



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 February 2012

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Aileen Campbell (Minister for Children and Young People)

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

Philip Raines (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 7 February 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (David Stewart): Good afternoon, everyone. I welcome you to today's meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and other electronic devices as they interfere with our sound system. Item 1 is to seek the committee's agreement to take item 5, which is consideration of the evidence heard under item 2, in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Current Petition

Child Sexual Exploitation (PE1393)

The Convener: Item 2 is PE1393, "Cut them free—tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland". The petition was lodged on behalf of Barnardo's Scotland. Members have a note by the clerk on the petition—paper PPC/S4/12/2/1 refers. As previously agreed, the Minister for Children and Young People is here. You are very welcome, minister. Thank you for coming along. I also welcome Philip Raines, who is the head of child protection policy at the Scottish Government. The minister will make a short statement, after which I will kick off with a couple of short questions. My colleagues will ask a variety of questions after that.

Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): I thank committee members for inviting me to discuss the petition with you. As you will have seen from the 3 October letter to the committee from my predecessor, Ms Constance, the protection of Scotland's children from harm is a key priority for not just the Scottish Government, but all of us. For that reason, we welcome Barnardo's work to highlight the important issues of child sexual exploitation.

I will give the committee an update on the three areas of work that were identified by Barnardo's. The first is research on child sexual exploitation. I am pleased to announce that we have just commissioned the University of Bedfordshire to examine the extent and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland. The university recently completed a similar study for England. The Scottish study will, for the first time, bring together all the information on the scale and scope of child sexual exploitation in Scotland, and the final report is due in June.

Secondly, we are starting work on refreshing our 2010 national child protection guidance. I have written to Barnardo's to invite it to work with my officials on improving the guidance's coverage of child sexual exploitation and what professionals should do to support children. That can only lead to better support for professionals.

Thirdly, in March, we will discuss with the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum how local areas can better address issues of child sexual exploitation through protocols and other mechanisms. I want to ensure that all areas have the right procedures in place for tackling that and other child protection issues.

All that work is on-going, in addition to the other work that we are pursuing in the area. In late spring, we will publish and roll out a final version of a national risk assessment toolkit for child

protection, which will lead to a more consistent and effective approach to picking up the indicators of child sexual abuse or other kinds of abuse.

Later in the year, we will publish a revised version of the guidance on child protection for health professionals, which is often known as the pink book. That will strengthen the ability of practitioners to identify and respond to sexual abuse and other child protection issues.

I know that the committee has also discussed children's online safety, which is an appropriate issue to raise today as it is safer internet day. As part of the actions that are being taken across Scotland, we have launched a competition for children and young people to develop a resource to teach others how to use the internet in a safe and responsible way, not least with respect to online grooming.

We also work closely with stakeholders in the area. We are co-sponsoring the e-safety live event in Edinburgh on 22 March and we have set up a knowledge hub for internet safety for professionals in the field.

I could carry on listing initiatives, but I will finish by commenting on the key principle behind everything that we are doing. Like any child abuse or neglect, child sexual exploitation requires all of us to work together, and to do so in a way that puts the child at the centre of what we do. That means that we must understand the risks and dangers of sexual exploitation in the context of children's wider needs—a principle that underpins Barnardo's excellent work with children.

Thank you for the opportunity to make that opening statement, convener. I am happy to take any questions.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I am pleased that you have now commissioned the research that you mentioned. Will you say a little more about its scope and the timescale for its conclusion? As you know, in research, things can sometimes slip, regrettably, so I take it that Scottish Government officials will be looking carefully at the timescale. Will the terms of reference include identifying the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation?

Aileen Campbell: Philip Raines has been working with the University of Bedfordshire on the research. We want to identify how many children are affected and to get to grips with what the research tells us about the problem in Scotland. As I said in my opening remarks, the study will conclude around June. The University of Bedfordshire has already done work on child sexual exploitation in England, and we want to get a clearer picture of what is going on in Scotland so that, where we need to take action, we can look at that and see how best to progress it.

The Convener: I am also pleased that you have involved Barnardo's in the work, because I know from speaking to some of its officials recently that it has carried out some groundbreaking work on the issue. I hope to be able to visit its operation in Glasgow, which has very good credibility. The committee might visit it, too.

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. Barnardo's has done great work in highlighting child sexual exploitation and we are keen to work with it to ensure that we get the appropriate mechanisms in place to tackle the issue.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Good afternoon, minister. I am delighted that you are here. You have answered most of the questions that I was going to ask; I wanted to hear an update on the timescale.

I congratulate Barnardo's on lodging the petition. I echo what the convener said; having already visited Barnardo's offices in Glasgow, I know about the excellent work that it carries out. I hope that the committee will visit it later, before we make conclusions, to find out more.

I am pleased that the research will be published in June, because research is important. You also mentioned the multi-agency work that you are looking forward to doing. Apart from the research, what other multi-agency work do you propose? Will there be multi-agency planning or work between agencies to ensure that people get the development and awareness that they need via the toolkit?

We should also bear it in mind that, although we have had responses from national health service boards throughout Scotland and they support the aims of the petition, the only local authority that replied to us is Glasgow City Council. It is supportive of the petition as well.

To cut my questions short, I know that the research will be published in June and we have the toolkit, but will you elaborate on the multi-agency work that you mentioned? Will there be regular meetings with councils, health boards and workers?

Aileen Campbell: As I said, we are going to work with Barnardo's as well as with local authorities and health boards. Barnardo's is going to work with officials to develop the review of the guidance, and that is another form of collaborative working. We are keen to look at the national guidance for child protection, and Barnardo's will be part of that.

We are also looking at the protocols. We plan to explore some of those issues with the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum at its next meeting in March, and the forum will consider how to take forward the work that is happening in local

areas. That is an example of a collaborative approach to assessing needs and addressing them in a more local way. The toolkit is another example of work to empower practitioners to realise what is going on out there and ensure that they are well placed to tackle the issues. We have to work collaboratively, because the problem does not lie just at the doorstep of a particular agency; we all need to address it in a more collaborative way.

More widely than on the issue of child sexual exploitation, the Government's whole ethos is about ensuring that the child is at the centre of all the services that we provide. That means that everyone has to work together. Whether a child is suffering from exploitation or from any other kind of abuse or neglect, they must be put first, and agencies must follow that through by working together.

Philip Raines (Scottish Government): I emphasise the minister's point that, in this area, we cannot work without collaboration, which means collaboration between the Government, stakeholders and the people who deliver services, and between services, including those in the third sector. Everyone understands that. That is at the heart of the getting it right for every child approach. Everything that we do in children's services is steeped in that approach. The minister set out a number of specific points on collaboration, but they point to the wider agenda of ensuring that there is collaboration for not just vulnerable children, but all children.

Sandra White: As part of that collaboration between the agencies, which I presume will involve the toolkit, will there be training to increase awareness and enable staff to recognise sexual exploitation, which is part of the petition?

Aileen Campbell: The toolkit that I mentioned is being piloted. When that process finishes, we will consider what works well and what perhaps needs to be enhanced. The evaluation will be published in its final form in the spring. The process is about constantly learning and evolving. We cannot just take a position on the issue and leave it at that; we have to keep up to speed with developments. That is why the pilot is a good way in which to approach the issue. When it has finished, we will consider what worked well and then roll out the toolkit.

Philip Raines: There will be training on the toolkit—there has to be. The Government is not responsible for training professionals in child protection so it would not be appropriate for us to do that, but it is appropriate for us to do whatever we can to support those professionals in meeting their training needs. With the toolkit, that will be essential.

We are also developing a training and development framework, which, in a sense, will be a common way in which all services in Scotland can understand what is required of everyone with regard to child protection—what skills and training people need and what competencies they should have. We are mindful of the fact that, ultimately, it comes down to the quality of the people who work with the children. It is all about personal relationships and judgments, so we must ensure that the right training, skills and systems are in place to drive up the performance of the people who do those jobs.

Sandra White: The minister said that the University of Bedfordshire research will be published in June. Will aspects of that relate to increasing awareness and staff development? That is the question that I was trying to ask. Will part of the research be about staff development and increasing awareness of child exploitation?

Aileen Campbell: The research will give us a clearer picture of the situation in Scotland and a clearer indication of the areas on which we need to focus. The research will certainly enhance our approach to providing practitioners with tools to carry out their jobs to ensure that abuse does not continue. The research will be part and parcel of that.

There is a clear direction of travel in what the Government is doing. There is a need for more research, so we have commissioned it. There is a need to support practitioners, so we will do that through the enhanced guidance that will follow the review of the guidance, through the toolkit, and through the other measures that I have mentioned. The direction of travel is to ensure that we tackle the problem effectively so that it is minimised over time.

14:15

The Convener: I will make a quick interjection. Sandra White might wish to come back in after it.

Do you have any concerns that, among local authorities, there is in effect a postcode lottery for the care of young people, both for the services that they get and for the detection of exploitation and the protection of young people? As Mr Raines said, you do not have direct responsibility for the matter, but you clearly have a leadership role in relation to local government and you fund it. In another sphere, you have opted for a single police authority. Has there been any discussion in Government about creating a single social work authority to look at child protection throughout Scotland?

Aileen Campbell: As Phil Raines indicated, the GIRFEC approach puts the child at the centre of the services that we deliver. I have not met a local

authority that does not want to ensure that it does the best for its children regardless of whether they are suffering from abuse, neglect or anything else. The GIRFEC approach and model are driving forward improvements for children in Scotland, which is something that we want to continue.

We will look at local protocols. As I said in my opening statement, we are working with the child protection committee chairs forum, which I will meet in March to discuss localism and see what we can do on that. That addresses some of the points that you raise about there perhaps being a disparity between areas.

The Government works in partnership with local authorities to ensure that we do the best for children in Scotland. The GIRFEC model and the way in which we approach child sexual exploitation show that.

The Convener: I understand the points that you make, but has there been any wider discussion about a single social work authority for the whole of Scotland?

Philip Raines: I will tackle your question about how we know how good local authorities in different parts of the country are at child protection and whether there is a postcode lottery. The simplest way in which we do that is that we have inspectors and there are inspections. It is a powerful tool to have the care inspectorate go in and look at how well child protection is carried out in particular areas. That has been going on for the better part of six years.

It is clear that there has always been a mixed picture, but also that there has been a huge improvement over time. Whereas there might have been a mixed picture when inspections began back in 2006, we now see that many more areas are driving up their performance and making improvements. The inspectors point to the fact that some areas are outstanding and some are still improving, but the upward trajectory is hugely encouraging for us.

You mention the possibility of a single social work service for Scotland. You will be mindful of the fact that the Government is keen on public service reform and is taking it forward across a wide range of services, not least children's services. The First Minister announced on 7 September, as part of the programme for Government, that we would introduce legislation to address a number of issues to do with children, not least through what has been called a children's services bill.

The consultation on the bill will go out in the next couple of months. It is not for me to trail the proposals, but it will certainly look at the idea that the best way in which to support children is not necessarily to merge services or create single

national bodies but to get services to work together in the best possible way. The bill will recognise that there are ways in which we can improve co-operation in the delivery of services, not least those for vulnerable children. The Government wants to open a debate with stakeholders, the public and Parliament about the best way to do that.

The Convener: Thank you. That was a very interesting reply.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister for her announcement at the start of the meeting on the initiatives being taken forward by the Scottish Government, including the commissioning of research, the refreshing of guidance, the publication of toolkits and various other things. I will read the *Official Report* with interest to find out about some of the initiatives that I missed when she made the announcement.

There is child protection guidance, but the petition is about child sexual exploitation. Do the minister and the Government have a different approach to child sexual exploitation, or is the child protection guidance enhanced to deal with it? There are clear differences between how we deal with child protection and child sexual exploitation. Does the Government intend to develop specific guidance for local authorities about that?

As Sandra White said, the committee wrote to a number of local authorities asking for feedback about how they were delivering on the ground on child sexual exploitation issues. Unfortunately, with the exception of one authority out of 32, none responded. That raises questions about whether the guidance is strong enough. Will the guidance or the toolkit need to cover other issues that specifically detail and reference the existence of child sexual exploitation as part of the wider child protection remit?

Aileen Campbell: I guess that it will be up to the committee as to how it takes up the response from the local authorities, but you have made your point well.

The "National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland" includes issues connected to child sexual exploitation such as online safety, runaways, systematic and complex abuse, forced marriages, and child trafficking. Such matters will be constantly under review as we work with Barnardo's and others. There is already a heavy emphasis on child sexual exploitation to illustrate the need to focus a wee bit of attention on that as being slightly different from other protection needs. Although there is a degree of separation, it is covered in the guidance.

John Wilson: Thank you very much, minister.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I will return to the toolkit. The 2003 guidance refers to certain triggers and indicators. Will those be extended for the toolkit that is being developed?

Aileen Campbell: The 2003 guidance and the recommendations and proposals that were made at that time have been superseded by a great deal of other national guidance and the toolkit that is being piloted. We are undertaking on-going work with other partners to ensure that we tackle this issue head on.

Philip Raines: It may be worth while my saying something about how we envisage the toolkit working.

We have a toolkit because there are 32 different authorities that do things in 32 different ways. Children move around and they deserve consistency and best practice across Scotland. Stakeholders asked us whether we could help and we agreed that there was good reason to come together and develop a national toolkit. When a professional walks in somewhere and thinks, "Something is wrong here," the toolkit is a way of identifying and sorting out what is wrong from the perspective of child protection. Once the professional has identified what is wrong, they may need something a bit more specialist and finely tuned and we will develop that, too. We want something that identifies the issues and helps professionals to dig a bit deeper into them. Some of those issues were raised in the 2003 guidance—the triggers that Anne McTaggart mentioned.

We will not launch the new material in May and think that that is it. We will need to think about how we develop it over time and create a suite of tools. No one has only a hammer when they build a house; they have a range of tools and that is what professionals across the country deserve from us.

Anne McTaggart: Other professionals have told us that the 2003 guidance included a range of triggers and indicators that were useful for good practice. John Wilson asked earlier about the difference between sexual exploitation and other child protection issues. I know you said that that matter is covered, minister, but I do not think that it is at the moment.

Philip Raines: Perhaps I can come back on that. We start from the point of view that child sexual exploitation is abuse. It is not different from abuse; it is a type of abuse. There are a range of issues and a range of types of abuse within child sexual exploitation, all of which need to be understood. There is trafficking, children meet people whom they should not meet in online grooming scenarios, and there is underage sexual activity. We think that it is essential that

professionals understand how to deal with those different scenarios.

When we published the revised national guidance for child protection in December 2010, we knew that we did not want to walk away and not touch it for another 10 to 12 years. We want to keep going back to it to ensure that we get it right. Barnardo's is saying that the 2010 guidance needs to be strengthened in relation to how we deal with child sexual exploitation and we welcome the opportunity to work with it and to think about how we can improve on the good things that came out of the 2003 guidance. A lot has happened in nine years. As members well know, child sexual exploitation has dimensions that we had not fully appreciated. The question is how we can strengthen the guidance in order that someone who is going in can think of all the issues that a vulnerable child might face and feel fully prepared to deal with those that come out of child sexual exploitation.

Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP): Perhaps I should declare an interest. I am still a member of Fife Council.

My question leads on from what colleagues have said. In the complex situation that we are in, unfortunately, with child sexual exploitation, how does the Scottish Government hold the 32 councils to account for what they are doing? I realise that the Scottish Government does not manage them, but how do we get the relevant feedback and ensure that they are doing what they are supposed to do, not only regarding mainstream abuse, if you will, but child sexual exploitation? How do you handle that?

Aileen Campbell: Earlier, we spoke about inspections and ensuring that people deal effectively with the problems that arise in their areas. I go back to the points that Sandra White made. A lot of what we have discussed cannot be done in isolation; rather, we need to work in collaboration to tackle the problems. One way of looking at the matter is by considering inspections, but we must work together to ensure that practitioners are given the tools and guidance that they need to tackle the problems helpfully. The national guidance and toolkits will feed into the way in which local government approaches the issue. Inspections are probably the one thing that we can point to in looking at where local government is with the issue.

Bill Walker: I will pursue that a little bit. I am not in favour of a national social work agency by any means, and of course we do not want to increase administrative costs, but I am glad that you have touched on inspections. That approach will be quite difficult, with 32 local authorities, but I thank you for explaining—

Aileen Campbell: Earlier, we spoke about public service reform. The other week, I was up in Dundee, where I opened Seymour House. A collaborative approach is being taken there. The health board, the police and the local authority are working together. A person who goes into the centre would not know which people worked for what agency. The child is put at the centre of the services that are being delivered for very vulnerable children in Dundee to ensure that issues are tackled effectively and that practitioners speak to each other and ensure that they know what is happening. They work in co-operation and collaborate to ensure that the issues that they face and deal with are tackled as effectively and swiftly as possible. That is the type of environment that we all want, and is a good example of how one local authority is approaching the matter.

Bill Walker: Thank you.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): It is clearly important that the agencies collaborate. Both of you have stressed that several times, and the minister has just given an example of good practice from Dundee. However, as we have heard from only one local authority, it is clearly difficult for us to know how things are working across the country. Can you give us any indication of how things are going in other parts of Scotland and particularly of the difficulties that exist in co-ordinating a joint working approach involving all the authorities?

14:30

Aileen Campbell: I came into my current post just before Christmas, but before that I was the Minister for Local Government and Planning and, when I visited local authorities, the areas where I saw much more collaborative working were around child protection. The only game in town is to work together and ensure that the services are delivered effectively—all the local authorities without exception are speaking that language. It is helpful that the Christie commission has set the scene and that people are having to approach issues in that way, but we can always improve. We do not want any child to suffer abuse, neglect or sexual exploitation.

Although I understand the committee's frustration at not having received the responses that you need—you will have to take that up with the local authorities—for our part, inspections show that local authorities are working with national Government to tackle the issue and that there is a willingness to work together and to travel in the same direction. No one in national or local government wants any child to suffer abuse or neglect. Our joint priorities and the language that we share are about working together to move forward. The inspections that Bill Walker spoke of

will be one way of scratching beneath the surface to find out more about the issues that you want to raise.

Nanette Milne: Have you discussed with the responsible ministers in England and in Wales whether they are finding similar issues and whether there are any comparators that you could use to benchmark what is happening in Scotland?

Aileen Campbell: I have not had direct dealings with my ministerial counterparts, but I understand that there is always close official-to-official working on such issues to ensure that, where areas are doing something good, we can learn from that and adapt that practice to our specific needs.

There are also differences between local authorities. People in Moray, for instance, will have a different way of dealing with something from people in Glasgow, so we cannot just roll things out from a central position. We must ensure not only a consistent approach, but that local needs are reflected.

We are willing to learn from others and my officials speak to officials in the other devolved nations and at Westminster. That work is always on-going.

Anne McTaggart: Minister, you have mentioned several times the protocols that you hope to set up.

It is the committee's responsibility to get back to the local authorities that have not responded to us—that will need to be addressed, as it is concerning that they have not responded—but that takes us down the avenue that the protocols that you think might be in place are not there.

Aileen Campbell: We will address the issue of protocols at our next meeting with the child protection committee chairs forum. That meeting can be informed by this discussion.

Anne McTaggart: Will the Government go down the line of instructing local authorities to establish protocols?

Aileen Campbell: As I say, we work together on the issue in a partnership approach, and there are mechanisms to ensure that we get a flavour of what is going on out there. The research that we commissioned from the University of Bedfordshire and that I announced today will inform our policy. The national child protection guidance is a set of things for everyone to do to ensure that the issue is tackled effectively. The protocols have been flagged up as an issue and will be discussed next month at the meeting that I mentioned.

The Convener: Just for the record, minister, Glasgow City Council did reply to us. I think that we asked for responses from a cross-section of local authorities rather than from all 32. I assure

you, on behalf of the committee, that we will chase up those local authorities that have not got round to replying. It is important that the committee understands what is happening throughout Scotland.

Aileen Campbell: Did you say that the committee had had one reply from the 32 authorities?

The Convener: I do not have the figures in front of me, but it was one reply from a cross-section of authorities, not all 32. If the relevant authorities do not reply, we will pursue them in our normal way.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I thank the minister for her evidence. I have learned something new, because I had no idea that today was safer internet day—there we go.

I welcome your comments about encouraging children to think of a resource to encourage their peers to use the internet more safely. Will you elaborate on that?

Children of different ages engage with the internet in different ways and on different websites. Will your work reflect that by ensuring that the guidance is not standardised, which would not cover the different ways in which children of different ages engage with the internet?

Aileen Campbell: This is a key area in which things are not static—the internet and social networking move forward all the time. We need to be up to date with how children interact with online social networking and all the different things on the web, so that we are adept at ensuring that children access the internet safely.

Internet access is another subject on which officials are working with the United Kingdom Government, through the UK council for child internet safety. That shows that people are working across boundaries to do the best by children. As I said, we have a conference in March on internet safety.

Children of all ages need to be engaged at an appropriate level to ensure that they understand how to use the internet safely, so that they are under no pressure, and to ensure that they are aware of what pressure might look like. We need to achieve that in a way that does not put children off and we need to engage with them in a way that they understand, so that they can use the internet safely.

Mark McDonald: Social media is one of the key ways in which young people use the internet to engage with each other and with others. Has the Government had many discussions with social media operators directly? Some social media sites should employ an age restriction on people creating a profile, but such restrictions are regularly flouted, so children who are younger than

the age restriction regularly use social media sites, which creates a concern. Are social media sites being proactive enough about finding users who are clearly below the age level for signing up to those sites?

I will raise a crucial point. I appreciate that the Government recognises child sexual exploitation. However, it came through the discussion with Anne McTaggart that elements of child sexual exploitation distinguish it from the wider abuse agenda—particularly the control element, which distinguishes it from some other forms of internet grooming, and other characteristics that social media operators might not be looking for.

I understand that social media operators work closely with the police and other law enforcement bodies to try to root out online grooming and people who use a profile that depicts them as being much younger than they are. However, I have heard in discussions with Barnardo's that child sexual exploitation could exist between a 21-year-old and a 17-year-old. People would not necessarily pick that up in looking for internet grooming, but it might be picked up by more subtle and nuanced investigations. Will you raise that with social media operators and look at that carefully?

Aileen Campbell: The conference that I mentioned will bring together a lot of different people, who will include professionals, teachers, and industry leaders and experts in internet safety. It will bring together a range of stakeholders to discuss the issue in a way that captures everyone's views. I know that officials have spoken directly to Facebook and will keep that dialogue going to ensure that the issues that you describe are tackled effectively.

The way in which the committee and Barnardo's have raised the profile of child sexual exploitation is useful in ensuring that any gaps that might exist are plugged and that we can take forward the knowledge that exists in a way that informs policy. The internet is never static and evolves continually, so we need to be wise to that and clever enough to ensure that we are sufficiently fleet of foot to ensure that our children and young people engage safely with the internet and remain free from harm when they do so.

Mark McDonald: I was not a member of the committee when it first wrote to organisations about the petition, so I do not know whether it wrote to social media companies as part of its call for evidence. We would not want to cut across what the Government is doing but, as part of what we do to make progress with the petition, the committee might want to write to social media providers to put to them the issues that I have raised and to find out what work they are doing on child sexual exploitation.

The Convener: That is a very useful suggestion, which we will certainly consider when we come to decide on our next steps.

Are there any further questions at this stage?

John Wilson: I have a couple of questions that follow up on some of the responses that we have received from Mr Raines and the minister.

Mr Raines indicated that the Government has in place inspection regimes to monitor what is happening at local level. As we understand it, a range of agencies are involved in monitoring what happens to children throughout Scotland, including the police, social work, health workers, general practitioners and people who work in education, whether teachers, supply staff, support staff or others. How does the Government monitor what is happening across all the different agencies? Through the inspection regime, do you look at how a local authority deals with the issue both internally, in departments such as education and social work, and externally, in how it interacts with health boards, the police and GPs to monitor what is going on and to identify where child sexual exploitation may be an issue?

Philip Raines: You are absolutely right. The remit of Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland is what is called a joint inspection remit. Its job is to go in and see how well child protection is carried out in an area. Child protection has to be carried out by not just the local authority, the health board and the police, but all the agencies coming together to provide the right sort of services to children.

The care inspectorate starts from the perspective of looking at individual children who have been through the process and thinking about what happened to them, which people they met and what services they came across. I am talking about services that they may have received through social work, as well as their interaction with different parts of the health service. That might also include how the police and family workers handled matters. At the end of the day, it is about how all the different agencies and bodies work together.

We look to the care inspectorate to provide us with that overview. It takes a holistic view of what happened to the child in interacting with services. We have asked it to design a new approach to looking at children's services that involves looking not just at child protection, but at the wider set of support services that children get.

John Wilson: Thank you for that response. You indicated that you monitor what happens when a child goes through the process, but we are trying to prevent a child from having to go through that process. We want to identify as early as possible anything that is going wrong in a child's life.

Instead of waiting until they are thrown out at the other end of the process, we want to intervene and to monitor what happens to the child.

The guidance notes that are issued to the various agencies and the workers who are involved in monitoring child protection and child sexual exploitation must detail how all the players in that process should interact with each other so that, when anyone has a fear or an intuition that something may be happening to a child, there is intervention at the earliest point. At what stage does the guidance allow those agencies and individuals who work with children to intervene in the process?

14:45

Minister, you indicated that the guidance that is issued by the Scottish Government to local authorities might not apply equally in a city-centre setting and in a rural setting. If you feel that the guidance is not working, what would the Scottish Government be prepared to do to strengthen the implementation of that guidance? As I said, I do not want any child to have to go through the process and come out the other end. I want to ensure that we have guidance in place that every agency knows is being practised by every agency that is involved in working with children and that we can stop child sexual exploitation at the earliest opportunity or bring in child protection at the earliest point and thereby save the child from going through a harrowing experience, which they might never recover from.

Aileen Campbell: The ethos of the Government is about tackling things before they become a problem. Using preventative spending to tackle problems before they arise is exactly the way in which we are approaching this issue and every issue across Government.

What you say rings true. Nobody wants a child to suffer harm. The driving force behind my role as Minister for Children and Young People is to ensure that all children are protected from harm and have happy childhoods. That is all that any of us wants for the country's children. That is about working collaboratively and ensuring that professionals can talk to each other in a way that means that they can intervene at an appropriate juncture and stop a child from becoming one of the statistics that we do not want to read about.

With regard to the national guidance, I was making a differentiation between a city-centre setting and a rural setting. National guidance exists, but there will be different circumstances depending on where people are across the country. I was only making the point that there are local differences across the country. Local protocols are under discussion.

Philip Raines can say a bit more about the issues that you raise around early intervention and preventative spending.

Philip Raines: The fundamental principle of the national guidance is that, if you spot something wrong, you have to communicate that. That—which is exactly what you are talking about—is at the heart of the national guidance. That is one of the reasons why we took such a comprehensive approach to revising the guidance. We had a sense that, under the previous approach to child protection, people thought that it was the responsibility of various professionals. We have taken the view that anyone who works with a child works in child protection. That is the view that the guidance takes. As soon as something comes up that someone knows is not right, they need to communicate that to the people who are in a position to assess it.

In the horrible tragedies that have happened across the United Kingdom and other countries, one thing that comes up time and again is not people not doing their job or being bad in any way but people not giving the right information to the right person at the right time because someone got some information but did not think anything of it. The fundamental principle of the guidance is how we can improve the way that services, as a whole, support those children. If, following an inspection, the Government has any sense that people are not doing their job correctly, it will take action. There is no question but that child protection is one of the fundamental roles of the Scottish Government.

Aileen Campbell: People are working together at a community planning partnership level, so they are constantly engaging with others about how they can ensure that their communities thrive. The example in Dundee that I spoke about was a tangible example of a building in which people were talking across desks in a professional way, without having to go through barriers that stop them taking swift action to help a child. That is one way in which professionals are tackling these issues, and I think it is a positive way in which to do so.

The Convener: I agree with Mr Raines's point. If you look at child protection inquiries across the UK following the death of a child, it is frightening to see the same general theme about a lack of communication. It is not only about social work. All agencies have responsibility for child protection, not least schools, the police and so on. The issue that Mr Raines raises is a real worry. It is not a Scotland v England issue, either. What concerns me is that there seem to be uniform failures across the UK when it comes to child protection. That was particularly the case in the past.

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. We need to make people work together and, perhaps, show disrespect to professional or even geographical boundaries to ensure that the child is at the heart of what is being done. If something is wrong, it should, as Phil Raines said, be reported to the right person at the right time to ensure that the early intervention and early action measures that John Wilson referred to are taken and that we stop problems before they happen.

Sandra White: Given that people who exploit children are very manipulative, I reiterate what I said at the very beginning of this discussion about the need for all agencies to work together. I think that we need a couple of things, the first of which is awareness training for professionals and everyone involved in child care. Secondly, we need to educate kids and young people to ensure that they recognise when they are being manipulated. I will not rehearse some of the cases that we all know about, but young people are very easy to manipulate and they need to be made aware of the signs. In that respect, I congratulate NHS Grampian on its approach to this issue. For example, it has developed a series of child exploitation seminars that will be delivered in schools in March.

Will the conference that is being held in March and the research that is being undertaken cover the kind of approaches that NHS Grampian is taking? Moreover, will you look at the replies that we received from NHS boards? The idea of taking the issue out to schools and explaining it to schoolchildren is an excellent one because, after all, kids have got to be made aware that certain people out there will manipulate them through social media and so on.

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. It would be foolish to ignore any good practice and if the Grampian example falls into that category I will be happy to learn from it. Indeed, through curriculum for excellence, we are trying to ensure that children are aware of what is happening to them; that if they are being manipulated by, say, a predatory adult they know what that manipulation might look and feel like and know where to go; and that they are given the right type of education on sexual health, relationships and other such matters to ensure that they are much more enabled and empowered to deal with this kind of horrific situation.

The Convener: We have already touched on child trafficking, but I will finish with a substantive question about it. As you know, the UK action plan highlighted instances in which children who may have been trafficked have gone missing from local authority care. Is that a particular issue in Scotland? What measures have been implemented to minimise the risk of such children

going missing from care in Scotland? I appreciate that you might not necessarily have the statistics in front of you, but you could ask your officials to explore the matter and we would be grateful if you could drop us a line about it.

Aileen Campbell: We can get back to you on that but I should point out that child trafficking is also covered in the national guidance for child protection. The Government is certainly aware of the issue but, if there are any statistics that we can share, I could make it an obligation to get back to you with them.

The Convener: We would appreciate that.

I thank the minister, Aileen Campbell, and Philip Raines for attending this afternoon. We certainly appreciate your evidence, particularly the positive news about the research. Indeed, we look forward to June when we might have another inquiry on the research conclusions.

I suspend for a minute to allow the witnesses to leave.

14:53

Meeting suspended.

14:54

On resuming—

New Petitions

Further Education Funding (PE1414)

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of new petitions. There is one new petition for consideration today, which is PE1414, in the name of Dougie Deans, on behalf of Unison further education sector, on funding for further education. As well as a note by the clerk, members have a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing and a copy of the petition. I invite the committee to consider the petition and discuss what action to take.

Sandra White: This is an important, topical petition on a subject that is on everyone's lips. However, although the petition refers to college funding throughout Scotland, it concerns me that it is rather localised—it seems to be about the north-east of Scotland, particularly Angus. The people whom the petitioners contacted seem to represent one section of the political arena. It concerns me that the information has been collected in quite an insular way.

As someone who came through the college system, I support colleges 100 per cent. I know that we will have a debate on FE funding and that the issue is being considered by the Education and Culture Committee. I would like the petition to go to that committee while it is considering funding. However, other members may have other ideas.

Mark McDonald: Sandra White is correct on the role here of the Education and Culture Committee. I think that the previous time the committee agreed to take a similar petition forward we were mindful of the fact that the Education and Culture Committee was already doing work on the subject. I would be wary about duplication of effort if we were to take the petition forward when the Education and Culture Committee will undoubtedly be looking at the issue. We should pass it on for that committee to wrap up into its work. As Sandra White has identified, although the petition broadens out to consider the national situation, it is very local in its focus.

Nanette Milne: That is probably the right disposal for the petition. Members have had thousands of e-mails on the issue so, although the petition initially focuses on Angus, it is on an issue that affects the whole of Scotland. The Education and Culture Committee is probably the right place for it to go.

Bill Walker: To supplement what colleagues have said, I think that we should not consider the

petition at present. There is a wonderful further education college in my constituency, and I want to support it in every way. However, the petition is a bit too narrow and we should refer it to the Education and Culture Committee, bearing in mind what is going on at present.

John Wilson: It would be remiss of us not to say that this has been the subject of wide-ranging debate in the chamber, where the Opposition has lodged motions for debate. The discussion is not confined to committees. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has answered a number of questions on the issue and has made proposals to take the FE sector forward. I agree that we should refer the petition to the Education and Culture Committee for consideration. Hopefully, the petitioner will be satisfied that, by passing the petition on to that committee, we are ensuring that it will form part of a wider debate on further and higher education funding.

The Convener: Do members agree to refer the petition to the Education and Culture Committee?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Under rule 15.6.2, we refer the petition to the Education and Culture Committee for it to consider the issues that the petition raises.

Current Petitions

St Margaret of Scotland Hospice (PE1105)

14:59

The Convener: Item 4 is consideration of current petitions. There are three for consideration today, the first of which is PE1105, in the name of Marjorie McCance, on behalf of the St Margaret of Scotland hospice. Members have the clerk's note and the submissions. I welcome Gil Paterson, who is here for the petition as a local MSP. Do you wish to make a short statement to the committee, Mr Paterson?

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I would be grateful for that opportunity. Thank you for the invitation.

Although the genesis of the petition was in relation to St Margaret's hospice, there are two general parts to the petition: funding for hospices rather than just for St Margaret's hospice; and continuing care for frail elderly people throughout Scotland. I want the committee to take that point on board before I start.

The petition is a long-running one, which I am grateful for in many ways. The committee's work on the petition has helped to focus attention on it, and I hope that it will bring about a conclusion that satisfies most people if not everybody.

At present, a contract is in the hands of St Margaret's hospice on the petition's two issues. There is also an offer from the health board for a meeting to go through the contract, but I am not at liberty to say what the issues are. This may sound odd, but I have not read it, so I do not know its entire contents. I believe that the meeting between the health board and the hospice on the issues in the contract is imminent.

If the committee will indulge me a little further, I repeat that it has been extremely helpful to have this as a live petition. The dialogue that I indicated will take place soon, so I feel that it would be premature at this stage to close the petition. I know that the committee has been patient; I think that this is the 13th time since 2007 that I have been to a meeting that has discussed it. However, I do not think that that has been a waste of the committee's time. I ask the committee to be a bit more patient and to continue the petition, because I think that that would be helpful to the petitioners and to the health board. I hope that I will soon be able to take a different approach when I speak to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite members to contribute to the discussion.

Sandra White: Gil, you said that a meeting with the health board is imminent but that you are not at liberty to say what the meeting is about. Can you give us a date for it?

Gil Paterson: I cannot give you a date, because one of the main players is not in the country at the moment. However, the meeting is imminent. As to the issues that are in the contract, they are exactly the items that the petitioners brought to the committee. I know that they are part of the contract.

I cannot give you an exact date for the meeting, but I am fairly certain that it will be soon.

John Wilson: I think that I have been to all 13 meetings that Gil Paterson has attended on the petition. It has been an interesting petition and I am glad that I have been able to follow it through. The petition has had a number of ups and downs regarding the dialogue with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde on the initial decisions that it made and the lack of consultation, discussion and co-ordination with St Margaret's hospice on what was being delivered in the area.

As time has shown, certain decisions that the health board wanted to implement have fallen through and we are back to a situation in which St Margaret's hospice is providing most of the care to which Mr Paterson referred. I support his suggestion that we keep the petition open slightly longer, for several reasons, one of which is the on-going discussions between the hospice and the health board.

In addition, there are the on-going discussions between the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy and hospice providers throughout Scotland. One of the issues that have come through from the petition is the disparity between different health boards' funding for the hospice sector in their area. I would like us to get a report back from the cabinet secretary on her discussions and on whether there is any movement on funding provision for hospices throughout Scotland such that we will see an end to the apparent disparity between health boards. I suggest that we ask the cabinet secretary to give us a report on the discussions and on other issues that may arise for hospice provision in the long term, but particularly for St Margaret's hospice.

The Convener: For information, I understand that the Scottish Government confirmed that revised guidance is due to be published at the end of March.

We have heard Gil Paterson's strong plea for us to continue our consideration of the petition, given the timescale that he talked about. The issue is important, but this is actually the 14th time that we have had the petition on our agenda—I do not say

that in an unsympathetic way, but there comes a stage at which we need to consider the next steps.

Bill Walker: I did not realise that there have been 13 discussions on the petition—that is an unfortunate number. During my short time as a member of the committee, I have learned that petitions can go on and on unless a decision is made. Gil Paterson asked members to continue their consideration. I know that you cannot give a specific date for the meeting that you mentioned, but are we talking about weeks or months?

Gil Paterson: I am pretty certain that it is weeks rather than months.

Sandra White: This is actually the 15th time that the petition has been considered in the committee, which demonstrates the importance of the situation. We must acknowledge that the hospice serves not just Clydebank but the west of Scotland. It provides an excellent service and does a good job. If we are talking about weeks, I support John Wilson's suggestion that we keep the petition open until we have more information.

Nanette Milne: I agree. Given what the clerk has told us about when the Government will report, we should certainly keep the petition open until the end of March.

The Convener: Do members agree to that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will continue consideration of the petition. We are conscious of the timescale. I thank Gil Paterson for coming along to make the case.

Gil Paterson: I thank the committee, again.

NHS 24 (Free Calls from Mobile Phones) (PE1285)

The Convener: PE1285, which was brought by Caroline Mockford, is on free calls to NHS 24 from mobile phones. Members have the note by the clerks and the submissions. I invite comments.

Sandra White: I found the petition interesting, given the cost of phoning 0845 numbers from mobile phones. I note that the Government is considering adopting the 111 number. I am happy to keep the petition open while we wait for an update from the Government on that. I am not sure that adoption of 111 would answer all the questions in the petition, but it would be a start.

John Wilson: I support the suggestion that we keep the petition open, but we should ask the Government when it intends to make a decision on use of the 111 number, because we do not want to keep the petition open indefinitely.

Bill Walker: I support that. Until recently, I was not aware how many people call NHS 24 from mobile phones, which is pretty expensive. People phone when there is a serious matter that does not merit a 999 call. I hope that consideration of the 111 number will be concluded soon, so that we can merge consideration of the petition with that issue or take another path. I am all in favour of keeping the petition open for the time being.

The Convener: Do members agree to keep the petition open and await an update from the Scottish Government on the adoption of the 111 number?

Members *indicated agreement.*

In Care Survivors Service Scotland (PE1397)

The Convener: PE1397, which was brought by Mary Roy, is on future support for and funding of In Care Survivors Service Scotland. Members have the note by the clerk and the submissions.

John Wilson: Given the responses that we have had from the Scottish Government on the issue, I propose that we close the petition. The Scottish Government has given a commitment to continue ICSSS for the period of the spending review—depending on decisions in the Parliament on the next budget, of course. Discussions are going on about how the Government takes forward issues that emerged from the time to be heard forum. We can close the petition, bearing in mind that if things do not come to fruition, the petitioner has the right to come back to us with another petition on the issue, if she wants to do so.

The Convener: If there are no more comments, do members agree to close the petition, under rule 15.7, in the context of what John Wilson said and the points that are set out in paragraph 16(4) of the clerk's options paper?

Members *indicated agreement.*

15:11

Meeting continued in private until 15:29.

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