



Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales

Cofnod y Trafodion The Record of Proceedings

[Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb, Llywodraeth Leol a
Chymunedau](#)

[The Equality, Local Government and
Communities Committee](#)

15/12/2016

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Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public
from the Remainder of the Meeting

Cofnodir y trafodion yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynnddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir trawsgrifiad o'r cyfieithu ar y pryd. Lle y mae cyfranwyr wedi darparu cywiriadau i'w dystiolaeth, nodir y rheini yn y trawsgrifiad.

The proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, a transcription of the simultaneous interpretation is included. Where contributors have supplied corrections to their evidence, these are noted in the transcript.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Gareth Bennett	UKIP Cymru
Bywgraffiad Biography	UKIP Wales
John Griffiths	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor)
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour (Committee Chair)
Sian Gwenllian	Plaid Cymru
Bywgraffiad Biography	The Party of Wales
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru
Bywgraffiad Biography	The Party of Wales
Jenny Rathbone	Llafur
Bywgraffiad Biography	Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Naomi Alleyne	Cyfarwyddwr Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol a Thai, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Director, Social Services and Housing, Welsh Local Government Association
Rocio Cifuentes	Cyfarwyddwr, Y Tîm Cymorth Ieuenctid Ethnig Director, Ethnic Youth Support Team
Anne Hubbard	Cyfarwyddwr, Partneriaeth Mewnfudo Strategol Cymru Director, Wales Strategic Migration Partnership
Shehla Khan	Rheolwr, Y Tîm Cymorth Ieuenctid Ethnig Manager, Ethnic Youth Support Team
Cheryl Martin	Swyddog Datblygu, Tlodi Plant, Plant yng Nghymru Development Officer, Child Poverty, Children in Wales
Roisin O'Hare	Nyrs Ceiswyr Lloches, Bwrdd Iechyd Lleol Aneurin Bevan Asylum Seeker Nurse, Aneurin Bevan Local Health Board
Dr Gill Richardson	Cyfarwyddwr Gweithredol Iechyd y Cyhoedd, Bwrdd Iechyd Lleol Aneurin Bevan Executive Director of Public Health, Aneurin Bevan Local Health Board
Catriona Williams	Prif Weithredwr, Plant yng Nghymru Chief Executive, Children in Wales

Yr Athro/Professor Bill Cymdeithas Seicolegol Prydain
Yule British Psychological Society

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

Chloe Davies	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Hannah Johnson	Y Gwasanaeth Ymchwil Research Service
Christopher Warner	Clerc Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 09:16.
The meeting began at 09:16.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau
Introductions, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

[1] **John Griffiths:** May I welcome everyone to this meeting of the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee? If we go straight into item 1, I have three apologies this morning from committee members: Rhianon Passmore, Joyce Watson and Janet Finch-Saunders. Are there any declarations of interest at this point? No.

09:17

Ymchwiliad i Ffoaduriaid a Cheiswyr Lloches yng Nghymru:
Sesiwn Dystiolaeth 4
Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales: Evidence Session 4

[2] **John Griffiths:** Let us move on then to item 2, which is evidence session 4 of our inquiry into refugee and asylum-seeker issues in Wales. Thank you very much to the first panel, representing local government, for coming in to help us with our inquiry today. May ask you to introduce yourselves for the record, please?

[3] **Ms Alleyne:** Good morning. I'm Naomi Alleyne. I'm director of social services and housing at the Welsh Local Government Association.

[4] **Ms Hubbard:** Bore da. Good morning. I'm Anne Hubbard. I'm director of the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership.

[5] **John Griffiths:** Thank you very much, both. If I may begin, then, by asking the first questions, which are around Welsh Government policy—to Anne, really. Your evidence, Anne, pointed to the lack of resource and capacity, which affects your ability to support local authorities. Is that still the case or have you received further resource since providing those views?

[6] **Ms Hubbard:** It is still the case. I have received further resource recently. We now have a refugee resettlement co-ordinator. She started work about a month ago, though unfortunately she's only actually able to do three days a week at the moment. So, while that resource is really welcome, there's still work that we're not able to do because we don't have the capacity. I think it's all got much more complicated in the last year, and even in the last two months, with the Syrian resettlement, the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme and the work we need to do around widening asylum dispersal, co-ordinating work around children from Calais and Europe. So, I've got extra resource, but I still don't have enough, I think it's fair to say.

[7] **John Griffiths:** Would you be able to give the committee any specific examples, Anne, of how that's affected your ability to support local authorities and on-the-ground delivery of support and services?

[8] **Ms Hubbard:** Yes. Let's talk about the Syrian scheme, if you like. So, it's a year on now. As the scheme's developed, we're starting to look at more of the integration issues around English for speakers of other languages, around community sponsorship, and around keeping up the momentum going forward. It is complicated. We're getting funding from the Home Office for an ESOL co-ordinator to help and support local authorities on how they can best develop ESOL resources, but I just simply don't have the time to respond to all the enquiries or give the support that I feel local authorities and their partners need on some of the questions around all of this—around the funding, around the process. I'm aware that, in quite a few areas of Wales, for example, there's a lot of interest and activity around developing community sponsorship schemes. That's really quite new. We've only got one area in Wales that's formally agreed to do that. That's a whole other piece of work that needs quite intensive support and individual work with local authorities.

[9] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks very much. In general, in terms of the

Welsh Government's delivery plan for refugees and asylum seekers, what would be your main concerns—either of you?

[10] **Ms Hubbard:** Would you like to start?

[11] **Ms Alleyne:** As I think we reflected in our evidence, since the delivery plan was published, the context for refugees and asylum seekers in Wales has changed significantly. I think, when the delivery plan was published, there was some concern around some of the actions not being very SMART; they're not very specific in terms of how they'll be taken forward or how we'll monitor progress or the impact and implementation of the actions. There was broad support for the principles and for the key objectives within the delivery plan, but I think our view is that it could do with a revision and an updating in terms of the changed agenda that we do have, and the opportunity to really embed integration and address the issues that are being told to us by asylum seekers and refugees in terms of the improvements that are required in terms of those services. So, I think that while it's positive to have a delivery plan, now would be an opportune time to actually ensure that it's revised and fit for purpose for the current context that we find ourselves in.

[12] **John Griffiths:** Okay. In terms of advice services particularly, what are the real issues there? Where are the gaps in advice services, would you say?

[13] **Ms Hubbard:** I think there's a gap across the piece, really, in specialist advice for refugees and asylum seekers. Clearly, generic advice services don't necessarily have the specialist knowledge that they might need in terms of the immigration process, in terms of their benefit entitlements and housing. We have a real issue, I think, not just in Wales but across the piece, really, in terms of people with no recourse to public funds. I know we're perhaps going to talk about the immigration Act and the potential impacts of that, but certainly, we've done quite a lot of work as a partnership around issues for people with no recourse to public funds. I'm not sure we've moved forward to any great extent, but that's a really complex and technical policy area that I don't believe the expertise is out there on the ground to actually deal with those issues.

[14] **Ms Alleyne:** There's already concern around there being a dearth of advice services for the existing asylum-seeker and refugee community that we have in Wales, but I think, moving forward, that if there are—. Obviously, there'll be an increase in the number of refugees arriving in Wales, but also

through the national transfer scheme of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and there are specific legal issues and challenges for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, particularly as they transition to the adult asylum process. I think there is a lot of concern that, in terms of the funding that local authorities receive to care for UASC, there's no additional funding that is provided to cover that legal advice. It is a real concern for a lot of young people who are transitioning around what their immigration status is when they're transitioning to the adult process. So, I think, not only is there a dearth of advice services now, but I think it could become more of an issue as more asylum seekers, refugees or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children settle in Wales as well.

[15] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks for that. Could I ask you as well about the two-tier system that you've pointed to and we've heard other evidence on? It does seem that quite a lot of organisations and people in Wales believe that it has developed in that way, and that the Syrian vulnerable people dispersal scheme has one level of support and resource that is considerably better than the general picture. What do you think should be done about that? What would you like to see happen? I know that it is tempting to say, 'Okay, well let's have more resource for everyone else who is not in the position of the Syrian people under that particular scheme', but would you point to any practical—given that resource is fairly scarce, as we all know—would you point to any practical ways of addressing that disparity?

[16] **Ms Hubbard:** I think what would be really helpful—. It goes back to the delivery plan and the Welsh Government, really. I said in my written evidence that the refugee and asylum-seeker delivery plan needs to address much greater complexity, broader geographies and all of the different resettlement programmes and inclusion issues, and the different levels of expertise and infrastructure across Wales. We've got a Welsh Government Syrian refugee taskforce and an infrastructure below that. I've been in this job quite a long time, and I remember when there was the Welsh Government refugee policy forum. I believe the time is now right, perhaps, to have another look at developing that same structure, so we're not just looking at the integration issues for Syrian refugees, but we're looking at integration issues for all asylum seekers and refugees—and migrants, actually, as well, which we haven't really touched upon. That would help, I hope, address some of the disparities across the scheme.

[17] There are, actually, opportunities as well with the Syrian programme that we need to take advantage of. Local authorities have got some

resource—they're developing capacity and infrastructure in places where they never had it before. I think that may open doors, in terms of them being more receptive and more able to participate in other refugee resettlement schemes— potentially asylum dispersal, because a large part of our work as a partnership is around talking to local authorities about supporting Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham in their long-standing task of being asylum dispersal areas. I think they are now looking to authorities to provide that support and help them with that task.

[18] I just feel that an overarching policy forum could look at the issues, the risks and the opportunities across all of the schemes and develop some actions that really take advantage of the resource that we've been offered with the Syrian scheme.

[19] **Ms Alleyne:** Just to add to that, obviously, this is Home Office policy that they deliver, so a lot of the discussions that we've had through the Syrian operations board have raised that concern around what is perceived to be a two-tier system—and also the acknowledgement that a number of Syrian people will have arrived spontaneously through the asylum system who don't get the same support that refugees arriving through the Syrian resettlement programme do.

[20] So, we've had those discussions, and I think, as Anne has said, it's not something that's within our control to change. The Syrian resettlement programme is a humanitarian programme, and there are others that the Home Office runs that we don't have in Wales. So, the Gateway programme, for example, receives not necessarily similar amounts but set amounts of funding to support that. So, I think we need to look at those opportunities, as Anne said, to highlight what benefits and learning we can take from working with the Syrian resettlement programme, and build on that infrastructure that some of that funding's allowing local authorities to put in place so that there could be some potential knock-on benefit in terms of our awareness, our responsiveness, our skills and our knowledge in responding to refugee needs across Wales.

[21] Obviously, one of the other issues that we don't know is—. Obviously, people who come through the asylum system, when they receive refugee status, we don't have a figure as to how many refugees under that scheme—well, not scheme, but through that process—that we have in Wales, or where people then go to live, because they can choose where they—. So, we need a bit more information, I think, around refugees' experiences, too.

[22] **John Griffiths:** What is the Gateway programme, Naomi?

[23] **Ms Hubbard:** It's a long-standing programme—the Gateway resettlement programme—that has resettled refugees in the UK for a number of years. We've never participated in it in Wales, but I'm aware that in places like Sheffield and Yorkshire and Humberside, they've been delivering those resettlement schemes for a number of years now.

09:30

[24] **John Griffiths:** Okay. So, whose decision is it to participate or not? Is that a Home Office decision as to whether it's rolled out in Wales, or is it a matter for Welsh Government or local authorities in Wales?

[25] **Ms Alleyne:** It's a decision for local authorities in Wales. There was a request from, I think, the Welsh Refugee Council, probably about a year ago, for local authorities to get involved in Gateway, or an opportunity to get involved in Gateway, but that was around the same time that authorities were starting to plan around the Syrian resettlement programme. But there are other programmes that operate, I think. As Anne said earlier, it's about what contribution local authorities can make to all the different schemes that the Home Office is operating at the moment. So, I think the concentration has been on the Syrian resettlement programme by local authorities so far in Wales.

[26] **John Griffiths:** It might be useful if you could provide the committee with a note in terms of those other programmes and what they involve and the opportunities for local authorities to get involved in the issues around that, if that's possible. Could you tell the committee a little bit about the infrastructure that's developing, then, under the Syrian resettlement programme and how that might be used to benefit others, so we don't have this two-tier system to the extent that currently exists?

[27] **Ms Alleyne:** One of the key aspects of delivery of the Syrian resettlement programme in Wales I think has very much been the partnership approach that's been taken. So, right from the start, there's been partnership arrangements put in place, whether its forums for people to come together, in terms of health and the police and the third sector and local authorities looking at how they prepare for the arrival and resettlement of refugees. That's also included, for example, the community cohesion officers to look at

tensions within local communities or some of the opportunities to work with members of the community who came forward and very clearly wanted to support the resettlement of refugees within Wales.

[28] Anne can talk more about some of the work that will be done moving forward now around ESOL. Although it can't directly be spent on other refugees, there are positive benefits in terms of access to services. Discussions have taken place, for example, with health and there's been the development of a mental health pathway, which I know Anne's been very instrumental and very keen on, in terms of the mental health provision. So, that pathway isn't just around the Syrian resettlement programme—it gives the opportunity for a pathway to be developed that also impacts on other asylum seekers and refugees. So, I think it just gives a little bit of the examples—some of the access to interpretation or translation. Having built some of that experience and knowledge, and putting some of those structures in places—. We're talking, for example, about developing packages for schools to help schools in terms of how they respond to the resettlement of Syrian refugees, which would also have, again, an impact and a positive opportunity for working with other refugees. So, I think it has allowed some of that and some of those developments and discussions to take place.

[29] **Ms Hubbard:** Naomi talked about the partnership work. So, right across Wales, there are multi-agency partnerships that have been established at a local level and are having conversations about Syrian resettlement. I think, in the fullness of time, those multi-agency partnerships can talk about other resettlement schemes and how they manage and participate in those. So, we have now got those structures and those relationships in place. I think we're well placed to do more going forward. I think the voluntary and community sector—there's a massive amount of community goodwill out there that we haven't fully tapped into or harnessed. I think we need to find ways to do more with that.

[30] In terms of ESOL, the UK Government, on the anniversary of the scheme, announced extra money for local authorities to spend, because, clearly, the learning of English or, actually, Welsh is key to refugees' integration. So, we're getting someone to help us co-ordinate that work and we've been clear in developing our principles around this work that we want those structures that are built up around ESOL to be accessible to other learners, and they might be asylum seekers and refugees from other places—actually, evidence shows that people learn languages better in mixed-

nationality groups. So, we're very determined that any new structures we set up will, where possible, be available across the piece. So, I think, as I said earlier, there are lots of opportunities here that we need to build on.

[31] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thank you, both, for that. Jenny.

[32] **Jenny Rathbone:** One of the things that seem to be most urgently required is a skills audit of people when they arrive, and I just wondered if you've got any sort of framework that you recommend to local organisations who are the sort of front-line contacts for refugees and asylum seekers. Clearly, there needs to be some organisation, because, having identified the skill, you've then got to do something with that knowledge. So, I just wondered what conversations have been had, either with Government at national level or at local government level, to have a systematic approach to getting people using their skills as quickly as possible.

[33] **Ms Hubbard:** I think we're at the beginning of that work, and it builds on something we discussed earlier about, you know, we haven't got a great deal of capacity in my team to start facilitating those conversations. However, at our last local authority all-Wales delivery group, we had this on the agenda and we've actually flagged that, at our next session, we want to have a wider discussion around that, because it is time, you're absolutely right, that more work was done to identify what skills people are bringing. At our brief discussion last week, it became clear that nobody is really collecting that information in a systematic way, so we need to think absolutely about how we go about doing that and then developing a skills strategy so that refugees are really able to rebuild their lives.

[34] **Ms Alleyne:** I think one of the conversations that we have been holding with the Home Office is around the type of information that actually comes around the families who are arriving. So, how we can improve some of that information, so around, you know, employment or jobs people have held in the past, training or education that they've experienced, or what they were going through, so that we can have a much better sort of knowledge around that.

[35] One of the things that we would like to do through the use of the refugee resettlement co-ordinator—but, as Anne said, they've only been in post for a month so far—is actually around the better placing of families in areas that could match some of those skills or employment opportunities. So, examples have been given from elsewhere where people from Syria who

may have lived in bustling urban areas have been placed in rural areas, and vice versa. So, I think what we'd like to do is have much better information about the family and the cohort and their aspirations or their experiences, to see if we can then better match where those families are placed within Wales. So, I think that's certainly one of the aims of the refugee resettlement co-ordinator. And those issues around skills, both for young people right through to adults, in terms of being able to take advantage of the skills that people have, and to go back to practising their employment.

[36] As Anne said, one of the key issues around integration will be around the use of language, and just a good example, if you like, linked in is an example from Ceredigion, where one of the people was a blacksmith and they've matched him with a blacksmith in Ceredigion to do a little bit of sort of voluntary work, but it also gives the opportunity to improve English, because it's the social interaction within that. So, I think you can see that people will try and match that, but, as Anne said, we're at the beginning of that journey at the moment, because for a lot of people, in the first instance, it's still the resettlement and the signing on at the GP's, but, certainly, integration will be key in terms of the skills development. And I think we'd like to have more discussions with the Welsh Government then, as well as to what could be done with the Welsh Government policy to actually be able to address some of those skills, because another example that somebody gave was, again, the cost of attending some courses. So, someone was a painter and decorator, but needed to go through a health and safety course. So, is there some funding so that we can access that and then that person, once they've improved their language skills, can go out, get a job and carry on rebuilding their lives and employment? So, it's certainly a key issue for us.

[37] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Sian.

[38] **Sian Gwenllian:** Cyn inni symud i ffwrdd o'r rhan yma, roeddwn i jest eisiau gofyn ychydig o gwestiynau am yr ochr strategol. A ydy hi'n glir pwy sy'n rhoi'r arweiniad strategol yng Nghymru? Mae yna nifer o gyrff gwahanol, o beth rwy'n ei weld. A fedrwch chi ddweud wrthyf i beth ydy'r cyrff gwahanol sydd yn cymryd rhywfaint o arweiniad strategol, ac a ydych chi'n meddwl eu

Sian Gwenllian: Before we move away from this part, I just wanted to ask a few questions about the strategic side. Is it clear who gives that strategic leadership in Wales? There are a number of different bodies, from what I can see. Could you tell me who these different bodies are who take some kind of strategic leadership, and do you think they work closely enough together? And is

bod nhw'n gweithio yn ddigon agos there anything that we can do to efo'i gilydd? Ac a oes yna rywbeth y improve that strategic leadership medrwn ni ei wneud i wella'r that's offered? arweiniad strategol sydd yn cael ei gynnig?

[39] **Ms Alleyne:** I think the strategic leadership is provided at different levels. Welsh Government have, through the establishment of their taskforce, their operations board and some of the sub-groups, demonstrated that strategic leadership and helped co-ordinate the response across public services, and getting that sign-up and that buy-in across public services in Wales and, obviously, the third sector as well. Within local government, I think the Welsh Local Government Association has provided a leadership role for local authorities in terms of encouraging that sign-up and supporting some of those discussions to take place. I think the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership has provided that strategic leadership, particularly around the operational aspects, such as the provision of toolkits, which, again, is a good example of where the limited capacity has been able to be supported through the provision of advice and toolkits that authorities could work through in terms of their preparations. The refugee coalition has provided some of that strategic leadership for the refugee sector, and bringing some of the sectors and the Syrian associations together.

[40] I think what we've been able to do through the taskforce and through the operations board is to bring those different sectors together to actually look at our approach within Wales, identifying some of those issues that do need to be addressed strategically through Welsh Government, not always within their gift, but we've also then fed issues back to the Home Office. I think there has been some really good close working in Wales to take this forward. It's not always easy to keep everybody informed at the appropriate time, as Anne said. We have struggled sometimes just in terms of the urgency of the situation and the capacity to do so. But I think what we'd like to ensure is that these systems or these structures are sustainable moving forward, because this is a five-year programme, and we need to ensure that we can maintain that interest, the sustainability, the changes to policy or practice that are required as time goes on, that we learn more experience and that people settle more within different communities. So, I think it has worked quite well so far, but we'd like to make sure that those structures are there and sustained moving forward as well.

[41] **Ms Hubbard:** Could I just add—? I'm not sure my microphone is on—

oh, it is. I meet with the other UK strategic migration partnerships on a regular basis on a UK level, with the Syrian programme team and other bits of the Home Office, so there's sort of a UK picture as well that we're able to feed in issues from Wales and discuss strategic issues across all the resettlement schemes, and bring those conversations and that knowledge back to Wales.

[42] **Sian Gwenllian:** Okay. So, it looks as if it's the Welsh Government's refugee taskforce that's the crucial one for pulling everybody together.

[43] **Ms Alleyne:** It has been around the strategic response, and then the operations board will look at that in more detail in terms of taking some of those issues forward.

[44] **Sian Gwenllian:** Which is different to the Scottish kind of model, where it seems to be the Scottish Refugee Council that is taking the lead. But, you know, it's just a different way that things have evolved, probably, so if you seem to be happy with the strategic working—. Because, being new to the whole area, it looks to me as if there are lots of different organisations doing similar work, and I'm not quite sure what different ones are doing. But, you know, if you say that the taskforce actually brings people together and that there is that strategic outlook—well, that's reassuring.

[45] **Ms Hubbard:** I think there is. I think the biggest challenge around a lot of this work is the communication. The work is complicated and it's got more complicated recently with the introduction of new resettlement schemes. So, I think one of the things we struggled with was how we communicate what's happening to all partners, because it seems that people are confused about what's actually going on. Actually, there's a lot of good work going on, but we simply don't have the time to manage the information flow I think as well as we'd like to, if that makes sense.

[46] **Ms Alleyne:** I think one of the issues I would flag up, if you like, is that sometimes it's around the delivery of what is a non-devolved policy area in a devolved context. And sometimes it can be difficult because the Home Office or the Department for Communities and Local Government or the Department for Education might come out with advice, and then we can spend some time looking at how that applies in Wales, or whether it applies in Wales, and what the appropriate legislation is within Wales. So, I think it can be difficult, because sometimes you feel like you're playing catch-up with the information that's available, and it would be helpful for Welsh

Government and the Home Office to have some more of that ongoing communication prior to some of those documents coming out, because we're tied in, as Anne said. Anne ties in with the regional migration partnerships across the UK, and we tie in very closely with the Local Government Association, which does a lot of the engagement with Government around the policy on behalf of local government across the UK, obviously then taking into account the devolved matters. But, obviously, the LGA won't be able to represent Welsh legislation. So, we just need to ensure that, at the appropriate time, those discussions are ongoing so that, when information or guidance comes out, it applies to Wales and our circumstances and context at the same time that it does within England.

09:45

[47] **John Griffiths:** We'd heard previously of concern that the operations board hadn't met since June. Would that be a concern for you?

[48] **Ms Alleyne:** We have ongoing discussions with Welsh Government officials, and there have been a couple of ministerial meetings between our spokesperson, Councillor Dyfed Edwards, and the First Minister or Carl Sargeant, as the Cabinet Secretary, in that time, so I wouldn't say that we feel that there's been a dearth of discussion around those issues. I think where we have been over the last few months is more about making sure that we've got some of the capacity, so looking at the process that was continuing. I think it probably doesn't concern me that we haven't met since June, because I think there are other conversations, and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership also has an executive board that looks at the partnership with lots of those partners around the table. So, we touch on those conversations. There have been meetings of the children's sub-group and there has been a meeting of the taskforce. So there have been meetings and discussions, even if there hasn't been a meeting of the operations group. But, again, I think because of where we are and the agenda changing, it's useful for us to review that structure to ensure that it is still appropriate for what we need to do now, moving forward. So, do you need separate groups for the Syrian resettlement programme or the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children programme? As Anne said, there may be an opportunity to bring some of that together into a refugee forum. But I think we are where we are, but it's also an opportunity to look at the infrastructure, moving forward.

[49] **John Griffiths:** Okay. A final question from me in this section, just on the regional approach to resettlement: what issues does that raise for local

authorities?

[50] **Ms Alleyne:** What do you mean by 'issues'?

[51] **John Griffiths:** Well, I think we'd heard that some areas, obviously, are much more used to ethnically diverse populations and receiving asylum seekers and refugees—the cities; other rural areas much less so. So, there are particular challenges, I guess, for those areas and, if we're going to have a regional approach that moves beyond the traditional city resettlement picture, then presumably there might be some resource and knowledge or expertise issues and, perhaps, some sharing mechanisms that might help.

[52] **Ms Alleyne:** Thank you for the explanation. I think we're very supportive of authorities working together on addressing issues that can arise, or on knowledge and capacity. I think we were very heartened a year ago that all local authorities in Wales wanted to participate and wanted to receive refugee families within their areas, but that, as you've highlighted, does raise issues that some areas don't have a diverse population and there may not be some of the appropriate religious or cultural services that people may want to access. I think, in a way, some of that has been borne out by the detailed planning that authorities have had to look at, to look at how they can put some of that infrastructure in place or, for example, link up refugees who may be in some areas that are more diverse, so that actually people can feel part of a settled community.

[53] I think the resettlement of families is a very local issue, because you need that local knowledge about the housing, the access to schools and the community cohesion, but that opportunity to share that knowledge, to share that information, to share some of the expertise of resources is a real opportunity. So, I think it's something that we're bearing in mind because, particularly if an area takes only one or two families at a given time, people could be very visible in those local communities or feel very isolated in terms of language barriers as well. So, authorities are thinking about how they address some of those issues and are tying up—so, for example, trips down from one local authority to an area where there may be a more diverse community to enable people to make those connections outside of their own locality.

[54] **Ms Hubbard:** Just to add to what Naomi's said, I think the isolation of some refugees, and by no means all, is an issue, and it's not just being felt in Wales. I know from colleagues working in other regions of the UK that there

are challenges for refugees who are in areas that are not diverse, and some of those have made it through to the mainstream media, and that may, in the fullness of time, happen in Wales. So, we've got our work cut out, really, and I think that's one of the biggest challenges to manage that.

[55] I will say that UNHCR did some research in Wales, I think it was last week, in north Wales and in one of the Valleys local authorities, and the feedback I got from that—and it was specifically talking to resettled refugees—was basically wholly positive. They were very grateful for the welcome and the community support that they've received. It's not that some of them are not feeling isolated, but it was wholly positive in terms of that whole-community response.

[56] **Bethan Jenkins:** Can you just say exactly on the record what that is? Is it the human rights commission, or the—?

[57] **Ms Hubbard:** United Nations human—. UNHCR—. United Nations human—. Do you know, I've forgotten?

[58] **Ms Alleyne:** I think it's the high commissioner for refugees.

[59] **Ms Hubbard:** That's it, sorry. So, they're doing work with refugees across the UK in understanding what their experiences have been, but as I say, the early feedback from our discussions last week is that refugees are feeling very well supported.

[60] **Ms Alleyne:** Just a final point on that, just to say, as we stated in our evidence, the role of the regional community cohesion co-ordinators has been key in making sure that that information flow is there. So, I very much welcome the recent decision to continue their funding for the next year as well.

[61] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks for that. Anne, if you could perhaps share with the committee clerks that information that you mentioned on the commissioner for refugees, that would be very useful. Bethan.

[62] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes, thank you for coming here today. I think it's hard to know where to start on some of these questions, because there are so many different challenges that face people. I have set up a Facebook chat group with asylum seekers following on from my visit to the African Community Centre in Swansea as part of this committee inquiry. I've been

inundated—literally, inundated—with concerns about housing specifically, but other issues too in relation to Clearsprings housing. I’m meeting them later today to discuss some of these issues, and I’m interested to hear your views because, from your evidence, it seems that you think there’s been improvement but, from my visit—and I don’t want to turn this into a speech, because that is not what committees are for—it’s just awful, actually, quite frankly, and I wouldn’t want anybody to be living in those conditions.

[63] So, I want to understand how we in Wales can effect change. I’ve had private landlords contacting me saying that they rent out to the Home Office, then the Home Office rents out to Clearsprings. So, it is then, I think, a Welsh devolved issue in that sense, because we have private landlords here in Wales who are actively aware of what they’re doing, and they’re embarrassed by it. So, can you tell me what conversations you’ve had with Clearsprings and the Home Office on these housing issues? When complaints are made, how are they dealt with? Because I don’t think they are being dealt with effectively. If people are faced with racism, how do they deal with that? And how are people potentially moved, then, from housing if it’s in such a bad state that you wouldn’t want anybody, actually, to be living in those circumstances?

[64] **Ms Hubbard:** Absolutely, I know it’s an issue of concern to lots of people and it has come up in various places, including in the media, and there were a lot of issues that were raised around Lynx House, which was really unfortunate. So, I think there are real challenges there. I think we have an opportunity, going forward, in terms of the renewal of those contracts. So, they’re coming to an end in 20—

[65] **Bethan Jenkins:** 2017.

[66] **Ms Hubbard:** 2017.

[67] **Bethan Jenkins:** But the Home Office says they are minded to renew those contracts. So, do you have some influence on whether they are minded or not to do that?

[68] **Ms Hubbard:** No, I don’t think so, Bethan. I think what they’re doing is they’re extending them for a year, and what they’re doing within that year is consulting with local government across the UK. In fact, we convened a workshop in Wales a month ago for the asylum accommodation support transformation team, and they wanted to hear from local government about what had been the challenges with the commercial and operating managers

procuring asylum support contracts, what lessons could be learned and what our ideas are on what asylum accommodation and support might look like, going forward. So, there was an opportunity there, and we took it, to raise some of the issues, and, absolutely, the issues around monitoring the quality of accommodation came up. In my work, I convene an operational asylum support forum, and that's a platform for local authorities to engage with the Home Office and the provider around the delivery of the contracts, around the accommodation—

[69] **Bethan Jenkins:** Who is involved in that, then, because I don't think asylum seekers are aware of, actually, the existence of that?

[70] **Ms Hubbard:** Sure. It's local government, health, Clearsprings, Home Office and some voluntary sector organisations. So, we have quite wide-ranging discussions and some of the actions emanating from that group have resulted in improvements to—

[71] **Bethan Jenkins:** And how do people interact with that group? How do they tell that group what's wrong and how changes can be effected?

[72] **Ms Hubbard:** Sure. Well, one of the things we've done in the past is we initiated an asylum seeker residents forum at Lynx House, because we're aware that the complaints process or the feedback process that Clearsprings have is possibly not the most effective, and there is an issue—

[73] **Bethan Jenkins:** Why do you say 'possibly not the most effective' instead of—?

[74] **Ms Hubbard:** There is a process in place, okay, but we all know that it's very difficult, sometimes, for asylum seekers to feel that they're in a position to complain about their accommodation, because they're—

[75] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, you don't have a definitive view, therefore, as to whether it is effective or not? You say 'possibly not effective'—

[76] **Ms Hubbard:** The complaints process, you mean.

[77] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes. What is your view on whether it is actually working at all?

[78] **Ms Hubbard:** I don't know in terms of the—. The Home Office have got

a person who monitors the Clearsprings performance in terms of complaints and all of that. So, I haven't got a huge amount of detail about how all that works, but I do know that we've made representations to Clearsprings and the Home Office in the past that we'd like to see much more work around a complaints process that asylum seekers feel they can use.

[79] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, that's not something that the forum would do. The forum wouldn't look at how the complaints are analysed and how they actually go about doing that. What's the point of the forum if you don't know what happens as a result of those complaints?

[80] **Ms Hubbard:** It's the job of the Home Office to monitor complaints around asylum accommodation—

[81] **Bethan Jenkins:** Do you know, though, then, how they deal with those complaints?

[82] **Ms Hubbard:** Well, I asked the Home Office to send me some information on that, and what they've told me about that is that the property standards under the COMPASS contract are monitored by three key performance indicators to ensure it's safe, habitable and fit for purpose. They do joint accommodation inspections. Over the past—

[83] **Bethan Jenkins:** And you're satisfied with that.

[84] **Ms Hubbard:** I'm not saying it's effective. I'm saying this is what they've told me is what they've got in place. As I said, we have raised an issue, as the forum, that we don't feel that asylum seekers are empowered or enabled to raise their concerns effectively about their accommodation, because of the power relationship and the fact that they're still seeking asylum and they are concerned that if they complain, that will have an impact on their—

[85] **Bethan Jenkins:** Surely, that's then what the operational asylum support forum should be doing. If you believe that asylum seekers don't have that power and if that's not something they can do, surely that's what the forum should be doing, and if you don't know or have a view as to whether it's good or not—.

[86] **Ms Hubbard:** I do have a view—

[87] **Bethan Jenkins:** Can you tell me your view, then, please?

[88] **Ms Hubbard:** Sure. As I said, I don't think it's working effectively enough, which is why we established a residents forum, so that asylum seekers—. It was chaired by Displaced People in Action, and it was a safe space where asylum speakers could talk about all the issues they've got in terms of accommodation and support. After each meeting they would send me a report of those conversations, and Clearsprings and the Home Office would take action on some of the issues that were raised. But, going forward, I think when the contracts are renewed and offered out again, there needs to be much more work around a complaints process and monitoring of accommodation standards that improves on what we've got now, because there have been concerns.

10:00

[89] **Bethan Jenkins:** Thank you.

[90] **Ms Alleyne:** I think one of the issues is that the forum can make observations, but obviously it doesn't have the power to direct, so it's difficult. They can feed back some of those concerns, but it's still down to Clearsprings in how they respond to it, or how the Home Office then require them to comply with some of those issues.

[91] **Bethan Jenkins:** But how vocal have they been? I don't know anything about it, and I don't think anybody I've met knows anything about it, so the frustration is—and I'm sorry it's coming out in an angry way, but the frustration is, therefore, that people don't know to be able to utilise this as a form—. Because they're very, very proactive; they want to be able to be helpful to other people as well as themselves. So, how can this be made more effective in that sense so that they can engage with it?

[92] **Ms Alleyne:** I'm sure you will have heard from the third sector, who advocate very strongly, regularly, on behalf of asylum seekers in terms of quality of accommodation. The problem is that, obviously, we can raise those issues and it's how Clearsprings then respond to them. So, I do understand the frustration, because I think that's shared in terms of the accommodation doesn't always meet what any of us would think were appropriate standards.

[93] **Bethan Jenkins:** Do you think, therefore, that it should be devolved to the National Assembly? Because, of course, with housing associations we can

have the Welsh Housing Quality Standard, we can know therefore that, if things go wrong, there's accountability in the system. Do you think that would be something that we could facilitate?

[94] **Ms Alleyne:** Firstly, the Welsh Housing Quality Standard doesn't extend to the private rented sector, obviously, at the moment and a lot of the accommodation that Clearsprings uses is within the private rented sector. So, I think there are other opportunities that we would want to take advantage of within the devolved context, but I would also say that I think one of—. Because I think you heard from one of your witnesses previously that, when local authorities had the contracts, some of the issues—I'm sure there were some issues around the quality of housing, but maybe not to the extent that some of those concerns have been raised now. I think there are issues with the contracts, because, if you look at the cost or the price per unit, it seems very low. I think that you've got providers who are providing accommodation with not a huge amount of funding with which to do that, so they're sourcing accommodation that may not be the best. I think there are issues with the contracts that actually probably need to be looked at, which may be outside of the scope, because they're Home Office contacts—

[95] **Bethan Jenkins:** And did you give the Home Affairs Select Committee evidence of that nature? Because, obviously, they've been doing an investigation into the housing of asylum seekers and refugees recently.

[96] **Ms Alleyne:** We haven't, no.

[97] **Bethan Jenkins:** Okay. So, what are you actively doing, then, as an association to raise those concerns with the Home Office, considering your earlier answer to Sian Gwenllian about the fact that sometimes those nuances of devolution are not appreciated by people outside of Wales?

[98] **Ms Alleyne:** I don't think there's anything we've done specifically that I can point to, but obviously we are part of the conversations through the strategic migration partnership, and would have attended the recent events and that would, obviously, feed into the Local Government Association. But we haven't, as yet.

[99] **John Griffiths:** I'm afraid we have to move on at this point, Bethan. We've got just about 12 minutes left, and unaccompanied children and community cohesion—

[100] **Bethan Jenkins:** Can I just ask quickly about the Immigration Act 2016? Because Jenny Rathbone made a very good point in the debate we had yesterday in the Assembly about, if refugees are not, if they don't—sorry, if asylum seekers don't get refugee status then they may be then evicted from their homes. Is there something you can just say quickly on that before I finish?

[101] **Ms Alleyne:** We do have concerns around the potential implications of the Immigration Act, around the provisions for failed asylum seekers. We responded jointly to the consultation with the LGA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—which is the Scottish equivalent to the WLGA—on no recourse to public funds, because of the impact it has on the individuals, but also the duties that local authorities have to support those who are vulnerable and in destitution, because I think our concern is that the provisions will lead to increase of destitution or increase of people and families in that area. We would like further discussions with Welsh Government around how we can assess what the implications of that could be and how we respond to it, because, obviously, how the Home Office—or the UK Government—has looked at it is around sort of trying to restrict also what local authorities could do under the National Assistance Act 1948. So, I think we need a bit more guidance about what we can do within that, and work with the third sector and others to ensure, as much as possible, that we minimise that impact within Wales, because the Home Office response is that, for failed asylum seekers, they will be speeding up their process to remove people from the country who don't have a legal right to be here; I don't think reality bears that out. So, you'll still have a group of people who find themselves in that position, who are finding themselves in destitution but with very little support available. So, we're very keen to have further discussions with the Welsh Government and others around how we both assess what the impact could be, continue to monitor it, or take any steps to mitigate those impacts as well.

[102] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks for that. Sian—unaccompanied children.

[103] **Sian Gwenllian:** Diolch yn fawr. **Sian Gwenllian:** Thank you. I just want to discuss the service for which Rwyf i eisiau jest trafod y gwasanaeth gwarcheidwaeth, lle y mae yna alwadau wedi bod o'r blaen i sefydlu gwarcheidwaeth o'r fath yng Nghymru. A ydych chi'n meddwl ei bod hi yn amser rwan inni gael gwasanaeth o'r

there has been a call before—the guardianship service. Do you think it's now time for us to have such a guardianship service? We've seen Scotland with this guardianship

math yna? Rydym ni wedi gweld yr service, which seems to be very Alban efo gwasanaeth sydd i'w weld effective. It has helped 300 children yn effeithiol iawn, ac maen nhw wedi already. So, what's your opinion helpu 300 o blant eisoes, felly. Beth about that? yw eich barn chi am hynny?

[104] **Ms Alleyne:** Thank you. The guardianship service, as far as I'm aware, isn't something that's actually been raised with the WLGA in terms of seeking our view on developing that, either from the third sector or from Government in that way. So, we've actually not discussed it as an option with our members or taking it forward. Obviously, in preparing for the committee, I did have a look at some of the information around the guardianship service, so would certainly be interested to learn more about it in terms of their roles and how it operates. Obviously, within Wales, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children would have access to independent advocates, as well as social workers and others, but also I acknowledge that the guardianship service was a bit above that, if you like, and particularly around being that one source, or that continuity, for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. So, I don't necessarily have a view, because we haven't discussed it, but would certainly be keen to learn more and willing to have a conversation about it, but, obviously, would just specify that there would be—if there was a need for additional funding, to ensure that we could provide that. But, again, it's about ensuring that the best interests of the child are fully maintained and that we can really deliver positive outcomes. As I said, one of the real concerns that we do have is around the legal advice and the immigration status of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, because that's a real concern for them, particularly as they turn 18 and the transition there.

[105] **Sian Gwenllian:** So, who's helping them now with those kinds of issues?

[106] **Ms Alleyne:** At the moment you would have social workers or independent advocates, or some access to legal advice, but, again, we just don't think that's probably sufficient for the uncertainty that can impact on UASC, and not just when they get to 17 or 17 and a half. This can affect children at a younger age in terms of that. So, I think there is a need for more legal advice and support. But, again, because, at the moment, there's probably about at least half of local authorities that don't have any unaccompanied asylum-seeking children that they're currently caring for—so, they are new areas, so, it would be new skills development and awareness

and we'd like to make sure that there is appropriate training provided around that. I think that is a specialism, because the immigration legislation is not easy to navigate.

[107] **Sian Gwenllian:** Do you have a view?

[108] **Ms Hubbard:** The same as Naomi, really. I think that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are obviously very, very vulnerable. I think the specialist advocacy provision that Tros Gynnal used to provide, that service, doesn't exist anymore. So, I think unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Wales are, to some extent, disadvantaged and they don't have the services that exist in other places. I think the time is absolutely right to review the wider support that's available to them, and a service that can add value to advocacy is definitely needed.

[109] **Sian Gwenllian:** Okay, so you would be happy to look at a guardianship scheme of some sort.

[110] **Ms Hubbard:** Absolutely—happy to engage with Welsh Government in discussions around that.

[111] **Sian Gwenllian:** Turning to the guidance that there is for local authorities in dealing with unaccompanied children, is that actually being rolled out in—? You say half the local authorities—the other half is not relevant anyway, but in the ones at the moment where there are unaccompanied children, are they actually using the guidelines and is that rooting?

[112] **Ms Hubbard:** You mean the Wales practice guidance on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of unaccompanied children.

[113] **Sian Gwenllian:** Yes.

[114] **Ms Hubbard:** It does form part of the all-Wales child protection procedures. In our work on age assessment and unaccompanied asylum seekers over the years, we've certainly—. I used to chair an unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's forum, and that was a place where social workers, UK Visas and Immigration, and other partners could make sure that we adhered to the best practice that's outlined in the guidance. So, I hope it's being used. It does need updating, but lots of the principles that are outlined in the guidance are still very relevant.

[115] We did training in March of this year for social workers from Cardiff and Newport on using the guidance on best practice in age assessments. So, we do what we can to promote consistency of practice in providing support to unaccompanied children.

[116] **Sian Gwenllian:** But you've got no hard evidence that it actually is being implemented.

[117] **Ms Hubbard:** No, I don't know. I'm not aware of practice that's going on in each local authority when they're supporting unaccompanied children, whether they're actually using it. I just hope that they are, and they've certainly been encouraged to in the past by the children's commissioner and by Ministers, who welcomed the publication of the guidance. But I think there's more work to be done to promote awareness around that.

[118] **Sian Gwenllian:** Is it being monitored in any way by the WLGA?

[119] **Ms Alleyne:** No, not that I'm aware of. As Anne said, I think we are of the view that it's timely now, again, to review that and make sure that it's up to date for the circumstances. Obviously, primarily, at the moment, the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Wales is around those who've spontaneously arrived, but there's a national transfer scheme. So, you could see that, over the forthcoming period, there'll be an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. So, we need to make sure that that's updated, it's circulated and it's well used within that. So, I think, certainly, that's a piece of work, moving forward.

[120] **Ms Hubbard:** A final point on that: we are actually getting—well, hope to be getting—some resource from the Home Office for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking children co-ordination and capacity-building role. We've made an application. We haven't actually had news on whether that's been successful—we sincerely hope it will be. That will allow us extra capacity to do more concerted work around policy and practice on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, because I think there's a real gap there.

[121] **Bethan Jenkins:** When will you know?

[122] **Ms Hubbard:** Any day now, hopefully. We've been asking for a response in the last couple of weeks, so we'd certainly like to know more on that before we break for Christmas so that we can make the necessary

arrangements.

[123] **Sian Gwenllian:** Do we have any idea of numbers?

[124] **Ms Alleyne:** Well, obviously, they fluctuate. I think as a ballpark—if you take it within that—there’s probably about 35 to 40 children at the moment. As I said, I think that will increase as time goes on. That was my last round robin, if you like, but I’m aware that some UASC, again, have spontaneously arrived since that time. So, at the height, a few years ago, it was about 150 UASC in Wales, so you’ve seen that it has dropped significantly within that time. But I think we’re foreseeing that it will continue to rise now.

[125] **Sian Gwenllian:** Are you still in contact with the 150, for example? Is there that continuous involvement with the children who have been resettled, presumably?

[126] **Ms Alleyne:** As they would have grown up and as adults—are you asking whether they continue that contact?

[127] **Sian Gwenllian:** Yes.

[128] **Ms Alleyne:** I don’t know. You’d have the leaving-care process that they would go through, but, post that, I wouldn’t have thought so.

[129] **Sian Gwenllian:** No, okay. Just turning, lastly, to the age assessments and the problems that are associated with that, how are we dealing with that in Wales?

[130] **Ms Alleyne:** I think it is one of those issues that obviously—. As Anne said, a few years ago, we were discussing different processes, especially when we had higher numbers, around improving our processes of age assessment. I think one of the things that we’d like to do is to develop people with more specialist knowledge and experience, not necessarily across the 22, but at least on a regional level—so raising general awareness of all social workers or all staff who will work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the opportunity to develop some real specialist advice and experience within that. But again, it requires training, and while the partnership has a training package, the capacity to be able to go out proactively to deliver that has been a challenge.

10:15

[131] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks for that. Jenny—community cohesion.

[132] **Jenny Rathbone:** Could you just tell us how many community cohesion co-ordinators there are?

[133] **Ms Alleyne:** I think there are eight, but that's because there are some who work part time across one region. So, there's one per region, but some work part time, so there are two who share that region.

[134] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. So, there are eight full-time equivalents. The work done by the UNHRC is okay as far as it goes, but there's an awful lot more that needs to be done. When we were in Scotland, we saw the beginnings of networks of community centres where people of all stripes could come, so that there's that level of interaction around cultural activities that enhances community cohesion. I just wondered—obviously, eight co-ordinators can't do very much, but it's really about engaging and gearing up the voluntary sector to provide those links with the indigenous community. Are you able to give us any sense of what work has been done so far and whether there are any places of good practice that you'd like to highlight?

[135] **Ms Hubbard:** I was just looking at a report, actually, that I was made aware of a couple of days ago, by Coventry University, 'Beyond fear & hate: Mobilising people power to create a new narrative on migration and diversity'. It's really very good, I'd recommend it to you. There are lots of very good recommendations in there on how we can work with communities in this new context that we're all in. I recently went to a meeting of Hope not Hate. They're doing some very good work on a community level, doing workshops around how to have tricky conversations around immigration. I think there's lots more work that we need to do collectively because the climate has changed somewhat in the last year and I think people's attitudes to migration are complex. As I signalled in my response, I think the work we've done in the past around myth-busting and providing information is not really sufficient for this; we need something much more complicated and sophisticated in this new context, and I think we need to take advice from people such as Coventry University and others who've done work around this.

[136] **Jenny Rathbone:** I think it's about tapping into the ordinary people who want to do something. They need to know where to go and how to make a contribution. There were over 100 people at the Aleppo vigil last night,

organised in less than 24 hours—that was in Cardiff. I just think there's a lot of people who feel they'd like to give a hand of welcome.

[137] **Ms Alleyne:** There is a website called helprefugees.org.uk and people can go on to the website and say what support they'd like to provide. That information comes to the partnership and we pass that on to the local authority area. So, people who are making those offers of befriending, language support and taking people to the shops are passed on. What I'd suggest, just because of time as well, is that we could ask some of the community cohesion co-ordinators to provide some examples of what they are doing because—

[138] **Jenny Rathbone:** That would be excellent.

[139] **Ms Alleyne:** Some of the third sector—we know there is some of the work that you've talked about.

[140] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. Well, that would be really useful because we can try and reflect that. Just lastly, the witnesses last week suggested that local authorities were actively discouraging people from publicising the fact that refugees were arriving and what a good news story this was. I just wondered if you—particularly Naomi—could say whether there's any truth to that or if it's just perception, because in Scotland there seems to be quite a different attitude.

[141] **Ms Alleyne:** I would say it's perception, because I have spoken to a few local authority officers over the past few days around this issue, particularly because we get quite a few requests from the media for them to speak to refugee families, so I have taken some views. I think what—I'm just looking at my notes here—I think what the authorities are saying is that they very much appreciated the media's interest in the story; it's about our contribution as a country to what is an international and humanitarian crisis, and people are interested and people are keen to ensure that Wales is playing its part. So, there have been a number of instances where the families have engaged with the media and local authorities have helped facilitate that. But local authorities have also been very concerned about protecting the privacy of refugees who are arriving, particularly in areas that may not be that diverse, where people can be identified, but also around protecting the interests of those who've been through quite a traumatic time—a very, very traumatic time—but also quite a dramatic time in terms of the travel across to the UK. So, there has been, if you like, some protection

around the families to ensure that their interests are best maintained. I think what they haven't—

[142] **Jenny Rathbone:** Of course, that's correct, but I think there's a combination of things going on here. Perhaps if the journalists were less lazy, they could just drop down to Trinity church and meet a few. But I think, you know, clearly, people have to be protected for their own interests, but if they want to speak, then they should surely be enabled to speak.

[143] **Ms Alleyne:** And I think that—. Nothing that came back to me, when I was saying, 'But have people been prevented?' There was no, 'We don't prevent people from speaking. We might talk to them about some of the—'. 'Risks' is too strong a word, but I'll use the word 'risks' because there are cultural differences, there are language differences. Some Syrian families have been very guarded around what they see as intrusion within that or appearing on media that go worldwide—does that have an impact? So, I think what authorities were saying is that they haven't prevented families from speaking to the media; they may talk to them about the potential implications of doing so, but that certainly hasn't been the case, and I think that, as somebody said, I know there's concern around that access, but also, are local authorities expected to put the media in touch with other groups of citizens and our service users in such a key way that we're being asked to put the media in touch with a number of Syrian families on an ongoing basis? So, I think, when the first arrivals arrived, we met as a group, with Welsh Government, with the authorities that were receiving the families, to talk about the media response and being able to provide some information to enable the media to report their stories, but also very keen to protect the privacy and the settlement process for the refugees.

[144] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thank you very much for that. I'm going to have to stop matters there, because I know we've overrun. I know you have to give evidence to another committee here this morning, Naomi. Thank you both very much for your evidence. You will be sent a transcript to check for factual accuracy. Thank you very much.

[145] **Ms Alleyne:** Thank you.

[146] **John Griffiths:** Okay, we'll have a quick two-minute break.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10:23 a 10:27.
The meeting adjourned between 10:23 and 10:27.*

**Ymchwiliad i Ffoaduriaid a Cheiswyr Lloches yng Nghymru:
Sesiwn Dystiolaeth 5**

Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales: Evidence Session 5

[147] **John Griffiths:** Hello, everyone. Welcome to the committee. We now move into item 3 and evidence session 5 to hear evidence on our refugee and asylum-seeker inquiry from children and young people's organisations in Wales. Would you like to introduce yourselves, please—perhaps starting on my left?

[148] **Ms Khan:** My name is Shehla Khan, and I'm the manager of Ethnic Youth Support Team.

[149] **Ms Cifuentes:** My name is Rocio Cifuentes. I'm the director of Ethnic Youth Support Team.

[150] **Ms Williams:** I'm Catriona Williams, chief executive, Children in Wales.

[151] **Ms Martin:** And I'm Cheryl Martin, development officer for child poverty.

[152] **John Griffiths:** Thank you all very much. Perhaps I could begin the questioning by asking about the Welsh Government's refugee and asylum-seeker delivery plan—the main concerns that you have about the plan and how you think it should be changed. Who would like to begin?

[153] **Ms Martin:** I would like to say that I would like to see in it some measurable outcomes. There isn't very much in there about how it's going to be monitored or reviewed, and also there are no timescales in there. I'm sure you've probably heard that from others before.

[154] **John Griffiths:** Yes. Okay, so those are the main points.

[155] **Ms Williams:** I think, from Children in Wales's perspective, all of this needs to be in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and, particularly, the best-interest principles—the right to protection, the right to family life, the right to be involved in decisions affecting children and young people, as well as all the other articles—health, education and so on. And that's actually—. For us, it's also within the European context, or the

worldwide context, because there are all sorts of things like trafficking et cetera that can affect the children and young people. So, I guess there's a whole range of things within the plan that we can go into detail on, but the wider context for us is that we feel children and young people need a huge amount of attention focused on them, and that's the first major point.

[156] Things like language, for instance. You know, how much support is there for children, young people and their families who come in to Wales—real, proper support for language? That's the sort of thing that we feel is falling between a lot of different places. That's one of the best ways for children and young people to integrate into whatever situation they're in. And so, the focus—I think it's the attention to detail on the practicalities within the plan that we would like to see more evidence of.

10:30

[157] **Ms Martin:** Can I just add—? I know that there was an equality impact assessment made of the plan, but I'm not sure whether there was a children's rights impact assessment made on the plan. I think we'd like to see that.

[158] **John Griffiths:** Okay; thank you very much. That's a point, perhaps, we might pursue. Any others?

[159] **Ms Cifuentes:** I think the plan is very much of its time. It was written two years ago, when refugees were pretty much a niche preoccupation; where we are today is that it's the main concern for many of the population of Wales. I feel that the plan focused too much on the direct support needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. Although that does need attention, there was insufficient attention given to the context that they live in and insufficient focus given to challenging misconceptions amongst the wider population living in Wales. I also felt the plan, which is common, I think, to a lot of Welsh Government delivery plans—they just tried to put into the plan activities that were already going on, or small-scale activities that Welsh Government were already funding, and tried to present those activities as meeting the needs of the whole refugee population and the whole issue of refugee resettlement in Wales, which was never going to happen. So I feel the Welsh Government didn't reach out enough beyond Cardiff to look at what other organisations were doing to support refugees and asylum seekers across Wales, and that that limited the scope and potential of the plan. So I would like to see a much more holistic understanding of the issue of

refugees, understanding that the main challenge that they face is actually how they are perceived, rather than direct issues regarding housing and schooling, which are issues that everybody shares.

[160] **John Griffiths:** Okay; thank you very much. We'll be moving on to some of those matters later on. Just in terms of ESOL, is that something you see as a UK Government responsibility, or a Welsh Government responsibility?

[161] **Ms Williams:** The UK Government's not proactive in Wales. I think we have a duty in Wales to be really very, very proactive. It's the essence of how families fit in, how the children and young people are able to function. There's basic language support, and it's very—like you've just said, it's in pockets. Local authorities should have an absolute duty to make sure everybody is able to reach whatever level of language they're able to. You have all the other immigration requirements of language at a later stage, so to me, I think we perhaps are a little bit—like Rocio's just said, we see it as a separate issue, but actually this is a fundamental mainstream issue that we should, for all people—. My own daughter went to Brunei, and when she got there, there was a buddying system; they helped you get around the whole of the system—the banks, the law, the language. Everything needs to be really focused on holistically: 'How is this young person or this family going to settle in this area as quickly as possible?'

[162] **Ms Cifuentes:** I'd like to add that I believe the UK Government should be pressurised to put more central funds towards ESOL from the Home Office under their migration policy. However, education is a devolved issue in Wales, and the Welsh Government does have a duty to ensure that people living in Wales have good access to education and that that access is equitable. ESOL provision is also one of the most cost-effective ways of assisting integration and it saves so much money in terms of savings that would then need to be used on LanguageLine or problems that happen due to language barriers: a lack of integration, a lack of access to employment, and so on. So it's a hugely cost-efficient measure, if funding could be improved. We all know that demand hugely outstrips supply at the moment. There are huge waiting lists, I think, across most of Wales.

[163] **John Griffiths:** Thanks very much for that. Children in Wales, in your evidence you've stated that, in terms of a delivery plan, there's not enough resource and capacity to deliver at a national level. So, I think the committee would be interested in some specific examples—you may well have just given one—of how that impacts.

[164] **Ms Williams:** Perhaps I could kick off. I think the language one is certainly one of our top issues, because interpreters and all that system costs money as well. So it's a false economy to think it's cheaper, but it's also the lack of priority given to resourcing in this field.

[165] I have another hat as well as vice-chair of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, and funding into the third sector to be involved in a whole range of the grass-roots activity that's very supportive of integration and just welcoming people practically—there's a whole range of wonderful initiatives that, if they could just be increased in size, would be very helpful, but there isn't the resource behind that. So, I think that's one example.

[166] **John Griffiths:** So it's upscaling generally.

[167] **Ms Williams:** Yes, it's really being aware of what works, and particularly what's needed—what people are identifying as what they need—and then probably the third sector is a really good place to begin to look at how that is going to be operated.

[168] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thanks very much for that. Could I move on, then, to the 28-day move-on period? We've heard that there are significant issues around this, and the difficulties that time constraint creates for people. What would be your view as to what the Welsh Government might do to address those issues?

[169] **Ms Martin:** You've probably already heard that there is this problem with the 28-day move-on period. During that 28-day period, people have to apply for national insurance numbers, and before they have a national insurance number they can't apply for housing or any benefits, and certainly for children and families that can be a severe problem, because it means they're in danger of becoming destitute during that time, and not having any access to services. So, the 28-day move-on is not only about accommodation; it's about the financial NASS support they get as well, which stops. So, there is a danger. There is a big gap and a danger of children and families falling into destitution, and having to rely on charities.

[170] **John Griffiths:** In terms of the Welsh Government, then, would you point to anything that you think the Welsh Government ought to do that it isn't doing to deal with those difficulties?

[171] **Ms Williams:** There's a whole range. I could talk all day about the effects in terms of the UN convention. Children are totally out of—they're exempt in terms of—. There's a whole raft of issues. To make strong, evidence-based representation, let's get some evidence from Wales of the actual stories from families, exactly what is happening, and take those to the DWP or whoever to make sure that it's on the record, and is regarded as a top priority.

[172] I think it's quite difficult, isn't it, because we don't want to start absorbing all the funding that we have in Wales on things that should be funded from the UK Government. So, I think that's a political issue. I don't know if, Rocio, you have a view.

[173] **Ms Cifuentes:** I don't know what power the Welsh Government would have to ask for the period to be extended, quite simply. It's just a practical matter—the logistics, the bureaucracy of benefits and NI numbers and so on. It just can't be done in that timescale, regardless of the vulnerabilities of the people going through that process. I don't know who decides, or why it's 28 days, and I don't know if there are similar issues happening in England and Scotland in terms of that period. It is very unrealistic, and a lot of people do fall destitute in that time, including children and families.

[174] **John Griffiths:** Well, obviously, the UK Government decide that 28-day period, and pressure could be brought to bear there, but we did hear when we were up in Scotland that there may be ways of addressing some of the issues in terms of devolved responsibilities. Bethan, did you want to come in at this point?

[175] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes, I just wanted to ask: in relation to what you said on getting it on the record and asking people, can you tell me if you're doing that, so that we can actually put that evidence forward to the Home Office from children so that they can show what the issues are?

[176] My second question is not specifically with regard to the 28 days. I didn't ask in the previous session, but when I meet asylum seekers and refugees, they tell me that quite a lot of the problems stem from the cost of education, from trips and uniforms—just those demands that, really, shouldn't be on them. We did an investigation in the previous Assembly on trying to mitigate for parents who may not be able to afford some of these things. I was wondering whether, even though we don't have the power over immigration and such, we could be doing things in the devolved areas better

to protect the children from having—. I spoke to an asylum seeker last week, and they said, ‘Oh, my child doesn’t go on the trips because the school won’t fund it and so he doesn’t want to go to school that day, because he feels isolated.’ That shouldn’t be the case, because that child already feels isolated enough. So, it’s those small things that may not be, initially, the stand-out things, but something that you can change to help them.

[177] **Ms Williams:** I think there is a whole range of things. On Saturday, Julie Morgan had arranged—and I met some asylum seekers—a small meeting; they were from Syria. One of the first things was that a lady produced a letter she’d had about having to pay—she hadn’t paid for school meals, and she should be entitled—. I think there’s a whole range of systems that local authorities could implement that are straightforward.

[178] In relation to the other issues—for instance, school uniforms—we did a report a few years ago about how, for all children living in poverty—. Actually, why would you have to have a badge on your jumper that’s expensive? Why can’t you just have schools with a colour or—? Make it accessible and as reasonable as possible. Cheryl, you deal with poverty, I think, and it is an issue for quite a lot of children, within which they are one group.

[179] **Ms Martin:** I think one of the issues is lack of information and education for professionals and practitioners about what the issues are for children from asylum-seeking families coming in. It can be very difficult—the whole integration system. If we take what Catriona said back a further bit to schools, when asylum seekers first arrive, they don’t understand how things work in Wales. ‘What’s a key stage? Why is my child in year 6 when he’s 11 years old? Why not in year 11? What’s a parents evening? What’s expected of me? Am I going to be judged on my parenting skills because of—?’ You can translate that through to health: ‘What’s a GP? What’s a midwife? What’s a health visitor? What’s the difference between midwife and health visitor?’ They live in fear of falling foul of systems.

[180] I heard of one incident where a mother—her child, an asylum-seeking child, was being bullied. She didn’t know what the systems were to deal with bullying, and this child had been physically bullied—had been assaulted. She went to the police, and she said, ‘My child has been assaulted—’

[181] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, so to get round this problem, surely what we need is a one-stop shop, just like people with health issues, and a key

worker. Otherwise, they're just repeating the same story and everybody's wasting their time listening to this long story. If you had one person dealing with it—do you support that and how far away are we from having that sort of system here?

[182] **Ms Martin:** Quite a long way.

[183] **Ms Williams:** I think we're a very long way away. I think the idea of having a reduced number of people interfering in the young person's life or the family's life—. I was in the European forum on the rights of children in migration two weeks ago, and one of the issues is the volume of people who've talked to these children and families en route here, so that by the time they arrive in Wales they've spoken to numerous people and repeated their stories, et cetera. It's like any child who is on the move, a young person through the care system or whatever, they need stability and continuity so they don't have to repeat everything. I alluded to my own daughter having a buddy when she arrived in the country she went to; they need the same to be able to have just all the basic things: are they allowed to do this, what's legal, what's not, do I end up in prison? Particularly if you've come from an oppressed country; you know, if they're scared of a lot of things—.

10:45

[184] **Jenny Rathbone:** Some of these things could be resolved by the school, to be honest.

[185] **John Griffiths:** Would you say that professionals in education, in health, in housing are adequately trained in terms of asylum-seeker and refugee issues, or not?

[186] **Ms Cifuentes:** Can I go back, if I may, to Bethan's question? In terms of how Welsh Government could mitigate some of those issues, I think two things. I think everything you've just been saying is better funding for the voluntary sector, because that key worker role is already carried out very successfully and effectively by lots of small voluntary community level groups across Wales. Swansea, Cardiff, Newport and Wrexham have a plethora of effective voluntary organisations that do go with asylum seekers and refugees to the school, to parents evenings, to explain what all these terms mean, who help them find, if they need a food bank or clothing, all these locally based services. I really feel that the Welsh Government needs to be much more effective and targeted in its funding of the voluntary sector to

make sure that it really reaches the communities that need it and can use the funds well.

[187] I also think, secondly, that there should be an emergency fund set up that asylum seekers and refugees can access, as well as other vulnerable individuals. That will avoid destitution and people falling into the most horrific circumstances. The Welsh Government surely has a duty to protect everyone living in Wales. So, I think there is a lot already going on, it needs to be better funded and supported and strategically joined up.

[188] **John Griffiths:** Thanks very much for that, and I take it from what you indicated by nodding your head that there is an issue with training for professionals as well. Yes, if you would, Shehla.

[189] **Ms Khan:** There is just one last point on Bethan's question. There isn't a uniform approach from statutory organisations when it comes to supporting asylum-seeker children, especially in schools. It's all based on each individual school, so some schools are excellent at providing free school meals, but others aren't. If there was some strategic direction for education, it would really help, and then all schools could follow that same format. So it makes it easier for that key worker, it makes it easier for the young people, and it makes it easier for the school staff if there's that format for them to follow.

[190] **John Griffiths:** Thank you very much for that. When you talk about the need for co-ordination, have you a view as to how that would be best achieved? Who should be doing the co-ordinating, and what structures might help?

[191] **Ms Cifuentes:** There are so many levels. I think, within education, there could be better co-ordination just across schools, so that there are clear guidelines for how schools should respond to refugee and asylum-seeker children. Similarly, for the health sector and the police, each profession needs clearer guidelines and, coming back to your question, there is at the moment a lack of understanding and a lack of effective training. Most public sector professionals, unfortunately, don't understand the difference between asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. They use the terms interchangeably and, even though they want to understand, they don't because the information isn't there, the training isn't there. The media messaging is so negative and misleading most of the time that even professionals who want to do their best aren't able to effectively support

people because they don't understand the different rights that different groups have, and so on.

[192] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Yes, Catriona, did you want to want to come in at this point?

[193] **Ms Williams:** Yes, I was just really wanting to say that we've got a lot of experience of children through the care system—and I'm not suggesting that these children are going to go through that route—but a designated person in various public bodies, who has that knowledge and expertise—a go-to person—within either the school or the education system. For looked-after children, there is somebody who's got that responsibility to actually talk to the children and make sure that—. It doesn't necessarily work, but at least there is somebody who's gathering in the knowledge and the issues because we do need to know what young people themselves want and families need.

[194] **Jenny Rathbone:** Moving on to the numbers of children in care, what do you think is going to happen when the Immigration Act 2016 is implemented in Wales, and families who have been refused asylum are no longer eligible under the right to rent? What is going to happen to these children?

[195] **Ms Martin:** In relation to going on to not being eligible for the section 95, and families will now go on to section 4—

[196] **Jenny Rathbone:** Could you just tell us what section 95 is?

[197] **Ms Martin:** Sorry, section 95 is the NASS system—national asylum seeker support. Section 95 is the amount of money that they will get whilst their claim is being processed. If they are then refused, they move on to section 4. Section 4 is a cashless system.

[198] **Jenny Rathbone:** It's a what system?

[199] **Ms Martin:** A cashless system.

[200] **Jenny Rathbone:** Cashless?

[201] **Ms Martin:** Cashless. So, they're given what looks like a credit card, which they take to the post office and it's charged up, and they can go and do their shopping in various allocated—

[202] **Bethan Jenkins:** That's a bone of contention as well.

[203] **Ms Martin:** Yes. Allocated shops like Asda or Sainsbury's.

[204] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. But specifically in relation to housing, how is this going to be affecting families with children in the future?

[205] **Ms Martin:** I'm not an expert in that field, but it will affect them.

[206] **Ms Williams:** Oh, yes. I think it's a huge issue.

[207] **Jenny Rathbone:** But we need to know about it now, don't we? Because it's going to cost local authorities a fortune.

[208] **Ms Williams:** Yes. I think this is the question, certainly from my experience across Europe, particularly currently, then the numbers and beginning to think laterally about how we deal with this is the agenda, as opposed to just assuming we can absorb exactly what we've had to date. I am not an expert directly. You have more direct contact as to the exact impact on families, but in terms of from a policy or a local authority or funding perspective, to give a quality service in the best interests of that child and family, basically, all the children are children and young people, like the children who go through in the care system at the moment, and these children require the same level of service as everybody else. So, it is an issue, and it's a resourcing issue that I think that, in terms of Welsh Government, we need to look at and actually begin to—. There are certain question marks about how many we're talking about. That might be a commissioned piece of research to look at not just currently, but potential projections, so that budget planning can take this into consideration, and the child impact assessments for Government, but local authorities as well.

[209] **John Griffiths:** Okay. That takes us into UK Government policy, and I think Bethan might have a further question on this.

[210] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes. Jenny has covered the Immigration Act, but if you've got anything to add on that, that would be useful. My interest at the moment is with regard to housing. I know that you said at the beginning that it may not be the—well, not the most important, but it may be secondary sometimes to how asylum seekers and refugees are perceived, but from my interactions, it seems to be one of the main issues that they face on a daily

basis.

[211] I wondered whether you could tell us more about whether you've raised concerns about some of the contracts that are in existence, specifically with organisations like Clearsprings, who are very poor in dealing with complaints from asylum seekers, and whether you think that housing, potentially then, could be devolved to Wales on this area so that we can deal with it here in Wales and the effect it has on children, because, of course, they're going home to—. I met a family last week where there are four or five people sleeping in one bedroom because they can't sleep in the other room because there's water coming out of the ceiling. So, how that affects their lives and their educational and health attainment in that regard, so, yes.

[212] **Ms Khan:** This is one of the most common issues that we see. A lot of the families, especially the women in the house, are on anti-depressants because they've got issues anyway that they're dealing with. On top of that, they've got housing that is so poor in quality and they've got children they're supporting through a lot of other issues, as well as coming home and then finding that their mum's quite depressed because she's spent the whole day in this really depressing environment. The furniture is appalling, the state of the houses is appalling, the carpets are appalling, and you just constantly raise these issues with the housing providers. The housing officers are not at all helpful, even though you empower the asylum seekers and refugees to call the housing officers every time there is a potential leak or what have you. They won't respond to their queries and there isn't an external body that you can complain about to get matters resolved. So, if there was any way of getting that power within Wales, it would just be really empowering—one issue at least could be resolved for these families.

[213] **Ms Cifuentes:** I think, from our experience, the local authority are embarrassed to have housing of this quality provided to people living in Swansea—to asylum seekers in Swansea. The local authority have far higher standards in their own housing, and they feel very frustrated about the lack of accountability that they see, so they don't have a clear point of contact with Clearsprings, which is the main housing provider for asylum seekers. It seems that everything has to go back through the Home Office, and there aren't clear lines of communication or accountability. As you've raised recently, the conditions are very much substandard and shouldn't be accepted, really, by the Welsh Government, because it is happening in Wales.

[214] **Bethan Jenkins:** Generally, then, with regard to communication

between the Welsh Government and the UK, do you think that's sufficient? Of course, if these issues are non-devolved. It's not just housing; it's the cards, you know, they can't go to the shops that they want to go to that may be cheaper; and there are transport issues via the funding that they get from the Home Office. How well do you think the Welsh Government is doing in that type of relationship with the UK Government in that regard?

[215] **Ms Cifuentes:** I think it should aim to be much stronger and much more of an equal partner on the issue of how refugees and asylum seekers are received, because it is happening in Wales. It's not happening in—. The Welsh Government is concerned with what happens in Wales, and it should stand firm that it won't allow substandard treatment for anybody in this country.

[216] I think, from my experience, the lines of communication and accountability are really unclear. So, even when we've been dealing with local authorities under the Syrian resettlement scheme, they constantly have to go back to the Home Office. The Welsh Government, I'm not clear what role the Welsh Government have had in deciding which families come and when—

[217] **Bethan Jenkins:** —and where they go.

[218] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes. So, it's direct between the local authority and the Home Office, which, to me, doesn't seem right. I think we have to bear in mind the direction of the UK Government in terms of migration policy, and the spirit of the Immigration Act 2016 very much goes against what I hope is the spirit of the Welsh Government. So, it will be difficult, but I think the fight needs to be fought.

[219] **Sian Gwenllian:** Is the housing problem just in Swansea and Cardiff, or is it general, in your experience?

[220] **Ms Cifuentes:** I only have direct experience of Swansea, and the main provider that I've heard complaints about is Clearsprings.

[221] **Ms Martin:** Clearsprings Ready Homes has the contract for the whole of the south-west of England and Wales.

[222] **Sian Gwenllian:** It seems to be that the problems, the really bad situations, are coming from the Swansea area.

[223] **Ms Martin:** No—and Cardiff. Cardiff, definitely.

[224] **Bethan Jenkins:** I don't think it's exclusive to Swansea, just that I've—

[225] **Sian Gwenllian:** You've highlighted it.

[226] **Bethan Jenkins:** —experienced it.

[227] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Well, Sian, unaccompanied asylum-seeker children, moving on.

11:00

[228] **Sian Gwenllian:** Yes. This idea of a guardianship service, what are your views on that? Is it time for us to be looking at that properly?

[229] **Ms Williams:** Certainly, the Scottish model has been there—it has been working. I suppose one of the things to say here is, most countries that are dealing—. This is the document, the European principles and guidance for guardianship. So, all other countries are looking at it and doing it. There was a whole session looking at how it was working, et cetera. It really goes back to what you were saying earlier about having one person who's going to really be looking after the interests of that child.

[230] Perhaps one thing I do want to say, and I didn't really answer your question earlier, Bethan, about young people's views on things and how that's going to come into the system—. That is one way of supporting young people to get their views into Young Wales or into whatever youth groups or whatever—to have a guardian. I think the numbers here perhaps have been one of the reasons why Welsh Government haven't progressed it, but that really should be looked at, because it's been proven to be successful elsewhere, and we know that the numbers are likely to increase from the Syrian resettlement programme.

[231] There's a whole range of things that that guardian can help on with the best interests of the child. One of them, and perhaps it's something we don't think about that much, is reunification of that child or young person with a family member who's in another country, because it's not automatic that anybody unaccompanied—. This was a real strong message from people directly involved internationally—don't just immediately assume that you have got that young person for ever in your country, because the best

interests of the child is to be with their family, and if their family are lost somewhere else—. So, there's a whole range of activities that the guardian, for whatever period of time, could look at, coordinate and help to support the best interests of the child.

[232] The other thing might be that advocacy perhaps has been thought of as what we've got in Wales. We've got a system, but the funding—. That's a reactive sort of service and, again, with funding, it's not been that well-funded. I know committees have had lots of discussions about advocacy, but I think we're basically keen on the guardianship.

[233] **Sian Gwenllian:** What would be the difference between an advocate and a guardian, then, in your opinion?

[234] **Ms Williams:** I think it's the longer-term nature of the relationship. It's a model that could be looked at, because we've got an advocacy system here, about how it's put together, to actually look at it using the principles of guardianship. Cheryl.

[235] **Ms Martin:** The thing about advocacy is that it's a reactive thing. So, it's something that is done to support a child or young person to have their views expressed, to have something started, stopped, changed or what have you—whereas a guardianship is a proactive thing. So, it's actually being proactive in getting, as Catriona said, the best interests of the child. So, it's very different. So, you're going from bottom up to top down.

[236] **Sian Gwenllian:** Do you think that guardians should be part of the looked-after children system? That's the way they do it in Scotland, isn't it, which seems to be a practical way of doing that.

[237] **Ms Williams:** If you think of the children as children first and as asylum seekers or refugees second, the system should be the same and the quality of the service should be the same for all children. So, it naturally fits in with placements and placement stability and quality. That is the issue. We've got to watch the quality of all the activities around these children, however well-meaning a lot might be. We need to be careful, we need to protect them; they need to have standards of—. So many children throughout Europe have got involved in being trafficked, et cetera—you know, we have issues in Wales. So, we need to protect and have the quality that looked-after children would have.

[238] **Ms Cifuentes:** I don't know the proposals for the guardianship system in detail, but it does sound like a sound proposal. However, I would just like to suggest that any such system should look to harness and work closely with any existing expertise and support that is happening already that would complement that service, which I think should fit within the looked-after children team. However, from our experience, generally within social services and looked-after children teams, there is a lack of cultural expertise and understanding, and that gap would need to be plugged, and I think, in partnership with the voluntary sector, that could be done.

[239] **Ms Williams:** Actually, in Children in Wales, Cheryl and colleagues do cultural awareness training exactly because of that, with a whole range of professionals, and I think that the workforce issue, generally, is quite a big one.

[240] **Sian Gwenllian:** There are guidelines for local authorities. In your experience, are those being used properly? Are they being monitored?

[241] **Ms Williams:** I personally couldn't say or answer your question, actually.

[242] **Ms Martin:** I have been out—. I haven't worked in that field for two or three years now—for two years—but there is, certainly around the age assessment, there is the new guidance, the toolkit, which came out and which is very good, but, actually, it's 84 pages long and there appears to be an expectation in local authorities that anybody, any social worker, will be able to read this manual and do an age assessment, which I think is totally unrealistic. There does need to be specialist, trained people within local authorities to do those age assessments, and I think you've had some information.

[243] **Ms Williams:** Well, yes. In the middle of this very large meeting with Ministers and NGOs and everybody looking after unaccompanied young people across Europe, the experts all stood up and said that, definitively, at this point in time, there is no scientific way of age assessing, and I just want that on the record, because I've heard it straight from the horse's mouth. So, whatever ideas are put in anywhere, at the moment, there is no way—

[244] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, it's not an assessment of teeth, then?

[245] **Ms Williams:** Teeth, bones, nothing—it's not possible. So, you actually

need to have the expertise of somebody who is working with a whole range of young people, who may know that young person, who might have known them back in whichever country they've come from and knew what year they were in school there or—you know, there's a whole range of things. But having the one-stop-shop sort of idea of expertise is important.

[246] **Ms Khan:** Can I just add that the experience of local authorities following these guidelines, recent experiences of Swansea—? It is really wonderful to have these guidelines. And there've been very active social workers who have taken this forward. But it comes back to, again, the point that was made earlier about lack of understanding of other professionals who are around those unaccompanied asylum seekers, supporting them. Very recently, we had a case of an unaccompanied asylum seeker who faced racial discrimination, which had a huge impact on his well-being, but others around the table dismissed it and actually moved the issue on by removing that young person away, not actually addressing the attitudes and behaviours. And it just goes back to that lack of understanding of the issues that are around this whole idea of how the world perceives asylum seekers and refugees, and we're not addressing it in the most appropriate manner at the moment. So, guidelines are only as good as the trained professionals who are around these people to support them through these issues. So, experiences are varied, when you've got great workers around and when you've got, again, a third sector who knows how to culturally support these young people, it works wonderfully, but when you don't have that third sector who has that understanding, then it can be left incomplete.

[247] **Sian Gwenllian:** Can I just ask one general point about strategic leadership? Do you think it's clear where that is coming from in Wales? Who's taking the lead on this, and who's actually co-ordinating the response? Is it clear?

[248] **Ms Cifuentes:** No.

[249] **Ms Williams:** In relation to the Syria resettlement programme, I think there is clarity about the drive that's coming from the heads of children's services, linking with Welsh Government. And one of the earlier questions, I didn't have a chance to respond to—I think Welsh Government are now, on this particular programme, are trying hard, I think, but it takes two to tango, and I think the problem is actually even basic things around understanding in the Home Office of that there is children's legislation that isn't legislation to do with immigration; really basic things. I'm in one of the groups, and, whilst

the individual people may be very competent in their own fields, the children's fields and linking it across and driving it forward has been difficult. So, I think the heads of children's services in local authorities have taken upon themselves for this particular resettlement programme what they feel needs to happen. So, to try to avoid things like the Home Office saying there's going to be a young person coming to whichever town in four areas in Wales to be reunited with their family, which they've assessed; somebody's said there's a family. The local authority needs to have much earlier notice of that so they can actually go and see are they being moved to another trafficking situation, or are they being moved to a proper uncle. There's a whole range of issues. So, I don't know, really, what's happened before, but for this programme I think there is an attempt to try to begin to drive it. To my mind, it should be with mainstream children's services, and that co-ordinated across Government to local authorities and health boards. The people who know about children are the ones who should be dealing with the children.

[250] **Ms Cifuentes:** I think a lot of issues are being confused and conflated. So, the Syrian resettlement programme, the Welsh Government did co-ordinate quite an effective board and operations taskforce, or something, and met a few times to look at co-ordinating that programme. But the remit was only the Syrian families being resettled through the Home Office programme. It doesn't take into account the asylum seekers who are spontaneously arriving in the UK and are dispersed to Wales. There isn't, as far as I know, a similar board that is looking at general refugee and asylum seeker resettlement in Wales. And there isn't, as far as I know, a board that is looking specifically at unaccompanied asylum-seeker children. So, there are three quite distinct issues that get jumbled up quite often in these discussions, and ideally Welsh Government should be setting up a board that maybe could have separate task groups to look at the specific issues under that. There could definitely be a clearer role for Welsh Government co-ordination of all of those. That would need to include third sector organisations, but also key public sector organisations.

[251] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thank you very much for that. Jenny, I think you've got some questions.

[252] **Jenny Rathbone:** Rocio, you stated very clearly that the Welsh Government has an insufficient effective media and communications strategy. What form do you think that communications strategy should take?

[253] **Ms Cifuentes:** I'm not a communications expert, but I—

[254] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. I'm not trying to put you on the spot; I'm just—

[255] **Ms Cifuentes:** I would like to see far stronger messaging from politicians filtered through the media, not just the *Western Mail* but looking at radio, TV, social media, looking at perhaps key points in the calendar where issues could be raised and highlighted, campaigns could be planned and delivered, maybe around Black History Month or Refugee Week, UN Day against race discrimination—there are certain events for which I'm sure you have a communications department and people working in that who can plan effectively.

[256] **Jenny Rathbone:** In the National Assembly, we do, yes.

[257] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes, who can plan events, but those events need to reach the places they really need to reach, not just preaching to the converted. So, that's been the problem with lots of community cohesion-type events, where the usual suspects turn up and it doesn't really change the attitudes of the wider public. So, there needs to be a far more effective communications strategy that looks to reach the most deprived communities in Wales by whatever media they are mostly using. Locally, the *South Wales Evening Post* is very supportive. I have to commend it as a really good example of supportive media around the issues of refugees and asylum seekers.

11:15

[258] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, in your area, around Swansea, you've used the media effectively to promote—

[259] **Ms Cifuentes:** We have. We have good contact with that paper. They regularly feature positive news stories about asylum seekers and refugees. But I haven't seen that happen in other—. Maybe I haven't seen it, but I'm not aware of it happening, and I haven't seen it as prominently in the *Western Mail* or other media. So I would like to see more of that.

[260] **Jenny Rathbone:** There's a perception by some organisations that local authorities are verbally saying to people, 'Don't engage with the media, because that could be counterproductive.' Have you heard that?

[261] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes. I think in some cases, particularly the newly arrived Syrian families, they've been bombarded with requests from media for interviews, and people wanting to make documentaries—and radio and everything—about them. These people have just left a war zone, they've been here a couple of months, so we ourselves have recommended to them—we've offered them the opportunity, but we've been glad, really, when they've declined, because it could open up a can of worms and could attract negative attention. So we are very careful about the way that we use individuals to highlight positive messaging. That individual has to be in a safe place, resilient enough to cope; that is our primary concern.

[262] **Jenny Rathbone:** I think those are very serious points we'd all accept, but there are many other asylum seekers who've been here a lot longer who might wish their voice to be heard.

[263] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes, and they're free to—. In these examples, I'm only talking about the local authority having advised recently arrived Syrian refugees not to engage with the media—

[264] **Jenny Rathbone:** So there's a slight confusion of message here, that, obviously, recently arrived from a war zone, they're very vulnerable people, but other people—voluntary organisations, maybe, have interpreted that as 'Don't engage with the media, full stop.'

[265] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes.

[266] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. And that's perhaps—. Could you just say a little bit more about the need for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of community cohesion? Because I think this is a significant to the whole panel, and it is very important, really. We're not just talking about combating hate crime, which is with us, and we all need to do that, but I think, really, it's much more about enabling people to meet each other. So how much do you think organisations like yours can promote community cohesion, which is an issue not just for refugees and asylum seekers, but for all members of the community?

[267] **Ms Williams:** I think, in terms of Children in Wales, as a national umbrella organisation with a lot of members who reach an awful lot of communities and people, we can have a role in supporting it. In terms of the not speaking to the press, I've only ever heard that, really, recently with the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers—but promoting some of the

organisations that are really very, very locally based; friendship groups, and how you connect. I actually think politicians, in your own wards, have a lot of knowledge about what's on the ground and mobilising people to get involved—and you've got some examples, Cheryl, I know. I think the key thing, really, for an organisation like ours is: what is the message we're going to give to our members about what is needed? So, for young people, for instance, I would like to see a lot more young people putting their stories on social media, connecting in with the Young Wales networks, linking in to any youth forums and youth groups. One of the bits of work that we're doing is supporting an organisation that's involved with black and ethnic minority groups to help them with their development of their young people's network, so that could then link into the other young people's work in Young Wales, where emotional well-being's a big thing. Now, there's a whole area, clearly, for this group in that field. But I do think the very, very local is one of the key—

[268] **Jenny Rathbone:** In Edinburgh, we heard of voluntary organisations going into schools and talking to children about being a refugee, and what it all meant. That seemed an excellent idea. Are you aware of any organisations doing that in Wales?

[269] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes, we do that on a regular basis.

[270] **Jenny Rathbone:** Well, that's excellent.

[271] **Ms Cifuentes:** We deliver a lot on a weekly basis. Probably two or three times a week we're in different schools delivering awareness sessions around refugee awareness, Islamophobia and diversity. It's tailored to what the school asks for, but it's a very popular service that we run, very much in demand and very effective.

[272] **Jenny Rathbone:** Excellent. Thank you for that.

[273] **Ms Cifuentes:** Can I respond to your question around community cohesion? In the evidence that I submitted, I was referring to this notion—. I really feel that we need to change the language that we use and be clearer about what we mean. I feel that, too often, community cohesion is used as a euphemism for race. Basically, 'What do we do about brown people?'—not to be flippant about it. I think if we mean racial minorities, ethnic minorities, let's say that. I feel that the term 'community cohesion' needs to be expanded. We need to look at class inequalities in our society and the huge

gap between rich and poor. If we're talking about people not integrating, I think class gaps are the biggest and most entrenched issues that we face. People from a very high social class will rarely interact with a person from a very poor background, so we need to talk about that lack of interaction at every level. It's not an issue that is just about ethnic minorities, and I feel that the discussion around community cohesion needs to embrace and understand that far more effectively. Otherwise, it sounds to people like we're just talking about a problem that we don't want to talk about, which is immigration.

[274] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. Just lastly, have any of you had to deal with conflicts that people have brought with them from war zones or civil wars—you know, where one ethnic group may be aligned with a particular political side, et cetera. Have you had to deal with that sort of problem?

[275] **Ms Cifuentes:** Yes. The Syria example is a good one. We know there are two informal networks or associations of Syrians in Wales, which have opposing political views. That is the reality that reflects where they come from. Sometimes, other professionals need to understand that slightly better when they're interacting with them. So, it's easy to see a group that calls itself 'Syrian Representatives in Wales' and assume that they speak for all Syrians when they don't. So, that's one example.

[276] But then, more important than that is the way that we have to deal with individual trauma, and people who have huge mental health needs due to the trauma they've been through. At the moment, there is a lack of accessible counselling for these people. In Swansea, we don't know of any counselling that is available through Arabic, which is the main language spoken. To have counselling delivered through an interpreter is not very effective.

[277] **Jenny Rathbone:** No. I understand that.

[278] **Ms Cifuentes:** So there's a huge gap for mental health.

[279] **Jenny Rathbone:** Given that it would be politically unacceptable for us to be providing better services for recently arrived people than for the indigenous community already here, what role do you think the voluntary sector can play in raising the money for specific, tailored services for people having fled wars, and the counselling they undoubtedly need?

[280] **Ms Cifuentes:** They can and they are already. So, there are a few examples of different organisations offering group counselling sessions for that kind of individual. Also, I know that the ABMU health board is currently putting out to tender for specific health services for asylum seekers, in recognition of the need that they're seeing in their surgeries. So, the money can come from various sections of the public purse—and the voluntary sector can obviously apply for some of that money—or from charitable trusts and foundations. So, there are ways around it, but I just think there needs to be broader recognition that it is a huge unmet need.

[281] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thank you very much for that. Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. You will be sent a transcript to check for factual accuracy. Thanks very much indeed. The committee will break briefly. We will recommence at 11:30, in five minutes' time.

Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 11:25 ac 11:32.

The meeting adjourned between 11:25 and 11:32.

Ymchwiliad i Ffoaduriaid a Cheiswyr Lloches yng Nghymru:

Sesiwn Dystiolaeth 6

Inquiry into Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales: Evidence Session 6

[282] **John Griffiths:** Bore da, bawb. Welcome to this meeting of the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, taking evidence on asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. This is our sixth evidence session and, obviously, we will be dealing with health. Could you all introduce yourselves, please, for the record, perhaps starting with Bill?

[283] **Professor Yule:** I'm Professor Bill Yule, emeritus professor of child psychology at the institute of psychiatry in London and chair of the British Psychological Society's taskforce on refugees.

[284] **John Griffiths:** Thank you very much.

[285] **Ms O'Hare:** My name is Roisin O'Hare, and I work as the asylum seeker nurse employed by Aneurin Bevan health board, based in Newport.

[286] **Dr Richardson:** Hello, I'm Dr Gill Richardson, I'm the director of public health for Aneurin Bevan university health board, but I'm also the NHS Wales representative on the Syrian resettlement taskforce.

[287] **John Griffiths:** Thank you very much. Perhaps I might begin, then, by asking the first question, which is about Welsh Government policy and the refugee and asylum seeker delivery plan. Could you tell the committee what your main concerns are regarding that plan and how you think it should be changed?

[288] **Dr Richardson:** Shall I kick off?

[289] **John Griffiths:** If you would, Gill.

[290] **Dr Richardson:** I think the ambition of the Assembly to welcome refugees from Syria is really commendable and I think that, working with the Home Office, the plan is a very good plan, in fact. What, probably, many of us who've worked with refugees and asylum seekers in the past would say, though, is that it is creating a two-tier system, so that many other parts of the world where there is confirmed conflict or coups d'état and the need for people to leave in haste—it results in inequalities for asylum seekers. So, the experience of professionals working on the ground is that they have to now work to two sets of criteria—and that's in local government and health—and that that places us in a difficult ethical position, because the needs might be very similar. So, whilst we really welcome the approach with Syrian resettlement, we do feel that it has created a two-tier delivery model for Wales, in keeping with the rest of the UK, which probably would not be something that we would wish to see propagated. We'd wish to see the whole of the service enhanced in the same way as it's been enhanced for the resettlement programme.

[291] **John Griffiths:** Could you, in that case then, Gill, tell the committee what would be the key differences between the experience that a Syrian refugee under the resettlement scheme would experience in Wales compared to another asylum seeker?

[292] **Dr Richardson:** Can I pass you to Roisin, who's in contact daily with people who are in this situation and can tell you the differences?

[293] **Ms O'Hare:** So, working with asylum seekers, of course, there's going to be a cross-over once they get their status and, obviously, become refugees. My experience of working with refugees is that they are given under 30 days to vacate the property that they've been in as an asylum seeker. In that time they need to get on the housing list and they have to get

themselves registered with the jobcentre. The Home Office has put in place, with the Welsh Refugee Council, the Move On project, which is available to them, but there are limitations to that service.

[294] In the Syrian resettlement programme, with the Syrians who have arrived, they have a caseworker who's designated to them and an interpreter who goes along with them. They really facilitate a lot of the appointments, a lot of services, access to services for them, which the people who, I would say, are in the mainstream service—they don't have that advantage. So, they're on their own in terms of trying to get a bank account, of trying to learn how to fill out the jobseeker's allowance booklets that they're given, and how they give evidence as to how they're finding work. When it's not their first language, that presents a lot of difficulties, and if people are struggling, if they've got any difficulties in terms of their mental health, or just in terms of adjusting to the system, they can fall to the wayside, really, in terms of not being able to engage in that way. So, that can lead to destitution then of our regular refugees, whereas in the Syrian resettlement programme, they have so much support with regard to that.

[295] **Dr Richardson:** Would it be fair to say—I think it's the caseworker element that makes the difference?

[296] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes.

[297] **Dr Richardson:** Having somebody to help them navigate through the system.

[298] **Ms O'Hare:** And advocate for them.

[299] **John Griffiths:** The casework around—.

[300] **Dr Richardson:** Helping them navigate through the system.

[301] **John Griffiths:** The caseworker and the interpreter, really, is it?

[302] **Dr Richardson:** Yes.

[303] **John Griffiths:** Okay. So, as far as the Syrian refugees under the resettlement programme are concerned, it's a better service, as you say, but how well co-ordinated is that service for those Syrian refugees between health, local authorities and Welsh Government? Do you think it is as co-

ordinated as it should be?

[304] **Dr Richardson:** Once the taskforce was set up, co-ordination became better and more streamlined. I think it would be fair to say that, in the initial stages, better communication from the Home Office would have been appreciated. There was direct communication with local authorities, and there was an inability to share which local authorities had accepted families with Welsh Government, so Welsh Government were therefore unable to share it with health. So, we relied very much on the fact that local authority colleagues on the ground were telling the health board of possible families to be rehoused, and we then, as health boards, had to look at the case mix of care that was required and indicate whether that was an appropriate place to settle the family medically. So, for instance, we had a family with a child who had a very serious heart condition, called Fallot's tetralogy, which requires a series of heart operations. They'd already begun treatment before the situation had deteriorated in Syria and now needed to continue and have the subsequent operations. So, it would have been entirely inappropriate for that family to be based in, for instance, Aberystwyth—far and remote from paediatric cardiac services, which would have probably been available either in the north of England, around Liverpool, or in Bristol. So, it was essential that we were able, as health boards, to see the assessment forms that the International Organization for Migration had filled in for each family, and it wasn't until that system got a little bit more streamlined that we were able to do so. So, I think, probably, there's learning there for the future. I know that there was, at the time, a lot of petitioning to the Home Office to share these details, which they weren't able to do, and so health and local government worked out a system, with the help of Welsh Government officials, to do that.

[305] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Thank you for that. Yes, Jenny.

[306] **Jenny Rathbone:** As with anybody with an enduring health condition, what people want is a one-stop shop so that they're not having to tell their story 50 million times. I just wondered if you think that that is appropriate for refugees. And how far away are we from actually instituting that in our partnership arrangement?

[307] **Dr Richardson:** I think once the families are accepted into an area, that's very good, in fact. We have general practitioners—the Syrian refugee families were immediately placed with primary care who would have been briefed with the International Organization for Migration form. Many areas would have had advice from asylum-seeker and refugee nursing. Also, Public

Health Wales issued guidance on the infectious disease or other health problems that an asylum-seeker or refugee family might have. I think very much that the GP can act as a key worker, just as they do for us. The problem was during the assessment period and the placing of the family, because it's essential that as much is known about their medical needs as possible. Whilst most of them would be fairly straightforward and wouldn't have a great medical need—maybe a pregnancy or perhaps an injured limb or something—some had much more severe needs. So, there were people who needed 24-hour nursing care or had a traumatic brain injury. We were looking at the highest risk—to bring the highest risk back for care, weren't we? Some of those had kidney problems. There were children with heart problems. That's just the physical side—what we didn't know at the assessment period was the extent of people's mental health needs.

[308] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, you still haven't managed to resolve that gap in information between the Home Office and initial placement.

[309] **Dr Richardson:** I think it would be fair to say that we set up a parallel system to one that probably should have been an official system, but the Home Office were quite definite about not being able to share this information with us, and that it was confidential between them and the local authority.

[310] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. So, if the local authority has it, then they informally should—

11:45

[311] **Dr Richardson:** The local authority, the WLGA and health have worked, with the help of Welsh Government officials, to establish a health framework with a pathway, which we all know now works, but that's not to say that—. It needs everybody to know about it, so, obviously, if there's a change of physician or somebody new in post, it might slip for a few months, and then—. But it's essential that we had it so that we could plan for their needs and so that we could indicate to the local authority that is initially offered the family and then consider whether they can meet their needs—that that could be fed into that decision.

[312] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Sian.

[313] **Sian Gwenllian:** I'm just wondering whether that lack of

communication between the Home Office and local authorities is, in some ways, adding to the delay in resettling families in Wales.

[314] **Dr Richardson:** No, because the Home Office was very good, I think, in its communications with local government. It was really that health was bypassed and we couldn't find out through that route and nor could Welsh Government. So, it was health that was disadvantaged. It's possible that the health element—waiting for the health element to answer—did involve, obviously, more e-mailing, and it wasn't part of the official process. So, yes, I suppose it could be that local government was waiting on health for advice as to whether to accept or not. But I think the relationship and the communications between the Home Office and local government were, I think, good, from my observation.

[315] **Sian Gwenllian:** But you hope, now, that this new system will accelerate the process.

[316] **Dr Richardson:** Yes.

[317] **Sian Gwenllian:** So, we should see an acceleration in the rate that families are being resettled.

[318] **Dr Richardson:** Certainly from health's point of view, it wouldn't be a block anymore.

[319] **John Griffiths:** I wonder if I could ask about the Welsh Government's development of a care pathway for refugees and asylum seekers so that they may better access general mental health services, but also specialist post-traumatic stress services. The target date for that is January 2017, which, obviously, isn't very far away. Are you confident—? It's a matter for the Welsh Government to be confident, I guess, but, from your point of view, do you think that's on track? Are you confident it'll be in place by January?

[320] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes, I feel that what's within that plan is what is happening on the ground, certainly in my area. I feel, though, that in terms of a specialist service for asylum seekers and refugees, because the traumas that they have experienced, which are, on the whole, unlike the traumas that normally come up in mental health assessments of the general population in Wales, are so different that there is a huge need to develop more of a trauma service. I'm aware of one in Cardiff, but not in other areas in Wales. They are such specific needs and such specific forms of trauma that I really feel that

we're doing an injustice by not having a service for these individuals who have experienced this.

[321] So, from that point of view, I feel that they are getting into the general mental health system, and that's set up well, but I do feel that primary mental health—there's a squeeze there already, so it's very difficult for there to be development of a specialist service within that. But in looking at other areas—. I know we've looked at Freedom from Torture, the service that's available in London and some of the bigger areas in England—it's a very specific organisation, and I feel there's such a need for development in that area for people.

[322] **John Griffiths:** So, could you tell the committee a little bit about the way that the Freedom from Torture professionals operate—the work that they do?

[323] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes. So, they are a range of professionals, from psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors to therapists, and not only do they provide therapy but also they provide medical legal reports. So, they look at torture-related injuries and write professional reports based on that to advise the Home Office on the validity of their claim—basically that this was done by torture. It's that ongoing support, helping with integration in the community, which is very difficult for people who have been through those traumas. So, there is a wide range of services that they offer.

[324] **Dr Richardson:** They do offer support. They have centres in Glasgow, London, Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle and they're keen to come to Wales, but they would require funding to do so. But they're very willing and have actually worked with Anne Hubbard from the Wales Migration Partnership to outline potential offers to Wales, which include training our existing health-service providers or setting up a specialist counselling centre here. I think it is needed. We have had some instances where we've been contacted because of worries that, having settled and had all the moving and transition phase, if you like, some of the individuals—particularly one father was experiencing really difficult flashbacks and trauma-related memories and was becoming very frustrated in the home. That then, obviously, we needed to pre-empt, before safeguarding issues became a concern for the family, for the children and for his wife. Needing to get expert help quickly was something that was difficult. So, there is general mental health available—crisis, 24-hour intervention—but getting that specific, trauma-informed, post-traumatic-stress-disorder counselling is not so easy because

of the lack of trained individuals.

[325] **Ms O'Hare:** I think we're seeing an increase in these concerns from mental-health practitioners in areas where Syrians have been resettled who are not used to working with asylum seekers and refugees. So, in Newport, where I'm based, the practitioners will be familiar with these situations, but in places such as Caerphilly and the Blaenau Gwent area I do get calls from them asking for advice because of the difficulties that they're having.

[326] **John Griffiths:** Could you tell the committee a little bit about how training takes place? I think, in the Welsh Government's delivery plan, it recognises the need for training. Someone suggested that there should be a Wales-wide national approach. Is that your view and how is training taken forward at the moment?

[327] **Ms O'Hare:** I think it would be—. Yes, that would be my view, that an all-Wales approach would be beneficial, because I think any healthcare staff will come into contact with asylum seekers or refugees and so it's imperative that they have a good knowledge base of their situation in order to give them the best care. At the moment—maybe, Gill, you can help me with this—the only equalities training that I'm aware of is on the intranet, online-based training, in our health board. I know that I've been working with the health visitors in Newport and we have come up with training that's being rolled out. It's a four-week, rolling programme to all the health visitors in the Aneurin Bevan area, and that covers asylum seekers, refugees and many important topics like honour-based violence, FGM and also working with Gypsy/Travellers. So, lots of different—and that's a standard training that's just been introduced. It'll start in January. I think something like that would be key for healthcare professionals in Wales.

[328] **John Griffiths:** Okay, so, if that was rolled out across Wales, you think that would be a step forward.

[329] **Dr Richardson:** That would help health visitors, but we need also all the other professionals as well, so it's actually quite a huge task. Roisin has done a lot of this locally, and certainly it could be rolled out. Roisin actually had a nurse of the year award for this work. But, basically, we need it for all the health professionals—for general practitioners; it needs to be available to social workers, because they've not always had trauma-informed practice as part of their training.

[330] **John Griffiths:** And you're not aware of much taking place other than what we've just heard.

[331] **Dr Richardson:** No.

[332] **Ms O'Hare:** Not that I'm aware of.

[333] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Well, thanks very much for that. We'll move on, then, to UK Government policy, which I know we've already strayed into. Bethan.

[334] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes, we have strayed into UK Government policy, but I've been asking previous witnesses about issues with regard to housing provision, and I think it is directly relevant to health in relation to then how people are able to go about their daily lives if they are living in conditions that are substandard—of course, adults and children notwithstanding. So, I'm wondering: if you see or identify an asylum seeker, do you discuss these other issues with them, to understand, to have a holistic approach to treating that asylum seeker? I met an asylum seeker last week who has a heart condition, for example. He lives in Swansea and he's struggling quite severely to access services sometimes, and I'm just wondering, outside of where you work directly, Roisin, how you're then helping people in other parts of Wales in relation to their needs, especially when they've got those difficulties that are not directly then funded from the Welsh Government.

[335] **Ms O'Hare:** In terms of the asylum seekers who I work with that are—. Do you mean in relation to the asylum seekers?

[336] **Bethan Jenkins:** Yes.

[337] **Ms O'Hare:** So, in Newport, where Ready Homes have the contract from the Home Office for Wales and the south west, and they provide the housing, there are many occasions where there are issues that are brought up because of health-related issues. And so there's a formal process to go through to request relocations for asylum seekers if the property's not suitable.

[338] **Bethan Jenkins:** How many requests go through, then, or are actually facilitated?

[339] **Ms O'Hare:** I suppose I can't really give a figure on that, but I'm

regularly raising concerns about the properties, to be honest. There are instances where there are delays. I have a lady who's in hospital recovering from a hip replacement who's ready to be discharged, but the property that she currently has is unsuitable, and so we're waiting for more appropriate accommodation. And there are delays, because of limits to the accommodation that they have, to find a suitable placement for her.

[340] **Bethan Jenkins:** Sorry, could you just say what those limits are?

[341] **Ms O'Hare:** So, finding somewhere that is on the ground floor, a bedroom that's on the ground floor, is very challenging.

[342] **Bethan Jenkins:** Do they have limits as to what the type of housing that they have, despite the huge contract that they have?

[343] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes. Well, that's the feedback that I get. So, obviously, they have to wait for somebody to move out of that particular placement for it to become available. So, there are issues.

[344] **Dr Richardson:** Nationally, would Ready Homes have—would they have a log of how many requests for rehousing had been submitted?

[345] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes. Yes, they would. Yes. And the protocol would be to request from the Home Office the specific needs of that person, and then they would instruct Ready Homes to find it.

[346] **Bethan Jenkins:** But do you see, because of the quality of housing, health issues being intensified or getting worse as a result of the fact that they are in substandard housing as compared to other people in Wales?

[347] **Ms O'Hare:** I think that, for some individuals, that can be the case. It would seem to be the case.

[348] **Bethan Jenkins:** And you are then raising it with Ready Homes and the Home Office?

[349] **Ms O'Hare:** That's right.

[350] **Bethan Jenkins:** And that then is being dealt with, or not, or—

[351] **Ms O'Hare:** In some cases, yes. So, recently, I've had one gentleman

who's been in a multiple occupancy property. He's in his 70s, and he's housed with young men, and it was having an impact on him and his mental health, and he's not exactly—you know, he's got multiple health conditions. So, I raised that with the Home Office and said, 'Look, it's not appropriate; can he have a single room?' Because many asylum seekers are sharing a bedroom with another person, and for him to be sharing with a young lad who would come in in the middle of the night wouldn't be suitable. So, they agreed and they instructed Ready Homes to find him a property. So, that was probably within a month, but there are situations that are ongoing that have not been resolved, so, I can give examples of either—

[352] **Bethan Jenkins:** Would you think it would be useful for that power to be devolved to Wales, so that we can have responsibility here, so you can directly talk to the Welsh Government? Would that make your life easier?

12:00

[353] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes, I think it would. I think that might be a good step for him.

[354] **Bethan Jenkins:** And on the general communication with the Welsh Government and the UK on not just housing, but on the general view, do you think that that's working or is it difficult on things like the Immigration Act that is coming through? Do you find that you're able to make those representations effectively, or—?

[355] **Ms O'Hare:** Because I sit with the Welsh migration partnership and those issues are raised and they're taken to Welsh Government, then I do feel that there is communication there to work towards resolving some of the issues that do come up.

[356] **Bethan Jenkins:** What about the issue when there's—? Like you said earlier, about the two-tier issue, under the Syrian dispersal scheme—they're being treated differently. Do you raise those concerns and are they dealt with efficiently?

[357] **Ms O'Hare:** Well, we have raised the concerns but I think there's a lot of progress to be made on improving the conditions for the mainstream refugees. So, no, I haven't seen any shift in their conditions since the Syrian resettlement programme started.

[358] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, the refugee plan from the Welsh Government isn't effective in that regard, then—it's not dealing with those issues as you would wish.

[359] **Ms O'Hare:** I think there are some aspects that can be improved.

[360] **Dr Richardson:** I think the pace of the response to the Syrian resettlement programme demonstrated that, actually, where there is a will and an impetus, there can be a really good service and an exemplar service for people in this situation. Certainly, the ministerial taskforce has helped co-ordination with everybody around the table—police, social services, housing, local government, health—

[361] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, you're not concerned that that operational committee hasn't met since June. You're laid-back about that or—.

[362] **Dr Richardson:** Well, I was a meeting of the taskforce since June, so—.

[363] **Bethan Jenkins:** Oh no, the operational meeting—

[364] **John Griffiths:** Operations board, I think.

[365] **Bethan Jenkins:** The operations board hasn't met. So, you're saying, I think like the WLGAsaid, that other meetings are happening, so you wouldn't be concerned—

[366] **Dr Richardson:** Other meetings are happening and, obviously, there's now an e-mail virtual group, so conversations are happening all the time. And then Anne Hubbard hosts a group where all local government are represented, and partners are also invited to talk about operational issues between local authorities.

[367] **Bethan Jenkins:** And who are the partners, sorry?

[368] **Dr Richardson:** Local authority representatives from across the 22—

[369] **Bethan Jenkins:** Just local authorities—not NGOs or volunteer groups in the areas.

[370] **Dr Richardson:** Well, I suppose because Anne Hubbard herself has very good links to the NGOs and each local authority. So, for instance, for

Swansea, they would have links to their NGOs and the response, so they'd come with the perspective of the whole sector for their area. So, they'd come together to share. I'm not part of the group myself, but all I can say is that I feel in close contact with Anne and Naomi Alleyne from health, and I feel that I'm well briefed and I feel that I understand any constraints or new issues quite soon after they emerge. So, I feel that, in a sense, what we need is probably a similar ongoing commitment such as the taskforce to the issues of asylum seekers and refugees as a whole, leading on from what we've now learned from the Syrian resettlement experience about how much better we can make this process, and how the quality can be improved. In a sense, once you've got your frameworks and once you've got your best practice, you don't have to keep meeting and meeting and meeting. There are still some issues left to be resolved, such as unaccompanied minors, such as the mental health issues, so I think there are still some task and finish tasks for Wales for the whole sector.

[371] **Sian Gwenllian:** So, you're saying that the task group could be widened out to include everybody.

[372] **Dr Richardson:** It would be exactly the same partners looking at the wider refugee and asylum-seeking population, as well as the Syrian resettlement programme.

[373] **Sian Gwenllian:** There aren't any major differences, really—

[374] **Dr Richardson:** There would be no differences. It's the same people.

[375] **John Griffiths:** Okay, thanks very much for that. And Sian, unaccompanied asylum-seeker children; I believe you have some questions.

[376] **Sian Gwenllian:** Yes, these are to Professor Yule, if that's okay.

[377] Rydw i'n mynd i siarad I'm going to speak Welsh, so you Cymraeg, os ydych chi eisiau rhoi might want to put your headset on. eich—. Dyna ni. Diolch yn fawr iawn i Thank you very much for coming to chi am ddod i'r pwyllgor. Rwy'n this committee meeting. I see that gweld eich bod chi wedi gwneud nifer you have made a number of o argymhellion fel Cymdeithas recommendations as the British Seicolegol Prydain o gwmpas Psychological Society around training hyfforddi ac asesiadau o blant sy'n and assessments of children who cyrraedd heb oedolion. Pa ymateb a arrive unaccompanied by an adult.

ydych chi wedi ei gael i'r So, what response have you had to
 argymhellion hynny yng Nghymru? A those recommendations in Wales?
 ydy'r awdurdodau yng Nghymru yn Are the authorities in Wales accepting
 derbyn rhai o'r syniadau sydd some of those recommendations that
 gennyh chi? you've put forward?

[378] **Professor Yule:** The recommendations have not formally been made; that press release was put out in November. I've not heard of any reactions, sorry.

[379] **Sian Gwenllian:** Okay. But can you just explain what those recommendations are? What should we be doing?

[380] **Professor Yule:** Right. We know from a number of studies over many years that there's a high level of mental health issues among the unaccompanied minors. My impression is that many people still assume that an unaccompanied minor is a seven or eight-year-old cuddly little kid who can be engulfed in a normal family and all will be well. In reality—and I was fascinated to see that the Welsh Assembly's 2010 paper acknowledged this—the vast majority are aged 16 to 18. The House of Lords report published very recently made that point very strongly. These are kids who have been through multiple traumatic events: whatever led up to them leaving home, what has happened to them on the journey with their agents.

[381] I've worked with many on an individual basis for legal purposes, and the stories they tell are horrendous: of walking over mountains—well, okay, that's tough—but being holed up in houses with older men for many months, while they're moving on to the next one. Those of us who do assess these kids for legal purposes have always assumed that many of them—boys, as well as girls—have been sexually assaulted, but it's far too sensitive to raise in an initial meeting. The House of Lords quote a Save the Children paper, a study of a group of such children, where 50 per cent were found to have sexually transmitted diseases. You don't get that from being given cuddly teddy bears as a way of treating trauma.

[382] I notice that, in the recommendations, there should be a full health check, including a check for sexually transmitted diseases. I don't know to what extent that is undertaken, because I've not seen any report stating the percentage who are found to have that. But that's just for starters. What I'm saying is that the majority of unaccompanied minors have probably had many traumatic events. Those need to be assessed to see to what extent

they're coping with whatever it may be, whether it be depression, anxiety or traumatic stress, and are receiving appropriate help for that, as is their right under the convention on the rights of the child. So, the need is there. It's not an occasional thing. For example, we did a study of the Kosovo refugees who were brought over to the UK under the programme, and we found that 50 per cent of the children met criteria for PTSD. That means that it's not a rare thing in that group.

[383] I find myself getting a little bit irritated, angry, with my own profession. By now they should be well versed in how to work with adults and children presenting with traumatic stress. We've known about it for quite some time. It's, what, 25 years since I set up one of the first child traumatic stress clinics, and that's been very busy. Yes, it's true that the sorts of trauma they will have had back in Syria and en route are different from being knocked down by a car, but the principles involved in treatment are the same. What happens is many adults, be they mental health professionals or not, are terrified of talking to the children about what happened in case the children start crying. For goodness' sake, of course they're going to start crying. The question is: can they do that in a safe environment and can they trust the person they're talking to? Then, having started talking about it, can they be helped to learn techniques for dealing with these intrusive thoughts and things that trigger off the awful memories? All of that we know a lot about.

[384] I know that, from Professor Bisson's department, there is training that goes on. It's a very specialist department. What I'm not sure about, and I apologise, is to what extent they've been involved in the IAPT programme that has been rolled out, I think, in Wales as well—the increased access to psychological therapies programme. Those therapists are trained to different levels to deal with common mental health problems in general, but also traumatic stress in particular. So, there is a build-up of trained people who can be called upon. It's in its seventh or eighth year in a row now, so there should be more people around.

[385] **Sian Gwenllian:** Where is the specialist unit you talk about?

[386] **Professor Yule:** Jonathan Bisson's in—Cardiff or Swansea? Apologies.

[387] **Sian Gwenllian:** Okay. There's one in Wales.

[388] **Professor Yule:** Oh, yes. As a mere Scot, my knowledge of geography

isn't as good as—my apologies.

[389] **Sian Gwenllian:** But it is Welsh based.

[390] **Professor Yule:** It is very much Welsh based. Professor Bisson has been one of the leaders in working with traumatic stress in adults for many years.

[391] **Sian Gwenllian:** Adults, is it, yes?

[392] **Professor Yule:** Of course, they deal with some children.

[393] **Sian Gwenllian:** Are there any examples of best practice that you're aware of, in Wales or other countries?

[394] **Professor Yule:** There has been some very good practice in the Netherlands for many years. About 15 years ago they were aware of the influx of unaccompanied minors, mainly adolescents, and so they set about it in a very logical way. They determined which were the main countries and therefore the main languages that these children spoke. They devised a battery of interviews and self-completed questionnaires that would be useful in assessing the mental health needs. They then translated those into all those different languages and, in my clinical work, I use those, frequently. Because, very often, the interpreter, one hopes, will have worked with it, but will not always be familiar with technical terms. We try to reduce those to the minimum. So what you have is the question in the child's own language with the English version underneath, and it's so much easier to make an assessment using that. So, that was Dr Tammy Bean who published that many years ago, and they are readily available.

[395] **Sian Gwenllian:** The problem of assessing the age of unaccompanied children; is it a problem? How do we come about the problem?

12:15

[396] **Professor Yule:** The view, as you probably saw, that the British Psychological Society took is that it's not specifically a psychological problem, but we very much go along with the idea of having a multidisciplinary assessment. Again, looking at your 2010 guidance, it was very clear that people were aware of the issues and very much were supporting the Merton protocol for determining age. It's amazing to me that it's still not better known—that's the first thing. That's where two social

workers, together—they've got some training—with an accompanying adult advocate for the child, interview the child, get information and all sorts of sources and put it together. It is not an exact science; there is no such thing.

[397] Where I, as a psychologist, have been surprised is that I can't find any evidence about whether two pairs of social workers agree or what is the validity. There's a lot of work that continues to be done, but that particular document, I thought, was really very welcome. At the bottom of each page was 'Children not refugees'. In other words, they're children first and have all the rights of all children around the world, and within the age assessment, almost, they're saying there is a right to be given the benefit of the doubt, and that has not always happened.

[398] **John Griffiths:** Jenny, did you want to come in on this point?

[399] **Jenny Rathbone:** On this age-assessment issue, we heard earlier from Children in Wales, which has been involved in a European-wide symposium on this whole issue. She wanted to put on record that all the experts there said there was no scientifically determined way of assessing ages, because individuals mature at different rates. So, is that something that you concur with?

[400] **Professor Yule:** At one level, yes. It's also an easy get-out, to be frank. That is the situation, therefore, the symposiasts should be doing something about it to try to get better ways of having agreement, and I don't know to what extent that's happening—

[401] **Jenny Rathbone:** Well, to be fair, she said that they were using other methods, i.e. making sure that other people from that community who could remember that this child was in school in x, y, z year, and other social evidence, rather than medical evidence.

[402] **Professor Yule:** Absolutely, but, of course, the problem with many unaccompanied minors in particular is that they arrive without any papers, often from countries where they don't have the convention of having a birth date, so, that's a problem. When you inquire about what schooling the young person has had, it often can be pretty basic from our point of view and, indeed, really not education so much as indoctrination, so that the things that we would use here to get social evidence for back-up are very difficult to get hold of.

[403] **Jenny Rathbone:** Thank you. There was one other point that I wanted to ask our Welsh health colleagues about that you raised, Professor Yule. Does the initial health check include checks for sexually transmitted diseases as a matter of course?

[404] **Ms O'Hare:** Do you mean for the unaccompanied asylum-seeker children?

[405] **Jenny Rathbone:** For anybody. I mean adults and children.

[406] **Ms O'Hare:** Just from the point of view of asylum seekers, which I see—

[407] **Jenny Rathbone:** For asylum seekers, that initial health screening.

[408] **Ms O'Hare:** So, with adults, yes, that is very much a part of the initial screening, and if any risks are highlighted then testing is offered. With the unaccompanied children, it's the looked-after children's nurse who assesses, so I'm not aware of her processes on that.

[409] **Jenny Rathbone:** But if 50 per cent have sexually transmitted—

[410] **Dr Richardson:** I think that looked-after children's nurses will probably be taking their guidance from the adult guidance, but it's not prescriptive, it would be fair to say. But I think that looked-after children's nurses are well aware that looked-after children, both from Wales and abroad, aged 16 to 18, will be possibly sexually active, either of their own volition or, particularly for these young adults, there may have been trauma, and certainly I think they would be offering that to the young person. But there isn't an overarching protocol for Wales, and it will be the looked-after children's nurse in each area who will be following what they are given as guidance, and developing their practice. However, looked-after children's nurses do communicate across Wales and have a network. But I think it's probably a loophole, that there probably should be a protocol for that 16 to 18 group to make sure that everybody in every area is offering that testing. At the moment, it's very much down to each health board practice.

[411] **Jenny Rathbone:** Indeed, there seems to be a massive loophole here, because it's not just 16 to 18-year-olds who get sexually abused, and it's not going to be just unaccompanied minors, unfortunately, who may have been sexually abused. So, it seems to me there's a major gap in our

screening processes, because obviously the quicker that an STD is dealt with, the better.

[412] **Dr Richardson:** I don't know if it's a gap or not. I mean, I suppose what I'm saying to you, Jenny, is I don't know if it's a gap or not. All we can say is, locally, what happens in Gwent—we think it would be picked up. I imagine, through the looked-after children's nurse network, that those experiences are shared, but I think, probably, there would be merit in screening for blood-borne viruses, for instance sexually transmitted diseases. It's difficult when you get into other areas, I suppose. You know, should every child be examined for genital warts? You're talking about quite an invasive thing.

[413] **Jenny Rathbone:** Indeed, but a simple swab shouldn't be that invasive. But, anyway, could you possibly write to us when you've consulted your children's nurses to find out what the situation is?

[414] **Dr Richardson:** We can certainly ask the looked-after children's nurses what protocols are followed throughout Wales.

[415] **John Griffiths:** We can certainly follow up as a committee more generally. Were you wanting to say something with regard to the age assessments earlier?

[416] **Dr Richardson:** I was, really. Just to say that, as a health board, as an NHS, we feel that there isn't any current reliable tool. Having spoken to dental public health colleagues, dental methods of ageing are notoriously inaccurate, and these are not methods that should determine somebody's criteria and eligibility for support or not. If there's any doubt, I think we should err on the side of giving the support and not have an age cut-off. The Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health have also drawn attention to the fact that there's no valid tool. Having said that, though, local authorities have been looking at tools, and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership does have a tool on their website, but it's not validated by health, it's not being consulted on by paediatricians, and that's the key.

[417] **John Griffiths:** Okay. So, that's something that needs to happen, Gill, is it?

[418] **Dr Richardson:** I think you could invest in trying to develop a tool with the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health, but I suspect that any tool is going to have some people who will be missed and will fall the wrong

side. It is probably more humane to err on the side of allowing the support, rather than—. Age is a very—. You know, when do you stop—18 and 300 days, or—?

[419] **John Griffiths:** Okay, well thanks for that. Moving on, I think, Jenny, you had some have some questions on community cohesion.

[420] **Jenny Rathbone:** Yes, thank you. Could you just tell us how health services involve asylum seekers and refugees in community cohesion? Starting with simple things like antenatal groups, breastfeeding, parent and toddler groups—is this something that your colleagues promote?

[421] **Ms O'Hare:** Yes, very much so. It's one of the key issues when I meet with asylum seekers who've arrived in Newport, during the health screening, to find out what their interests are, what their previous occupation was, to then, at the end, come to some sort of plan, a signposting plan, of where they can go to engage in the community in those areas. The biggest thing, obviously—people are so keen to learn English, so signposting them to the nearest ESOL classes. But, yes, as you say, with the antenatal groups and midwifery, when they engage with them, they encourage them to come along to the groups. Mother and toddler groups—I have a list of the ones in the local area to encourage them to go there, just to meet people from the community. Also, there are ones specifically that are run for asylum seekers and refugees in the area. Sometimes that's a good stepping stone to getting them out of the house and then further engage with the community.

[422] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, in your experience, do people take up this offer?

[423] **Ms O'Hare:** They do. Also, there are many people who are very keen to volunteer in the community. So, in Newport, for example, we have the Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations—so, helping them fill out an application form for that and finding a volunteering opportunity. But can I just say, from one observation, transport can be an issue? Because, obviously, as we know, they're living on £36.95 a week, and so getting to and from these groups or volunteering opportunities can cost a significant amount. So, that's sometimes a barrier for people, unfortunately.

[424] **Jenny Rathbone:** If they have to go to a health appointment with a child with a heart surgery problem, do they get help with—?

[425] **Ms O'Hare:** They do, yes. They have a health certificate that's issued to

them, and they can recover the costs from that.

[426] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay, but, obviously, that doesn't apply to social integration.

[427] **Ms O'Hare:** To more social integration, that's right.

[428] **Jenny Rathbone:** Okay. So, others have said that there needs to be more done by the Welsh Government and others to raise awareness about the positive contribution that asylum seekers and refugees can make. I wondered if you have any ideas on how we might go about that, or what role health can play.

[429] **Ms O'Hare:** We were speaking earlier that, with asylum seekers, there's such a range of individuals who we're talking about. Obviously, we know it's not just one similar group of people. We see so many people from different backgrounds with so many different skills and areas of specialist knowledge. So, for example, from a neurosurgeon from Afghanistan to a dentist from Aleppo, and from a public prosecutor from Eritrea to a human rights lawyer from the Congo. So, there are so many skills and so much experience that these people have that we could benefit from in our communities, but often they're overlooked because the skills and knowledge aren't acknowledged, and there's not an opportunity for them to maybe thrive in that area. So, at the moment we know that Displaced People in Action—if there are medically qualified asylum seekers, they will help in that area with English classes and helping them get into that area, and back in to work again, once they've got their status, but there are so many other areas of specialty where there are a lot of barriers for people to be able to practice in that field and to continue with that area of expertise.

[430] **Jenny Rathbone:** So, in sticking with the medically qualified individuals, do you think that health services are effective at integrating very quickly into—? Obviously, they've got to learn English as No. 1, and also learn about our clinical governances, but do we have effective pathways for those people?

12:30

[431] **Dr Richardson:** There's a programme that the Wales Deanery runs to help medically qualified refugees and asylum seekers to have their qualifications recognised to ensure that they understand how to practice in a

Welsh context. They will have help in passing their English language assessments, for instance. They will have help in registering with the General Medical Council once they're deemed to be judged of a standard to do so. They will have refresher training, if that is needed, if they've had some months away from their practice. However, when somebody has passed through all those stages, they are unable to work whilst they're still an asylum seeker. So, in the time that it will take for their case to be heard, they could de-skill. So, we do need to, I believe, look at ways that people who have passed through this Wales Deanery scheme can shadow or go in almost on a supernumerary trainee basis to health facilities. At the moment, Roisin is trying to facilitate that for our neurosurgeon from Afghanistan, which, as you know, is an area of shortage. We've also got a GP from Ivory Coast, Côte d'Ivoire, who has qualified and is anxious to keep up their skills by working alongside a Welsh GP. We're desperate for GPs in Gwent, particularly for our out-of-hours service. We can't employ him, even though he's completely qualified and declared competent by the Wales Deanery and accepted by the GMC, because he's still waiting for his asylum-seekers case to be heard. So, I think there is a real danger that sometimes we think of refugees and asylum seekers as a potential group that can use our assets, whereas actually they have enormous assets to offer us that we're not able to take full advantage of because of the slow process that they have to go through. We have pharmacist shortages and we've got a pharmacist who's currently shadowing a pharmacist in the Pill area of Newport to maintain their skills. We would love to use these people in our health facilities at a much earlier stage, and I'm sure the same is reflected for quite a few other specialties as well.

[432] **Jenny Rathbone:** Part of that is a conversation with the Home Office about enabling asylum seekers to work, but it's also—. Could you just say how successful you've been in enabling people to get volunteer placements to shadow so they don't lose their skills?

[433] **Dr Richardson:** I think we've tried, locally, to integrate and incorporate. It very much is on the good will of the receiving—the person they're going to shadow.

[434] **Jenny Rathbone:** There are benefits for them, though.

[435] **Dr Richardson:** There are benefits. The neurosurgeon needs to pass through certain—. Obviously, the nearest neurosurgery unit to Newport is Cardiff. They need to go through the internal processes for the Cardiff and Vale trust, vetting and barring and all the usual checks, before they're

allowed. It's quite difficult—often, on these forms, you're asked to have verification from somebody who's known you for two years, or for somebody who's known you for a year before you can get a bank account, for instance. So, it's not easy for these individuals to demonstrate that, even when their skill base and their qualifications have all been recognised.

[436] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Well, thanks very much for that. You will be sent a transcript of your evidence to check for factual accuracy. Thanks very much for giving evidence to the committee today. Thank you.

12:33

Papurau i'w Nodi Papers to Note

[437] **John Griffiths:** Okay. Our next item, item 5, is papers to note. We have two papers to note: the note of the committee's visit to Scotland as part of this inquiry and correspondence from the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to building regulations Part L. Are you happy to note both? You are. Thank you very much indeed.

12:34

Cynnig o dan Reol Sefydlog 17.42 i Benderfynu Gwahardd y Cyhoedd o Weddill y Cyfarfod Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public from the Remainder of the Meeting

Cynnig:

Motion:

bod y pwyllgor yn penderfynu gwahardd y cyhoedd o weddill y cyfarfod yn unol â Rheol Sefydlog 17.42.

that the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order 17.42.

*Cynigiwyd y cynnig.
Motion moved.*

[438] **John Griffiths:** In that case, we move on to item 6, which is a motion

under Standing Order 17.42 to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting. Is committee happy to support that motion? Thank you very much. We move into private session.

Derbyniwyd y cynnig.

Motion agreed.

Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 12:34.

The public part of the meeting ended at 12:34.