easier. Certainly the data pack that has recently been published has made an enormous difference, even in just understanding where some of the homes are. Bringing all that information together is absolutely critical.

Q110 Neil Carmichael: Chief Constable, your area is actually coterminous presumably with Wiltshire County Council?

Chief Constable Geenty: It is, yes.

Q111 Neil Carmichael: Do you find that effective for your police force to effectively engage with the authority as necessary?

Chief Constable Geenty: It makes it simpler to engage with one local safeguarding children's board. We have two, one in Swindon and one in Wiltshire, because they are unitary authorities. That makes life easier logistically. There are force areas that have five, six or seven different safeguarding boards in the one area and that can be difficult.

From my perspective, all the agencies need to recognise the importance of the safeguarding children boards and be represented at the correct level. I have seen cases where, for example, the representation for the police may be at inspector or sometimes sergeant level; that is not satisfactory. As far as I am concerned it needs to be at a strategic level. I, for example, will go to the local safeguarding children board, not as a regular member but just to go and visit and see what is going on so I know what my superintendents and chief inspectors are doing. I found the quality of the board tends to reflect—this might be controversial—the quality of the independent chair. If you have a really strong independent chair on the board who is robust and will hold all the agencies to account, then the board works very well.

Q112 Neil Carmichael: You raise two very good points there: consistency in terms of the kind of person on any board and the leadership, effectively, of the board. Presumably all of you would agree that there is too much variation in those two areas—except Jane, perhaps, who is familiar just with Rochdale, but do you compare it with others?

Jane Booth: I have chaired other boards and I sit as a board member representing the north-west on the National Association of LSCB Chairs, so I can speak from a slightly wider perspective. The issue of effective and efficient boards is really important. The National Association has recently done some work that I personally found very helpful about what an effective board looks like. In many areas, funding that initially came through the Children's Improvement Board is being used to support chairs through seminars and working groups to develop more effective and efficient report processes.

The issue of commitment and attendance is really important. In my area, Rochdale is coterminous with one division of Greater Manchester police and I have the Divisional Commander sitting on my board; that works well for me. Most board chairs would be unhappy if they were not getting senior representation and would deal with it.

In most areas agencies themselves see the value of doing that. We are talking about at a macro or strategic level now, but even at the detailed level, having those engagements right at the top does mean that things like the kind of detailed work that we are talking about, like the joint risk management of a young person who is vulnerable because of a placement, works better if you have the strategic stuff lined up properly.

Q113 Neil Carmichael: Most people would probably assume through watching this or reading the report later that an authority would be looking after its own children, certainly under the board structure that we are talking about. In fact, that is not always the case is it, because children would come from another authority to an authority that has the home that is suitable for that child. How do we ensure that the board of the recipient county knows enough about the children that are arriving?

Jane Booth: All boards will be looking at how they quality assure services provided. I am concerned, as Chair of the board, with all the children who are in Rochdale. I do not care where they came from. My job as Chair of the board is to ensure that children are safeguarded in Rochdale.

Sitting around my board table is the Director of Children's Services, who has no statutory responsibility at all for those children who belong to Kent, Suffolk or wherever. Under our arrangements, they know they are there because our private providers tell us. With the proposals in the future, for them to have had a dialogue with their opposite number in another authority, they will, at least, have a better insight into those. At the moment there is that total disconnect. Almost every agency round my table will have an involvement with a vulnerable child in a private residential unit, except for Children's Services.

Q114 Neil Carmichael: How does the police force deal with that question?

Chief Constable Geenty: It has been a problem. Out-of-county placements for children coming into Wiltshire from other places have been a problem. In the past, we have not found out about them until well down the line, and then local officers tend to find out about them first. That is how we obtain the information. There is no statutory responsibility to tell the police of placements.

Q115 Mr Stuart: Do you sometimes first find out about the child in your area when they have run away from home and they are at risk?

Chief Constable Geenty: Absolutely. That was the case in the past and that caused considerable difficulty. It was bad for the child, with people not having the knowledge of what that individual's needs were. That was a huge risk in the system. The recommendation in the report about the receiving home having a responsibility to tell the local authority and the police that they have had a new placement is really important. If the duty is left with the originating authority then that delay in time can be quite considerable and sometimes there are breakdowns in communications. Placing the ownership on the receiving home is a good move.

Q116 Mr Stuart: Does there need to be a sanction to ensure it happens? There are lots of things on the system at the moment, which if they all happened would be fine, except they do not. People do not do what they are duty bound to do.

Superintendent Taylor: That was going to be my point about it being guidance. If something is mandated, what is the scrutiny that sits behind that? For me, this is such a critical issue about understanding who those young people are living within our area and how we best safeguard them. If something is not mandated, you cannot always say it will happen, so I would support that.

The other point for me is about that positive experience with the police service and building in that liaison, knowing where our residential care homes are so you build up the relationship with the young person, rather than that first experience either being when they turn up in custody or we are looking for them as a missing child.

Q117 Pat Glass: Should that be the beat officer? Yesterday in Thanet we saw a PCSO, a young girl right at the bottom of the system. Her job was to liaise with the residential homes. She knew those homes; more than that, she knew those kids. She could talk to us about those kids and those homes.

Superintendent Taylor: It should be the most appropriate person who is able to do that role.

Pat Glass: Should it be one person?

Superintendent Taylor: It depends very much on the number of care homes you have and the environment in which you are working. In schools, for example, we will use PCSOs to engage with schools. They are absolutely superb at it; there will be other schools where they are not.

Q118 Neil Carmichael: We cannot micromanage to that level. The questions that I am really trying to drive towards are, essentially, how do we make sure the boards can apply rules and regulations?

Jane Booth: The boards do not deliver services. We bring people together and hold them to account.

Q119 Neil Carmichael: The accountability issue is excellent, because when you say “we” hold them to account that is absolutely important, but there are two questions: how do you manage to hold a police force, which is not in your area, to account for some failing there, and how are you held to account?

Jane Booth: To take your out-of-authority example, we had a very sad and difficult case to deal with earlier in the year of a young woman who had been placed by another authority with fairly disastrous consequences for her and someone who she assaulted. We asked the safeguarding board in the area she had come from to conduct a review in that area about what had led to her placement in our area. The chair in that area is now holding to account, through her processes, the agencies that made those decisions and placements to justify that their practice was good enough.

Within my own area, we hold all agencies to account through doing an audit, using a bit of legislation called Section 11 of the Children Act 2004. We give people a series of indicators, we produce evidence as to their performance against those indicators and where there are deficits we challenge and we ask for action plans to improve that. We do serious case reviews where things have gone wrong. We do some good practice audits. We do some conversational audits with children and young people to inform us about the quality of practice. There is mutual challenge.

Chief Constable Geenty: Joint inspections would help to improve accountability, that is through HMIC, Ofsted and the other inspection bodies. It will be an uncomfortable experience for those people being inspected, I am sure, but it would be a more rigorous, joined-up process than the one we currently have.

For example, in my own force area, I had HMIC, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate Constabulary, doing inspection on safeguarding a month ago, and then three months prior to that we had had a safeguarding inspection for the local authority. The two did not talk to each other. I know there are plans in place; I was disappointed that those plans for joint inspections did not come to fruition, and I would strongly urge that, if we really want to make people accountable across all the agencies, joint inspections with similar criteria for all the agencies involved in that inspection would ensure that those standards were met.

Q120 Neil Carmichael: That sounds like a really good suggestion. I can see some difficulties with it in terms of logistics, different cultures of inspections and so forth. This Committee will have to consider that because that is a very important point.

I want to talk about risk now. You have to assess risk. There are two issues there, are there not? There are different agencies assessing it, who may have different ways of calibrating risk and I would like a few comments about that. What about the dangers of a situation where the risk is too great: what do you do and how do you cope with that?

Superintendent Taylor: There are two issues for me. One is about training; people who are involved in the assessment of risk need to understand how to do it, be trained appropriately and be given the right skills and tools to do so.

The second part is some of the cultural issues that need to be addressed. It is really important, particularly with things like return interviews for missing children, where the guidance suggests that local authorities should be doing it, that we need to ensure that is taking place and those conversations are then happening. The comments that young

people may make, from whatever organisation is having that conversation, need to be taken in all seriousness and the gravity of some of the comments they may make needs to be understood. Sometimes it is too easy to miss some of those comments and not necessarily pick up on some of those risk factors. That is where that training and tool set is really important.

Jane Booth: We are talking about risks of different kinds. It is also important to recognise that the factors that influence risk are dynamic. Somethings could change in a young person's life and it is very important that those are responded to. One of the difficulties that our private providers experience is that where there are changes and a young person is the responsibility of an authority some distance away, getting an urgent review of their care plan is more difficult to achieve on a short time scale than it would be if you could convene a meeting down the road and go this afternoon. Individual management of risk for the young people has to be an ongoing process.

The proposals in the draft regulations are also about risk assessing an area. That is really important. I am quite surprised that people who are setting up an assessment do not think of that as a routine, common sense thing to do. When you are looking for a location, you would look for the best that you could possibly find. That would include assessing the risks in an area.

Q121 Neil Carmichael: We have touched upon membership of the board, upon accountability, upon leadership and relationships with other areas. In a quick answer, do you think the boards should effectively replace local authorities as the chief holders to account, managers or whatever of residential homes?

Jane Booth: No. You wanted a quick answer.

Q122 Siobhain McDonagh: I want to look at the issue about listening to children. Many local authorities fail to provide return interviews, despite their requirement to do so under existing statutory guidance. Will the revised statutory guidance increase the provision of return interviews? Are further changes required to ensure that it happens?

Superintendent Taylor: I have touched on this already: the challenge is with it being guidance and what is mandated within that. There are always capacity issues but that return interview is absolutely critical as part of the investigation into some of the possible underlying risk factors. There needs to be a way of ensuring that takes place.

The other interviews that happen are the safe and well checks, which are often conducted by the police. What is really important is that they are not mistaken for return interviews; they are a very different thing. They are about checking the welfare of the child and that there are no immediate risks. There may be some inquiries that come out of it, but that return interview is really important. That responsibility needs to be undertaken responsibly.

Iryna Pona: We have done a review of the provision of return interviews. An interesting thing we found out was that the current guidance on missing children can be misinterpreted. Some local authorities did not consider return interviews to be something they should be offering to children and young people.

We found out that, in relation to looked-after children, the majority of local authorities said they did provide return interviews. The quality of return interviews and how many children can access these interviews also needs to be taken into account. Although around 70% said they had them for all children or for some children if they meet certain criteria, the actual number of children who received return interviews was quite small. If you looked at the qualitative answers to our questions, some of the answers were being provided because the child requested them, but if the child does not know that this provision should be provided, how can you provide it; or they have a set of different criteria when they provide what they consider the risk and they are the absolute opposite, depending on what area you are talking about. It is also very important that the return interview is not the end of the process and that there is follow-up activity. Return interviews will only be good if you come up with a plan of action to address the reason why young people are running away.

Q123 Siobhain McDonagh: If the DfE were to require all return interviews to be conducted by trained, independent providers, would there be enough providers in the market to be able to meet that?

Chief Constable Geenty: I am not the best person to answer that, but I do think that an independent person is probably better than a statutory agency.

Mr Stuart: Especially one 200 miles away.

Chief Constable Geenty: Absolutely, but also someone that the children can relate to and who is experienced and professional in the area. It is a hugely important matter and the quality of what is happening at the moment is patchy to say the least.

Q124 Mr Stuart: Siobhain's question was about the capacity, but somebody locally who understood the Thanet area, did interviews and was risk assessing would surely be far more useful than social services officers coming from hundreds of miles across the country to try to do these interviews, probably grudging and reluctantly and with a high risk of no follow up. Anyone disagree with that?

Superintendent Taylor: No, I completely agree. The challenge there is how you then manage those out-of-force placements. If you are shifting that responsibility on to the host area, again, it makes it really important that the child's needs are considered when making that placement, rather than the fact that the accommodation is cheaper and the responsibility for managing return interviews etc. is placed elsewhere. It is important ground.

Iryna Pona: It is important for children to have a choice in who they speak with, because a return interview is going to be effective if a young person feels they can have a trusting relationship with that person. In relation to looked-after children, there are already services that local authorities can use, like advocacy services. They are trained professionals who know how to communicate with children and very often children have relationships with their advocates. It is a slightly different role, but you need to look at where the capacity is and how you can do it.

Jane Booth: The independent element is really important. We need to recognise that sometimes these children are running to something, but on occasions they are running

away from something. We need to have that independent element in understanding what it is they are experiencing.

Q125 Siobhain McDonagh: What guidance is available on how staff in residential homes should handle children who go missing or run away from care? Is there sufficient training for this area?

Jane Booth: In my area the protocols for dealing with children who go missing are written into the child protection procedures, the safeguarding procedures, which we require all people working with children and families in Rochdale to observe. With the private providers, they are also looking with one eye to the procedures that apply in the area where the young person has come from. However, if I am honest, I think they are more familiar with ours than they are with theirs.

The procedures are relatively straightforward and simple. Recently in Rochdale we have made all our safeguarding board training available to the private sector free of charge because our concern is to make sure everybody who is working with children in the borough accesses that. In my experience elsewhere, sometimes it has been the case that all agencies who contribute to the board access free training but other people have been charged. We have stopped doing that because we want them to take up the training.

Iryna Pona: Procedures wise, the staff probably are better aware of how to deal with someone who is missing, who they should communicate this to and inform etc. However, in terms of how to deal with it, there is a definite need for training. We see a lot of punitive responses such as withholding pocket money or taking away mobile phones, which can put children at more risk because they can go missing anyway without money or their mobile phone to ring for help. There is a definite need for training for staff.

Q126 Siobhain McDonagh: You referred to the safe and well checks earlier on. In its February 2013 report, *Missing Children*, Ofsted found little evidence that police safe and well checks were being undertaken regularly. Is the new draft guidance likely to rectify this?

Chief Constable Geenty: It comes back to what the guidance is around how you report someone missing from care and what are the mechanics around it. There was a tendency to use the police as a safety blanket, to call them out and that would solve the problem, as far as some residential care homes were concerned. That is changing and the police guidance is changing some of that. Safe and well checks are still part of the process and procedure.

The systems have improved through the guidance since those days. Whether or not it will make it satisfactory, I do not know. Most police procedures these days, in terms of when a child who has been missing has returned, will have a safe and well check. It does not apply to all; it does not apply to the absent category, for example. You do have to understand that there will be a difference in the number of return interviews or safe and well checks that are done.

Q127 Alex Cunningham: Can we move on to child sexual exploitation specifically? I know you may have covered some of that when I was not in the room. The draft statutory guidance requires the local area Runaway and Missing From Home and Care protocol should

include arrangements to monitor outcomes for looked-after children and to analyse any patterns of child exploitation, including those placed in the area by other local authorities. Do the proposed reforms do enough to address the issues around child sexual exploitation, or is the emphasis too much on going missing rather than the other possible implications that the child may be at risk?

Chief Constable Geenty: Going missing is a key risk factor, so I do not think we should minimise the fact that it is one of those signs that should be high up on your list when you are looking at the signs and symbols that could indicate exploitation. However, there are others and we are becoming aware of them. This is where the joint training kicks in, so that the professionalisation of carers and also the change of culture in other agencies—including the police—look for those signs and symbols, recognise them when they see them and when they do, they take action to intervene. Missing is an important factor, but it is not the only factor. Most of the multiagency training now does look at whether the child returns with a present or a gift. Has their behaviour changed significantly? We are beginning to understand what those signs and symbols are.

Q128 Alex Cunningham: Will the joint working that is going on ensure that that becomes the issue that you believe it should be?

Superintendent Taylor: It is part of it. We have talked about the risk assessment process and the fact that needs to be a dynamic risk assessment. It is that ongoing process and ensuring that everybody is involved in that. Multiagency working is clearly the way you need to address that risk, but everybody needs to understand what the signs and symptoms are of that in order for that to be a successful process.

Q129 Alex Cunningham: How effective is that across the country? There will be these pockets of very good practice where this is happening. What is the picture across the country? Is this becoming common or have we a long way to go?

Chief Constable Geenty: The focus on child sexual exploitation is ensuring that the response is much more consistent at a national level. Is it perfect? Of course it is not. Are there areas where we can improve? Absolutely. However, through the CEOP, for example, and the monitoring of the national action plan around child sexual exploitation, we are making the progress around training, identification and risk assessment.

Q130 Alex Cunningham: Is it getting better, Jane?

Jane Booth: The emphasis of the Children's Commissioner's report that was published this week was able to identify that all safeguarding boards do at least have some sort of strategic group addressing sexual child exploitation now. There has been significant improvement in the last 18 months in terms of awareness of the need to get things together around this. Whilst the link with young people going missing is very evident, our experience suggests that a significant proportion of the young people who are at risk of sexual exploitation will not be reported missing. It is really important to disseminate information across a really wide range.

We take all the opportunities we can. We try to talk to children and young people through the school curriculum and youth services; we ran sessions for parents last year to talk to them about being alert to what might be happening with their children; and of course across all the professional networks. In some senses, the children who have been reported

missing, at least there is the opportunity that somebody will do a bit of an assessment about what is going on for them.

Alex Cunningham: It is a pity that the assessment is not much good to them, really.

Jane Booth: No, it is not, but they are at least coming to public attention; somebody will be thinking about their needs.

Q131 Mr Stuart: The Children's Commissioner report also said that 94% of safeguarding children's board are failing to follow Government guidance on child sexual exploitation. That is pretty damning is it not? That suggests something fundamentally going wrong with the system.

Jane Booth: We might usefully debate what the boards are doing, because we know that everyone has a strategic group in place, we know that most of them are able to demonstrate that they have active policies in place. Whether they are delivering on the ground is very different.

In some areas they are only at the stage of beginning to find out. For example, I am aware of one board in the north of England that has committed significant resources to scoping the problem because they had been in the position of thinking "we do not have a problem" and now they know they need to think differently.

We all know that we are not doing as much as we should on this. Even in Rochdale, where we have had to focus our attention on it, we know we still have some way to go, but at least we are beginning to understand the problem. At a practice level, the more the agencies can come together and where you see multiagency teams developing, we are seeing much better practice.

Q132 Alex Cunningham: We have seen the statistics about the number of children involved in sexual exploitation. Are you telling us today that there are vast numbers more than we know about?

Jane Booth: We have to believe what the Children's Commissioner has said to us, which was that there are potentially very large numbers of children at risk. In Rochdale, what we have found is that we are able to identify significant numbers of children who are at risk. We are able to say that, of those children at risk, a significant number do not go on to be abused if we can work effectively with them. What we do know is where we do not work effectively with those young people who are at risk, there are plenty of perpetrators out there who will work with children.

Q133 Alex Cunningham: When can we expect to see a drop in the number of children who are being sexually exploited? Can we expect that because of the change in the system?

Jane Booth: I do not think we can eradicate abuse. We will see a rise in numbers before a drop in numbers because we are recognising the vulnerability of young people and

recording that in a different kind of way. That does not necessarily tell us that it is happening more; it is telling us that we are dealing with it more.

Superintendent Taylor: The other issue—and the report talks about it as well—is that children often do not recognise themselves that they are being exploited. We need to create that culture where children have the confidence to speak to whomever that most appropriate person may be and then that is shared.

We recognise that we are not perfect at dealing with this yet. We have an action plan that is being rolled out across the country to try to formalise some of the practice to improve that. I completely agree; it is more likely to go up before it starts going down. You could argue that that is a good thing because we are understanding the issue.

Q134 Alex Cunningham: I agree with that as well. On trafficked children, do the proposed reforms place sufficient attention to their particular needs when we hear about children who do not have English as their first language, for example? Are they getting the support they need, particularly in relation to return interviews and other aspects of safeguarding generally?

Iryna Pona: Trafficked children is one of the areas that has not been addressed through all the different reforms. A lot more needs to be done to keep trafficked children safe. I hope the Government will use the opportunity of the coming modern Slavery Bill to introduce some of these measures to protect and identify trafficked children better, such as independent legal advocates for trafficked children, better data collection about trafficked children; these things definitely need to happen.

Q135 Alex Cunningham: So the proposed reforms do not go far enough yet?

Iryna Pona: No, not in relation to trafficking.

Q136 Alex Cunningham: What do they need to do? What do we need to recommend in relation to that? You mentioned the modern Slavery Bill, but what specifically do we, as a Committee, need to recommend that will improve the situation for trafficked children?

Iryna Pona: An independent legal advocate for trafficked children would be helpful, because they need someone who can help them understand what is happening to them, as well as the rules, legislation and requirements. It is a very complex system and they need someone there guiding them through that process.

Q137 Alex Cunningham: Are there other views, perhaps? Are the reforms likely to lead to fewer trafficked children going missing in the future? Is there a view on that? We have already heard that it needs to go further.

Chief Constable Geenty: Re-trafficking of children is obviously connected to serious and organised crime. The intelligence that we are now receiving around this form of slavery is helping us to target those particular groups. We need to put more resource and effort, perhaps through the National Crime Agency and the local forces, to deal with what is, I believe, a growing problem.

Q138 Alex Cunningham: Are the resources available?

Chief Constable Geenty: They will have to be made available, because trafficked children had to be one of our foremost priorities.

Q139 Pat Glass: This Committee has said and recommended before that all children, whether they are trafficked, asylum seekers etc. should come under the responsibility of the Department for Education and not under the Border Agency, the Home Office etc. Would you agree with that: that they should come first as children under the Department for Education?

Chief Constable Geenty: Absolutely.

Iryna Pona: Yes.

Q140 Pat Glass: I was quite surprised when we looked at the profiles of private residential children's homes at the issue of qualifications. I know qualifications are not everything, but they are a really good place to start. I was also struck by talking to the staff about the levels of training that they receive. In a school for children with behavioural difficulties, I know that we would never dream of having staff that were not trained in the de-escalation, restraint, restorative justice and behaviour management. I would be very surprised if in homes run by the local authority, the Children's Society or Barnado's, staff were not similarly trained. This is mother's milk, really, but do you think there should be a requirement in the proposals of the Government that staff should be trained in these areas in private children's homes?

Jane Booth: The proposals in the changed regulations are very welcome, from my point of view, both for staff in day-to-day contact with children, but also in terms of managers also being qualified to do the job.

Q141 Pat Glass: Would that make it easier? I know the Government are very concerned about the number of times that the police are called to private children's homes in particular.

Superintendent Taylor: Again, it is a balance. Sometimes we should be called to private children's homes. That is why it is important to get the crime recording standards right and the protocols in place so there is that shared conversation and we understand what children's homes can and should deal with and what the police can and should deal with. Training is paramount to that. It also covers all the risk assessment and all that stuff we have talked about. Yes, I think it would help.

The other thing is about the child coming first within those homes and making sure that decisions are made for the child, not necessarily on behalf of the home. I was speaking to a magistrate from Dorset yesterday who said they have seen a number of cases where crimes have been reported for insurance purposes and that can never be in the interests of the child.

Mr Stuart: Thank you all very much indeed for giving evidence to us this morning. If you have any further thoughts or reflections following today, please do feel free to email us, particularly in terms of recommendations that you think should be going forward to Government. Thank you all very much indeed.

Witnesses: **Kamran Abassi**, Service Development Director, Advanced Childcare, **Andrew Webb**, President of ADCS and Corporate Director, Services for People, Stockport Council, and **Tim Parlow**, Senior LAC/SEN Category Manager, North London Strategic Alliance (NLSA), gave evidence.

Q142 Mr Stuart: Good morning and welcome to you. Thank you very much for appearing before us today to talk about this important issue. Ofsted's new single inspection framework for children's services emphasises the importance of inspectors' judgment in determining the quality of services and practice. Do you feel that Ofsted's workforce has sufficient expertise and knowledge of social care practice to be able to make accurate assessments?

Andrew Webb: Ofsted's workforce is large and variable. Some of their inspectors have been recently in practice, others not for a long time. It is very important, when you think about an inspection regime, to link the quality of the analysis with the quality of the final judgement given.

In general, Ofsted's inspectors are able to carry out that role of getting behind the data, looking very professionally at the nature of a child's experience where they meet children, and making professional judgements about what is going on. However, the issue is when they then try to move from that general professional judgment into very definitive statements, for which you would, perhaps, want a far more scientific basis. If you are going to come with a quasi-scientific judgement then you need a set of tools that are very different from those that are being used.

One of the problems we have with the Ofsted regime is not so much the quality of the inspectors but the purpose to which their judgments are put, which is to create an impression that you can sum up a very complex institution with a very clear picture. In fact, it is almost never as simple as that.

Q143 Mr Stuart: You talk about summing up an institution, but if we want a system that is built around the child then, while we are interested in the institution, we see it as part of a complex array of agencies that are supposed to work together for the child. It could be that we have an outstanding institution but such is the distance, weakness, lack of supervision or whatever of somebody else in the system that the child's needs are not being met. Is that true? Do Ofsted inspections capture enough of the whole picture and hold people to account to make sure that the interests of the child are paramount?

Andrew Webb: Ofsted inspect from both ends: they inspect local authorities through a single inspection framework and follow the journey of that child, so the answer to that would be yes, generally. When they look at the regulatory inspections of children's homes, they see a very partial picture because they go in to inspect an establishment in which the child is living. You cannot always marry the two effectively, because sometimes the children's home is very distant from the local authority that is making the placement.

Kamran Abassi: Can I first say thank you for allowing me and my organisation to participate. It is an area that we have worked tirelessly and passionately on for the last 16 years. We are wholly committed to working with all stakeholders to ensure that the most vulnerable young people obtain the best possible outcomes. Thank you for giving us the opportunity.

Our experience as a provider with Ofsted, it is fair to say, is a mixed bag when it comes to consistency of inspections. There is a real focus now on regulations, with compliance, which is good, because everybody should be compliant. However, there is a shortfall when it comes to looking at the starting point for individual young people. The young people that we receive in the independent sector have had numerous breakdowns. A large proportion of them have numerous placement breakdowns. They have major issues around trauma, abuse and trust. They have had chequered educational histories so the base line starting point for young people often is not given as much weight as it should be, in my experience in a number of inspections. Consequently, young people may be moving on a journey of improvement, but because that is not taken into account it is reflected fairly negatively in the inspection reports that are produced.

Q144 Mr Stuart: Thank you. Tim, can we rely on Ofsted's professional judgement?

Tim Parlow: I would agree that it is a large system so it is going to be a mixed picture. I would pick up on the point you made about outstanding providers not necessarily meeting individual child's outcomes well. The reverse can also be true. We have worked with providers who received a poor Ofsted rating, based on an inspection at a point of time and sometimes based on compliance issues with policy—so largely bureaucratic reasons for getting a poor judgment—where the children that were placed with them were, in fact, making very good progress. This is because local authorities will be very aspirational for this group of young people and will not want to place children in providers where there is a perception that it needs improvement. That makes it very difficult for a private provider to then continue their business. What we end up with is young people needing to move because of that. That is an unintended consequence for Ofsted.

Q145 Bill Esterson: Does Ofsted need to change what it does and where it spends its time and effort to look more at the individual needs of each child?

Tim Parlow: I would agree with evidence that I know the Committee has heard before that the voice of the child is perhaps not heard enough in Ofsted inspections.

Andrew Webb: It is not only the voice of the child; the Ofsted regime, in relation to children's homes themselves, ought to look much more carefully at the outcomes. The framework we have for identifying how much difference a children's home placement has made to a child's life is not good. To clarify, the evidence is not very good but often the contribution is very good.

The history of Ofsted inspections of children's home started with compliance and regulation, making sure that staffing ratios were right and diet was adequate and so on. We need to move very much further on from that to an examination of how much impact a home has, whether it has contracted with the right people to provide the right specialist expertise, whether they have it in house and so on. No school in the country would expect to get away with the sort of inspection that a children's home does on attainment and

achievement. That needs to change if we are going to have a radical impact over the next couple of years on the purpose of children's homes and what they achieve.

Kamran Abassi: We should be looking at wider stakeholders. The young person is absolutely central. There are other key agencies: the police, education, health, parents and other stakeholders whose contributions or views should also take into account.

It is also important, from my perspective, that Ofsted come just twice a year, for two days out of 365, and they form a view. We as an organisation always work towards having robust and very honest self regulation. We are there day in, day out and we need to create robust reports—regulation 33 and 34 reports—that go to regulators, local authorities and other stakeholders that evidence what is going on, on a much more frequent basis. Equally, local authorities come in and visit the homes through various commissioning or child care reviews; independent reviewing officers and visitors also come in, and they all form very important parts of what is going on for that child and how the home is performing.

Q146 Bill Esterson: Moving on to the Government's reforms, we have had significant evidence that they do not go far enough and that what is needed is a fundamental overhaul. Can you explain to us to what extent you think the reforms are a step in the right direction, or whether you agree that they do not go far enough? What is needed?

Kamran Abassi: The key areas are reducing out-of-area placements, the suitability of the locations of children's homes, the level of qualifications of staff and managers, quality assurance and also partnerships. Those particular areas are very important areas to focus on.

The very key one for me, which is probably underplayed, is the role of effective leadership and management at a children's home level. They are absolutely critical. I have been a homes manager myself. I have supervised home managers. The role they play in setting the culture, value, nurture, ambition and holding other stakeholders accountable, where they are failing young people, is absolutely pivotal. There needs to be more emphasis on the leadership and management. I believe Jonathan Stanley talked about that.

There also needs to be focus on the fact that residential care is part of a wider lax system we need to look at reforming. There needs to be far more robust assessments and early intervention with young people to try to prevent them coming to the children's home sector. There needs to be much better care planning and getting the right placement initially for a child, rather than having a young person who is in the DfE data set who is 15-years-old, has had lots of placement breakdowns, like I explained before: they have major issues around trauma, trust and abuse. It takes five or six months of hard resilience working to try to build a relationship of trust with that young person, often when placements are very short term in nature anyway.

It is a whole system of reform that is needed. If we can do an early assessment on people when they are younger and put in place the right interventions earlier, it should avoid the cost to the young person and to the state at a later stage. There have definitely been early intervention and missed opportunities throughout the early childhood of most young people, if you look at their chronologies.

Andrew Webb: The reforms deal with the children's-homes-as-is situation quite well. If we can have children's homes doing more or less what they do then the reforms are generally going in the right direction.

The workforce issues definitely need to be picked up. We need a good debate about what every children's home is trying to achieve. The whole emphasis on expanding the statement of purpose and aligning resources people have in the children's home to deliver on that statement of purpose is to be welcomed.

To pick up on the last point, this is a whole-system issue. The Association of Directors of Children's Services carried out a piece of work last year; they did a review of research evidence and produced a discussion paper, *What is care for?* What we looked at was the care system and what it did well and what it did less well. The thing it does least well is meet the needs of adolescents who enter care for first time as adolescents, i.e. the children's home population. Children's homes are used quite extensively for children who, in other countries, would not end up in the children's home system. We should look at much more flexible ways of providing restorative approaches to community involvement, more flexible non-registrable approaches to providing space and time for children and families in local communities, as well as then concentrating on, perhaps, a smaller residential care sector with a much clearer statement of purpose.

Q147 Mr Stuart: What did you mean by that? Can you spell out what that looks like?

Andrew Webb: At the moment, a significant proportion of adolescents who enter care return home within less than two years. Nationally we spend an awful lot of money on not making much progress. If they end up back at home at 16, what could we have done differently to prevent them from coming into care at 14, is the question. How do we align our community resources—police, health, social care, education—more effectively to prevent the need for them coming to care in the first place?

Q148 Mr Stuart: That is a fair point. Ideally you would anticipate the problems earlier, intervene earlier and avoid the need to take the child away from the family in the first place. Assuming the child has entered residential care, do we have the right incentives in place to ensure the home authority is working hard with parents from the moment the child comes into the system, to ensure that that child could be returned to the family earlier? Take your 14-year-old: perhaps, if the right family intervention went into place they could be returned after a year, rather than two years. If they are going to come back, they would probably prefer to come back after a year if you can make sure it is safe and you have dealt with the problems that led to the child's removal in the first place. Is that a fair point? Any thoughts on what that would look like?

Andrew Webb: Yes, those are some of the things we have looked at exploring and we would need to be quite innovative. Your last session talked extensively about the regulation. At the moment, we have a system that if you are in it, you are highly regulated and, perhaps, approaching a more heavily regulated area and if you are not in it, you are not in a regulated area at all: you are either in or out of care.

How can we be more flexible in our use of resources? Children come into care at a point of real family crisis, let us not forget that, and often at a point when neither the child nor

family can see any alternative other than separation. However, the system where a child is in care and then moves sometimes quite a long way from home, because of the lack of available places locally, gets in the way of that early bridge building. Some of our approaches to care assume, “We have now taken over the care of this child”, as opposed to, “This is very much a shared arrangement and we ought to drive all our services and direction of an earlier return home.” I am not sure how we create incentives. That is a culture shift, a professional practice issue rather than an intervention issue it seems.

Q149 Mr Stuart: Is it the case that, sometimes, overworked social work departments, once they have dispatched a child to some far off residential home effectively cease to work hard with the family and cease to see that child’s welfare as being a central issue for them?

Andrew Webb: I do not have evidence that they cease to see the child’s welfare as the central issue. Putting every amount of pressure they can on a return home is not always there.

Q150 Bill Esterson: Is a return home always the right thing anyway?

Andrew Webb: No, not always. We know from the data that is in the public domain at the moment that adolescents are as much at risk of abuse, exploitation, neglect and various other forms of harm as younger children, so no. However, where there is an opportunity to build that bridge, it is not always taken. However, that is not through a lack of child welfare focus because the child is placed in a home, is safe and their well-being is being dealt with. It is just that in the long term, it may have been more appropriate to keep them at home.

Tim Parlow: We need to be careful that we do not just think of children in residential care as being troubled adolescents who cannot be coped with at home. There are a number of different types of provisions that we are talking about when we talk about children’s homes. We might be talking about therapeutic provision for a child, for instance, with autism or severe mental health issues. We might be talking about somebody who has been moved away from home because of their educational needs and then, because the provision for them is so specialist that there is not one available in their local area, they end up going for a full year.

Pat Glass: They would generally go to educational placements; what we are talking about here is social placements.

Tim Parlow: It is not always a residential school. Sometimes children go to a school and are placed in residential care near to that school in order to facilitate that.

Q151 Pat Glass: Not in my experience, which is extensive in SEN—as is yours, I understand. It is not usually that way round, is it?

Tim Parlow: It is not usually that way round, but these regulations will cover those instances. It is difficult because we are always talking about a small specialist group of children. The population of residential homes, in total, is a very small percentage of all children. Then when you start sub-categorising, we get to even smaller numbers, which is part of the problem of not having enough local provision because we are talking about

very small numbers of children. Going back to that point, we need to be sure that the changes cover all those types of provision, and in that sense I would say that perhaps the proposals do not go far enough.

Q152 Bill Esterson: Can I come back to the Government's proposals then? Have they put enough money into the system to cover what they are proposing?

Andrew Webb: It is hard to work out what the short-term and bureaucratic implications of some of the changes would be. I do not think there is enough money coming in to deal with all those issues. Some of the expectations on the receiving authority, for example, from the conversations about responding differently to children who have gone missing, independent visits to homes—I have not seen anything like a costed proposal for dealing with that. The other proposals around workforce development, again, I have not seen what the investment would need to be to go from where we are now to the aspiration that is set out. At the moment it looks a bit uncostered and under-resourced.

Q153 Bill Esterson: Do you agree, Kamran, or is there anything different?

Kamran Abassi: From a sector point of view, there is a feeling that social workers are overwhelmed and bursting at the seams. Central Government decisions around cutting funding are having an ongoing impact. We are getting more and more children, where the gate-keeping by the local authorities, sometimes financially driven, is "We are trying to keep these young people out because of the financial pressures." Then, all of a sudden, there is a crisis and these young people with very complex needs and very high risk behaviours are being placed in emergencies or request placements on emergencies on the same day. Ultimately that is anecdotal, as there is not a great amount of research done, but what we do know is that planned placements, where good assessments done and introductory visits are done are far more likely to be successful for a young person in fulfilling their care plan versus an emergency placement that has just been requested on the same day for a higher acuity young person, where it sometimes becomes, "Where is a bed available?", rather than, "Is that the right specialist resource or the right staff skill set?"

Bill Esterson: Your point is that there is an up-front cost for a planned placement, but of course that saves money in the longer term.

Kamran Abassi: Yes.

Tim Parlow: The point I would make about resources is also the consequence of something, which I know has taken a lot of the Committee's time, about those local placements. The boroughs that I represent are all in north London. We do not have a lot of provision to meet the needs of certain groups of young people in that area. If we were to commission new provision in the area, there is a tremendous cost implication because building a new children's home in London is going to be very pricey, whether that be a new local authority children's home or alternatively an independent one, where we would expect to see significant rate increases in order to offset that capital investment.

Q154 Mr Stuart: That leads neatly, Andrew, to ask you what response you have had from the DfE to your concerns about the new duty on the Director of Children's Services to

sign off individual cases of out-of-area placements. Who should take ultimate responsibility, within an area, for decisions about these children?

Andrew Webb: Ultimately the Director of Children's Services is accountable for any number of decisions. The move following Eileen Munro's review of social work and some of the other work that is going on around the country to increase professionalism of social work is pushing us in a direction that is designed to increase the delegation to a local level, to increase delegated funding and so on. Care planning is a complex process signed off by an independent reviewing officer. It seems to me that there are already many checks and balances in the system already, and the person best placed to make a decision about an individual child is almost never the Director of Children's Services.

Mr Stuart: The thinking behind it is to put pressure and nudge on the system to force people to confront some of these cost pressures, but to provide care closer to home because it is clearly the Government's belief that, in general, being closer to home is better.

Andrew Webb: In general, it is. We have heard of a number of reasons for making specialist placements, which need to be where they are because you cannot get a sufficient number. The incidence of a particular issue will not always be enough in a local area to have specialist provision. It is a symbolic gesture, I appreciate that.

Q155 Pat Glass: Is it not more than a symbolic gesture? I have been in this position and I insisted on signing these things off. What it did was bring it to my attention, and prompt me to ask, "Why are we sending these children with autism away? Why do we not have provision here?" Once you start asking those questions, you start commissioning services. Is that not what this is about? It is not symbolic.

Andrew Webb: Local authorities are complex organisations and this particular decision, whether it leads to the collection of data that would enable you to commission differently when you see the pattern of need emerging and so on, has to be done in a systematic way. A Director of Children's Services may find more effective ways of delegating these functions to senior people other than themselves. That is my point.

Q156 Mr Stuart: We have heard evidence that too much of the commissioning is not really commissioning: it is reactive, responsive and sometimes last minute. Again, this is a nudge to try to ensure that people do what you are supposed to be doing now, Tim, which is getting together with people in a concentrated area and jointly commissioning so you do have the numbers to be able to do so in a reasonable and strategic way. In fact, it is taken quite a lot of nudges from Government to get you to do the obvious in the first place. Is that not a fair criticism?

Tim Parlow: The point about the emergency placements is that we need to recognise that those are relatively low incidents. In most care placements, the decision is made by a panel of professionals, usually a multidisciplinary panel of professionals, and so there has already been quite a lot of oversight on that.

Q157 Pat Glass: But they make the decision on what is available.

Tim Parlow: Yes.

Pat Glass: Not what we should make available.

Tim Parlow: Yes. That goes back to the work that I am doing, which is to do a strategic needs assessment across a sub-region to say, “If we are all purchasing small numbers of a particular type of care then let us see what we can do to bring that closer to home.”

We should also not forget that the DfE data pack suggested that 76% of children’s homes are in the private and voluntary sector and 24% in local authorities. That is because local authorities closed their residential position because we all recognised that families are a better place for young people. We have probably done far more around commissioning that sort of provision and it now turns out that perhaps this was at the cost of this smaller number of children, who now we are moving over greater distances.

Q158 Mr Stuart: How well does the new guidance on missing and runaway children reflect the role of agencies and organisations other than local authorities, including residential homes?

Kamran Abassi: From an organisational point of view, we already comply with local missing and runaway protocols. We have our own policies and procedures in place looking at prevention as well as incident management.

The big challenge we see is when we have submitted, for example, our child protection procedures in the past to the local safeguarding boards, to get the local safeguarding boards to sign those off as compliant to the local areas. Equally, we feel the biggest hurdle that we have seen to ensure that the missing from care protocols or policies we have in place are compliant with the police and LSCB is making sure they sign those off as consistent with their areas. There is a lot of training that we provide in this particular area, when it comes to missing from care and CSE training for our workforce at initially level one, which is basic awareness, signs and symptoms, going through to a level two and three, which is managing complex cases, interagency working and information sharing. There is quite a lot that we are already onto on this particular area.

The thing I would push back in terms of the 2011 standards is they were fairly prescriptive when it came to what should be included in induction of care workers before they could work directly with young people. That came out in 2011 and I would urge that there are far more prescriptive conditions applied to what people should have in terms of minimum training requirements to be working with children. That has been taken out of the current standards.

Q159 Mr Stuart: You are nodding Andrew; do you agree with that?

Andrew Webb: Yes, and I would add that the police-led pilot on missing and absent produced some very interesting results in local authorities, with the providers needing to think differently about how they classify episodes. It puts the responsibility back onto providers in the pilot, which I looked at very closely, to make a professional judgement about the risk and nature of the episode they are dealing with before reporting it, which puts a big onus on the staff on the ground to fully understand what they are doing.

The very well-run homes, the homes in which there is a good level of staffing and oversight, we found worked extremely effectively in that area. They could explain to the police precisely why they did not think something was a risk. If we are going to push up the quality of residential care, whether it is to do with going missing or anything else, we

then have to take more responsibility on and accept that responsibility. That seemed like a good trade to me.

Q160 Mr Stuart: Specifically on the guidance? How do you feel about the guidance?

Andrew Webb: On the guidance I would like to have seen a bit more clarity on the differentiation between going absent and missing.

Q161 Mr Stuart: Does it put too much emphasis on sexual exploitation and care homes in particular, rather than wider issues to do with children going missing?

Andrew Webb: Slightly, but that is such a real issue that we have not got to the heart of yet. This week's report on the abuse of children by children needs to be factored in there as well.

Overall, police and homes locally have raised their level of interest in going missing from a simple bureaucratic process to a much more child-centred and individualised approach. I am a bit concerned that if we over-regulate in respect of this type of interview being carried out by that type of qualified person and so on, we might just end up using resources inappropriately. Some young people go missing 50 or 60 times and to have a procedure that requires an identical response to every one of those is not a good use of resources.

Mr Stuart: It is a bit like how the missing and absent categories allow better focus on those who most need it rather than wasting time on a bureaucratic hurdle.

Andrew Webb: Yes, because some children do go missing from home because they want to get away from that home because of what is going on there. However, that is increasingly rare in my experience; it was more a feature in the past. Children tend to go to something rather than from something. I am not sure the current regulation takes enough account of that.

Q162 Neil Carmichael: The evidence of many who have written to this Committee about this subject has talked about the lack of strategic planning of the provision and therefore, in some areas, inadequate provision. You are nodding, so do you recognise that as a problem?

Kamran Abassi: The DfE produced a data set in September 2013, which talked about the imbalance between supply and demand. There are a couple of areas—north-west of England, west midlands—where there is oversupply. It has come over time: day one there may have been one provider and then there is another one and another one. On the other hand, there is a large under-supply in London, which is our largest net-exporter of young people because there are no local homes. That is because of the cost of property and the workforce challenges that may be attached to it. Therefore, absolutely, there is a supply and demand issue.

As an organisation, what we are trying to do is really address some of those issues and look at specialist services, wherever possible, in a local area to meet the needs of young people. There will be a cohort of young people who, simply based on the risks, whether it

is gangs or CSE, who cannot live locally for a period of time, but ultimately there needs to be a transition back to a local community setting.

We are the only organisation that has a dedicated CSE service that is semi-rural. It is an alternative to secure welfare, where we have a real multidisciplinary team on site. It is a school, children's home and therapy team who are all on site working with the abuse that these young people have suffered and dealing with their trauma, initially giving them a place of safety and containment and then building their resilience, dealing with their trauma and then eventually helping them transition back into the community. Wherever possible, yes, we are trying to address that as an organisation.

Q163 Neil Carmichael: How should councils be encouraged to work together more effectively? Do we need some changes in overall structure?

Tim Parlow: We are starting to work together effectively. I realise that that is patchy across the country. I can only speak of great experience in my area of north London, where we have a group of five London boroughs that are committed to working together to look at this issue.

The point about being importers or exporters of children is an interesting one because quite often we hear about London boroughs placing children outside of London. One of my boroughs is, in fact, a net importer of looked-after children because they have a great supply of fostering places. Therefore there are a number of authorities on the boundary of London that rely on them for foster placements. However, in terms of residential homes, they do not have any so they move their children out. There is clearly an imbalance of provision of different types in different areas.

Q164 Mr Ward: Why is it five, and not four or six? How did that happen?

Tim Parlow: The reason we have the five that we have is purely down to the appetite of local authorities. All the London boroughs are part of London Councils, so we all work in a collaborative pan-London arrangement. The North London Strategic Alliance, which I represent, takes five boroughs in north London. There is also East London Solutions, which deals with six boroughs in the east, and West London Alliance, which deals with a group in the west. A lot of it comes down to the natural partnership that comes out of, 'We share a lot of providers.'

Q165 Alex Cunningham: This is a bit of an aside, which I hope the Chair will allow, but I have never heard anybody say "a great supply of foster placements" in my life before. Why is that?

Tim Parlow: There are a number of reasons: one is housing stocks; you need particular types of property. If you think about some of the inner-London boroughs, they are going to struggle to have the types of properties that allow people to become foster carers because they do not have the spare space. When you start moving to the outer-London boroughs—when I say a "a great supply" what I am saying is they have a greater supply than they need in terms of their own children who need foster placements.

Alex Cunningham: So it is down to houses.

Tim Parlow: That is not the only reason. There is also the hard work that the local authorities do on recruiting foster carers and those sorts of things as well.

Alex Cunningham: I would like to see what they have done, if you could write to us about that.

Q166 Neil Carmichael: Councils working with other councils—that sounds good. What about councils assessing other providers and market capacity? How does that work? Can it be improved?

Andrew Webb: Across the country there are a consortia of different sizes, nature and quality—west midlands, the black country; the north-west has 22 authorities in one. It is a very long-standing series of arrangements designed to push up the quality of residential care, manage contracts in a consistent way and try to influence the market to supply specialist facilities where the pattern emerges. There is quite a long history of shaping the market but the market does depend on providers coming in and going out of it. There are all sorts of forces to play there: regional property prices, local planning and so on.

Q167 Neil Carmichael: That brings me neatly to my next question. According to the Office for Public Management, sufficiency assessments are a bit haphazard: they have not really been thorough or completed by some councils. What do we do about that? Should there be some kind of mandatory action taken?

Andrew Webb: All local authorities should carry out sufficiency assessments.

Mr Stuart: They do not.

Q168 Neil Carmichael: They do not. The point is they do not, so what do we do to make sure that they do?

Andrew Webb: The benefit of carrying out a sufficiency assessment is that you then identify the strengths and weaknesses in your local area.

Neil Carmichael: If you have done one, you will know that, but if you have not done one then you will not. Therefore, the question is still, what do we do about the ones who do not?

Andrew Webb: The obvious answer for you is to legislate. The pressure on local authorities to obtain value for money as they go forward over the next two or three years will force those that have not done this sort of work to think quite differently about commissioning.

There are a couple of themes emerging on commissioning. Commissioning needs to be done at a higher level than it currently is: so across four or five boroughs maybe, the large shires or in each conurbation. However, until we have improved the level of individual child assessment—the social work assessment that identifies need in a clear way so you can get an aggregate report for the needs from the local area, which set out very much more precisely what you need residential care to do—then you cannot get that level of sophistication into your commissioning strategy. I am sure the residential provider would echo that. Children arrive without a clear enough plan as to what is expected of the

establishment. We have to go back one stage to identify aggregate need patterns in a much better way than we have at the moment to drive that commissioning.

Q169 Neil Carmichael: In answer to that question that I was about to ask about whether local authorities know enough about the quality of the place they are placing a child in, is it basically that they need to understand what their own market situation is?

Andrew Webb: At a more comprehensive and sophisticated level than they do. Some children are well very well assessed, well placed and their needs are well met. However, the standards are not consistent across all children and across the whole country.

Q170 Neil Carmichael: Do you welcome the Government's plans for a statement of purpose?

Andrew Webb: Very much.

Q171 Neil Carmichael: Do you think it is strong enough?

Tim Parlow: I would echo that we welcome it very much. Local authorities and providers are getting better at having a dialogue about placements. A big part of the reason for placements breaking down, as we all know and hear repeatedly, is because the child is not in the right place in the first instance. What we as local authorities need to get better at doing is talking to providers about exactly what it is that we need for that child. At the moment what happens, in some cases, is that you have social workers and placement officers looking around for a place that will accept this child, which we have reduced now to maybe a one-side risk assessment.

Q172 Neil Carmichael: The one person you missed in that list was the child.

Tim Parlow: Absolutely; that is what I was coming on to say really. We need to have a place that meets the needs of the child. We need to hear about that from the child. I said earlier that we would welcome the idea of the voice of the child being more pushed to the forefront in the proposals. Certainly that needs to be a dialogue between providers.

Picking up on what collaborative working has meant in the past between local authorities, we are all aware of situations where it becomes a group that get together because they say, "Our buying power is greater if we get together so therefore we can force prices down." There is plenty of evidence that that has happened. However, what you are seeing now with collaboration is that it is much more about trying to shape the market and get the right provision in place so that it is a less conflicted picture between local authorities saying—

Q173 Neil Carmichael: How are you going to get the child's voice involved in all this dialogue?

Tim Parlow: Local authorities are already much better at consulting with children and young people during the commissioning process. That is part of it. Part of it is also in ensuring children's voices are heard in the regulation and the inspections. That is why I mentioned earlier about the Ofsted cycle. I am sure my colleague will talk about how, within homes, children are much better consulted now.

Neil Carmichael: Kamran, you have just been given invitation to contribute.

Kamran Abassi: I have, yes. Firstly in relation to the statement of purpose, we absolutely welcome that. It will lead to very specific details about the specialism that a home can provide, which can be matched better to young people rather than being generic and just compliant with a list of schedules or criteria stipulated by regulations. It is far more pointed in terms of moving towards what is the specialism that that home can provide? Hopefully what should happen is on the receiving end, from a local authority point of view, there should be more diligence. Sometimes, in emergency situations they should look at that statement of purpose, come out and visit the service and get feedback from other local authorities who are placed there to get a whole picture and decide whether that is the right placement for the child.

Q174 Mr Stuart: Given how many children in care have special educational needs, will the new landscape—I know it has not emerged yet—of local offers and hopefully a more visible set of services available for children with special educational needs help in informing better commissioning?

Kamran Abassi: In our experience there is a disproportionate number who do not have a statement, who are being looked after by us because they have been moved around on a number of occasions and have not been assessed so they do not have a statement.

Mr Stuart: You mean too many of them ought to have a statement, in your view, but do not have one?

Kamran Abassi: Yes.

Q175 Neil Carmichael: What news on this would you bring from Stockport in terms of child engagement?

Andrew Webb: We engage all our children very carefully in their individual care plan. The original question was around commissioning and how that is influenced by children.

Neil Carmichael: What I am trying to tease out is what engagement we have for the child. That is the question I want to answer.

Andrew Webb: The child is fully engaged in their own assessment. Once they are placed, we have advocacy services that meet with them to feed back if they are not feeding back. We have reference groups for children in care. We have a Children in Care Council that meets on a regular basis on a Monday evening outside my office. They regularly pop in and if I am not there will leave me Twix bars and things.

There is a good dialogue with children in care these days about the nature of the provision they are receiving and the nature of the services and system around them. However, it is very difficult to build from that individual child's view into a commissioning strategy. It is just difficult, but once placed, the child should be an integral part of the entire feedback loop, to the provider, their social worker, through their care plan and via their reviewing the individual—

Mr Stuart: I have to cut you off there, Andrew, as we only have a few minutes left.

Q176 Pat Glass: Can I just unpick which children we are talking about here? Tell me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that children whose assessments are educationally driven—so children with autism, who are blind or deaf—who go to education placements, there may be all kinds of arguments about, “They are too expensive, they are too far away from home”, but in general the outcomes for those children are good. What we are talking about is children with behavioural difficulties, whether or not they have a statement. I take your point, Kamran, about more of them should have statements, but the kids we saw yesterday all had statements, so I am not sure that would make a difference. I do sympathise with you Tim; I have tried to put together commissioning services for children who are deaf and hearing impaired in south-east London and it was not easy. How is it going for you?

Tim Parlow: Good, I think, thank you. We have particularly focused in north London on fostering placements first and foremost. We have just come to the end of a procurement exercise for independent fostering placements. We are a little bit earlier in the journey on embarking on our residential work. We are currently undertaking the data gathering and number crunching so that we know exactly what the cohort of the children we are talking about looks like. There is tremendous appetite within local authorities to work together.

Q177 Pat Glass: What are the barriers? Andrew said it is not being done at a high enough level.

Tim Parlow: I cannot comment for the rest of the country; in London I think it is. I have a directors group so my directors of children’s services meet regularly.

Q178 Pat Glass: Are they willing to put their money where their mouth is?

Tim Parlow: They are, with the caveat that there is an expectation that what we are doing will also yield financial benefits in terms of savings. As long as we are able to demonstrate that what we are doing is having a positive effect on the spend, that is fine.

Q179 Pat Glass: When we spoke to the Minister last week, we talked about these things. I talked to him about spend to save and how you have to have the services in place before you can start bringing children back. He indicated that there may be some resources around to help, if there was a good enough case made. Was your consortium aware of that?

Tim Parlow: No, but we would welcome that very much.

Andrew Webb: I cannot speak for the Minister, but the innovation fund he announced last month would, probably, fall in to this category.

Q180 Pat Glass: What can the Government do to encourage commissioning consortia? If there were one or two things, from your experience, that Government could come in here and wade behind you, what would it be?

Tim Parlow: I would very much welcome the idea of resource being made available on a spend-to-save basis, because it takes a leap of faith. Particularly when we talk about London and residential homes, the idea of investing in new provision is very problematic. One of our concerns about the proposals is that we totally recognise that out-of-area placements are not always the right thing, but we are also very cautious that we know that

if you suddenly said, “You cannot place outside your local authority”, that would be very problematic for us in this area.

Andrew Webb: To pull together and publish best practice with some really good hooks into both the financial and care planning data that you need; to put together a research project, to deliver something like that would probably move us on.

Q181 Bill Esterson: There has been a complete shift in the ownership of children’s homes from local authority to private and voluntary. I want to ask about the involvement, particularly, of private equity, where profit is a key part. *The Independent* reports that the Chief Executive of Advanced Childcare took home over £200,000, a big increase from last year, and yet not all the homes, by any means, were rated good or outstanding. What is the impact of the need to make large profits in that part of the ownership of children’s homes on quality of care?

Kamran Abassi: Our priority, first and foremost, is quality of care. I have been involved with the organisation for 12 years; eight have been with private equity backing. They have been extremely supportive. They have not been involved in the day-to-day matters. They are absolutely 100% committed to providing the best quality of care, education to very complex young people. They have given us investment to allow us to be innovative, flexible and pioneering. We have launched a specialist CSE service as an alternative to secure. There have been zero dividends taken out in my whole time at the organisation, so no shareholder has taken a pound out of the organisation in any way, shape or form. If you look at the data and look at the local authority costs versus independent costs per young person, it is cheaper in the private organisation for value for money.

Q182 Mr Stuart: You said value for money; how is value for money measured?

Kamran Abassi: Placement stability, the outcomes in terms of improving educational attainment, the reduction of risk for young people and taking into account the starting point for the young people. There needs to be far more work done. My colleague Jonathan Stanley from ICHA did make a point of talking about outcome-based monitoring—

Q183 Mr Stuart: A significant proportion of your homes are only rated adequate, which now means it needs improvement.

Bill Esterson: A third were either adequate or inadequate.

Kamran Abassi: I can give you our figures as of 30 September, which were published reports. We have nine outstanding, 55 good, 15 adequate and 15 not inspected; that is overall 7% outstanding, 41% good and 11% adequate. We are absolutely committed to making sure—

Q184 Bill Esterson: What was the date for that?

Kamran Abassi: 30 September. The data set had a different set; it was as of 31 March. They are published Ofsted reports and this has been checked with the DfE, so that has improved from the previous report.

Q185 Neil Carmichael: Andrew and Tim, do you have a concern about the involvement of private equity in children's homes?

Andrew Webb: Not an ideological concern, no. My concern would be if we moved into the market dominance that we saw with Southern Cross in the adult sector and if an organisation with so many vulnerable lives in their hands goes bust then it has a massive impact. Equally, some of the residential establishments that give me the most concern are those single ownership, with insufficient working capital, a single provider with the best of intentions and an inadequate business model. We need a spread.

Q186 Bill Esterson: Do you think single occupancy homes are a problem?

Andrew Webb: No, not necessarily. Where they are, as I described them with inadequate backing, then they can be.

Bill Esterson: It comes back to good management, then.

Andrew Webb: Yes, good management and we need a test of resilience in every provider. Over the last 30 years, when I have been in this business, we have moved from the dominance of voluntary aided and voluntary sector homes, through massive closures to local authority dominating and now clearly the private sector dominating. We need to make sure that whoever is running them has the financial stability and the leadership capacity to deliver one of the most complex tasks it is possible to ask anyone to deliver.

Q187 Pat Glass: How can providers be incentivised to deliver higher quality care to children, including those where children are demonstrating very risky behaviours? How can we up the bar on private providers?

Andrew Webb: The simple answer is that it is a joint responsibility. It goes back to my point about our being very much clearer when we procure a placement about what it is we want them to achieve. We should then have a management information regime that looks at how much progress people make. We need an inspection regime that takes account of progress. In the simplest terms, it is shifting expectation from containment to therapy and intervention. It can only be done on a case-by-case basis.

Q188 Pat Glass: This Committee has pushed in the past for Ofsted to be able to inspect chains of academies, rather than just individual academies or schools. Would you welcome that in the private homes sector, so that they can inspect groups rather than just single homes?

Andrew Webb: I am not sure what value it would add.

Pat Glass: It would deal with your issue of resilience.

Andrew Webb: Only if they then started looking at the financial viability of the very large organisations.

Tim Parlow: It would be useful from the point of view of clarity about ownership, so where we commission from groups and we know that they are groups then that is fine. Of course, we do not always know about acquisitions that have happened or businesses that are still running under previous names but are now backed by single equity houses. I do

not think local authorities are necessarily the best equipped to have that information to hand. Therefore when they are making a commissioning decision—and I completely accept that the commissioning decision has also to take into consideration financial stability and those issues, but we will not always have that information very close at hand.

Mr Stuart: The final word to Kamran. I had better bring this to a close.

Kamran Abassi: The registration criteria for a children's home requires financial viability evidence to be put forward.

Q189 Mr Stuart: Is that sufficiently demanding?

Kamran Abassi: It is, yes. We, as an organisation, have met with senior accountants—

Mr Stuart: We had tests on our banks that were seen as systemically important and they went horribly wrong.

Kamran Abassi: We have met with Ofsted and their accountants and gone through our financial standing as an organisation. It is tested through inspection as well.

Q190 Mr Stuart: How is it tested through inspection?

Kamran Abassi: They check the business and development plans for the home during inspection as well. That is for the 12-month forward plans for this particular service. Coming back to your point as well, each home is individual and I would recommend individual inspections are absolutely critical.

Q191 Pat Glass: I just think it would, perhaps, restore transparency if you knew social workers pension funds were running children's homes. That might be useful in terms of transparency.

Kamran Abassi: They are, as far as I am aware.

Mr Stuart: Thank you very much indeed to the three of you for giving evidence to us today. If you have any further thoughts, reflections or, most importantly, recommendations then feel free to send us even a one-bullet-point email. We would welcome any contribution to our inquiry. Thank you very much indeed.