



Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru The National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant a Phobl Ifanc The Children and Young People Committee

**Dydd Iau, 21 Mehefin 2012
Thursday, 21 June 2012**

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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir trawsgrifiad o'r cyfieithu ar y pryd.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, a transcription of the simultaneous interpretation is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Christine Chapman	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Jocelyn Davies	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Rebecca Evans	Llafur Labour
Lynne Neagle	Llafur Labour
Jenny Rathbone	Llafur Labour
David Rees	Llafur (yn dirpryo ar ran Julie Morgan) Labour (substituting for Julie Morgan)
Aled Roberts	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Angela Bourge	Gwasanaethau Plant, Cyngor Caerdydd Children's Services, Cardiff Council
Nigel Brown	Cyfarwyddwr Cynorthwyol Gwasanaethau Plant, Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Blaenau Gwent Assistant Director for Children's Services, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Mandy Humphries	Rheolwr, Gwasanaeth Mabwysiadu Gogledd Cymru, Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Wrecsam Manager, North Wales Adoption Service, Wrexham County Borough Council
Kim Perkins	Gwasanaethau Plant, Cyngor Caerdydd Children's Services, Cardiff Council
Audrey Somerton-Edwards	Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Wrecsam Wrexham County Borough Council
Buddug Ward	Cyfarwyddwr Cynorthwyol y Gwasanaeth Plant a Theuluoedd, Cyngor Sir Ceredigion Assistant Director, Families and Children Service, Ceredigion County Council
Emily Warren	Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Welsh Local Government Association

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Kayleigh Driscoll	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk
Sian Thomas	Y Gwasanaeth Ymchwil Research Service

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 1.20 p.m.
The meeting began at 1.20 p.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon Introductions, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Christine Chapman:** Good afternoon, everyone. We now return to the Children and Young People Committee. I remind Members and witnesses to switch off their mobile phones and BlackBerrys as they affect the transmission. We operate through the media of Welsh and English; headsets are available for simultaneous translation on channel 1 and to amplify the sound on channel 0. Members and witnesses do not need to operate the microphones themselves. We have received apologies from Suzy Davies, Simon Thomas and Angela Burns. We have also had an apology from Julie Morgan, and I am pleased to say that David Rees is standing in for her today. Welcome, David.

1.21 p.m.

Ymchwiliad i Fabwysiadu Inquiry into Adoption

[2] **Christine Chapman:** Today, we have evidence from Cardiff Council and Wrexham County Borough Council. Welcome to you all. Will you introduce yourselves, please, for the record?

[3] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** I am Audrey Somerton-Edwards; I am head of service for corporate parenting for Wrexham County Borough Council, which is currently the host for the collaborative arrangement for the North Wales Adoption Service.

[4] **Ms Humphries:** I am Mandy Humphries; I am the manager of the North Wales Adoption Service.

[5] **Ms Perkins:** I am Kim Perkins; I am the service manager of the looked-after children accommodation service for Cardiff Council.

[6] **Ms Bourge:** I am Angela Bourge; I am the operation manager for resources in Cardiff children's services, and adoption comes within my remit.

[7] **Christine Chapman:** If you are happy, we will go straight to questions as there are specific things that we would like to ask you. We have taken evidence from a lot of different sectors now, so it would be useful if we start off like that. I will kick off with the first question on challenges. What are the biggest challenges that you face in delivering effective adoption services in your own local authority area?

[8] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** One of the fundamental challenges is giving social workers the capacity to do a good quality job. I am talking about the childcare social workers there; we regard them as the front door, leading the child through to adoption. The caseloads and the increased referrals have had a significant impact on the quality.

[9] **Ms Bourge:** I would echo that in terms of Cardiff's experience. We have seen significant numbers of referrals into children's services in recent years. Our looked-after children population has not increased significantly but, in terms of the make-up of that population, we have seen an increasing number of babies and very young children coming into care. That has increased the adoption workload, both for case management social workers and for our adoption social workers.

[10] **Christine Chapman:** We are going to come to quite specific issues later on, so I will move on for the moment. I have a question for Wrexham council: what do you think have

been the main benefits of operating with five other local authorities as part of the North Wales Adoption Service?

[11] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** One of the crucial benefits is the more concerted and strategic recruitment activity, because you are working across a much bigger territory. Your capacity is increased because you have adopters well out of the child's own area. So, you are not spending on expensive out-of-borough or out-of-county placements for those children, but you have stayed within your own resources. That is one of the benefits, but there is also a good opportunity for consistency of practice. Reducing the number of panels is also a benefit.

[12] **Christine Chapman:** We know that Cardiff has dealt with the highest number of adoptions of any local authority in Wales over the past nine years; I think that it is 245 adoptions. What do you think the specific challenges would be regarding this volume of adoption work?

[13] **Ms Perkins:** For me, as was said earlier, it is the capacity of the social workers to manage the work. In addition, because the work is so specialist, it is about managing to recruit and retain social workers who have that specialist knowledge, and in a climate where we do not have enough social workers and when there is so much movement and pressures on them. That does not help the situation.

[14] **Christine Chapman:** What about the pressures? Obviously, you have the adoption services, but you also have to deal with the short-term crisis work, which goes with the territory. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[15] **Ms Perkins:** One of the difficulties is how people can prioritise a workload that is probably far more than they have the capacity to manage. Everyone does their best, but when you have child protection issues coming to the case management fieldwork teams and you have a child that is in a settled and stable foster placement that you know is safe, I could appreciate why, while it is incredibly important to move children on as quickly as you possibly can to get the best outcomes for them, if you have to make a choice about what you are doing with your time and if there is that much pressure on you, you would go for the child who is at risk of significant harm as opposed to the one whom you were assured is safely placed and whose work you can pick up the next day or the day after. It is one of the realities, unfortunately, of the pressure of the work.

[16] **Christine Chapman:** I am sure that some of these issues will come out again, so we will now move on to Jocelyn Davies.

[17] **Jocelyn Davies:** We have heard claims from the voluntary adoption agencies that the structure of the local authority adoption and fostering budgets is having the unintended consequence of children being parked in foster care for longer than they ought to be, which is causing harm to those children. They might be being taken out of immediate harm, but leaving them too long with foster parents before getting them to their permanent home is damaging in itself. Would you accept that the way in which those budgets are structured is also having an impact, apart from the issues around social worker time that you mentioned in your answer just now?

[18] **Ms Perkins:** I do not feel that the structure of the budgets for case management and adoption services is an issue per se in terms of the speed at which children move. Overall, if we could have far more staff, it would obviously assist.

[19] **Ms Bourge:** I am not sure that I completely understand the question—

[20] **Jocelyn Davies:** They told us that the fostering budget is normally large and that the

adoption budget is normally small. They told us that it costs more than £20,000 to organise adoption and that it costs more for fostering, but that it is from a larger budget. So, the temptation is to keep the child in the fostering budget rather than adopt, because the adoption budget is small.

[21] **Ms Bourge:** That is not my experience at all in Cardiff and I am sure that Kim would confirm that. Certainly, in terms of our general budgets for children's services in Cardiff, we have seen significant realignments of our budgets year on year, so we have been very fortunate at a time when other parts of the council have had to make significant cuts. The issues around safeguarding children and progressing care plans in a timely way have been recognised by our administration. So, I would not say that it would be our experience that there would be a deliberate—

[22] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, it is not the structuring of the budget, but it is the fact that social work time is taken up with more urgent cases rather than moving children on in Cardiff.

[23] **Ms Bourge:** There is a factor at play in that. The other bit is around the experience of social workers, which I would say is probably more significant, and because adoption is quite a specialist area of work. Certainly, in terms of staffing levels in Cardiff in recent years, we are currently in a position where we have very few case management social work vacancies. However, if you look at our social work workforce in Cardiff, you will see that we have high numbers of inexperienced and newly qualified social workers working in teams where there are low numbers of experienced social workers.

1.30 p.m.

[24] Years ago, you would see a good mix in teams, where the more experienced social workers worked alongside the inexperienced and were able to take them and mentor them through certain processes. Although we have tried to compensate for that in terms of looking at coaching and mentoring for our social care staff, the reality is that we have a workforce that is weighted heavily with high numbers of inexperienced staff. That has consequences in terms of how confident social workers and their managers are in terms of progressing this work.

[25] **Ms Humphries:** I think that the authority would do the reverse, because it really is keen to move children on. In fact, the cost of fostering is quite significant for it.

[26] **Jocelyn Davies:** There was no question about the cost of fostering being much more; it was that the budget was much larger and could accommodate it.

[27] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** In our collaborative arrangement, that is less of an issue, because we are not paying adoption fees between us. So, that is not an issue.

[28] **Jocelyn Davies:** It does not apply in your case.

[29] **Ms Humphries:** That is a key positive about working across the six authorities. We do not charge for placements, so there is no question about whether we need to choose one or the other. It gives an open view of what is available for children, and more choice.

[30] **Jenny Rathbone:** I want to pick up on the shortage of the highly skilled people who are needed for this sort of work. Have you considered working in multidisciplinary teams? In the health service, where there have been shortages of midwives, it has had a skills mix. One of the issues that people have told us about is around getting hold of data, which does not need to be done by a social worker; a good administrator could chase data.

[31] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** All the way through the process, the delay is built into it in

terms of medicals and any data that you need. In the north Wales adoption service—this is an idea that we are bouncing around at the moment—because of the waiting list for child and adolescent mental health services, we have been considering making a proposal to our partnership board around having our own therapist, so that we deliver directly to children who need to be moved on or children who need a post-adoption service. So, there is a very good argument for thinking in a multidisciplinary way across adoption services.

[32] **Ms Humphries:** From the point of view of childcare social work and adoption—because we have two areas: the adoption assessment and the childcare—we would like to see a consultant social worker dealing with adoption in a childcare team, advising other people and liaising with the adoption service. So, you would have someone specific who has that knowledge and is consistent with all the workers, especially inexperienced workers.

[33] **Ms Bourge:** I would echo that. In Cardiff, we are moving towards having a combined fostering and adoption service. We are not there yet, but we are working towards that. One of the reasons for that is around promotion of permanency for children. We think that we will have greater success in doing that within a combined service. We are thinking about developing specific roles within that. For example, currently, we have fostering support officers, who are non-social-work-qualified staff, who undertake key elements of work that do not require a social work qualification. We would be looking to develop a similar role to work across both fostering and adoption, because we acknowledge that there are elements of the adoption roles that do not need to be undertaken by qualified social workers. If we can look at support workers doing elements of that work, that can create further capacity in our qualified social work staff. So, I would agree. Certainly, our experience in other areas of our work, where we have multidisciplinary teams, is very positive and I think that it is worthy of further exploration.

[34] **Jenny Rathbone:** Given the current constraints that you are under, are you managing to achieve the idea that every child has to have a permanency plan after four months? How are you achieving that?

[35] **Ms Bourge:** We have a specific process in terms of ensuring that the permanency meeting takes place and that a plan is in place. We then have a way of tracking that to ensure that the procedures are adhered to and that timely progress is made.

[36] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, you are saying that you are achieving it.

[37] **Ms Bourge:** We have processes in place. I am not confident enough to say that we are achieving it in every situation, but we are certainly working towards that.

[38] **Ms Humphries:** I would say that the plans are in place, but, again, we have delays when relatives have come forward and because of court processes and so on, so the plan might not necessarily be definite. You might not know the outcome for some time, until the court process is completed.

[39] **Jenny Rathbone:** One issue raised with witnesses this morning was why we wait four months before we start to look at the twin track that we might need for children, in that children coming into the looked-after system have already had some pretty serious issues, otherwise you would not even be contemplating doing that.

[40] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** If you are working with a family that has had complex care proceedings ahead of this child arriving, you need to be making your plans very early, to cut down the delay for that child.

[41] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, you do not wait for four months, where appropriate.

[42] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** You can see which ones need planning over four months or you will know where you are going well ahead of that; it is about being open and honest about what that plan is and what your evidence base is for that plan.

[43] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, in some cases, you are starting on the road that you need to go down in relation to adoption before the four months.

[44] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Yes.

[45] **Jenny Rathbone:** Is that the case in Cardiff too?

[46] **Ms Bourge:** I think that that is the case, but I would say that we need to get much better at that. Particularly in the scenarios that have been described—when we know that there is a family history, such as parents who are on their tenth, eleventh or twelfth child who have gone down this route—we are not always good at recognising that in a timely way and making progress. However, in some instances, we would be able to bring that—

[47] **Jenny Rathbone:** That is another issue that has been raised. Why, when you have a mother who has already had several children adopted because of drug abuse or whatever it might be, it is not an automatic process? You pretty much know when the baby is going to be born. Surely you are then fast-tracking the situation, are you not?

[48] **Ms Humphries:** Often, social workers will know what they want to do, but the legal process will delay that. There is no doubt that the legal process will delay that, because you have to get the placement orders and so on.

[49] **Ms Perkins:** In addition, I would also say that, sometimes, different parents are involved with sibling groups, so the change of circumstances and the need and ability of one parent to provide better care would need to be explored, to be fair.

[50] **Christine Chapman:** To follow on from Jenny's question, you said that there are issues around why there are some delays, and we have the figures for both authorities, but are you picking up any themes on how this can be improved and on things that are working? We want to improve the situation, so are you picking up any particular ways of doing that that can be disseminated to other authorities?

[51] **Ms Perkins:** Angela has talked about how we were looking to develop some of our unqualified roles and, in addition, we are looking to some of our more senior social workers to offer support to the more inexperienced staff. Having that support in the process and looking at the issues that have caused those delays and trying to target them is one way that we have identified to improve and speed up the process, and improve the quality of the work as well as its speed. That may assist. Some of the changes being proposed in relation to the way in which ought-to-be-placed decisions are made may assist in that process, with them going straight to the agency decision maker and the court, as opposed to via the adoption panel. We will have to see how that works in practice, because I am mindful that medicals will still be required and birth parent counselling will be required, and the engagement of parents in that process is quite important for getting information for the child. That can be a lengthy process, and you want to make your best attempts for the child's future to obtain the necessary information for them. So, as that will still be needed, I am interested in seeing how that will work. Hopefully, it will improve things and then we will be able to further adjust what we are doing to speed things up where we can.

[52] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** In terms of speeding up the process of approving adopters, we are exploring a possibility whereby, once we have assessed and are ready to present

adopters to panel, we use various panels across the region. We are currently taking legal advice on that. Obviously, that would have to refer back to the agency decision maker where the assessment was undertaken, but we are trying to be creative in cutting down any delays that we possibly can. We have been exploring the notion, particularly for older children, of approving possible adopters as foster carers in the first instance, so that they have those children and understand them and then become adopters, and it is then a smooth process rather than, bump, bump, change, upheaval and instability for the children. It is about being creative and targeting your recruitment in the right place.

[53] **Jenny Rathbone:** What you are talking about is concurrent planning.

[54] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Yes.

[55] **Jenny Rathbone:** Why are we not doing it in Wales, given that it has definitely been around for the last 12 years?

[56] **Ms Humphries:** I think that we have to accept that the majority of adopters who come forward are childless couples who want a child of their own, and do not want to consider fostering or the chance that this child will return home to its parents. So, you would have to be very specific and have good staffing levels to support them.

[57] **Jenny Rathbone:** True, but there will be some families who would be prepared to take that risk, and some who would not.

[58] **Ms Humphries:** There will be some people, yes, and it is finding those people that is the issue, I think.

[59] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** I would agree with that. You need to recruit those people who want to do that rather than convert the people who want a baby who has been relinquished, and is a closed story with the family.

[60] **Ms Humphries:** There is another issue with legislation around the panel. As Audrey was saying earlier, we are getting stuck in a situation where one of our panels is available and free, but it is not the two agencies that we actually have the panel for. There needs to be some flexibility in the legislation around panels, for a start, if we are thinking of going broader, to make some use of all the panels that are available. Also, in terms of—what term do we use for them?

[61] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Second-time adopters.

[62] **Ms Humphries:** Yes. We are having to reassess them, and I am not sure whether that is in legislation or not. It is not clear. Should we have to go through that process, or should we look at a different form of assessment at that time and prevent that delay as well, so that people who come back for a second child have more of a parenting assessment with the child who is already placed, rather than go through the whole thing again?

[63] **Jenny Rathbone:** If my colleague Angela Burns were here, she would certainly be asking why is it necessary to go through the same process for a second-time adopter, particularly if the local authority has approached the family to ask, 'Would you take a sibling of the child you already have?' Why are local authorities not empowered already to differentiate?

[64] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** We have had examples of two children born in one year and they are going back and thinking about reassessing, which is just a waste of resources, really.

[65] **Ms Humphries:** Normally, if we know that a child is on its way and is likely to come in, we will prepare those issues and discuss them at the panel, but if it happens later, there seems to be this need to do this additional assessment. It is not really clear in the legislation or the guidance whether we can get rid of some of that process and just do the stuff that is significant for that second-time adopter.

[66] **Christine Chapman:** Obviously you share the frustrations that we have, so that is well noted.

[67] **Aled Roberts:** I was wondering whether you could perhaps give us some written evidence on that, because it is important to know whether the conflict is under the Act or under Welsh regulations.

[68] **Ms Humphries:** I think that there is usually an expectation that the panels and agencies will ensure that the whole process is gone through, but it is not clear.

[69] **Christine Chapman:** Obviously, we need some clarity on this.

[70] **Aled Roberts:** You are obviously thinking of ways in which you can change things. Do you have any professional view on the Harrow-Coram partnership? We have heard evidence that it had a permanency tracking panel that speeded up the process, particularly for children under the age of 10.

1.45 p.m.

[71] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** We were talking about having oversight of decisions and plans for children, and we would see that as the role of the consultant social worker. I know that the consultant social worker is tried and tested in England and, in Wrexham, we are just about to recruit to that role so that we have that expertise and mentoring, but also a monitoring role and data collection. We are looking to have a consultant social worker working across fostering and adoption so that they understand all of the dynamics and the imperatives in each of the services and are able to monitor plans across those services. Once again, that is about delay.

[72] **Jenny Rathbone:** Are other local authorities considering that?

[73] **Ms Bourge:** We have a principal social worker post. The substantive post is actually with our fostering services, but that worker is currently doing most of their work within our adoption service. In terms of realigning our services into a fostering and adoption service, we are looking for that person to be working across both services. If we were to create more than one post, it would have that dual remit, because that would facilitate the promotion of permanency across fostering and adoption. We have principal social worker roles in other parts of children's services. This has just been rolled out and our experience is that it is quite effective to have those workers who are very experienced and have particular interest and expertise in designated areas.

[74] **Christine Chapman:** Okay. I will bring in David Rees.

[75] **David Rees:** You obviously represent Wrexham, but also north Wales. Is the consultant post for Wrexham only, or are you looking at having this role within all of the authorities?

[76] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** That is a Wrexham post, but we want to share it because good practice is good practice and we all learn from each other.

[77] **David Rees:** So, it is just in Wrexham at this point in time.

[78] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Yes.

[79] **David Rees:** I just wanted to clarify that point.

[80] **Christine Chapman:** I am conscious of the time. We have less than half an hour and we have a number of other areas to cover. Aled, would you like to come in at this point?

[81] **Aled Roberts:** Yes. I am very proud to see Wrexham's performance, but I would like to raise a point regarding decisions about the best interests of the child and the timescale between that decision and adoption. Your figures are better than those of most of the other authorities; are there any particular factors that you think have led to that situation as far as the data are concerned?

[82] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** That is the benefit of the collaboration. We are approving people and we are able to match. No-one is short of children to place, but we are all short of adopters. It is a wider arrangement but it is still quite local to north Wales, so we all know what is going on. Mandy has every child in her head, she has every adopter in her head, and she knows when they are going to panel and to which panel. It is about having that local information and being able to pick up the phone and ask someone, 'Would you be interested in these adopters, who have such and such experience?' We are, almost, matching before the panel. We are not pre-empting its decision, but you can track it by knowing what you have. Mandy does monthly activity lists, which show every child, every adopter and every assessment. We have none to allocate. Everything has to be smooth and to flow very well. That is how we manage to get things done quickly.

[83] **Ms Humphries:** That is not to say that there are no difficulties with placing some of the more difficult children. We do have waiting lists, but, although we have done only two years of the north Wales adoption service, as the service goes along, we can see that things are improving across the board, certainly in relation to training, recruitment and getting people through the system. It is starting to flow nicely.

[84] **Aled Roberts:** What is your view of the English suggestion of set targets, timescales, and so on?

[85] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** I think that timescales are good. I think that we need to be mindful that the clock is ticking on these children's lives and we need them to be placed. However, there are many people out there who want to adopt, so it is just about having slick services. If we were all businesses and not local authorities, we would be much slicker at this. That is where we have to be. We have to be clear about our business plans and our business is children. We need to cut down on timescales.

[86] **Christine Chapman:** I will move on now to David's questions.

[87] **David Rees:** I would like to discuss recruitment. I am sure that you do not have all of the adopters in your head. I am sure that you have too many and therefore cannot remember them.

[88] **Ms Humphries:** I wish I had too many.

[89] **David Rees:** The south-east Wales adoption service noted in its consultation response that

[90] 'Prospective families need to be confident of a prompt and professional response, with clarity of information and for the process to be an open and transparent one.'

[91] I am sure that you would all agree with that. However, the committee has heard evidence from a variety of sources and received a broad spectrum of responses in relation to the requests and the initial consultations. How long do you think the timescale should be from the initial request to assessment? In particular, have you seen disparity across the different authorities that you are in a consortium with? Are you pulling those together?

[92] **Ms Humphries:** We are definitely pulling them together, because it is our responsibility now. There is no doubt that there were delays at the start of the service, but, as I said before, as we have got the staff and processes in place and there is more equity between the six authorities, that is starting to move a lot more efficiently. We had issues in getting a training officer; we tried very hard to get someone who could train in the Welsh language as well, but we were unsuccessful. Since our training officers have been in post since last August, there has been training every month. So, enough adopters have come through on a monthly basis. We are hoping to go to every two months, but there are that many coming through that we are doing training every month at the moment. That process has improved for several authorities. Some authorities were very efficient anyway, but there were some who were not as efficient. There is more parity across the board now.

[93] **David Rees:** Could I ask Cardiff the same question?

[94] **Ms Perkins:** It is the same situation. We recognise that there have been difficulties with the speed with which things are moving in the past, and some of it is about the organisation with regard to training, as you said. Sometimes, it is the structure of the process that causes difficulties, so we have been looking at that and trying to target areas. If our training is not at the right point when people are coming in, could we make it more regular so that they can go on training at the right part of the assessment, and speed things up in that way? That is, rather than going out to do screening visits and initial assessments, and then moving on, combine that and get the checks and the necessary things going at the start. We are aiming to have a much slicker system from start to finish, putting in our own performance indicators and timescales, looking at the way in which social work staff who are undertaking the assessments are being supervised, so that their managers are looking at how they are progressing, looking at progress and keeping it on track, and having it planned to go to panels so that the work is being overseen and moved forward. It goes back to the advice and support given to the social workers, so that they have what they need to do the work, so that we can go from there. It is about becoming more business-like and the efficient use of resources, because, in some areas, it is not necessarily that we need more resources, but that we need to make better use of them. We are very much trying to do that.

[95] **David Rees:** North Wales is probably doing this in the consortium, but would you look at working with other authorities if you find that there is a backlog or a problem? Have you gone to another authority to ask, 'Can you give us help to speed up this process?'

[96] **Ms Perkins:** We are members of the South Wales Adoption Agency Consortium, and we collaborate with other local authorities in terms of adopters. We have some joint training resources. I have a meeting with them tomorrow in which we will look at the training programme that we want to collaborate on, so we utilise our colleagues in other local authorities as far as possible. It is relatively rare for us to place within Cardiff, so we are looking a lot of the time to our colleagues in the consortium for their adoptive placements. Our placements tend to go more to our colleagues, because of the risk factors involved in a big city for our children. That leads back to the concurrent planning. One of the difficulties for Cardiff with concurrent planning is, when you do not know whether a child is going back home or not, you would not necessarily want to place them out of area. However, for an

adoptive placement, we would be placing them out of area the majority of the time. So, there are difficulties in that sense due to the nature of our local authority.

[97] **Jenny Rathbone:** Is Cardiff not a big enough city? There are different ends of the city and the people living there never venture into the other side. I would be interested to know how the consortia arrangements that you are now entering into have improved the situation for potential adoptive parents, because we have heard a lot of evidence from adoptive parents saying that Cardiff and others have said 'Sorry, we're closed; we do not need anybody'. That does not chime well with the fact that a lot of children are waiting for placements.

[98] **Ms Bourge:** I think that it is fair to say that we have not actively recruited new adopters in recent years. In Cardiff, we have historically always had a steady stream of people coming to us wanting to adopt. We have relied very heavily on that.

[99] We have not invested our energies into recruitment campaigns, for example. I think that we can learn a lot from the time and effort that has gone into our recruitment of foster carers over recent years, just in terms of how we have made that front-door process much slicker for fostering. We need to replicate that. As Kim says, we have identified that. We have also identified that we have quite a way to go. However, certainly in recent years, we have not invested our time in that particular area. We need to address that, and it is a priority in our current business plan for our accommodation services.

[100] **Christine Chapman:** Did you wish to comment, Audrey? I will then bring Jocelyn in.

[101] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Last year, we had plenty of applications from adopters but not enough social workers to undertake the assessments, so Mandy went through a relatively difficult process to recruit a pool of relief sessional workers, whom we use as and when we need them. It has been very helpful to include them in the training because some of that, being alongside adopters being trained, has cut little bits off the assessment time so that we have been able to spot-purchase and not have the massive overheads of taking on more staff. It has aided the flow to some extent. On the position about the length of adoption assessments, I do not think that we should cut them down or shortcut too far. We need to do everything that we need to do. It is a rigorous process, but necessarily so.

[102] **Christine Chapman:** We will take a supplementary question from Jocelyn and then from Rebecca. I then wish to move on.

[103] **Jocelyn Davies:** My question on that point, really, is about poor responses from local authorities. We spoke to people who had been in touch with Cardiff authority. I take your point that you have not been actively recruiting, but these people told us that they were told, 'You are not needed, and we will not be doing anything for six months'. Those people were not advised that they could go elsewhere. They were just left, or no-one got back to them, or something like that. There is a big difference between active recruitment, as I think that you would agree, and people being given a poor response that they really were not needed. These are people who went on to adopt successfully in the end. I guess that I would agree with you that, if you cannot go through the process, even if it is a hard process, the adoption itself will be hard for you to put up with.

[104] **Ms Bourge:** I would absolutely agree with that. That is a position that we cannot defend today, and it is something that we are acknowledging and will be seeking to address. The reality is that there may be an issue about our capacity to undertake those assessments, but we also have the ability to buy in additional support, from time to time, to ensure that those assessments progress in a timely way. That is certainly something that we would be

committed to doing. I would completely agree with that.

[105] **Christine Chapman:** Do you wish to come in on this, Rebecca?

[106] **Rebecca Evans:** Within your pools of adopters, or potential adopters, do you have enough people who are willing and able to adopt a child with special or additional needs? Is that a problem?

[107] **Ms Perkins:** We do not have enough.

[108] **Ms Humphries:** No.

[109] **Ms Perkins:** Again, one of the benefits of being linked to the consortium that we are in is that some of our colleagues in the charitable organisations specialise in the recruitment of adopters of children with specialist needs. However, I still do not think that there are enough. There are not enough adopters across the board, but it is even harder to find the right natural link for children with more specialist needs.

[110] **Ms Humphries:** I think that specialist needs and contact issues are a significant issue in recruiting the right adopters for those children who are waiting.

[111] **Christine Chapman:** Do you have a question, Lynne?

[112] **Lynne Neagle:** Yes, Chair. One of the problems that we have heard about from parents is the difficulty that is caused when social workers change regularly throughout the adoption process. Could you comment on whether that is a problem in both your respective authorities? If not, what do you do to prevent that from being a problem?

[113] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** I think that Wrexham has been fairly well-positioned in terms of the retention of qualified social workers, but it is an issue for everyone, really. It is about having the right rewards for social workers, giving them a career path and the correct training to do the job, and developing their resilience to stay with the profession, but also to move on in their careers. So, that has helped, but I take the point that it must be extremely upsetting for families to have a constant stream of strangers coming in with their family information.

2.00 p.m.

[114] **Lynne Neagle:** What about Cardiff?

[115] **Ms Perkins:** We do experience difficulties with changes of social workers. Again, a big part of retaining staff is allowing them to improve their experience in their roles by providing them with development opportunities and support. I am sorry if I am being repetitive because I keep saying that one of the ways in which we are looking to address these issues is by putting in those more senior roles to support and advise social workers. If they feel less under pressure, we are far more likely to retain staff, who will be far happier in their work. Again, it is not necessarily about more resources but utilising existing resources better to sustain the staff we have and so that they can keep improving and expanding on their knowledge.

[116] **Lynne Neagle:** We know that local authorities are under pressure. Certainly, in my authority, I know that children's services have come under a great deal of pressure. Are you seeing any reduction in the number of opportunities for social workers to have professional development training opportunities as the resource squeeze starts to bite or do you feel that things are properly protected?

[117] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** I would say that we have more than we had previously because everyone recognises that there is no easy ride for social workers and that the better trained and supported they are, the better you will retain them. That is done through having a clear training plan so that you develop your workforce. It is also about working across the other agencies so that you have a workforce partnership and you are all exchanging information and accessing each other's training. We are quite lucky in Wrexham in that we have a lot of resources. I hope that it stays that way.

[118] **Ms Bourge:** I would echo that. In part, that is in acknowledgement of the fact that we have a high number of inexperienced social workers. Therefore, for example, we have very good mentoring and coaching initiatives that we have rolled out. So I would not say that there has been a reduction in opportunities.

[119] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** With regard to adoption, we have a training officer who is just champing at the bit to get out there and train all our social workers in the very specific work of adoption services.

[120] **Christine Chapman:** Jenny wants to come in on this.

[121] **Jenny Rathbone:** I want to pursue a little further the concept of concurrent planning. We have already mentioned it as something that puts the risk on the adults rather than the child and that it has already worked so well in Harrow in minimising the delay in placements. Apart from the fact that we are not actively recruiting foster carers who might consider adoption, if we are not asking prospective adoptive parents whether they are prepared to take those risks, we will certainly not be recruiting them because they will not know about that sort of thing. Therefore, what does it take to change the culture? Why is it that this has not travelled well as a concept, bearing in mind that it is not just Wales but most other parts of the UK that do not use it?

[122] **Ms Humphries:** I think that there is an issue with legislation as well. I do not know how Harrow does it because, as I said, I do not have the detail, but the fostering and adoption regulations are different. It would be helpful if there was some way that those two could be combined in legislation in order to support that way forward.

[123] **Jenny Rathbone:** There is the fact that you do not know about it. Coram is pretty well known throughout the UK, and this paper has been written up in one of the professional journals. Therefore, the fact that you do not know about it makes me concerned that we really are not very good at sharing good practice in a rigorous way.

[124] **Ms Humphries:** We are aware of it. We just wonder whether the parents are initially approved only as foster carers and then as adopters or whether they are just approved as adopters. The legislation does not allow for those two approvals to happen in one place. At the moment, under the legislation, those have to happen in two different places. I think that that can delay the process quite considerably.

[125] **Ms Perkins:** With regard to Cardiff, I have read up on Coram and the ways in which England has approached this with current planning, but there really is a big difficulty with Cardiff following something like that with children in particular. Not all adoptions relate to babies. For children, you may be looking at adopters outside the local authority boundary so you would then be looking at including out-of-area placements in legislation, but also at moving children to other schools in order to place with a foster carer before moving on to adoption. That would not necessarily be felt to be in the child's best interest, because they could be moving schools and then having to be moved back. We would far rather sustain them in the Cardiff local authority boundary while the planning process was going ahead. A

rehabilitation plan would be in place to see how that progressed before we placed them.

[126] There is a risk involved in having children adopted within the local authority boundary in Cardiff, irrespective of whether they are placed in the outer areas, or whether the birth family lives on the opposite side of the city to the adopters, because people will tend to access central resources. That would put the children and the adopters at potential risk of running into the birth family. Again, foster carers who turn into adopters, if they attend the LAC reviews and other things, will potentially be well known to the family, and this could cause some follow-up issues from Cardiff's perspective. However, that is not something that we are not looking at, but there are issues with regard to logistics. There would be a limited number of cases where that would not be a useful system for us to follow.

[127] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** We had an example of some children we knew we could not place in north Wales because it would be risky. So, we recruited from England.

[128] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, that is all right for the children.

[129] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** Yes.

[130] **Christine Chapman:** I am conscious that we only have about five minutes left before our next witnesses come in, and I know that other Members have questions. So, I ask everyone to be as succinct as possible. Jocelyn?

[131] **Jocelyn Davies:** I will just ask one or two questions about the situation post adoption. What systems do you have in place to respond to a request for a post-adoption assessment and support for children adopted into your local authority areas after the three years are up?

[132] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** When those children are placed in our authority from elsewhere, they usually come in through the front door. An initial child-in-need assessment is done, and as soon as it is determined that there is an adoption element, it generally comes about. It is not always about adoption, but we usually end up supporting because there is an element of adoption. One of the debates that we have is whether, three years after adoption, those children are children in need, if the support is unrelated to the adoption, or whether they require post-adoption support. That is the discussion that we had on the train on the way down. It is not clear.

[133] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, when it is not clear, do the services get delivered before you have your negotiations, or does it mean that services and therapies are not delivered to that child while this disagreement or negotiation goes on about who pays for it?

[134] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** In all honesty, in those examples, there is probably a delay, because of the lack of clarity and because of our budgets.

[135] **Ms Perkins:** I would like to hope that, in the majority of cases, a child who is identified as having significant need, because we are notified of them being in our area, has an adoption support plan in place, which would prepare us for taking them on. I cannot say that, in all cases, everything moves as swiftly as it should do, but there is definitely a commitment—and we would do the same with our own children being placed in other areas—to a programme of therapy when it is known that the child and the adopters will need a significant level of support beyond three years. That is something on which I would want to have negotiations and discussions prior to the three-year period expiring.

[136] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, by the sounds of it, you have a policy of your adoptions being outside of your local authority area, where possible, in case people run into each other. So, I imagine that this is something that you come up against regularly.

[137] **Ms Perkins:** It is not a policy as such. It is an approach for individual children who, a lot of the time, have been adopted due to child protection issues. So, it is to address the risk factors. So, although we always consider placing in Cardiff if appropriate, that is our approach in the majority of cases when it is not appropriate.

[138] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, in the majority of cases you have a policy to address that situation.

[139] **Ms Perkins:** Yes.

[140] **Jocelyn Davies:** You must therefore be regularly asked to contribute towards the costs of therapies for the children who you have placed out of county after the three years are up?

[141] **Ms Perkins:** Yes, and we do that. If there is a long-term plan for children, there are cases for which we will make that commitment. We have placements in the London area for which we would make an ongoing commitment as a local authority to support beyond the three years, because that is what they need. They need an intensive period of therapy that will go beyond the requirements. You have to look at each family and try, wherever possible, between local authorities—and I like to think that, most of the time, all our colleagues in local authorities all over the UK do this—to look at the best interests of children. So, most of the time, you can have those discussions and work it out. As I said, I am not saying that there are never any issues, but that is how we tend to approach it. However, with cases where there are unanticipated needs, the front-door system would mean coming through our intake duty team, who would carry out an assessment of the child's needs at that point and put in services from there, as appropriate.

[142] **Ms Bourge:** The important bit about the front door is that we identify at that first point of contact that the child is adopted, because the issue is that sometimes they would not necessarily meet the thresholds for children's services in terms of their presenting information, but if we know that they have been adopted, they are eligible for adoption support. So, we have now built that into the questions that are asked at the point of referral.

[143] **Ms Humphries:** There is an assumption that adoption services can provide all these services to the children, and, in fact, most of the people within those services are social workers. The corporate parenting responsibility of health and education has to be much more robust than it is. We recently had somebody on a waiting list of 36 weeks—that is almost a full pregnancy—for a CAHM service. I cannot see why social services are responsible for purchasing that therapeutic input all the time, when it should be provided through the health service.

[144] **Ms Bourge:** If we think that there is a need for a therapeutic service, which CAMHS would need to provide, it is tricky for us to allocate that money for, essentially, a service that should be provided through the health service. So, those ongoing discussions are quite complex and there are debates about whether children and young people meet the thresholds for CAMHS, and so we have, on occasion—

[145] **Jocelyn Davies:** CAMHS decides that.

[146] **Ms Bourge:** It does, but there may be some discrepancies between what we and what CAMHS would say should be the threshold. Equally, we have purchased services that are technically therapeutic services, so there is a debate about whether we should use our funding for those services when they are health services.

[147] **Ms Humphries:** It would be useful for the equivalent of the LAC nurse and LAC education officers in the adoption services to have that knowledge of those services and to be able to be able to work with them.

[148] **Ms Somerton-Edwards:** It goes back to that notion of being multidisciplinary.

[149] **Ms Bourge:** It is important for the assessment process, because, as social workers, we are assessing in terms of what we know about social work provision. We cannot assess what health provision somebody needs, and that is where you need that multidisciplinary approach, because you need CAMHS to come on board to provide an assessment. I understand CAMHS asking, 'Why are you saying that they need play therapy, because you're not qualified to say that?' That is where you need health to come on board to help with the assessment process so that we can determine that we are putting in the right services for children and young people.

[150] **Christine Chapman:** On that note, I will have to draw this session to a close, but I thank you all for your evidence today. It was extremely useful and I know that it will help us to draw up a report. Thank you for attending. We will send you a transcript of the meeting so that you can check it for factual accuracy. Thank you. I will now invite our next panel to the table.

2.15 p.m.

Ymchwiliad i Fabwysiadu Inquiry into Adoption

[151] **Christine Chapman:** We continue with the inquiry into adoption services and will now be taking evidence from the Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Social Services. Welcome to you all. Would you introduce yourselves for the record?

[152] **Mr Brown:** Good afternoon. I am Nigel Brown, the assistant director of social services in Blaenau Gwent.

[153] **Ms Warren:** I am Emily Warren, the policy lead for health and social services at the WLGA.

[154] **Ms Ward:** I am Buddug Ward, the assistant director at Ceredigion social services.

[155] **Christine Chapman:** Welcome to you all. First of all, thank you for providing a paper in advance. If you are happy, we will go straight into questions and we can develop the themes as we go along. Just by way of introduction, you may be aware that we have taken a lot of evidence on this very important issue, and it has been interesting to see the various aspects and threads to this inquiry in the evidence that we have heard. One of the themes that has emerged is the uneven provision of support offered to adoptive parents in particular, so I wondered what your response would be to that. Why is there such a variation between authorities?

[156] **Ms Warren:** We have read a lot of the evidence that has been presented and I think that it is fair to say that it is probably a theme that came through. We would accept that provision is uneven across Wales, and there is probably a lot that we can do as local authorities to improve that. Probably one of the reasons for why there is uneven provision is historical, in terms of where demand has been and where resources have been allocated. That is right in terms of local authorities being able to put resources where there is demand.

Certainly, in terms of how we can improve services in adoption, it is very much part of the sustainable social services agenda, and that is something that we are committed to looking at as part of the new service model.

[157] **Jocelyn Davies:** We heard evidence relating to several local authorities—I will not say that it is your authorities, because I do not think that it would be right or fair—where people had had very poor responses when they initially contacted them. Some were put off, or felt that they were being put off, and were told that they would need to wait many months before an initial assessment or that their services as prospective adopters were not needed. Have you got any views on how this could possibly happen?

[158] **Mr Brown:** It is very disappointing to hear that. I can speak on behalf of my own local authority, and we are very proactive in looking to recruit adoptive carers and ensure that, from their first point of contact with us, the response they get is one where we engage with them and get out and meet them as soon as we possibly can. As Emily has already indicated, there is a varying response across Wales, and that is something that we recognise needs to improve greatly. There are occasions when the expectations of adopters at the first point of enquiry lead them to interpret some information as that message. To give an example, we get enquiries from people wanting to adopt new-born babies or a child under the age of six months who is female and blond, so the conversations may well be about the reality that it is rare for us to have children under the age of 12 months to be placed for adoption, so they may want to reflect upon what it is they want to achieve from the adoption process. Sometimes people can feel put off by that and can go to other local authorities. There are examples where people have been to another local authority and been told, ‘Sorry, if that is what you are looking for, then you are not going to be able to achieve that’, so they have come to us, relayed that, and so, by having that further conversation with them, they start thinking, ‘Well, perhaps we would consider an older child’. So there is a lot that we can do as local authorities to improve that, and it is that two-way process between people contacting us and the response they get as well.

[159] **Ms Warren:** In terms of the paper that we sent in, which I know has been circulated to you as part of the evidence, we see no reason why, in terms of the initial screening, there cannot be some kind of national function where there is a phone line, similar to the advocacy service that you have called Meic, so that anybody who is considering adoption, whether they have considered it for three years, three weeks or three months, is able to ring a national helpline and have that initial conversation. That would increase consistency and it would also probably help to support those who are at different stages of thinking through the process and signpost them to go to their local authorities as a next stage. That is something that we have put forward for consideration.

[160] **Ms Ward:** Carrying on with the theme that Nigel started, many people still think of adoption as being of relinquished babies. There are very few babies who are being relinquished. The babies we have are ones for which we have to go through care proceedings. Some 85% of adoptions are through care proceedings, because the children come from difficult family backgrounds and we have to take their parents to court and, basically, take their children away from them. So, that is another issue.

[161] My authority is part of a consortium in west Wales. That has been of benefit in terms of responses to adoption enquiries, because we can put on training more routinely and provide more information evenings more routinely because there is a greater volume. If, for example, Carmarthenshire has a glut of adoption enquiries at any given time, then the adoption workers from Ceredigion could do the assessments. So, we share in that way. There are ways and means of improving that and we have already started the journey, but there is certainly a long way to go for some authorities.

[162] **Jocelyn Davies:** I would like to ask a supplementary question. I take on board what you have said about prospective parents initially having expectations that are too high, but do local authorities expect too much from those people and from those who might be slightly unconventional when they come forward? Are they put off?

[163] **Mr Brown:** I am the senior decision-maker for the local authority and, in a similar situation to that outlined by Buddug, Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire and Torfaen have a joint adoption service. So, I see all of the prospective adopters and have to sign those off in my role as the decision maker. I am always pleased to see that there is a wide range of people coming forward in terms of age, ability and life experience. From my experience, I would have to disagree. I see a real broad range of people: people who have their own birth children and go into adoption because they want to offer a permanent home to a child and people who have tried unsuccessfully to become parents and want to adopt a child because they want their own child. So, there is a real breadth of people coming through, which is really good, because I see children with a range of needs who need that broad range of potential carers.

[164] **Christine Chapman:** Aled, do you have some questions?

[165] **Aled Roberts:** Hoffwn edrych yn fwy manwl ar rai o'r anghysonderau ynglŷn â'r ffordd y mae awdurdodau lleol yn perfformio o ran yr amserlen ac oedi. O ran yr amser rhwng y penderfyniad er budd gorau'r plentyn a mabwysiadu, rydym wedi derbyn tystiolaeth bod un awdurdod yn gallu gwneud hynny o fewn 150 diwrnod ond, yn yr awdurdod gwaethaf, mae'n cymryd dros 500 o ddiwrnodau. Pam bod cymaint o wahaniaeth rhwng yr awdurdodau? Rhoddaf un ffigur arall i chi. Mae gofyn i bob awdurdod gael cynllun dyfodol parhaol wedi ei gytuno, ac mae hynny i fod o fewn pedwar mis. Fodd bynnag, roedd 13 awdurdod lleol yng Nghymru wedi methu â chyrraedd y targed hwnnw. Rydym yn poeni'n enfawr am un awdurdod, lle'r oedd tua 40% o'r plant heb y fath gynllun.

Aled Roberts: I would like to look more closely at some of the inconsistencies regarding the way in which local authorities are performing in terms of the timetable and delays. In terms of the time between the decision being made about the child's best interests and adoption, we have received evidence that one authority is able to do this within 150 days but, in the worst authority, this takes over 500 days. Why is there such a difference between the authorities? I will give you another figure. All authorities are required to have a permanency plan agreed, and that is meant to be done within four months. However, 13 local authorities in Wales failed to meet that target. We are hugely concerned about one authority, where around 40% of children were without such a plan.

[166] **Ms Ward:** Dechreuaf i ar y cwestiwn hwnnw. Mae'r niferoedd yn ein hawdurdod ni yn fach iawn. Dros y pedair blynedd diwethaf, 14 o'n plant ni sydd wedi cael eu mabwysiadu yn ein sir ni. Mae'r ystadegau sy'n cael eu rhoi i mewn yn ddibynnol ar y diwedd glo, sef yr *adoption order*. Mae hynny'n wahanol iawn i'r lleoliad ar gyfer mabwysiadu.

Ms Ward: I will start on that question. The numbers within our authority are very small. Over the last four years, 14 of our children have been adopted within our county. The statistics that are submitted are dependent on the outcome, namely the adoption order. That is very different to the placement for adoption.

[167] O ran y pedair blynedd hynny, mae sawl plentyn yn ein hawdurdod wedi gorfod aros sawl mis, os nad mwy na blwyddyn neu ddwy flynedd, er mwyn cael y lleoliad neu'r *match* iawn. Mae gwahanol resymau dros hynny, a chan ein bod yn cael ein darlledu, ni allaf fynd mewn i hynny gan fod y rhifau mor

In terms of that four year period, a number of children in our authority have had to wait many months, if not over a year or two years, in order to get the correct placement or match. There are various reasons for that, and, as we are being televised, I cannot go into those details because the numbers are so

fach. Er enghraifft, dywedwch fod gennych bedwar plentyn mewn blwyddyn, ac mae hynny yn digwydd, gallai un neu ddau o'r lleoliadau fethu oblegid gwahanol resymau— efallai achos bod problem feddygol wedi codi a'n bod wedi gorfod ailchwilio am deuluoedd oherwydd nad yw'r teulu rydym wedi ei ddewis yn barod i gymryd ymlaen y risgiau hynny, neu efallai bod y sefyllfa o fewn y teulu yn fregus ac rydym yn gorfod aros peth amser cyn bod hynny yn setlo i lawr. Mae hynny'n golygu bod ein hystadegau yn dangos mai dim ond un plentyn mewn pedwar sydd wedi cyrraedd y nod. Felly, mae ffactorau felly yn effeithio ar yr ystadegau, ond mae sefyllfaoedd bob plentyn unigol yn unigryw i'r plentyn a'r teulu hwnnw.

[168] **Aled Roberts:** Mae'n anodd deall bod un awdurdod yn gallu gwneud hynny o fewn 150 o ddiwrnodau. Nid yw'n bosibl i ni dderbyn bod y sefyllfaoedd dros y rhesymau pam nad yw pethau yn symud mor gyflym ag y dylent yn bodoli yn yr awdurdod hwnnw i'r un graddau ag y maent o fewn awdurdodau eraill dros gyfnod o flynyddoedd.

[169] **Ms Ward:** Os oes dau blentyn gennym allan o 10 plentyn sy'n cael eu hystyried, a bod dau blentyn yng Nghaerdydd allan o 30 o blant yn cael eu hystyried, mae'n golygu bod yr ystadegau yn *skewed*.

[170] **Aled Roberts:** Nid ydym yn sôn am ganrannau o ran y ffigur cyntaf; rydym yn sôn am faint o amser mae'n ei gymryd i wneud rhywbeth penodedig. Fodd bynnag, rydym yn sôn am ganrannau o ran yr ail ffigur. A ydych yn credu ei fod yn dod lawr i'r rhifau?

[171] **Ms Ward:** Mae hynny yn sicr yn un rheswm drosto.

[172] **Mr Brown:** At first glance, that information raises an awful lot of questions, and it is interesting to look at that in terms of what we want to measure, what we want to achieve for our children, and what gives us confidence that the outcomes that we want to get for our children are achieved in a timely way. To give you two examples that might go some way towards explaining the variation in figures, in my authority we had cases where the best interest decision was made by the panel at a given point in the planning for that case. Given the complexity of what happens in court, and changes in the circumstances, that case can remain in court for up to two years. So, whereas the decision made by a local authority to place for adoption is made, as you have just described, at a certain point, the date at which we can place a child is governed by the end of the court case. We have other cases where the decision to place for adoption is made by the panel and the conclusion of the care proceedings

small. For instance, say you had four children in a year, and that can happen, one or two of the placements can fail for various reasons— perhaps because a medical problem has emerged and that we have to seek another family because the identified family was not willing to take on that risk, or a situation within the family is vulnerable and we have to wait a while for that to settle down. That means that our statistics will show that only one child in four will have reached the target. So, those factors have an impact on the statistics, but the situations of individual children are unique to that child and family.

Aled Roberts: It is difficult to understand that one authority can do that within 150 days. It is not possible for us to accept that the situations for the reasons why things are not moving as quickly as they should do not exist to the same degree in that authority as they do in other authorities over a period of years.

Ms Ward: If we have two children out of 10 being considered, but there are two children in Cardiff out of 30 being considered, it means that the statistics are skewed.

Aled Roberts: We are not talking of percentages in terms of the first figure; we are talking about the amount of time it takes to do something specific. However, we are talking of percentages with regard to the second figure. Do you believe that it comes down to the numbers?

Ms Ward: That is certainly one reason for it.

is very prompt—within perhaps two, three or four months after that decision—which allows you to move on to look at the placement. I am not sure whether that example gives you a flavour of the outcomes that we achieve for children.

[173] One of the things that we have looked at across Wales as part of the work that we have done on adoption is to look at how we perform as local authorities and how we respond to need. The point at which the court makes the order that a child can be adopted to the point that we place that child for adoption is something over which we have complete and utter control. Delays in that period cannot be excused. The average across Wales is about three and a half months from the point of the order being made to the child being placed. That takes into account that that case has to go back to the adoption panel after the placement order is made, the family needs to be approached to see whether they are happy, introductions take place and the child is placed. So, an average of three and a half months from the point that local authority has a legal agreement to go ahead and place for adoption to adoption is not significant.

2.30 p.m.

[174] With any performance information, we have to understand what we are measuring. I think that we are very aware, as local authorities, that we must not allow drift to happen. At the point that that placement order is made, we should be ready to be actively looking. There are some issues where, if, for example, there are no parents within your consortium arrangement, you cannot legally start to advertise or recruit externally for those children because you would be in contempt of court: you have to wait until the court has made the decision. There have been cases whereby, if we had been able to start some specific recruitment, perhaps, or approach other agencies at an earlier stage, we might have been able to move that along slightly. I think that three and a half months is probably a very positive step, given all the processes that have to happen in between.

[175] **Aled Roberts:** Felly, os derbyniwn bod ffactorau allanol yn effeithio ar yr amserlen, beth am yr ail bwynt ynglŷn â'r ffaith bod 13 o gynghorau yn methu ar yr amserlen pedwar mis o safbwynt y cynllun parhaol? **Aled Roberts:** Therefore, if we accept that external factors affect the timescale, what about the second point regarding the fact that 13 authorities are failing to meet the four-month timescale of the permanency plan?

[176] **Mr Brown:** It is important to look at what we are seeking to achieve for children. That particular indicator means that, after four months of a child becoming looked after, you need to consider whether you know what the plan is for that child. We know that the plan made for those four months is often very different to the outcome for that child because of the planning and the court process. It is a performance indicator that has been put in there at some time by the Welsh Government, and it has certainly driven us to look much clearer at permanency, twin tracking and triple tracking at that early point. In itself, it does not suggest that children are necessarily drifting in the system. For me, the question is: what was the outcome for those children where that system was not in place? The fact that that was not ticked does not mean to say that the outcome was disadvantaged. Again, I agree that there is inconsistency in that particular performance indicator.

[177] **Christine Chapman:** Obviously, we are concerned about the statistic. Do you wish to ask a question on that, Aled? Otherwise, I have Jocelyn and David who wish to come in.

[178] **Aled Roberts:** We have heard that there is evidence that children are drifting in the system. What action are you taking—not you, personally, but as an association—to deal with this inconsistency?

[179] **Mr Brown:** I cannot sit here and say that there are no children drifting in the system. I am simply saying that I do not think that you can measure the drift by that particular performance indicator. There is much more complexity behind that and there are much more rigorous questions that we could ask than simply looking at that performance indicator.

[180] **Ms Ward:** We all have independent reviewing officers who are reviewing the planning for these children. Although the statutory line is that, after four months, the next review should be at six months, the reviewing officers are actually monitoring the plans regularly during that period, and they can come direct to the head of service or even go to members at any point if they think that there is a drift that is not explained or not acceptable.

[181] **Christine Chapman:** Emily wishes to come in first. I will then call on Jocelyn and David.

[182] **Ms Warren:** There are two slightly separate issues. As an association, I suppose that we would challenge the perception that there is drift in the system and that there is delay in the system. Probably, through the evidence that you have heard today, and in the evidence that other people have given, the range of complex issues as to why there are delays in the system has been presented to you. In terms of how, as local authorities, we measure and manage that, there is probably quite an outdated model of performance indicators. They are based around times. The data tells you what you have just reflected back to us: that 13 out of 22 authorities did not do this x amount of times. As part of sustainable social services, we have been negotiating a change to how we measure improvement and performance so that, instead of the data telling us that 13 authorities did not meet the performance indicator of four months, we look to develop improvement and outcome-focused data, which recognise the story behind the data. Therefore, we need to identify what the outcome was for the child, and the targets that people were working towards that supported improvement, rather than very arbitrary timelines. We have found a great deal of examples of how many were doing so, and in what timescale. This is the first year that we have developed service improvement datasets which, for people who like performance, I am happy to share when they are published in June. They will be reviewed annually, and that is more of a drive so that, under the traditional performance indicators, we have this set of improvement data, which is much more about the story behind the data and whether we are measuring the right things. This year is very much the first step towards that. I will be happy to circulate the datasets on adoption when they are released.

[183] **Jocelyn Davies:** My question is on this issue of the external factors and the court proceedings. You say, 'It was the courts that delayed that, so it's nothing to do with us'. How do we, sitting on this committee, know that that is not evidence of poor decision making, and that the courts are not doing the right thing by saying 'no', or that some councils, quite frankly, are just not very good at presenting their cases in court? These are important decisions that you are making. You are taking children from their parents permanently. How do we know that the courts are not correcting poor decision making on the part of the local authority? I do not buy the idea that you can just dismiss a two-year delay by saying, 'Oh, that's down to the courts'. That is not enough information for me to conclude that those judges are bad and making the children drift. What assurance can you give us that it is not just down to poor decision making and poor performance on the part of the local authority?

[184] **Mr Brown:** I do not think it is a question of the courts saying 'no' to the plans that we have. In my experience, when we go to court to say that adoption is in the best interest of a particular child, in the vast majority of cases, the court goes along with that decision. I do not think that there is evidence that the court is saying that local authorities have got care planning wrong. We are not critical of the judges involved in the cases. I do not think that we are, by any means, suggesting that this is the judges' fault. What happens in court is very complex. If I were to give examples of some cases that we have had going on for two and a

half years, it has, by no means, been the fault of the judges or the fault of poor assessments; it is a question of additional parties coming into the proceedings and, under human rights legislation, requesting to be assessed—these are grandparents, aunties and uncles and so on. Therefore, in a sense, it is the additional assessments and work that the court is commissioning. We are certainly not being critical of the judges. However, it is the process that then means that the plan for the adoption for the child has to go on hold while a number of additional assessments are undertaken. It is not until they are ruled out that that plan comes back to the foreground.

[185] **Jocelyn Davies:** I think that all of us here, and everyone who watches television and reads the papers, could provide a list of cases, and of eras even, within local authorities, when children have been wrongly taken from their parents, put up for adoption and adopted. Therefore, the outcome for the child must come down to whether it is the right decision. I do not think that we could sit here and say that the local authority is always 100% right in every single case. So, that is a backstop, is it not? Therefore, in terms of your qualitative data, would that be included in it, that we would be able to see the reason?

[186] **Ms Warren:** The reasons for what?

[187] **Jocelyn Davies:** The reasons for the delays, and not just ‘It was at court’.

[188] **Mr Brown:** It is also about how we measure the delay and at what point we are classing it as a delay. If we are talking about the journey of a child from the point of becoming looked after to being placed for adoption, at what stage are we talking about a delay? What is the correct length for that process? I do not think that there is a correct length. For some children, it might be six months; for others, it might be 18 months. We have to be clear about what our expectations were and apply those to individual cases because no two cases are the same. Data are not going to give us the reasons why. The individual casework will explain why there was a delay. We are in control of some parts of this, but, once it gets into the court environment, it takes on a life of its own in a sense because there are so many other parties that become part of the proceedings. Therefore, I am not quite sure what we mean by ‘delay’.

[189] **Christine Chapman:** This goes back to the issue of permanency plans and so on, does it not? The statistics available to us from local authorities are that, between 2008 and 2011, there were 13 local authorities in Wales failing to meet this requirement and, as Aled mentioned, in one local authority, more than 40% of children were without a permanency plan. Therefore, again, this is within the remit of local authorities. This is where our concerns lie. We are trying to understand it better. We have taken evidence from adopted children themselves. Last Saturday, Angela Burns and I were talking to some of these children, so there is now a human face to it. Uncertainty is bad for most people. All of us want to have some certainty in life, and this reflects that it is not happening for some children. That is why we are concerned about it and that is why local authorities should be as well.

[190] **Mr Brown:** When we talk about permanency at that point, again, very often, it is about triple tracking. Sixty (sixteen NOT sixty) weeks into a child becoming looked after is very early in terms of the decision making. So, unless they are for older teenagers who have become looked after because of problems at home and we are trying to get them back home, the majority of those plans, particularly for younger children, will be as broad as, ‘We’re looking to rehabilitate the child back into the home, so we’re going to assess the parents and we’re considering whether we need to go into proceedings’, or we may already be in proceedings, in which case the court will determine the care plan direction for that case, or it could well be that we are looking at the extended family for the child to have a special guardianship order. So, I can understand where you are coming from in that question, but that is a question that is asked on a certain day and does not necessarily reflect what is going to

happen the next day or at the next meeting, or the activity that is taking place. So, it is much broader than that.

[191] **Christine Chapman:** We have David next, then Jenny and Aled.

[192] **David Rees:** I think that you have already answered my question. The statistics are important and although they are always behind, they make us ask the questions. Is it true that we are seeing far more families in flux effectively in relation to these children and that, therefore, the decision regarding permanency is taking a lot longer because those family situations are in a great deal of flux in one sense? Are we seeing more of that today?

[193] **Ms Ward:** Families are all very complex and we do not just look at the nuclear families when we are considering plans for the children. Our first port of call, when they first become looked after, is to look at whether there is a doorway back home, and if there is not a doorway back home, we look at whether there is a doorway into the extended family. That is our starting point at all times. We do not necessarily disregard those before moving on to other options, but we have to look at those options because children are entitled to family life and to grow up in the family into which they were born. So, we have to look at that carefully. As Nigel said, the four-month scenario might be right for some children, because it is as clear as daylight when they first come into care that adoption will be the endgame for them, but we still have to go through the whole legal process, and not necessarily just through the court, as we have to go through the process of looking at family members and of asking ourselves whether we need a care order or whether we can work with the parent to get to the end point that we want. So, each child is very complex and unique.

[194] **Mr Brown:** Also, before we are able to consider actively whether the best-interest decision for the child should be adoption, as a local authority, we have to be satisfied that we have ruled out every possibility within that family. So, at that four-month review, even if we say that we are assessing the parents and if that does not work out we will go for adoption, once we have assessed the parents, we cannot start the adoption journey until we have checked out whether there are grandparents or aunts and uncles and had them assessed. We would have to be confident that we have ruled them out before going down the adoption route. Our drive is to ensure that children stay with their family wherever possible, but adoption is the plan if that is not safe or appropriate for a child.

[195] **David Rees:** You stated in an earlier answer that some of the court cases may be delayed because of grandparents wanting assessments. So, I cannot match the two there, if you assess them beforehand—

[196] **Mr Brown:** We very often assess both. As a local authority, perhaps before we go into proceedings, we will have visited them to assess them. You very often find that families say ‘no’ at that stage because they want to support their daughter. However, once you are in court, some families will then realise, ‘Oh, heck, this is real. I would rather look after the child than to have the child going to live with someone I do not know’. Alternatively, the grandparents or the aunts and uncles who came forward, but who were ruled out by us because we did not feel that they were safe or appropriate, will come back during the court process, if they have legal representation, there is a view that we have to give them a due hearing and so the court may request a reassessment of the family because there is a difference six months along the line. So, we often end up assessing or considering the same people on two occasions.

2.45 p.m.

[197] **Ms Warren:** What we are grappling with when, as local authorities, we come to evidence sessions such as this is how to reflect the complexity of families who may be in a

state of flux and the need to achieve the best outcomes for the child, with all agencies working together in a timely fashion. However, what is ‘timely’ when you have a child who will be taken away from their family and placed with a forever family? It is the most important decision that you make, is it not? For policy makers, it is a real conundrum, because they need to be assured that appropriate measurements are in place, and that local authorities are performing and working in partnership with the courts. How do we do that to best effect, reflecting the complexities that are coming out in this discussion about how decisions are made and delays coming up in the system? I do not think that there are any easy answers.

[198] **Jenny Rathbone:** No-one is arguing that there are easy answers, but there is widespread concern across the UK that the delays are impacting adversely on these children, so I think that it comes down to the intelligence of the robust systems that you have in place to ensure that things are going as fast as they need to go. Is your officer thinking outside the box? Is there a challenge if twin tracking is not going along—that is, where kinship arrangements within the birth family are being assessed to see whether they could lead somewhere positive, at the same time as thinking ‘This is an eight-year-old girl, and I can think of family x who want a child of this profile’? Surely you are in a position to second-guess the outcome of the court process. You have to await the court’s decision, but you are handling the data, so you must know the likely outcome.

[199] **Mr Brown:** Absolutely, and that is one of the strengths of the consortium arrangements that we have. As soon as the plan for a child is adoption, that child is referred to the in-house adoption service so that the social workers can speak together and look at the child potentially coming through for adoption. We cannot do anything about it, but we can start thinking about the recruitment process. For the vast majority of children, certainly in my authority, that is the case. We have people lined up so that, the moment that placement order is made, we can move on that. To use that example of an eight-year-old child, we know that recruiting adopters for older children or large sibling groups is more challenging, so there is a dilemma, because we could identify somebody, but do we hold on to them and make them wait 18 months or two years before the court says ‘yes’, or do we use them for an alternative child who is further on in the system? There is a real dilemma there between holding on to adopters, hoping that the plan will be adoption for that child, or using their valuable resource for another child. What you have described is what happens for the vast majority of children, and younger children, in particular, but when you come to the larger sibling groups or older children, there is more of a dilemma about hanging on to that resource. The criticism is that people are coming forward to be assessed and are being approving as adopters, but it is two or three years before a child is placed with them. It is about trying to manage both ends—

[200] **Jenny Rathbone:** A two or three-year delay has to be unacceptable. Buddug, you mentioned members. What are they doing to ensure that local authorities really are gripping this one, given the widespread anxiety about it? Are they involved at all? Do they take their corporate parenting responsibility seriously? Some do; some do not.

[201] **Ms Ward:** Our authority has a corporate parenting panel that looks at all the cases that are going through at the minute, and it monitors them and questions us on them. ‘Where are you at with the four children you told us about last time? You were looking at twin tracking, but has there been any progress?’ That was true of the previous government in the county, and I am sure that the next political leaders in our county will do the same.

[202] However, the other issue with adopters who are prepared to take older children, children with special needs and sibling groups is whether they are prepared to wait for those children. It is one thing whether we are prepared to hang on to them and keep them waiting for a length of time to satisfy little Joe’s needs, but the other side is whether the adopters are prepared to hang on for little Joe, or whether they are pushing to have another child placed

more quickly? It is between the devil and the deep blue sea with each of them.

[203] **Rebecca Evans:** I want to look at the budget structures for local authorities. We have heard concerns that the structure of the authority's fostering and adoption budgets means that some children end up 'parked' in foster care. That is not a word that I like, but it certainly paints a picture. Do you recognise that? Obviously, the fostering budget is so much bigger than the adoption budget, and this is a concern that has been raised.

[204] **Ms Ward:** Certainly for us, I have to say that there is no way that a child would not be adopted if there was a need for that child to be adopted. It is a children's services budget, not a fostering budget or an adoption budget. If I overspend on my children's services budget because I need to, I will. If I need to go to my members and say, 'Look, we've got these five children who we want to place, but we haven't got the resources in-house or within the consortium at the minute so we have to go outside and purchase them', I know that they would support me to enable that to happen, despite going over budget.

[205] **Mr Brown:** We have one opportunity to do our best for our children, and I am really taken aback by any suggestion that that would prevent any child from being placed for adoption. Speaking for my colleagues in local authorities across Wales, we know that the outcomes for children are much better served by being adopted, and when a child has been adopted, it frees up resources for the local authority, because we are then able to focus on those children who need to be looked after or for whom there are child protection concerns. I have worked in several different local authorities and never come across a head of service or anybody making the decision that one sum of money is for fostering and another for adoption. From my own experience, I can tell you that, over the past 12 months, we have had to purchase a number of external placements from the voluntary sector for children who have specific needs or who are in specific circumstances, and I have no hesitation at all in going to my director and executive member to say that that is the decision that I am making. Even though it places considerable budgetary pressures on us, as far as I am concerned, there is no choice. I am not familiar with the principle that you cannot move money from one budget to another.

[206] **Jocelyn Davies:** Are there situations in which a child has foster parents for a long time—and really it is a permanent placement but it continues to be a foster placement—and perhaps that family would struggle with adoption in respect of finance? Are children sometimes left in fostering when actually it is their permanent place?

[207] **Ms Ward:** At every single review, we look at the legal status of the child and whether we can secure that child's legal status better. At any given point, if it is right for the foster carers and the child to consider either special guardianship orders or adoption, we would support that 100%, and funding that would certainly be no issue. We would carry on the fostering allowance less the statutory child benefit and so on that they can gain as normal citizens.

[208] **Mr Brown:** In my own local authority, we have a high number of foster carers over the past seven years who have taken out permanent orders, and the vast majority have chosen not to go down the adoption route but to have special guardianship orders. That is the right decision for many older children.

[209] **Jocelyn Davies:** On paper, would it look to us as though they were being fostered when actually it is their permanent home?

[210] **Mr Brown:** No. The local authority would no longer be the corporate parent for those children. If they are made subject to a special guardianship order or an adoption order and they remain with their foster carers, that child is their child and not the responsibility of

the local authority—with the exception, perhaps, of having a financial responsibility or offering support if the parents want it. It is their child and they parent that child.

[211] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, is that a proxy for adoption? In that example, they have not been adopted by those people.

[212] **Ms Ward:** They have not been adopted, but the legal responsibility for that child is the same. The only thing that is not allowed to change within that, unless you have a directive from the court, is the child's name. So, the surname can remain or change, depending on what you put through the court.

[213] **Jocelyn Davies:** When I asked whether that was a proxy for adoption, it was not a criticism, but, in my mind, that is a permanent home—

[214] **Ms Ward:** It is a permanent home until they are adults.

[215] **Mr Brown:** For some older children, if they have been with long-term foster carers for a number of years, many of them will retain a level of involvement with, or knowledge of, their birth family. That might be for birthdays and Christmases, or it might be every other Saturday. So, a special guardianship order does not sever the legal connection between the child and their birth family. By going for a special guardianship order, the foster carers have parental responsibility and control of that child, but the child still has a legal connection to their birth family, which, for many of them, is very important.

[216] **Christine Chapman:** I am conscious that we are running short of time. We have some specific questions, so I ask Members to be quite succinct. Rebecca, would you like to continue?

[217] **Rebecca Evans:** Yes. I just want to look at multi-agency support post adoption. What structures and systems do local authorities have in place to support children and families adopted in their areas once they have ceased to be the responsibility of the placing authorities—that is, after the three years are up? The committee has heard that some problems might manifest themselves several years after adoption.

[218] **Mr Brown:** There is a statutory duty for us to undertake an assessment for adoption support services. Speaking for my local authority, that referral would come in through our front door. If we were aware that that child was an adopted child, there would be a conversation with our adoption services to identify who was best placed to provide that support for the child. Sometimes, adoption support does not present as being such. A child might have been subject to an allegation of child abuse, for example. So, it depends on the nature of the referral that comes back to us, but we have a duty to undertake that assessment. Local authorities are very clear about their duty and responsibility to undertake that.

[219] You mentioned multi-agency support, and that is where the greater challenge comes for those children who perhaps have more complex behavioural and emotional needs, namely in accessing specialist therapy through health services for that. Once you start talking about therapeutic intervention, that is a part of the remit of the health board, but trying to engage it to commission and provide that service is really challenging. I would imagine that that situation is similar across Wales.

[220] **Ms Ward:** In any adoption, we try to make our support plans as robust and as long lasting as we possibly can. Where we anticipate future behavioural or emotional problems, we can write that into the adoption support plan, and if the adopters could not get that support in their local area under the auspices of child and adolescent mental health services or whatever, they can come back to us because it would be written into the support plan from day one that

we would support future therapeutic intervention. So, that is one way in which it can be done.

[221] We have an adoption support co-ordinator who makes contact with all adopters once the placement has been made, and when we are aware of other children placed within our authority, likewise, she can make contact with those adopters and tell them what facilities are available in west Wales. If they needed future support, they could then come back to us. However, as Nigel said, these are families that we are putting up to act as full families, and they need to access what any other normal family would access. So, that is the first port of call, but there is always the fallback that they can ask their home authority for reassessment, and the authority in which they live could undertake an assessment as well.

3.00 p.m.

[222] **Ms Warren:** There is also a perception, which we need to try to break down if we are to take forward the national adoption service, that it is a social services responsibility. As Buddug says, these families are supported to operate as families, and they might be accessing CAMHS support from the health sector, or education support in terms of the child's schooling. When we get to the stage of looking at what post-adoption support could look like in Wales, the two things that we will be asking for are that health and education are around the table, and that there are appropriate resources on the table to shore up what is probably a very streamlined service at the moment.

[223] **Christine Chapman:** We are short of time, but I will bring David in to ask some questions on adoption breakdowns.

[224] **David Rees:** With regard to adoption breakdown or adoption disruption, to clarify, that is the failure of an adoption process with a particular family on one occasion only, and not a total failure to place a child, is it?

[225] **Ms Ward:** Yes.

[226] **David Rees:** I just wanted to make sure, because the terminology is the terminology. You identify in your paper that there have been only five recorded post-order and five pre-order breakdowns. The Welsh Government guidance says that you should be reporting on the post-order ones. Do you keep statistics on the pre-order ones and also on when a child is placed elsewhere, so that you are able to demonstrate that?

[227] **Ms Ward:** In terms of the statistics, all Welsh authorities submit what is called a 903 report to the data unit. Basically, that report shows the child from the moment they become looked-after to the moment that they cease to be looked-after. So, if a child has been through the legal process to gain a placement order that allows the local authority to place that child for adoption, that is recorded. If the child moves into an adoptive placement, that is recorded. If that placement comes to an end and they come back to our local authority care or go straight to another adoptive placement, that is recorded. Once the adoption order is granted, that is recorded. So, we are able to get those statistics. We did work last year on this, and the numbers for post-placement children, so children who had been placed for adoption but where the adoption order had not taken effect, where there had been a change of placement, were recorded, and it was less than five times across the whole of Wales. That report also contains the numbers of children who come back into local authority care after an adoption order has been granted. The reason for that child becoming looked-after again is noted in a category, which has only been around for five or six years. That category has been used less than five times as well.

[228] **Mr Brown:** That is the quantitative information. In terms of quality, we are required to hold a disruptions meeting when that takes place. That builds into a learning lessons

exercise for the agency for the local authority, but also for the inspectorate when it inspects the adoption service. The three-year inspection cycle would be looking for evidence with regard to all those adoption breakdowns, if there were any, that those meetings that were taking place and what lessons had been learned from a qualitative perspective.

[229] **Christine Chapman:** It may be difficult for you to comment on this, but we have had contrary evidence that the information relating to adoption disruption is very limited. The statistics appear to be surprisingly low, because we have had written evidence to the contrary. Do you have any initial comments on that?

[230] **Mr Brown:** I have seen some of the evidence, in which the figure of 20% has been bandied around. It is about looking at the cohort and age profile of children and the period of time you are looking at for those. Very little large-scale research has been undertaken in terms of placements; a lot of very small-scale research has taken place. We know that the age of the child being placed for adoption has a significant impact on the stability of that placement. Some of the research showing the figure of 20% tends to deal with children who are older at the age of placement—eight to 14—when we know that there is a greater chance of the placement breaking down, as opposed to the placements of those under the ages of five, six or seven. Also, for some of those placements that had broken down, that research would have taken place in respect of adoptions that took place a number of years ago, before the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 came in and before the adoption support services were much more robust or better. I can remember in the early days as a professional that when the adoption happened, that was it: you closed the case and you moved on. The world is now significantly different from what it was five or six years ago, so we must be mindful, with regard to those figures, that they do not necessarily apply to the practice that has taken place over the past few years, certainly since the adoption Act.

[231] **Christine Chapman:** That is useful.

[232] **Jocelyn Davies:** Could I just clarify that those five recorded breakdowns are legal adoptions?

[233] **Ms Ward:** You can access two lots of figures. One is in relation to children who have been placed with adoptive families, but something happened and they left those families before the adoption. So, those are pre-order breakdowns. The other is to do with post-order breakdowns. So, those figures are for one year—2010-11—but there were fewer than five. The Assembly would not even tell me the number, because there were fewer than five and it does not release figures for fewer than five.

[234] **Jocelyn Davies:** So, it could have been one.

[235] **Ms Ward:** Yes, or there could have been none.

[236] **David Rees:** Could I confirm that those figures are for permanent placements?

[237] **Jocelyn Davies:** Yes, they are permanent. Do you have any figures for the residency orders or the special guardianship orders that break down? Would they be recorded?

[238] **Ms Ward:** No, they would not be recorded, other than in children coming back into the system.

[239] **Mr Brown:** The reason why the children became looked after again would be recorded, but it might not be stated that it was an adoption breakdown—it would state the reason why they became looked after again.

[240] **Jocelyn Davies:** Yes, because—[*Inaudible.*]

[241] **Ms Warren:** We had the first meeting of the expert advisory group on adoption a few weeks ago, and we had this debate then. I think that a lot of the figures that are bandied about are not Wales-only figures; they are UK figures. As Nigel said, there are different age groups, so you have to put a health warning on them. However, what we can do is send you what the data unit collect, and we could put the committee clerk in contact with the person in the data unit who collects them. They could then perhaps explain exactly what it is that they are collecting, how they are collated and what the figures tell us. I guess that you would expect me, from the WLGA, to say that, when you say that it is surprisingly low, it is because authorities are doing a good job, and we should applaud that, rather than question why it is so low.

[242] **Mr Brown:** I want to give some examples of disruption, because it is important to try to understand whether we are saying that disruption is negative or positive, or whether we are trying to say that we could have done things differently. In the authorities that I have worked in—I do not want to be too specific—some of the disruption has been in relation to 14, 15 or 16-year-olds who may have been adopted 13 years previously. Families within the general population experience difficult times with teenagers and placements unfortunately break down. So, it is not surprising that children in those circumstances will sometimes experience those kinds of difficulties and challenges. For me, it is about trying to understand what is it that we could have done differently that would have prevented that from happening, but also about what we can do now to support that family to maintain that relationship because, very often, that is the only relationship that that child has. It is broader than just saying, ‘These are the disruptions, isn’t it terrible?’ It is about understanding the impact of that on children. We know that, for the children who remain in foster care and do not go on to be adopted, the chance of placement stability for them is probably much lower than had they been adopted, because, unfortunately, foster care is not a permanent option for children.

[243] **David Rees:** On that point, do you also record the length of the adoption period in those statistics, because, as you just mentioned, the breakdown could happen several years down the line? Do the statistics record when the adoption breaks down in terms of the adoption period?

[244] **Mr Brown:** Given that the numbers are so low, we would not class that as a statistic. However, as part of the case management for that individual case, we would be very much aware of when the child was placed for adoption and the child’s history. So, we would have that information to manage that individual case. However, we would not be looking to report that. It is important that we understand the life of that child and that we use that information to support the family.

[245] **David Rees:** I understand that, but it also goes back to the fact that statistics are statistics and that there are stories behind statistics. Sometimes, that type of information should be made available, so that we can see the short-term issues and the long-term issues.

[246] **Ms Ward:** I am not sure how complex the systems of the data unit are in terms of being able to link the child that is disrupted when they are aged 15 in 2012 back to the child who was placed for adoption in 2002, for example. I am not sure whether there is that flexibility in the database system, but we can ask about that.

[247] **Jocelyn Davies:** All of this is reported up to the age of 18, is it not?

[248] **Ms Ward:** Yes.

[249] **Christine Chapman:** On that note, I draw this session to a close. There were other

questions and, again, there has been some conflicting evidence, so Members will need to look further at this. Thank you for attending; it has been an extremely useful session. We will send you a transcript of the meeting, so that you can check it for factual inaccuracy. So, thank you for attending and we will continue with this inquiry.

[250] **Jocelyn Davies:** We are leaving a lot—[*Inaudible.*]

[251] **Christine Chapman:** Yes. Before I close the meeting, I advise Members that the next committee meeting will be next Wednesday, 27 June, when we will be taking further evidence on the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill. The next evidence session on our adoption inquiry will be on 5 July, when Members will be meeting adoptive parents in Wrexham, Narberth and Cardiff. I now close the meeting and ask Members to stay for a few minutes.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 3.12 p.m.
The meeting ended at 3.12 p.m.