



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The Children's Commissioner for England](#), HC 477

Wednesday 25 May 2016

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Members present: Neil Carmichael (Chair), Lucy Allan, Michelle Donelan, Marion Fellows, Suella Fernandes, Lucy Frazer, Catherine McKinnell, Ian Mearns, Stephen Timms, William Wragg.

Questions 91 – 127

Witness: **Edward Timpson MP**, Minister for Children and Families, Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q91 Chair: Welcome, Minister, Ed. It is great to see you here today on yet another excursion for the Education Select Committee. We are looking into the responsibilities, powers and independence of the Commissioner following the Children and Families Act 2014. It is a timely update. We have had the Commissioner before us already and we want to assess the impact of the Commissioner within Government. I am going to kick off. Does “Ambitious for Children” set out a clear and measureable programme of work?

Edward Timpson: First of all, thank you for the opportunity to talk about this important area of work, which happens obviously not just in Government but in the independent role of the Children’s Commissioner. As someone who has transcended two Governments in this role and seen two different Children’s Commissioners take on that responsibility through two different remits, and bearing in mind the additional and strengthening powers that we gave the Children’s Commissioner in the 2014 Act, I think I am in a reasonably good position to try to look at how the role has progressed during that period of my tenure.

I think it is fair to say that “Ambitious for Children” is what it says. It is ambitious and because of the wider remit that the Children’s Commissioner now has it does mean that there is a greater requirement to look at a grander landscape of issues that directly and indirectly affect children, particularly vulnerable children, who were specifically moved into the role of the Children’s Commissioner when the Children’s Rights Director position was subsumed into it.

I do not think it is for me to specifically comment about the priorities that the Children's Commissioner has set herself—she is independent from Government and rightly so—and I know it is something that the Committee will want to reflect on themselves and perhaps give some steers to in their own report, but certainly from my perspective, and without trying to muddy the waters of independence, I think it is a programme that sets out a good range of challenges both for the Commissioner and Government. I am particularly pleased to see that children in care are at the heart of that. There has already been the “State of the Nation” report from the Children's Commissioner, where over 3,000 children in care were spoken to and their views and experiences taken into account. I am pleased that is a priority—of course, another Children's Commissioner could have picked five other priorities and that is a matter for them—but it is one that the Government is very interested in and is wanting to work with them on in the years ahead.

Q92 Chair: Thank you very much. You have another Bill coming along, the Children and Social Work Bill. Clause 15 of that Bill gives the Secretary of State power to exempt local authorities from children's social care legislation. Which particular Acts does the Department have in mind in that context?

Edward Timpson: This is specifically designed not to be a prescriptive approach by Government as to what local authorities can and cannot exempt themselves from in terms of mainstream social care legislation. It is a power for local authorities to innovate, a power that they have called for themselves, and as the Bill goes through its introductory phases in the House of Lords, what will be established is some of the specific asks that some local authorities have already thrown in our direction. What is important is it gives a level of flexibility for local authorities to redesign services in a way they think will best serve children, but they will only be able to do so with the consent of Parliament, with an affirmative resolution. I think that is an important safeguard, so that Parliament can be confident that any changes to their responsibilities are based around that very strong principle of making sure that it keeps children safer and in better care.

Q93 Chair: It has been suggested that this could limit the powers of the Children's Commissioner, although it does make clear that she would always be consulted. Does it potentially limit the powers or will you give a commitment that it will not?

Edward Timpson: No, I do not believe it does limit the powers of the Children's Commissioner. We have, as you say, made sure that there will be in legislation a requirement for them to be consulted on any changes that are proposed by local authorities and then considered by Government and Parliament. What I am happy to do is look carefully at that aspect of the clause, both through its passage in the Lords and of course when it comes to our House in due course.

Q94 Lucy Allan: Minister, when we saw the Children's Commissioner in January we had an evidence session on the existing powers that were available to her. Could you give your assessment of how effectively the Commissioner is exercising the existing powers that she has?

Edward Timpson: I think it is worth reminding ourselves of what I alluded to a few moments ago—the wider remit of that role through the 2014 Act, essentially from the establishment of the Children's Commissioner back in 2004. That initial remit was

essentially around making sure that the views of children were gathered by the Children's Commissioner and then amplified on their behalf in the way that Government were developing policy and implementing it. What we have now is a much wider rights-based remit where they are there to promote and protect the rights and best interests of children. In conjunction with that is the greater level of independence: they no longer have to request that the Secretary of State allow them to carry out any investigation and can do it off their own bat. They of course now report to Parliament directly. The only connection in some ways with the Department for Education is that the Children's Commissioner is the accounting officer for that non-departmental public body and the Permanent Secretary in my Department is obviously looking at value for money in what we are using that public money to do.

In terms of how effective that has been under that new remit, we are only a year into it so I think it would be unfair to give a wholesale analysis of how effective that has been, but from my standpoint I have, from the close involvement that I and my officials have had with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, seen a huge amount of work going into the restructuring and refocusing of the Children's Commissioner's role and office. There are some very clear changes in direction through streamlining to concentrate very much on the priorities that have been set. But I think it is still early days to really establish what the impact of that will be. We will see the business plan soon for the coming year as well as the Commissioner's own report on how the first year has gone.

Q95 Lucy Allan: The Commissioner told us that she would welcome having additional powers—I think she mentioned an enforcement capability. Is that something that you would consider? There was a question of does she have enough teeth, as it were, and whether she even felt that she did, to exercise her responsibilities.

Edward Timpson: I think it is right to point out that the Children's Commissioner is not a policy maker. That is Government's role. None of the other Children's Commissioners around the world, including the very first one in Norway, have an enforcement power. They do not have the democratic authority to do that. Where they can be extremely effective is through gathering the views of children, advocating on their behalf as the champion of children and influencing Government policy. There are some good examples of how both the previous and the current Children's Commissioner have already done that, with concrete changes to Government policy, based not solely on the work of the Children's Commissioner, but very significantly on it. So there are ways that they can still achieve change that is better for children without the enforcement powers. When John Dunford did his initial report he was clear that ability to perform their role well would not be dampened by their inability to enforce any of the recommendations they made.

Q96 Lucy Allan: Under the Act, sections 109 and 110, clearly there are powers for the Commissioner to enter premises and to require information. What assessment would you make of the Commissioner's use of those powers under those sections?

Edward Timpson: In particular the ability to gather data and request it from individuals and public bodies is a very powerful tool at the disposal of the Children's Commissioner, which is used. We can look at the report on child sexual abuse and the prevalence of it. A lot of work was done based around the data that was collected through that power. Similarly the right of entry: I know the Children's Commissioner spent a lot of time in

secure training centres, in mental health institutions, and in that position was able have that level of access, which is not there for most of us. So there are important ways that the Children's Commissioner can bring influence to bear but also get that insight, which in turn reflects back in greater credibility in what they have to say.

Q97 Ian Mearns: The Children's Commissioner did say to us that while she did not have an enforcing role, I think she was indicating she would welcome an opportunity to carry out some advocacy work on behalf of individual children, individual cases. How would you view that?

Edward Timpson: There are elements of the Children's Commissioner's role where they can already do that. If you look at children in care, children who live away from home, although they cannot advocate on their behalf in an individual case unless there is strategic significance to that issue at hand, they can assist and advise those children in whatever circumstances they are in with whatever help they may require. The advocacy comes through either those means or through the reports they write, which set out many of the views that have been shared with the Children's Commissioner in writing that report. I mentioned before the 3,000 children in care that formed part of the report on the state of the nation in relation to those particularly vulnerable children.

Q98 Chair: Minister, you mentioned that the business plan will be published shortly and we were informed of this yesterday, which is very helpful. What role have you and your officials had in that business plan?

Edward Timpson: It is a plan that is drawn up by the Office of the Children's Commissioner. We do not have a role as a Department in doing that. The business plan, as you say, has not been published. Like you, we are aware that it is imminent. Where there is an interest for us, of course, is around where the public money that has been provided to the OCC has resulted in any net benefit for children because, as I said earlier, there is a duty on the Permanent Secretary in my Department to hold the Children's Commissioner to account as the accounting officer as to how that money has been spent. Clearly the business plan is a part of assessing that particular function.

Q99 Chair: Have you seen a draft of it yet?

Edward Timpson: I saw a draft yesterday for the first time, but apart from that I have had no involvement whatsoever.

Q100 Chair: So the only thing that you have done is seen a draft of that business plan and we will all await its publication as soon as it may be?

Edward Timpson: Correct.

Q101 Catherine McKinnell: It very much follows up on what you have been talking about in terms of the Education Department's role in working with the Office of the Children's Commissioner, but also holding them to account. The Commissioner told the Committee that she feels it would benefit from being located within the Cabinet Office rather than the Department for Education in order to have that wider influence on Government and

its approach towards children. Have you discussed this with her or with your ministerial colleagues?

Edward Timpson: No, I have not.

Q102 Catherine McKinnell: Is it something that you would consider?

Edward Timpson: Not at the moment, no. I think there is a good fit between the Children's Commissioner and the Department that is responsible for children and families, as the effective host Department through the contractual basis that the non-departmental public body that the Office of the Children's Commissioner is relates to that Department. It has not fettered, as far as I am aware, any ability for the Children's Commissioner to engage with other Government Departments. There is good evidence to suggest that is happening well. She has been very active in making good and strong relationships across Whitehall. I know, for example, that she has been working closely with the Ministry of Justice in the work that they have been doing around youth custody—some of the children's views that she has fed into that work have led to some changes in guidance—and also with the Youth Justice Board, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Justice, for example, around the blanket approach to strip searching of children in a young offenders' institution and also in a case where one prison had a no hugging policy. These are two things that have changed as a result of the Children's Commissioner engaging with the Ministry of Justice. I am sure I can provide the Committee with other examples across other Government departments, but I am confident that we have the right set-up and obviously it is something that we will continue to look at as the new remit of the Children's Commissioner continues to bed in over the six-year period of her tenure.

Q103 Catherine McKinnell: In terms of the review of the administrative classification of arm's length bodies, are you aware of any consequences this may have for the Children's Commissioner role?

Edward Timpson: I am not aware. I know when the Dunford review was carried out in 2010 that it was part of a wider review of non-departmental public bodies across Government. We accepted that report and the recommendations of Dr John Dunford in full. Whether there are any implications for the current review, I do not know, but I will endeavour to find out some more detail. If there is anything that is relevant that the Committee should know, then obviously—where I am able to—I will share it with you, Chair, in writing in due course.

Q104 Ian Mearns: Does having the Children's Commissioner embedded within the Department for Education—I think that there is currently a plan underway about moving out of Sanctuary Buildings—not provide an opportunity to extricate the role of the Children's Commissioner and take her outside of the DfE, to have a place somewhere where she could be in less familiar surroundings, as it were, in terms of the people that she is scrutinising and overseeing?

Edward Timpson: The physicality of the arrangement may be a moot point. You may have something in it, Mr Mearns. I do not know. We are on the seventh floor; they are on the ground floor. We occasionally see each other spinning through the revolving doors in DfE and that can be helpful sometimes, having some informal conversations around current issues. So it could go both ways, but there will be changes in the arrangements of

Government Departments over the next few years and that may provide an opportunity to look at where we are currently and whether there is a better way forward.

Q105 Ian Mearns: I just think from the perspective of the objective observer, the Children's Commissioner kind of oversees the role of the Department through their interaction with children, but yet she is embedded within the Department's buildings. You wonder what the objective observer think about that.

Edward Timpson: I take your point about perception and people wanting to feel that there is genuine independence. That could help create the right perception, but the reassurance I can give the Committee is that in no way, shape or form does the fact both our offices happen to be in the same building have any influence on the professional relationship that exists.

Ian Mearns: With the exception of revolving doors.

Edward Timpson: With the exception of revolving doors.

Q106 William Wragg: Minister, I do not want to dwell for too much longer on the relationship between yourself and the Commissioner, but I wondered, in your experience, has the Commissioner ever transgressed the boundary that you talked of in terms of not making policy? Have you ever felt that perhaps they have gone beyond the remit you think they should have?

Edward Timpson: No, I do not think so. They—and I say “they” because there have been three Children's Commissioners—between them have published some very hard-hitting reports with some very strong recommendations. It is right and proper that we have to respond now to all of those recommendations. We do not have to agree with all of them, but some have influenced policy. I can only talk from my own point of view that I do not feel that there has been an occasion where that has strayed into an attempt to effectively create policy. It is there to challenge current policy and make recommendations as to how we could improve the performance both of Governments and those working with children, but unless there is a specific example that you are referring to, there is not one that springs to mind.

Q107 William Wragg: I raise it in the context admittedly of a devolved power, but the Children's Commissioner for Wales yesterday said that the Army enlistment age should be raised. I wonder if you had ever encountered anything along that sort of suggestion that you would see as a transgression into a policy area.

Edward Timpson: The Children's Commissioner, who is there to advocate on behalf of children and promote their best interests, as long as any view expressed is a view that is expressed through that process as opposed to a personal view, then that would seem to me to be a perfectly proper way of commenting on any aspect of Government policy. That is something that we, as Members of Parliament, also have to bear in mind when representing our own constituents and having issues of conscience as well that we weigh up. But the role of the Children's Commissioner is very clearly set out in legislation, also in the new 2014 Act in part 6, schedule 5, how they go about doing that, what the parameters are and there has certainly been no suggestion to me that—in England at least—they have fallen outside those parameters. But of course it is Parliament who have

the role of scrutinising the role and the impact of the Children's Commissioner with the annual report that will be laid before Parliament very soon, and an opportunity to test out some of the boundaries that you suggest rightly are in place.

Q108 William Wragg: Other than those encounters of revolving doors, how often do you meet with the Commissioner and how would you characterise your working relationship?

Edward Timpson: Since March 2015, when the current Children's Commissioner was appointed after a pre-appointment hearing of this Committee, we have met formally on eight occasions, both in one-to-one meetings, but also with a young person's advisory group set up by the Children's Commissioner, a group of children and young people who have experience of care and also other aspects of living life outside of their home. They meet with me on a reasonably regular basis so I can hear directly from them.

As I say, there is also, on the fringes of conferences and other events, opportunities for us to discuss current matters which are of significance. A good example of where we have done that recently is around the situation of child refugees in Calais, where the Children's Commissioner went out there and came back to me and gave me a full read-out of what she had seen, what the experience was that she had seen on the ground. I think that is a useful and productive way of using the office to inform me and Government more widely, not just on the back of reports that take a long time, understandably, to bring to fruition, but also as and when issues do crop up, it is important that we have as contemporaneous an understanding as possible. The Children's Commissioner is very helpful in providing that for us.

Q109 Ian Mearns: Just out of interest, to follow that up, are you aware if the Children's Commissioner is meeting regularly with other Government Ministers?

Edward Timpson: I know that there are a whole host of meetings that the Children's Commissioner has had with other Government Departments. When we met a few months ago she did give me not a checklist, but a more granular understanding of who, why and when. It may be something that the Committee want to ask the Children's Commissioner to provide details of.

Q110 Chair: Who decides when meetings take place? Do you invite the Commissioner or does she invite you?

Edward Timpson: I do not know how dinner parties work in Stroud, but it tends to be both a formal arrangement where we set up a regular catch-up or what we call KIT—keeping in touch—but on top of that there are requests from the Children's Commissioner to meet with me on specific issues. I just talked about the situation with child refugees in Calais as a case in point. Where there are significant events in the calendar of the Children's Commissioner, with the business plan and the annual review coming up, she can give me an opportunity to discuss with her what the contents of that will be before it becomes publicly available.

Q111 Chair: I am not sure if you will be going to a restaurant or not. I normally have barbecues in the summer in Stroud and I invite them as I see fit, but not necessarily to probe whether or not they are doing a good job. That is really what I am getting at. Does the

Commissioner test the Department on its performance or do you test the Commissioner on what she is doing?

Edward Timpson: I think it works both ways, inasmuch as we are interested in what the Children's Commissioner's Office is concentrating its time and energy on. There will be some issues that we have a mutual intention of wanting to pursue, not necessarily for the same reasons. The Children's Commissioner is doing a lot of work with care leavers to understand what greater support they need as they leave care. That has happened at the same time that, as a Department, we are doing—both through the Bill and more widely—a huge amount to try to increase support for care leavers in the areas that we believe that they most need it. Of course, the ability for us to share those thoughts and those ideas I think can only be a good thing.

Whether that means that we are scrutinising each other's performance and how we go about doing that—I am not sure it is as direct as that. The role for the Children's Commissioner is to make recommendations to Government, for us to consider them, which we do, and similarly for us to be confident that the Children's Commissioner is performing their role as against the grant funding provided by the Department. But ultimately it is not for my Department to assess the impact and the way that the Children's Commissioner is fulfilling their role. That is something, very rightly, that is the remit of Parliament.

Q112 Chair: You used the phrase “mutual intentions”, that when they occur you have a chat. How does that sit with independence?

Edward Timpson: I am not saying this is something that is talked about and considered as something that we should both do and then it is acted upon. What I am saying is that there are occasions when we are both looking at the same issue—but often for a different reason—and it happens to coincide, and therefore it makes sense, rather than us working in parallel to one another, to learn from what each other is gathering in terms of evidence and what works, so that ultimately the Government policy that comes out at the end of it is much better informed than it would otherwise have been. So there is not any formal or even informal arrangement of sitting down and saying, “What should we both be doing?” The independence is very clear and the priorities set in the “Ambitious for Children” document are those that are solely owned by the Children's Commissioner. Where there is some synergy with what Government are doing, then that is helpful because it means that we have an agenda where we are both trying to make progress.

Q113 Chair: What services does the Department provide the Commissioner with?

Edward Timpson: There is the grant funding, which, as set out in the Dunford review, is something that has been ongoing and will continue to do so in the current role. I know that the Children's Commissioner has outsourced some of the functions around IT and administration to the Department for Education, but that is her decision and that is a purely contractual arrangement in order to fulfil, as I say, an administrative function within the Office of the Children's Commissioner. What I would say also, there has been a huge amount of restructuring going on within that office. There have been some recent welcome appointments around head of strategy and head of analysis, which I think are going to provide a greater strength and focus for the office in establishing what they can evidence to back up what children are telling them.

Q114 Chair: There have been some changes between the framework agreement of 2012 and 2015. Could you give us some headlines as to what those changes were?

Edward Timpson: Which framework agreement are you talking about?

Chair: For the Children's Commissioner.

Ian Mearns: It is a framework agreement between the DfE and the Office of the Children's Commissioner. Back in 2012, the publication of the framework agreement at that stage said that any subsequent changes to the framework agreement would be published and that it would be published in both Houses of Parliament, in the Commons Library and on the websites of both the Department and the Children's Commissioner.

Edward Timpson: I am not aware of any changes to the framework agreement, but what I will endeavour to do is go back and check, because if there has been that undertaking, of course we need to fulfil it.

Chair: That would be really helpful. Thank you.

Q115 Ian Mearns: What I would point out, Minister, is the current 2015 framework agreement has not yet been published online, either on the DfE or on the Children's Commissioner's website, and it has not been deposited in the House of Commons Library.

Edward Timpson: I will take that back and make sure that the actions that need to be taken are.

Q116 Lucy Frazer: The Child Protection Taskforce was set up in 2015. Is there any duplication between the role of the Child Protection Taskforce and the Children's Commissioner?

Edward Timpson: No, there isn't. I should explain what the purpose of the taskforce is. The Child Protection Implementation Taskforce is a ministerial taskforce—Ministers are the standing members of that particular taskforce. There are some others across Government. There are not that many, which indicates the importance that the Government places on this particular issue. That taskforce is not there to make Government policy, it is there to implement agreed Government policy—predominantly around the social work reform agenda that is now well underway—to monitor its progress and make sure that we are achieving what we have set out in what is a fairly wholesale but ambitious programme of reform. So it does not have any difficulty sitting alongside the role of the Children's Commissioner because it is simply about trying to make sure that Government policy is implemented well.

Q117 Lucy Frazer: Would it be sensible for the two to talk, or are they so divergently different that it would not make any sense for the Children's Commissioner and the taskforce to meet up? Is there a role for communication between the two?

Edward Timpson: At a point of delivery of the Government's agenda outside involvement with the taskforce has been used. Where there is a relevance to the role of the Children's Commissioner in a part or stage of that implementation, then of course we are open to using her knowledge and her role to help achieve that.

Q118 Lucy Frazer: Has it happened yet? Has there yet been an issue in which she could have or should have been involved in the implementation of social policy early on in the process?

Edward Timpson: This is about implementation of both social work reform, so this is the new accreditation assessment system for social workers, the new knowledge and skills statement, and how we make sure that every child and family social worker is going to be able to go through that by 2020. The principal adviser for the Committee in that role is the Chief Social Worker, Isabelle Trowler. She is not independent in the same way that the Children's Commissioner is. She has an independent role, but she is also a civil servant who is an adviser to Government. As the implementation continues, that is the key advice that is required. It is not about the formulation of Government policy, where the Children's Commissioner would want to make children's voices heard through her role.

Q119 Lucy Frazer: I understand. So it would not surprise you if you knew that she told us she has not met the taskforce yet?

Edward Timpson: I know she has not, but she still has regular access to myself, she meets regularly with the Chief Social Worker. It is not as if there is an unavoidable chasm between what the taskforce are doing and what the Children's Commissioner is doing. There are a lot of the same people involved, it is just that the taskforce is very, very clearly defined in its role of Ministers pushing through Government policy through carefully scrutinised implementation.

Q120 Chair: That dinner analogy is coming up again, because of course she told us that she wanted to be invited to the taskforce. Before we move on to Catherine, how does the Commissioner interface with other Departments in terms of her work? She is based in the Department for Education, but obviously the Department of Health might have an interest in her work or the DWP or whatever. Does she talk to those Departments on a regular basis?

Edward Timpson: As I understand it, yes. That is the information that Anne Longfield has shared with me in the meetings that we have had. She has made a particularly strenuous effort in her first year to make herself known right across Whitehall. I know that that has been productive and I mentioned before about the work with the Ministry of Justice as a case in point. I suppose in many ways it is very much like a Minister in the Department for Education. When I am trying to persuade and cajole ministerial colleagues to take my portfolio as seriously as their own, I have to get out there and sometimes move on to their turf and use that as an opportunity to make my case. That is what the Children's Commissioner is also doing in trying to involve herself with other areas of Government policy. I think that is the right thing to do.

It is one of the areas where I have been very keen to make more traction, not just through things like the family test, but also by changing the mindset of other Departments about the significance of the children's agenda in some of the formulation of policies that they are still carrying out, but also in policies that already exist, how they can improve them if they thought about it differently and through the lens of a child. That, I think, is what the Children's Commissioner is attempting in her tour around other Government Departments. Again, probably if you wanted to know, then it is best to ask the Children's Commissioner herself what meetings she has had and what contact she has had with other Ministers.

Q121 Chair: Absolutely. Do you think she has enough power to pack a punch with, say, the Home Office on the issue of child protection?

Edward Timpson: Yes, I do. I think one of the challenges that still remains is with the widened remit of the Children's Commissioner, with also the fact that we now have a six-year fixed term to try to remove it outside of the fixed-term of Parliament so it can transcend Governments, to embed the significance of that much more deeply in other Government Departments and also at local level too, because that is where most things get done, within local government, around local service provision.

A good example of where that has sort of filtered down through the involvement of the Children's Commissioner, take the report that she did on school exclusions, which made a whole range of recommendations that has now led through changes in guidance around listening to children's voices more in making decisions around exclusion and around special educational needs exclusion. That is filtering down to local level because they have to now change their approach based on the Children's Commissioner's recommendations that we have accepted. But I do think that there is more work that needs to be done, not just by the Children's Commissioner, but more widely by Parliament, by local Members of Parliament as well, to explain the role of the Children's Commissioner so that more children are able to reach out to her where they may need to.

Q122 Catherine McKinnell: The Children's Commissioner has set the challenge for herself that every child in care will not only know that she is there for them but will know how to get in touch with her. Obviously part of that is extending her reach through Government Departments as well and building those relationships that you have described. Within the Department for Education itself, she obviously works closely with you, but across the Department for Education how are those relationships, in your opinion?

Edward Timpson: I think they are very good—they are very constructive. There has been good engagement at every level, but as her new office is taking shape, we are having to build new relationships and understandings based around the priorities that she has set for herself. We do not grow in everything. We are not either dismissive of everything the Children's Commissioner does or just accepting. It is the healthy middle ground where there are exchanges of views and the data that the Children's Commissioner has the ability to collect is extremely useful to the Department, but in all of that the independence is still absolutely crucial, both because of the point Mr Mearns raised around perception, but also in terms of the credibility of the Children's Commissioner. So it is a good relationship but one that necessarily has some distance because otherwise the role could not be carried out in the way that it is envisaged it should be.

Q123 Catherine McKinnell: So on that basis would you say contact within the Department for Education and across Government is generally initiated by the Children's Commissioner rather than Government Departments?

Edward Timpson: I think in the early part of Anne Longfield's tenure she has understandably, in the throes of enthusiasm and wanting to get herself known, been the protagonist in many of those encounters. But we are now moving on to the next stage, having the first year under her belt, where there is a greater level of awareness across Government. As I think I acknowledged a few moments ago, there is still work to do, so

that it is not just certain Departments like the Department for Education, Ministry of Justice, Department of Health and the Cabinet Office, but some where they may not think there is a direct need or relevance to the work that they do vis-à-vis the Children's Commissioner, but there could well be if they formed a closer working relationship.

Q124 Catherine McKinnell: So she should hopefully look forward to some dinner party invitations?

Edward Timpson: Yes.

Q125 Catherine McKinnell: The Commissioner has also told the Committee that she did not think there was a coherent understanding of spending on children across Government Departments. As the Minister for Children, would you agree with that?

Edward Timpson: One of both the delights and dilemmas of being Children's Minister is that you could be Children's Minister in pretty much any Department. I take the view—and I do not think naively—that every Department has a role in making children's lives better. That means there is a lot of spending going on that may not be immediately obviously for the benefit of children, but somewhere along the line it does. So it is very hard to collate all of that in a way that gives us confidence as to what the sort of input and output is across Government.

I know within our Department we have become much better at pulling together what money we are spending on children's services, on the wide remit of policy areas that are in DfE in relation to children. We work closely with the Home Office, for example, on child sexual exploitation, and with some of the agencies there like CEOP. We have the UKCCIS board looking at child internet safety, which also involves the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We have the national citizen's service, which is over in the Cabinet Office. So we have a good understanding of where it is obvious. I think where there is less understanding is where it is happening more by stealth rather than by a direct Government initiative to support children. So it is probably more than we think, which would be a helpful position to be in, but also the nub of your point is an important one, which is are we getting the most out of it. If you had a dinner party of Permanent Secretaries, which I am sure would be a wonderful occasion, sitting around discussing this issue, they may have to think about it and how they could improve.

Chair: We will have to invite you to a dinner party.

Edward Timpson: That is sort of what I have been angling at.

Chair: Catherine, do you have any more questions?

Catherine McKinnell: Not on this issue.

Q126 Marion Fellows: I was delighted, Minister, to hear you saying there could be Children's Ministers in every Department, but the Commissioner herself said she would like to see you, the Minister for Children, attend Cabinet with a cross-departmental brief. Would that be a good idea?

Edward Timpson: If reports of reshuffles are anything to go by, probably now is not the best time to answer that question. We already have a representative of children in the Cabinet—my Secretary of State. It is very clear that children and family sits within her Department and so that role is already fulfilled. I have heard this argument made before. I can see why it would be attractive at face value, but it does belie the fact that there is already somebody sitting around the Cabinet table, that is what they are responsible for and that is what they push on behalf of in their role.

Q127 Marion Fellows: Do you think that is the only way for the views of children to be given more of a role in Government, through the Secretary of State at Cabinet?

Edward Timpson: I think it should happen at every level within Government. Cabinet is an important forum for the rights of children to be promoted, but within the workings of Government, whether it be at junior ministerial level where I sit, whether it be at official level, there is a need to ensure that it is not just a single person who holds that policy. It needs to be something where there is a clear joint enterprise across Government at every level. There are a lot of mechanisms that would exist to do that. Take the Social Justice Cabinet Committee, for example, that was very much the catalyst for the cross-Government care leavers' strategy, involving a whole host of different Government Departments, Ministers and officials working together for the benefit of children leaving care.

In all of this, and thinking about the role of the Children's Commissioner, Parliament is important too. I used to be chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children in care and care leavers and the group on fostering and adoption. They can be a good way of pushing and probing Government to think harder about what more they can do. I was a former member of this Select Committee. There is also much that can be achieved through that level of scrutiny. For me, there is not a single person or place within Government where we say, "That is where we need to put it". We need to make sure that influence transcends and permeates through all parts of Government. Yes, starting in Cabinet, but I would argue it is better bottom-up. The more people we have who work on the frontline who believe in what we can achieve for children, if we only worked in a particular way and skill people up in a particular way, then it is how all those people who sit above them are supporting them to achieve it. I think that is a much more powerful model for giving children what they deserve.

Chair: Thank you very much for all the answers you have given us. We are going to reflect carefully on the outcome of this session and consider our next steps. It is possible we will be writing to you for clarification of a few matters and I hope that is all right.

Edward Timpson: Yes, absolutely fine. I think I said I would help the Committee on one or two areas that we discussed and I am very happy to do that.

Chair: Yes. Great, thank you very much for coming today.