

## Petitions Committee

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 15 Ionawr 2019  
Petitions Committee | 15 January 2019

### Child Houses

**Petition title:** [P-05-859](#)

Provide Child Houses in Wales for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse young people a voice when commissioning local services in Wales.

**Text of petition:**

The child house concept is based on best practice learned from the USA and Scandinavia. Recognising the vulnerability of the child victim and the harm caused to the child by multiple interviews, the child house uses a child-friendly response to child sexual abuse (CSA).

In the UK, 2 child houses are available in the city of London, in Wales there is none.

As a child, you do not know who and where to run to, you do not know that there is any support available, if we can offer Child Houses across the UK, we can save children.

Continuation of Refuges for Domestic Violence, there should be Child Houses for children suffering child sexual abuse.

We know that many children who are suffering child abuse will at some point try and escape, they will want to free themselves, but they have nowhere to go. They will be returned back home, back into the arms of their abuser.

Providing a safe house, that is child-friendly, that can open the way for disclosure and safeguarding.

In Iceland, the 'Barnahus' model has been in place since 1998, and offers in one place, forensic interviews, making court statements, medical examinations and access to therapeutic services. We should make this available like we do a domestic violence refuge. Since the Barnahus model was established in Iceland, the number of child victims of CSA coming forward for help has more than doubled per year, indictments have tripled, and convictions have doubled. This is enough evidence to show they are crucial.

Not only should we be providing child houses, but we should continue this with educating children that these options are available. Please join us in the Campaign to address this issue and let's make a push for the Welsh Government to provide a Safe House in Wales, we surely cannot expect children to get to London, if they are even aware such houses exist.

Our children need somewhere to run to, they need to be safe and they need to have access to the correct support to save themselves from the life sentence of child sexual abuse.

## Child Houses in London

The petition refers to two 'Child Houses' which were established in London in 2016. This Mayor of London [press release](#) refers to the funding for them being made available and states:

The UK's first two Child Houses, funded by £7.2m secured by the Mayor's Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC) and NHS England (London) from the Home Office Innovation Fund, will offer medical, investigative and emotional support in one place, removing the need for young victims to go through the trauma of repeating their statement several times to different agencies.

The press release goes on to state:

The new Child Houses, which will open next year, will build on the work of the CYP Haven. While the Haven offers an urgent 24/7 response, a predominantly clinical service and short term care and support, the Child Houses will provide a multi-agency, long-term support and advocacy service under one roof. Criminal justice aspects of aftercare will be embedded in the service, with evidence gathering interviews led by child psychologists on behalf of the police and social workers, and court evidence provided through video links to aid swifter justice.

[...]Based on the original Icelandic Barnahus model, which promotes a multiagency, interdisciplinary approach under one roof, the Houses will gather more effective evidence from interviews and offer faster progress in investigations and court cases.

## Funding for the London 'Child Houses'

Referring to the Mayor's Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC), information on the [London Assembly](#) website also states:

MOPAC and NHS England (London) successfully applied to the Home Office Police Innovation Fund and received a total of £7.2m over two years, matched with NHS England (London) funding, to implement the Child House model for victims of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in London.

It also states:

Previously £1m was allocated from the MoJ Victims Grant (DMPCD 2016 44) to support the development of the Child House model. As MOPAC has been successful in obtaining monies from the Home Office Innovations fund the £1m will be reallocated. A decision on how this will be spent will require further DMPC approval.

## Icelandic ‘Barnahus’ Model

The Mayor of London [press release](#) states that the Child Houses in London are based on the Barnahus Icelandic model. Adopting this model was recommended in a 2005 [NHS England Review of pathway following sexual assault for children and young people in London](#). It describes the Barnahus model in the following way:

In Iceland for example, when a child discloses sexual assault, an appointment is made at the Barnahus. An interview is conducted by a specially trained forensic interviewer (with a background in child psychology) in a child-friendly room which is video-linked to an observation room. The interview is witnessed by the child’s advocate, social worker, the defence and prosecution teams, with a Judge presiding. The Barnahus is effectively an outreach of the courtroom at that time and the recorded interviews usually suffice as the child’s full testimony for court. The interviews are reportedly more successful in obtaining information with increases in the number of prosecutions and convictions for CSA. Because the interviews are usually completed within one to two weeks of the initial allegation being made, this allows the child to start therapy quickly, either at the Barnahus or locally. The recorded interviews are also used to plan therapy and medical examinations / aftercare can also be provided at the Barnahus.

The Mayor of London [press release](#) further describes the Barnahus stating:

The model recognises the vulnerability of the child victim and the harm caused to the child by multiple interviews. The Barnahus in Iceland provides one place in which the child can have forensic interviews and make court statements, have medical examination and access therapeutic services, which are also available for the victim’s family. Since the Barnahus model was established in Iceland, the number of child victims of CSA coming forward for help has more than doubled per year, indictments have more than tripled, and convictions have more than doubled. The Barnahus model has since been exported to Norway, Greenland and Denmark, with pilots planned in Finland and Lithuania.

## Views of the Children’s Commissioner for England

Referring to the funding for the ‘Child Houses’, information on the [London Assembly](#) website states:

The Children’s Commissioner for England specifically recommended piloting the Barnahus (Child House) model and the use of child psychologists in Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews in the UK.

In 2016, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, published a [Report on Barnahus: improving the response to child sexual abuse in England](#). In it she concluded:

It is clear that the Barnahus represents a truly child-centred approach to child sexual abuse. Services are designed and administered in a manner consistent with the best possible criminal justice and therapeutic outcomes, and the results obtained are extremely impressive.

Experiences in Sweden, Norway and Denmark demonstrate that the model can be adapted and implemented within the legal framework of another country, without compromising the core principles which deliver such impressive results. It is now time for commissioners in England to look at how the

model can be piloted here and adapted to our own legal system so as to help improve rates of prosecution and, ultimately, outcomes for children.

## Welsh Government's position

On 11 December 2018, then Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care, Huw Irranca-Davies AM, responded to correspondence from the Committee. In it he states that 'evidence gathering in support of the prosecution process means that the development of Child Houses is largely a reserved matter'. He says 'it would be prudent to wait' for the evaluation of the Child Houses in London. His response to the Committee also refers to the funding for the 'child houses' being similar to funding arrangements for Sexual Assault Referral Centres.<sup>1</sup>

### Sexual Assault Referral Centres

Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) are different from 'Child Houses'. They are all-age facilities where a range of specially trained professionals are located to support individuals who have been raped or sexually assaulted. SARCs are intended to provide a single, safe location where victims of sexual assault can receive medical care and counselling, as well as assisting Police investigation into alleged offences. They should include facilities suitable for a high standard of forensic examination.

### Views of the Children's Commissioner for Wales

The Commissioner facilitates and chairs a national roundtable meeting about child sexual exploitation (CSE). In November 2018, Professor Sally Holland published her [Annual Report 2017-18](#) and in the accompanying [media release](#) she says:

Children who have been raped or sexually assaulted face unacceptable waiting times for medical examinations and support.

The Commissioner's main concerns relate to two areas:

- 'children who have been raped or sexually assaulted cannot access a forensic medical examination quickly enough after the traumatic event they have experienced, due to shortages of suitably qualified and experienced medical staff, and often have to travel long distances; and
- access to specialist counselling for children and young people affected by sexual abuse is not available when required in order for those children to begin the road to recovery.'

The Children's Commissioner went on to recommend:

[...] that Welsh Government ensures that Sexual Assault Referral Centre provision for each health board area includes 24/7 access to a rota of suitably trained paediatricians and forensic medical examiners,

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<sup>1</sup> The Minister states 'whilst I am the Minister with lead responsibility for the safeguarding of children, including sexually abused children, I do not have the policy lead for Sexual Assault Referral Centres'. The First Minister has 'sexual violence' listed under his Ministerial Responsibilities.

so that no child has to wait for many hours or even days for an examination, and that sufficient counselling and recovery services for victims are available throughout Wales.

The Welsh Government [accepted this recommendation](#) in November 2018 stating:

The Welsh Government agrees that nobody, whether adult or child, should have to wait for services following any incident of sexual violence. The care and needs of the victim should be paramount for all services.

There have been issues in relation to the provision of paediatric services in recent years and the NHS is currently leading work to develop a sustainable and appropriate model of sexual assault services across south, west Wales and Powys. This work is being conducted in partnership with the Police, safeguarding, third sector and others and includes consideration of children's services. Work will continue throughout 2018 and into 2019. In the interim the NHS is working with its partners to ensure paediatric and Forensic Medical Examiner provision for children can be provided in a timely fashion in line with the needs of the young person.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.