



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Pre-appointment hearing: Children's Commissioner for England](#), HC 815

Tuesday 11 November 2014

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair), Neil Carmichael, Bill Esterson, Pat Glass, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr David Ward

Questions 1-57

Witness: **Anne Longfield OBE**, Preferred Candidate for Children's Commissioner for England, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning, and welcome. It is good to have you joining us this morning as we conduct this pre-appointment scrutiny of a proposal from the Secretary of State that you should be the next Children's Commissioner for England. As part of our preparation for today, we used Twitter and asked people to suggest to us what we should question you on. A lot of tweets picked up on under-fives, including issues such as school starting dates for summer-born children; the early-years workforce; the schoolification, as it was put by some, of early years; and support for parents who want to stay at home with their children rather than go to work. Others concentrated on the rights agenda, including teaching about the United Nations charter in schools. How far do you see the former group of issues being your responsibility in comparison with promoting the rights of children in England in that UN context?

Anne Longfield: The early years are clearly an important part of the sector, and it is one in which I have been involved for almost three decades. I am very much embedded within that, but my work has gone across the whole age range of children and families too. I am clear that the agenda I am being asked to promote is children's rights, the defence of those rights and the protection and furthering of those rights, and all age ranges of children would be part of that responsibility.

Q2 Chair: To be a success in this role, what will that look like?

Anne Longfield: I will be seeking to do a number of things. One is to champion relentlessly the interests and rights of children. That is something I have spent my whole career doing, so it is not unfamiliar to me.

Q3 Chair: Perhaps you can explain what that means and unpick it a little.

Anne Longfield: I have never considered myself a specialist health professional or education professional, if you like. I have always worked with children and their families to support them to fulfil their potential. That has gone through all the work I have undertaken. I see myself very much as standing alongside children and their families and supporting them, rather than coming from a professional place or sector as the starting point. Therefore, championing their rights across government and in the wider public domain will be absolutely core. It will be very much about looking at how we take that forward by practical means, and within that there will be a need for challenge, nationally and locally. Some of it will be government and some will be all those who have a responsibility for and interest in supporting children. There is also a responsibility about how you translate that into real change. I do not see myself as an individual raising issues and difficulties without feeling a responsibility to translate that into a better outcome for children.

Q4 Chair: But you will not have the power to implement things, only to champion it, as you say, so what do you mean by what you have just said?

Anne Longfield: I have worked in the voluntary sector for virtually 30 years, apart from a short period within the Prime Minister's strategy unit. I am used to not having levers of power at my disposal, but what I do have is the office and the status that commands; a recognition across government and elsewhere because of that; and the ability to put forward strong evidence. An awful lot of evidence and research has been undertaken by the commissioner's office. I have the ability to be able to go forward, speak to others who have that responsibility and decision-making power to deliver, and use my almost relentless power of will to persuade others to take this on.

Q5 Chair: Would that be below or above the line? One of the other things the tweeters who responded to us worried about was how you would be able to prove independence from government. One suggested that it was a struggle to see how the proposed appointment could be considered independent and able to meet the role specification. How would you answer that?

Anne Longfield: It would be both; it would be below and above the line. There will be distinct areas of independence and there will not be agreement. There may be emerging areas raised by children and young people themselves; they may be areas where government is set in a different direction. My responsibilities will be to children in all of that, not the decision makers. I will need to use my own personal evidence, persuasion and abilities to get these on to the agenda. Some of it will be below the line. There will be areas of joint working and vision. Some of that may be a joint vision with parts of the local government sector; it might be the voluntary sector; it might be government, and there I will be seeking to join together collaborations to be able to push that forward.

Q6 Chair: Staying at national government level, seeing that is what we typically scrutinise, I am trying to get an idea of how you would see that relationship. There are many different ways of doing it. You can be phenomenally critical behind closed doors, in the belief that publicly criticising the policy of a democratically elected government of the day will be counter-productive, or you can very publicly go out there and say on behalf of children, “I just think it’s wrong; this policy is out of order.” You may get a big splash and create a sensation, but the balance is trying to work out what will lead to the best outcomes for children. I am trying to get from you an idea of what your natural inclination is in playing that tactic, whoever is in government. We may have a change in government next May. How do you deal with government? It does not like being criticised.

Anne Longfield: Few do in my experience. It will be a balance, and there will be areas where I will be able to identify that the best route forward will be through collaboration, which will be around internal criticisms and more of a “critical friend” relationship. There will be others where I will have to go out more on a limb. Part of the next stage of the post is about having a higher public profile and being able to feed that into the ability to make an impact and, rather than reacting to what others are saying, which is what you are asking me about, set the agenda in a much more direct way. You can see some of that emerging now, and I will be seeking to build on that.

I do not anticipate that I will go straight for an outlandish headline in any way, but I will have to use my own political—with a small “p”—abilities to be able to judge when that is best done. I have done that in the voluntary sector, which relies on being able to get things done through relationships and the power of persuasion all my life. I think it is something for which I am well prepared.

Q7 Bill Esterson: You will go for outlandish headlines if it helps children.

Anne Longfield: It would not be my first port of call, and an outlandish headline is probably not the best starting point anyway, because you would hope it would be based on what children and young people and the evidence tell us. Nonetheless, if there is an important case to be made that is not being heard, that has to be part of what you have at your disposal to put forward. I would not seek to do this in any inflammatory way, but I would have to be firm in my arguments in doing so.

Q8 Bill Esterson: Can you tell us what you think are the most important issues that you are going to address?

Anne Longfield: There are two about the system we have in supporting children and two to do with policies. There is an urgency around our system of support for children, which I think deems review and action. There are two aspects to that. The first is about how we engage children and young people in the delivery of that support. We are now in a situation where there are far too many transactional relationships with children rather than services that are able to understand children’s contexts, work with them as individuals and put them at the centre of those services.

The other aspect of that is what I have talked about for a long time: children’s services that are not joined up. We still have too many services that act in isolation—some might call

them silos—and those are not yet joining up in an intelligent way around young people and intervening early. Those are about the way support is organised.

There are two aspects in policy terms that are clear priorities at the moment. We have major inquiries under way at the moment around the sexual exploitation of children. It is something for which the Office of the Children's Commissioner is very well respected. It has done good work on that and led some of that debate. There is a role for the commissioner to play to bring children's and young people's voices into that in a very robust way as the debate goes on, and clearly children in care is an area that is not only specified within the role but is also a common concern. Both concerns go across government and party. One of the things I will be hoping to do in the role is gain some cross-party support on these, so we are looking at a long-term plan and strategic dialogue over time.

Q9 Bill Esterson: If we were to judge your success at the end of your term, what would that look like?

Anne Longfield: I would hope we had achieved and moved forward a culture change in support for children that would have a much more active regard to their participation in decision-making. By that I mean professionals who are able not only to listen to children and do that as a matter of course but understand their situation and actively work with their strengths and support them to move forward. I do think that is a culture change. There are some areas of practice, such as family nurse partnerships and others, that do that in a very real way, including the troubled families programme, but it is something we need to see much more embedded in the system.

On the particular issues around policy areas, clearly the sexual exploitation of children and vulnerable children will be very much on the agenda in coming months and years. Within that I would like to engage a lot of my activity and energy to move that forward to a place that could almost be unrecognisable from the situation we have had.

Q10 Bill Esterson: Is there anything specific you would recommend in those areas as a start of what you are going to do?

Anne Longfield: I think the young person's voice within that starts to be able to shape what that change is. Within the whole area of vulnerability and the findings in Rotherham and elsewhere, you are looking at a set of services that is not responding in the way we would want, or have not been, and is not preventing vulnerable children from falling into those particular situations. We are also looking at a response that is not joined up in any real way around the needs of the child. There are mechanistic ways around that, but also some real ways we can listen to and protect vulnerable children.

Q11 Bill Esterson: We might come back to that in a bit more detail. What do you think your predecessors' biggest achievements have been?

Anne Longfield: The roles themselves were clearly a landmark to get the position established, and both have done that and gained respect in their role. They established

offices. I am very pleased there has been a strengthening in the role and welcome that. I think we are at the starting point to be able to see how that can harvest itself in terms of making that impact. Some very good research work has been going on. There is a prolific amount of research reports in there. The role is still in its infancy. It is being held back somewhat by transition to the new role, and the building blocks within it to take those issues forward are immense.

It has also brought about a change of culture and thinking about how we engage with young people. We take it for granted now that activities such as Takeover Day exist, and that has good participation in itself. What has also been striking around the country is that where youth services and support have come under pressure because of lack of public money the participatory element is one that people have retained and looked after. I do not think that would have been the case 10 or 15 years ago and that the children's commissioner has had a real impact in making that central stage in a meaningful way.

Q12 Bill Esterson: Is there anything your predecessor did not manage to achieve that perhaps she might have done?

Anne Longfield: Expectations of this post are high, rightly so. People will always want more. I think the will is with the post to make it work. There have been timing issues around some of the changes. Personalities make a difference. I will be different from the two predecessors. I will be very hands on in terms of solutions. I hope that I bring to bear a strong network and work experience across parties and government, and I will be seeking to do some of that. Expectations have been very high, and there will always be a list of things people have found in terms of impact that has not happened. There is a role to make good on all the research that is there, and that is the next step.

Q13 Bill Esterson: You described your priorities. We talk quite a lot on this Committee about what the balance and link should be between education and children matters. How do you see your role in addressing that agenda and making sure that balance is right?

Anne Longfield: Education is a crucial part of support for children; in no sense would that not be the case. Children's rights have a home within the school environment, just as within other support environments. One of the balances will be about how that role and I speak to all children, as well as vulnerable children. Some of that will be about ensuring that schools are participating in some of these dialogues. For families it is a natural balance. Their children need education and they care deeply, as do children, about the quality of the school environment, but they are also very aware of the importance of their time outside school. There is a natural balance to be had that would bring itself through by what children tell us. There are things about the machinery of government that always pop up within this. Should or should not the words "children and families" be in the title? Should there be a children's Minister?

Q14 Bill Esterson: Do you think it makes a difference?

Anne Longfield: It usually reflects some of the internal workings, so in those ways there is a difference to be had. It is what you deem within government to be a priority and the different ways of delivering it. However, as to whether it is within education or elsewhere, or whether there is the potential to coalesce leadership around children and family issues within government, I do not think the debate has gone away.

Q15 Bill Esterson: Will you be pushing for a name change?

Anne Longfield: It would not be my first priority, because I believe it is what you do rather than what you call it. Having said that, I do think it is an important issue.

Q16 Bill Esterson: You have been working on a number of issues in your current role, not least the proposal to extend Sure Start centres to become children and family hubs. How much of what you are doing now will you want to pursue in your new role?

Anne Longfield: It is a little like the first question about early years. Sure Starts have been a central part of campaigns of which I have been part for 14 or 15 years. I have been deeply involved in some of that, not only in proposing them but shaping and delivering them. They go to the heart of what I have been doing.

I do think there is a role to take forward some of that, not simply because they are part of what I have been doing, and therefore I am familiar with it. The reason Sure Starts are important is that they are a mechanism for some of the changes I talked about. They are a mechanism for bringing services together; they are the trusted aspect of services for many children and families; and they are a mechanism to bring together and engage with families from conception right through to social care. They are a mechanism and way of delivering services rather than an individual set of services in themselves. Clearly, they will take their place alongside a much wider range of issues and greater focus on vulnerability, but they would still have a role.

Q17 Pat Glass: I am a great believer in the fact that we are never as swift as when we are chased. However, successive governments do not necessarily support that. The whole point of today and you sitting in front of us is for us to judge whether you are robust enough to challenge government on the things that really matter. That is the crux of why we are here. We have had a 47% increase in children on protection plans, and there are massive gaps between the attainment of those children who come from the poorest and those who come from the wealthiest homes and, despite government rhetoric, it is not getting any smaller. UNICEF's latest Innocenti Report Card said that we are the sixth richest country in the world and yet, in terms of the wellbeing of our children, we are 16th out of 29, which is shocking by anybody's standards. In October 2014 the proportion of children living in poverty had increased from 24%, which was awful, to 25.6%. Given all of those statistics, none of which is particularly good, how do you rate how the Government are doing, and what would you do about it?

Anne Longfield: Despite the fact we have some great experiences and support for children as they grow up in this country, it is clear that across the piece we are not doing enough for children. Those statistics do not need any more explanation than as they appear. They

are enough to give us a wake-up call that we need to do more. I have been clear about that in my current job and previous one, and would seek to do so in my new post. As a country we need to reaffirm our commitment to children. How we want to treat children and how we judge ourselves is a decision we make as a society, and we need to pay more regard to it. I think most members of the public do think that. If you ask people, they want to put children first. Often, it is something that in policy terms people aspire to, but when it gets tough they fall behind some of the more difficult issues, especially around election time.

I would be seeking to get cross-party sign-off to reaffirm the commitment to the rights of children and putting them as a top-five issue. There is a will by parties to do that. We have a consistent commitment from parties to make Britain the greatest place for children to grow up, but another statistic I have is that almost one-third of families say they do not think where they live is the best place to bring up children. We have choices as to how we deal with that as a country, and within government there are choices too. Those choices have not yet been focussed on enough by government, and it would be my task and driving force to do that.

Q18 Pat Glass: What I am looking for is: are you going to be able to say bluntly to government, whether it be this one, the next one or whatever, “This is not good enough,” and do that robustly, and publicly if necessary?

Anne Longfield: My responsibility will be to children and to do that.

Q19 Pat Glass: So it is to children, not government.

Anne Longfield: Absolutely. That is my starting point. I have always felt that my responsibilities are to children. I feel that everything I do is a benchmark, but there is more to government than just one set of people; there is a parliamentary group that also needs to sign up to this and push it forward; there is a public domain; and there are those delivering services. There has to be a challenge all round to do better, and those statistics will sit with us as a measurement of that, but within all of that my commitment is to children. I would be letting down this role if I did not challenge at every level.

Q20 Chair: Can you give us an example where in your previous life you have got into a public spat with government about something you did not agree with?

Anne Longfield: Whether or not you call it a spat, one of the things I have been very clear about recently is the need for an independent public inquiry following Rotherham. There are a number of public inquiries, but I have been very clear in my call for an independent time-limited inquiry—I was calling for leadership from the Prime Minister—and a recognition that this is an ongoing matter. It is not part of historical abuse; it is not just Rotherham. I felt that an independent and time-limited inquiry was very much needed. That has been followed through in terms of dialogue with the Home Office and elsewhere.

Q21 Pat Glass: One of the things the OCC has been quite successful at is safeguarding and promoting the rights of children who live away from home. We know that

these children are collectively more likely to be exploited; they are at the bottom of the achievement targets; they are more likely to be jobless, homeless and so on. What steps would you take to ensure that this function is given sufficient priority within the office?

Anne Longfield: I would want to make that a major priority, and that was one of the two things I set out. It demands the most change in culture, aspiration and delivery. It needs to be a central focus. I would be seeking to explore what aspects I can bring best value to. There are issues high on the reform agenda at the moment around adoption, fostering and the placement of children in care. I would want to look at all of those from the children's perspective, and indeed kinship care, but within that the quality of the dialogue, judgment and decision-making around young people, and the whole notion that young people desire, and often feel they do not have, the ability to shape some of those outcomes. It is about being able to bring children's views and rights within that in a much greater way, and start to move to a situation where not only do you start to support young people in that area but help them shape a better future.

Q22 Pat Glass: One of the things that has been highlighted by recent scandals in Rochdale, Rotherham and so on—there are lots of them, and I am sure there will be more—is that collectively as a society and as professionals working in this area these children simply do not matter enough to us. How would you use your role to challenge and change public attitudes in relation to these groups of young people?

Anne Longfield: The public have been genuinely quite shocked and outraged that services could have responded in that way. It has been brought to light. There is a genuine distaste for how that has been handled and that people want change. There is a momentum there to be built upon. There is some rich evidence on this within the Office of the Children's Commissioner that has been put forward, which I would seek to bring to the public's attention. I would plan to do a significant amount of public profile raising in this area.

A very good review of Rotherham is going on, headed by Louise Casey. It needs to be extended elsewhere, but I would seek to work alongside those reviews and not only influence and bring to life children's voices within that but also the outcomes. We have a key opportunity to do exactly what you are suggesting, and I think that in this role I could play a real part in making that happen with children's interests at heart.

Q23 Bill Esterson: You mentioned adoption, fostering and kinship care and the challenges there. What specifically will you press for to make a step change in the outcomes for children who are taken into care?

Anne Longfield: It is a complex area, so I cannot give huge broad-brush answers.

Q24 Bill Esterson: Is there one or a couple of specific points?

Anne Longfield: As a personal view—I would want to look at it in more detail—I have been really taken by family group conferences where you get together the young person and family and anyone else around them to look at how they would shape an outcome themselves. That may be slightly before that situation, but it is about empowering

individuals close to the child to be able to take some control and shape it. That is a powerful way to start to shift the balance.

In terms of children in care, we need to have much greater relationships with individual children. We have to find ways for children to be able to shape their own destiny within that situation. I know that sounds very easy, and it is something I would want to look at in some detail.

Q25 Bill Esterson: What about for younger children?

Anne Longfield: We have the adoption of a set of reforms at the moment, and there are issues in the press today around that. We need to have not just speed but good judgments about the best place to place those children. It is an area I would prioritise, and it is one that I would be seeking to push through in terms of reforms, but be able to bring in, in a much more direct way, the needs of children and their desire to shape.

Q26 Chair: Part of your role and remit is to make recommendations for changes to legislation, policies or practices. You have had a long time working in the children's sector.

Anne Longfield: What would I do about it?

Chair: Yes.

Anne Longfield: I do think there is the role to explore—I think it will become more apparent once the inquiries have reported—reforms and legislation on how services work around the needs of the child, and how they work together. We have had various pieces of legislation over the past 20 years that take steps towards that, but at the moment we are clear that services and support are not meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in the way we would want them. We do not know the scale of that yet, but we know that it is not acceptable. It is not acceptable to any of those in government or the general public. I do think that legislation around that, however it might play itself out, needs to come on to the statute book in coming years. It does not need to duplicate; it cannot be knee-jerk, but we have to find a better way for services and support to respond to changing needs.

The other part of that is that there are areas where services are struggling to keep up with changing lifestyles. Online safety is one that all children will talk about; it is something that most adults are struggling to understand, even the speed of some of it, but it has to come to the forefront.

Q27 Chair: We recommended that time should be taken to get the services right, but basically the Government should work towards an outright ban of the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for young people. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Anne Longfield: That is one of the recommendations that I see has not yet been taken up. The vulnerability of young people in care at that key stage of transition is a matter we have to respect. I know that is what you were deeming to do in your discussions. Personally, I think that is an area that has many merits.

Q28 Chair: Is that a “yes”?

Anne Longfield: It is almost a “yes”.

Q29 Chair: I do not think there is anyone in or outside government who does not wish the best for these people, but at some point you have to tie yourself to specific measures.

Anne Longfield: I agree. It is clear that bed and breakfast is an unacceptable place for young people. Even though the amount that might be used in B and B is very small, I do not think it should be taken up. Personally, I would have sympathy with that.

Q30 Siobhain McDonagh: How do you see the commissioner’s power of entry being used? Are these powers proportionate?

Anne Longfield: It is great that those powers are there, and I welcome that. I understand they have been used on a number of occasions but not widely. It is an important power to have and one that can be used very effectively, looking at children in care. I know it has been used in young offender institutes and with asylum-seeking children and families. All of those are areas where you would wish to continue with that, but more can be done in terms of wider services around vulnerable children and children in care. I understand the push to make them stronger and broader. I think that at this stage they are proportionate with the scale of the role, but it is something we should keep under review.

Q31 Siobhain McDonagh: What approach would you take if your staff uncovered serious wrongdoing as part of an interview?

Anne Longfield: That has to be planned in from the start. You must have a contingency plan that allows you to find out difficult things. You are not going to have necessarily a reaffirming chat; there has to be a challenging process within that. I would expect to see within the office processes for dealing with that. There would need to be a mechanism in place to be able to make that real and take it to the place where that can be furthered and, if need be, you may need to expose that as a wider process. I expect those processes to be in place and, if they were not, I would want to get them in place.

Q32 Mr Ward: You were asked earlier about our relative standing in international league tables. Why are we there? It is over a long period of time. Could you identify a key thing? We are not uncaring; we are not lacking in wealth. What would you put it down to?

Anne Longfield: Children’s wellbeing, their ability to spend time with families and the like is the thing that emerges as the area of concern. What we are trying to do in this country is find a halfway measure. In southern European countries you have a large family structure around you; in northern European countries the state intervenes and there is much more state interaction in family life. We are trying to get a halfway house here, and we are not always successful in that, or it is not that easy to achieve. We are trying to build family structures, but families are still largely working, and that add stresses and strains in terms of the home environment and family income. We also have a set of

services, but most people still have to finance their own way through. On the whole, most people are relatively comfortable with that halfway house, but children within that do not always find a comfortable place.

My comment about finding a different approach to supporting children and services around that cultural change is part of that response. In this country we have some very good services, but often they are delivered in isolation. Sometimes part of the catalyst in getting there locally at the moment is that, because there is ironically less money for children, people are joining up slightly more because they have to, but we need to find a way that unites services around individual children and families. There is a lack of the individual's power to be able to shape services around them, which sometimes makes both children and families feel they do not have the place they would wish to have.

Q33 Mr Ward: In 10, 15 or 20 years' time will we have got nearer to that? Do you sense we are moving in the right direction?

Anne Longfield: I think there is a move towards that. As I speak to local authorities around the country, most of them are seeking to join up services. Some are looking to develop a hub approach, as we talked around earlier, but the seismic change needed to get there is immense. I would wish to add my energy, evidence and role within that to help get there. That is a prize worth fighting for and one that is achievable.

Q34 Mr Ward: We have the work programme or project plan. I would like to get your views on a couple of areas. The first relates to the child rights impact assessment on legal aid and the comment made that it has negatively impacted upon civil and criminal legal aid changes. How will you ensure that the Government and others respond to those findings?

Anne Longfield: There has been some good publicity about that. It is a good report and research, which is the starting point on which to base this, and there has been some good publicity about it. As with all research, it now needs to follow through into action. It needs to become part of the challenge but also the solution for those dealing with this as part of the process of government.

Q35 Chair: The question is: how will you ensure that they do that?

Anne Longfield: I would build on the work there and push it through as a core priority.

Q36 Chair: What will that look like? How?

Anne Longfield: It will be through personal relationships and good solid work with individuals in office. It has a good starting point in there, and the research needs to drive it, but it is a matter of pushing it through with those who can make a difference.

Q37 Mr Ward: Could it and should it have been foreseen?

Anne Longfield: Yes, of course. Part of the role, I hope, will be to get on the front foot and scrutinise legislation as it is coming up with a view to influencing and shaping it. There are many aspects to this role and many fronts on which to work, so priorities will be important. Having said that, that could have been anticipated, and that is why the role has to be a robust player in decision-making along the way as well as challenging after the event, if you like.

Q38 Mr Ward: The other area is the investigations into child sexual abuse, but there is the Government's own July 2014 Home Office inquiry. How will they complement each other, and how would they be different?

Anne Longfield: The remit of the July 2014 inquiry is very much around historical abuse, and it is a lengthy process. I have been told that it will be sizeable with immense amounts of evidence being given.

Q39 Chair: Is it nonsense because of that?

Anne Longfield: No.

Q40 Chair: Was it just political pressure to include in one inquiry all institutions, all decades, all types and practically across all time? Is that not a completely unmanageable and thus eventually ineffective way of investigating and responding to what is a current and real problem?

Anne Longfield: It is not the most practical or effective way forward to be able to get good timely results on a current issue. Experts tell me it will take time, and it will be immense. Within all of that we have to understand that this is an issue for children and young people today, tomorrow, next week and the week after. We need a timely and time-limited inquiry that can bring forward results shortly. You can work alongside that. It can also work with and learn from the current Rotherham inquiry, but an effective short-term answer and solution is needed.

Q41 Chair: What is the effective short-term inquiry you are talking about?

Anne Longfield: What I was calling for before was a short-term inquiry that was time-limited, looking particularly at the lessons from Rotherham and elsewhere.

Q42 Chair: The Government response, struggling as it is to find a chair, is not the correct response.

Anne Longfield: That has its role but it is long term and, as you say, huge. The young people who are very vulnerable today and have the most devastating experiences any of us could think of today demand and deserve an earlier response that is more targeted towards their needs.

Q43 Neil Carmichael: I apologise for being late. What I am about to ask may well have been covered already. One of the things this Committee often hears is the problem of agencies not co-operating with each other, with disasters unfolding because of lack of communication and lack of proper and strategic control over certain issues. You are obviously aware of these things because you are nodding with vigour. My initial question is: how would you in this role set about addressing some of the failures in agency co-operation?

Anne Longfield: I have referred to it a few times, but I am happy to develop it. The lack of joined-up working debilitates an awful lot of good work. There may be excellence in different parts of the service, but if it does not join up about the whole child you are always trying to address a particular part of the need. We all know that, especially when there are complex problems, they are all interlinked. You do not have just a health issue; you are not just poor. They are very much interlinked, and the response needs to be one that is pulled together and has the child at the heart of it. I said it was one of the things that would be a core priority, alongside trying to find a way to move from the transactional way of working with children and families to one that is much more about respecting them and working with them as individuals.

There is a move locally to align services in a much more direct way. I would be looking to use that momentum to move forward. I would also be looking to bring to light, publicise and research the impact of that lack of join-up on children's lives. A couple of weeks ago we were looking for some of that evidence in one of the proposals I was putting forward about joining up services. Every serious case review will have information and a comment on the lack of join-up. There is not often research that says quite what the impact is, or how it can be measured. That is a real role in undertaking some of that research and putting it forward. At the moment there is a gap. We know what happens when it does not occur, but what are the benefits to be gained if you get a join-up of services? That is possible and timely. It would be well received by those who have a will to make this happen, and it would be at the heart of the change in some of the attitudes and the respectful approach to services that I know everyone in the room wants, and all those working with children would seek as well.

Q44 Bill Esterson: You have talked a lot about improvements in services and ideas you have to make changes that will take time. There are up to 75,000 children in care and many more on the at-risk register. For very young children, every day's delay delays their development as a child and their ability to build relationships and thrive later in life. For older children, there are similar issues. What is it that you will do to bring an immediate improvement in the life chances of the children that most need your help?

Anne Longfield: I hope I have not shown any lack of urgency in that talk about services. I do not think that all of those will take decades. It is a long-term plan, but there could be some immediate responses.

Q45 Bill Esterson: What about children who are at risk now?

Anne Longfield: Of course. What I would seek to do is put a spotlight on this area. I would seek to undertake research with young people and children in that role, and to embark on a series of engagements with professionals working in that area.

Q46 Bill Esterson: From your 30 years' experience working in the sector, you already have a lot of those answers. What would you want to change before you go into that process? What is going to happen on day one?

Anne Longfield: I would want to make clear that this is an absolute priority and that I am seeking to work with everyone who has a responsibility for children in care to improve it. I would seek to harness the research that had already been undertaken to bring that to good use, and also look to invest my personal time in being able to work with that sector and make change. Part of that is about working with workforce changes those who are in those posts; part of it is about raising aspirations around quality and what is and is not acceptable. Clearly, this Committee is doing its part in raising some of the issues around care leavers. I would also be working with the wider voluntary sector who have this absolutely at their heart. There is a potential for some campaigning work around this. The campaigning spirit is strong in me, and I would hope that would continue. There is a potential to coalesce support around campaigns and to use the status and power to gain entry to expose some of the ways this needs to change very swiftly. There would be no lack of urgency in that.

Q47 Bill Esterson: On the issue of corporate parenting, in theory it is a great model for making sure every child in the care system is treated the same as if they were our own children. In practice there is a significant gap. Do you accept that comment? If you do, how would you go about closing that gap? A particular example, which came out of our 16-plus inquiry—the Chair has mentioned the proposal to ban B and B—is raising the age of residential care to at least 21, and things like that.

Anne Longfield: There is a self-evident gap between the care a good parent would be able to give and the situation that a lot of young people find themselves in at the moment. We also know that the most vulnerable young people are the ones with the most complex problems. I would support raising the age of responsibility related to leaving care. As the mother of a 21-year-old, I know how long that parenting role goes on—I relish that—but I know how vulnerable those years can be as well. Anyone who works with children, be they vulnerable or not, knows that transition to adulthood is one that can be rocky at the best of times for all children.

Q48 Bill Esterson: We are in the middle of two inquiries: PSHE, and apprenticeships and traineeships. What aspects of children's rights do you think we should be considering as part of those two inquiries?

Anne Longfield: There is a clear right within PSHE around information and citizenship. Some good work has been started around children's rights in schools. That is a rich area to look at. It is an approach that would bear fruit in terms of enabling young people to understand their own rights, but about responsibilities and citizenship within that. Some strong and rich learning can go on within the school curriculum or school day. Much would be gained to have issues such as relationships within that arena. Some may go further and say it should be about parenting, but much of that is around relationships too. That is an area where there is much to look at. There are some clear views from young people themselves that can feed directly into that about the kind of support they need.

In terms of apprenticeships, for those who are looking to move into adulthood and the world of work there is now broad recognition that that route has the potential to be really fulfilling. There are some very good examples of how apprenticeships can be meaningful. That would benefit from young people being able to shape those. They have to be meaningful apprenticeships, as does the dialogue with young people within that, and there is an opportunity to shape that.

Q49 Pat Glass: As part of the work of the Office of the Children's Commissioner is about involving children in everything that you do, do you think that Amplify and Young Amplify are sufficient for that?

Anne Longfield: It is very good they are there. I understand they are a very good group, but I do not think it ends there; it is part of a whole. Very good groups have been established, such as local youth parliaments and local mayor schemes, and there is much benefit in linking with them and being able to work with them in a very robust way. There is some really good work going on with schools. Being able to work with schools, grow their level of engagement and liaise with them on this is something that should be very good, and then being able to get to the stage where in each area of policy a distinct group is formed that can influence and put forward its own views. I can see from reading the work plan and what is in it that that is established and is part of the future, but there is real strength in that. That focussed policy voice from those who have real experience about that area of work is one that I would seek to grow.

Q50 Pat Glass: Looking at the children who are most vulnerable and would benefit most from the involvement of the office—those with learning difficulties, those who do not, or are not able to, give their views orally, and young people who are scared and frightened, or are at greatest risk of being exploited—is sufficient work being done with those groups to ensure we get their voice into the work of the commissioner?

Anne Longfield: They clearly are the ones who will not be able to select themselves into some of those situations. I completely understand the point. I do not know enough to comment on whether the commissioner's office does enough to engage those groups at the moment, although clearly it has a responsibility for that and there are mechanisms to do so within the role. I know it will be a priority. I would imagine that is really important.

I do not think that as a country we are at a stage where we have enough messages from young people in those situations. One of the things I would seek to do is bring their experiences to life with them. Some of that can be done by extending the mechanism already there; some can be done as part of the push I talked about to get the needs of children in care and looked-after young people at the forefront; and some of it can be done through positive media work. Part of the benefit of working in the sector for 30 years is that I have good contacts with the media and public agencies. There will be ways of handling some of the delivery in a positive way, and also working with other charities that work with some of the most vulnerable young people.

Q51 Bill Esterson: You talked about your relationships with the media and the portrayal of children. Do you think that will help bring people forward to work with children as social workers, foster carers, adopters or, for that matter, teachers?

Anne Longfield: I am proposing something that will add value to the next stage, if you like. All of this is about a means to an end. Increasing the public profile will hopefully increase the ability to have impact; increasing the messages around the needs of children and the ability to make change will increase recognition that working with children is one of the most worthwhile careers there can be. There is the possibility a self-fulfilling circle and, with backing from government and political parties as a priority, we have the potential to have a seismic shift.

Q52 Siobhain McDonagh: How will you ensure that the children's commissioner provides value for money?

Anne Longfield: In John Dunford's really good report, his comment was that it was not at the higher end of spend for similar offices across Europe, so it is a defined budget and there are higher ones, but, quite rightly, it has to earn its keep. As to the main measurements of that, money is one but there is also the opportunity lost for children if it does not, of which I would be mindful. I have worked in the voluntary sector for most of my career and money is at a premium within that. I am very used to making the most of a very limited budget and the notion of punching above weight in terms of budget levels, but I would stress that the opportunity lost to further the interests of children would be the one against which I would want to benchmark this if it was not to succeed.

Q53 Siobhain McDonagh: Do you agree with the Dunford review that the salary of the current commissioner seems excessive?

Anne Longfield: It is a generous salary. I do not know how it compares with salaries of commissioners elsewhere. Maybe I should know that, but I do not. It is an important role that can change the lives of millions of children, and that is what it has to deliver. There could be endless discussion about what that equates to. I am not the one who set the salary; others have, but it is generous and it is one that demands, as does the post in terms of importance and potential, stretching every sinew to make change, and clearly that is something I am very keen to try to do.

Q54 Chair: Is there a danger that the role ends up a bit amorphous? Today, two things have come out clearly. One is giving a voice to children, listening to them, emphasising that and banging the drum for them relentlessly so their voices can be heard in systems that otherwise can serve them but ignore them. That seems clear, and the particular role and responsibility for looked-after children seems quite clear, but, as soon as you get from PSHE to apprenticeships and the whole gamut of policy areas, is there not a danger that in wandering across the landscape with your rights paper in hand you will not really effect anything very much?

Anne Longfield: That is why it has to have focus, and it is about being able to have much clearer focus since the reforms of the post. The focus has to be the thing that drives this through. We have to look at the four or five priorities in here that will make the difference

in this period of time. To go back to the point about urgency, everything I have been talking about has to be about the long game, but there has to be fast change. I am used to delivering on fast change, and that is where the momentum needs to be.

Q55 Chair: You are also used to delivering particular services. As to the role of championing children with no executive levers and 25 staff, is there not a danger that you are a tokenistic cherry on the top of a system that quietly gets on with its own drivers and you will be lucky if you get heard occasionally?

Anne Longfield: I would hope that was not the case. I have had no indication that this is a tokenistic role. I would be doing everything within my powers not to allow anyone, even if they did think that without my knowing, to slip into the realisation that it might be that. I am not looking to take up this role for anything other than making a difference for children. I would not be delivering on that job if I allowed anyone to think it was tokenistic.

Q56 Chair: If this Committee decided it could not recommend and support your appointment, would you stand down?

Anne Longfield: For a start, I would hope you would not. I do not know what the process is in detail.

Q57 Chair: Last time we had a children's commissioner candidate the then Committee decided not to support the appointment. Nonetheless, the appointment was made by Ed Balls, the then Secretary of State. In other instances, candidates have decided that, without the support of the parliamentary watchdog for that subject area, it would not be appropriate and they have stood down.

Anne Longfield: I am an optimist. I would like to think you would not get to that situation, but it is really important that I have your backing.

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