

## Work and Pensions Committee

### Oral evidence: DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak, HC 178

Wednesday 9 December 2020

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Members present: Stephen Timms (Chair); Debbie Abrahams; Shaun Bailey; Siobhan Baillie; Neil Coyle; Steve McCabe; Nigel Mills; Selanie Saxby; Dr Ben Spencer; Chris Stephens; Sir Desmond Swayne.

Education Committee Members present: Apsana Begum; Ian Mearns; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 314 - 356

#### Witnesses

**I:** Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England, Ben Levinson, Headteacher, Kensington Primary School, Dr Kathryn Hobbs, Headteacher, David Nieper Academy, and Joanne Ormond, Headteacher, Maryport Church of England Junior School.

**II:** Paul Marshall, Strategic Director of Children and Education Services, Manchester City Council, Matt Dunkley CBE, Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education, Kent County Council, and Nancy Meehan, Director of Children's Services, Torbay Council.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anne Longfield OBE, Ben Levinson, Dr Kathryn Hobbs and Joanne Ormond.

Q314 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee and welcome to members of the Education Committee who are joining us today for this session. I warmly welcome all witnesses for the two panels we have joining us this morning. Thank you all very much for being here. I would ask that each of the four witnesses on the first panel just briefly introduce yourselves to us, starting with Anne Longfield.

**Anne Longfield:** My name is Anne Longfield. I am the Children's Commissioner for England and my role is promote and protect children's rights.

**Ben Levinson:** I am Ben Levinson. I am the headteacher of Kensington Primary School in Newham, east London.

**Dr Hobbs:** Good morning, I am Kathryn Hobbs, I am the headteacher at David Nieper Academy. We are an 11 to 19 school in Alfreton, Derbyshire.

**Joanne Ormond:** Morning. I am Joanne Ormond, I am the headteacher of Maryport Church of England Primary School, which is up on the north-west coast of Cumbria.

Q315 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for being with us. I have the first question and it is a question initially to each of the headteachers. How has the pandemic affected children at your school, and has it brought some families into poverty for the first time or has it just made things harder for families who were already struggling? I would be grateful for a comment from each of the three headteachers on that, starting with Ben Levinson.

If I can just indulge in a little parochial pride as the local MP, I congratulate Kensington Primary School on being named primary school of the year a couple of weeks ago. Ben, what is your response to that?

**Ben Levinson:** First of all, thank you, Stephen, that is very kind of you to mention that. There has clearly been an impact on the financial situation of a number of families. We have an increasing number of families, both at our school and across the trust that I work for, which has five schools in Newham, who are now applying for free school meals who had not previously. We have a sizeable population in the schools of families who have no recourse to public funds who have really struggled through this period.

To be honest, one of the biggest concerns for us is that group of working parents who are still in poverty despite being in work. They have been squeezed even further by this and we have seen a huge number of them



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coming to us. We run a food bank out of the school. We have a partnership with a local café where we have a Pay it Forward scheme and families get referred there to get free food and drinks, and the numbers coming to us have increased over this period of time. I do think there has been a significant effect there.

In terms of the children, children are remarkably resilient and when they came back en masse in September, they have coped incredibly well with this in the short term. What the long-term impacts are obviously is something that we will have to wait and see. But certainly in our schools, they have come back, they have got back into their learning, they seem—given the circumstances—relatively happy and settled.

**Dr Hobbs:** I would probably echo many of Ben's points. What I would say is that 50% of our families are pupil premium, so large numbers to begin with. We have not seen a huge rise on that number, but what we have seen is obviously people struggling to make sense of what is happening and struggling to find their way through that. I would say there was a lot of anxiety from people initially trying to work out how things were going to work, for example, with things like free school meals. In particular the impact that has been felt mostly in our school is on access to IT.

It would be fair to say that we were caught out with the numbers of families that did not have access to a laptop. A lot of that was hidden previously because most children, most secondary schoolchildren, do have a smartphone. They were producing a lot of their homework that way and possibly we just had not asked the right questions, only to discover that, when they were trying to work at home every day, obviously a smartphone is not a substitute in terms of writing essays or extended text. We realised very quickly that access to digital devices was quite key for many of our families, obviously for those in pupil premium, but also for the next group there as well.

We were able to mobilise a few laptops to get out to people in the initial lockdown and we thought, coming back into September, it would then just be a case of working with the children who were required to self-isolate, but we discovered that that problem is probably exacerbated now and we are still looking to how we can continue to support families with digital devices. Access to quality internet has been another thing that has impacted very heavily on our families.

**Joanne Ormond:** I would probably echo a lot of what Ben said there. In our school 15% of our families are on free school meals, but since returning in September that has increased by four families who have moved on to that free school meal band. For us, it is that next level of families up that are struggling—the ones who have low-paid jobs, so they don't necessarily qualify for the free school meals. One example I do have is we have one family—and it tends to be the single parents as well—a single working mum. Although she works full time, her contract is



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only for part-time, but she gets a lot of overtime within her job. When she was then furloughed, she was only furloughed on her part-time hours, but obviously she still had the bills, so she is an example of one family that is really struggling. We do have a number that are within that group as well.

I think our free school meal families are doing okay, obviously inasmuch as they can be, given their circumstances. My main concern is about, as I say, that next level, the lower-paid part-time workers who have then been furloughed and the impact that is having on their children. They are not necessarily able to access the same offers that are out there within the community. For example, over half-term in October a lot of the businesses around our town offered food packages or free meals in the cafés and things for children as long as they could go in and prove that the children were on free school meals.

But obviously those parents that were not at that level and did not qualify for free school meals then could not access that either. Those are the families that we are now referring on to the food bank and the local community centres to give them some extra support. We provide them whatever support we can in school, like free snacks and things like that as well.

**Q316 Sir Desmond Swayne:** The Chief Inspector said, and I quote, “There is the majority—a group who have slipped back in their learning to various degrees since schools were closed to most children and movement restricted”. A statement that I suspect will be blindingly obvious, after all—is that not why we require children to go to school in the first place? But within that group we have heard of children who have fared so much worse, who are back in nappies, who have forgotten how to use a knife and fork, whose reading ability and behaviour has deteriorated much further. The key question to our heads is: first, does that correspond with your own experience? Secondly, why is it that those children have fared much worse? Is it just a question of more money, more benefits, or is this something more profound that is wrong?

**Dr Hobbs:** Obviously as a secondary school we have not seen some of those early years regressions that you mentioned there. What we did notice coming back in September is that for lots of children being in social situations was something that they almost appeared to get out of the habit of. Obviously they had been working at home and in isolation for a long period of time. I would say that we have noticed more falling outs and a lack of an ability to resolve issues promptly, which has required more staff intervention. Certainly levels of anxiety have been very high for some children and some families, particularly those with underlying health conditions where obviously they do feel a responsibility to keep their families safe.

Has that impacted on particular groups? Yes and no. Certainly children with special educational needs have found that lack of social contact very difficult and more difficult to manage on return. Regarding Ben’s point,



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children are very resilient and they do find ways of working their way through that, but it has probably required, from our point of view, more pastoral support than we have been used to putting in. For our year 6 children coming into year 7, they did miss out on a huge amount of transition into the academy. We tried to put things in place virtually, we also did run a summer school where we did bring children in for a day in the summer holidays and we found that was beneficial in terms of reducing anxiety and just getting them school-ready again—obviously school-ready, but with all the new restrictions that we have had to put in place.

**Ben Levinson:** It is fundamentally a hugely complex question. I think for us we have not necessarily seen that kind of level of regression of children. From our perspective, both through lockdown and then when children returned, our focus was fundamentally on the wellbeing of our children and of our families. That was our driving focus, to ensure that they were okay when they were at home and that they were okay when they came back. That is paying dividends now because they are now making that progress that we would like to see from them.

Inevitably, as you said, the whole point of children coming to school is so that they can get that quality of education. For a lot of our younger children, in particular the teaching of phonics, the learning of phonics, the basic building blocks of reading is an area where they have significantly fallen behind, because for most of our parents the teaching of that is not something that is easy to pick up; it is not something that is easy to deliver. They have fallen behind there. As for the rest of the piece, ultimately it depends on family circumstances, and we have some families who are living in financially very difficult situations, but who have had all of the time and all of the opportunity to spend with their children, and those children have benefited in many ways from that.

Equally, we have families with two working parents who have been trying to juggle working from home, childcare, education and so on, whose children have then suffered as a result of that. It is certainly not along financial lines, I wouldn't say, in any kind of strict correlation of that. Certainly there are children who have suffered.

As Kathryn says, those children with special needs, particularly for us, we have a lot of children who are autistic. Inevitably the disruption to routines, to the consistency, as well as all the high emotion that is surrounding the children at the moment from parents, from wider society—they found very disruptive. We have had a lot of those children who have found that very difficult and have been very dysregulated as a result. Inevitably then that is impacting on their opportunities for learning and their progress as well.

**Joanne Ormond:** We have quite a big early years unit. Thinking about the little ones within our nursery and our reception class—we have not had anybody who has regressed in terms of the toilet training or anything



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like that—we have noticed that this year quite a lot of our new starters are not potty trained and are not using the toilet fully yet, which is unusual for us. We normally maybe have one or two children that are still in nappies or pullups when they start our nursery, but this year we have between 12 and 15 who are not regularly using the toilet correctly. Whether that is a result of this or it is that particular cohort, I am not quite sure, but it is certainly impacting now that they are back in school, because staff are taking time out having to take children to the toilet and change them and things. It is pulling staff away from the learning in that respect.

What we found with the reading and the phonics in particular, it was the year group that were reception last year who have now moved into year 1 who have struggled the most with the phonics because they just got to grips with blending their sounds when they went into lockdown. We put a lot of work into our online learning over the lockdown. Those parents at home, they are not trained teachers, so with all their best intentions, they did a good job, but it was not the same as the children being in school getting their phonics teaching.

Since we have come back we have had to put a lot of resource and a lot of interventions into our year 1 children to try to get them back up to speed with their phonics. On the whole most of them are catching up. It is quite a positive picture at the moment. In terms of behaviour, I think what we have found is that the children struggled getting back into school and just getting back into the routine of the day. I think for a lot of them their bedtimes have been disrupted so that they were not going to bed until quite late. There were a lot of children who had been spending many hours gaming, getting them out of that habit of staying up late on their Xboxes or whatever. Our focus was on building relationships back up again.

A lot of our parents did try very hard with the home learning but again, as has already been said, it was those parents where both parents were working from home, they had two or three children, trying to do the home learning—they either didn't have enough devices or their internet was not strong enough. We have one family that has five children and, yes, they do have a laptop, but divvying the time of the laptop out between five children was a big issue for them, and mum and dad were both at home working as well and also needed to use the internet.

For our SEND pupils, what we found was that a lot of parents wanted to do their best for their children over that time but did not necessarily have the strategies and the resources they needed to provide home learning or to support the home learning at the appropriate level. I do not know what it was like in the rest of the country, but all of our specialist advisory teachers and our ed psychs were not doing any visits or anything at all over lockdown obviously, so those children missed out. Speech and language was a big issue so any children of ours with speech and language issues did not see a speech therapist at all for well over six or



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seven months. That is now only coming back quite intermittently. Even at this point they are still not back to full capacity within our area.

On other hand, there were children that did respond very well to lockdown, loved being at home with their parents and did lots of activities. We kept in touch with them remotely, we did wellbeing phone calls and some of them did flourish at home with parents who would otherwise be at work. So quite a mixed bag, but certainly some issues.

**Chair:** Anne, would you like to comment on this? I know my colleague, Siobhan Baillie, wants to raise a point as well.

**Anne Longfield:** What we are hearing is how the experience of the pandemic and lockdown in particular has been very different for different children in different circumstances. I just want to say thank you to all the headteachers on this session today, but many more throughout the country too. Everything you did for those children and families during the pandemic was fantastic. I have heard of schools that reached out to families, delivered food and made sure that there were contact points.

There are a number of things. First, clearly there were some families where income dropped dramatically during this period. That might have been losing hours or indeed losing jobs completely. There are 450,000 families who applied for Universal Credit in the first few weeks. One of the things that would be very helpful is to have better data on those that are claiming Universal Credit by numbers of children, by local authority area and also by the number of hours they worked. That would help to get a better grip and picture of what we know.

There were those families who fell into a much more difficult financial situation, but then what we are now hearing as well is there were children who were already leading a very difficult life because of poverty but it was going quite unseen. We heard the digital divide is real. About 1 million children did not have access to devices, but there is a much wider context of living with poverty that I think struck children during this period. That would be poor housing. If you are in accommodation that was very cramped, with no outdoor space, there was a period of time where you would be in a very different situation than if you were a family with a large house and outdoor garden. About 8% of families do not have a private garden, but for black and minority ethnic children that is 22%, so significant number of children there.

We also know that children were much more stressed if their parents were having a difficult time throughout this period. We know that things like domestic violence increased during this period, but the police said that finances was one of the things that was driving a lot of those reports. When we surveyed children, 21% of children that we asked said that lack of money was one of their top three worries during the pandemic. We know that for those children whose parents were going out to work outside the home—that is, they couldn't work at home, which is largely going to be those with lower-paid jobs—they were much more



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stressed during that period. It is about 68% versus 40% than those that were working at home. That in itself was causing much more stress for those children. Also those children reported family relationships being much more difficult if they are on a lower income or if they are working outside the home.

The context of poverty is something that has come into the spotlight during the pandemic in a way that I do not think it has before. It has done so at a time where the services that are around to support those families—schools in themselves, but also access to social workers, children’s centres, family support and the like—was at best altered because it was often behind a screen but often was just not accessible for an awful lot of families. That support system was not around. While it is not directly in correlation, we know that the number of referrals to social services dropped by half at one point during the pandemic. Children just were not in the line of sight to be able to get help. For all of those reasons, children have fared disproportionately badly if they were living in poverty before the pandemic. Of course there are more now who are in poverty because of the change in finances.

**Chair:** Siobhan wanted to raise a point and Christian Wakeford wanted to as well, so we will take both of those points and then come back to our witnesses.

Q317 **Siobhan Baillie:** Very quickly, I do not think we should be shy about acknowledging that some families struggle and some people need help through no fault of their own, but we cannot keep asking schools to do more and more and be parents on top of everything else. How important is it that we get services like family hubs up and running and we get things like DWP’s strengthening relationships work that they have done through charities like OnePlusOne really active? Schools already have so much on their plates and we know that children were missed from not being in school, but it should not be only the school and the teachers’ eyes on these children.

Q318 **Christian Wakeford:** I remember when schools first were going back in June and the guidance was— I would say it was clear on paper—it was not particularly—but in practice it looked very different. There was obviously a greater need for pastoral care in the school setting. From a school perspective, how much of that pastoral care in regards to children’s mental health was related to a change in the school environment? How much was it being at home and away from friends in a completely different educational setting for three months? Was there any work done within your schools to assess that and mitigate it?

**Joanne Ormond:** Yes, in relation to what Christian has just said, we have quite a strong pastoral support team in our school anyway. We do have a learning mentor that works full-time. It is her role to pick up any children who have anxieties or any issues. What we found is that the children have not necessarily been affected by being away from their friends. We did put a lot of work in the first couple of weeks of September



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about establishing relationships again, but what we found is the children who had issues within the home during lockdown so, for example, we had more calls. In Cumbria we are doing something call Operation Encompass, which is a domestic violence response.

I had more calls over lockdown about domestic violence incidents from the police in that three or four months than I had done in two or three years. It is also the children who either during lockdown or since lockdown whose parents have split up, and that is quite a significant number within our school. A lot of that was to do with the pressures again, whether it is money or just being on top of each other in the house. They are the children that we are putting the most work into at the moment—as I say, the ones that have suffered from being witness to domestic violence and the ones whose parents have separated in the last six months.

**Dr Hobbs:** With the first lockdown our staff did a huge amount of outreach work. For the special educational needs children, they were receiving very regular phone calls and we quickly realised for some children and some families it needed to be more intensive than that, so we had some of our teaching assistants delivering lessons via the telephone because we realised that was a much more appropriate way to support those children than trying to work their way through online material. Indeed, often parents had technical questions and needed that level of support.

We were putting in bespoke education for many of our special educational needs children. Our pastoral team effectively became a roving team and because many of the services that people have already mentioned were not able to do home visits, we suddenly realised that we were the service that were still prepared to do home visits. Often staff were standing in gardens and talking over fences just to be seen by children and families.

We had one little boy who had only recently transitioned into the school, and that had been a very difficult transition. If we had lost complete contact with him or if it had only been remote, it would have been very difficult, and we feared we would lose him from school altogether. So our staff going out and standing in the garden just having a 10-minute conversation with him and his carers proved invaluable and has meant that he has been able to come back in September and settle in very quickly.

A huge amount of our pastoral time was spent delivering laptops, repairing laptops, taking new leads out, trying to answer technical questions that we could not do over the telephone and delivering the free school meal vouchers. We had 20 families who could not receive them via email or we just could not resolve the technical issues, so every week those vouchers were being driven out to those families. We realised that became a huge part of our work.



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I would echo the comments that many of the waiting lists for services have grown a lot longer, so we have had to put additional staff in ourselves to try to address some of those needs. We brought a counsellor in one day a week, which we are about to increase to two days a week, just to try to pick up some of those issues before they sit on a waiting list for so long that it becomes a crisis.

Indeed, it is the pastoral team that we will continue to expand. We have brought in additional support for our attendance officer. I have staff whose titles have become remote learning liaison because children just need that day-to-day contact—they need to be able to speak to somebody if they do not understand the work that is coming out. We are delivering paperwork to children who can't access it online; we are collecting work. We have had a lot of papers being delivered to students. Anything that we can do to try to support children, to let them know that we are still thinking about them during lockdown and we still cared about them—as I said, we realised that we were the one service that was continuing to go out.

I very much appreciate Siobhan's comments that it cannot all fall to schools, but in that initial lockdown it did feel like we were the front and back line and probably everything in between. A lot of that is continuing now while other services try to manage the huge backlog of need that has built up.

**Ben Levinson:** Just to echo what others have said, Stephen, you will be keenly aware about some of the challenges that we face in Newham. We had some of the highest levels of domestic violence in the country already prior to lockdown and significant numbers of incidents over the lockdown period and subsequently. We have some of the highest child homelessness in the country, one in 12 children living in temporary accommodation or homeless in other ways and the impacts of all that, as Anne has talked about.

From that pastoral care perspective, we have fortunately spent the last three years researching and completely revolutionising the day-to-day curriculum that we deliver as a school. One of the fundamental pillars of that was around children's health—so, physical, mental and emotional health. That was something that we were already delivering pre-lockdown and what has happened over the last 10 months has only reinforced what we already strongly believed: that one of the fundamental building blocks for children in their lives and in their education is their health. From just living a happy, prosperous and good life, we are living longer, but we are living longer in ill health. We need to build that foundation at a younger age.

Also in terms of their learning, often when we are looking at children's learning, children who maybe are struggling to read or struggling to write, when you track that back, often the barriers to that, the fundamental barriers around children's health—it is children who are



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anxious, children who are stressed, children who are unable to cope with an argument that they had with their friend at playtime and do not have the strategies to get over them and focus back on their learning.

We are already building all of that, so taking that out and putting that into more of a remote approach was something that we were able to do reasonably seamlessly. Our focus was very much on the wellbeing of families. It was not about overloading families with a huge amount of additional work, which ultimately they are going to struggle to access. We are 99.7% black and minority ethnic as a school and we are 97% English as an additional language. Huge numbers of our population have arrived fairly recently in the country and so levels of English are a real challenge, and then there is asking parents on top of their worries about work, their worries about finance and their worries about illness to start delivering lessons, supporting lessons, supporting learning at home and getting to use the digital technology. We have already heard a lot about that, but internet access and digital poverty is not just not having a device but, as people have said, if you are working from home you have to have multiple devices. Putting that stress on families we did not feel was the best way to go.

We felt that supporting emotional wellbeing, delivering food parcels, as we were doing on a daily basis, providing safe outdoor space for children who were in lockdown to come and run around in the playground for half an hour and timetabling that—those kind of things were what were important, because when they came back to school, if they were in a good place emotionally, physically, mentally, then we could do the work that we do best, which is getting on with the learning. That was really our focus and that is what I think has made a big difference.

To pick up on your point, Siobhan, that is the million dollar question, isn't it? Schools are not schools anymore. We are not the three Rs, we are not writing, arithmetic; we are so much more than that these days. How far that goes and where that sits is a huge question. As a trust we employ speech and language therapists, we employ family support workers, we employ special needs teachers. We already do all of that because the access to services and the quality of services that we can get isn't at the standard we think it needs to be for our children. We are already making those choices.

It is possible to keep on extending that envelope with the right resource if we believe that is the right way to go. That is probably a much bigger conversation than what we have time for today. Certainly as things stand we are stretched and possibly beyond that, if I am honest with you, in some cases in terms of what we are delivering, what we are trying to deliver, what is being asked of us across the whole piece, from housing support for our families to supporting those families who have no recourse to public funds, to accessing the appropriate services through the social work element, so many different things that my staff pick up on and do to support our families.



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**Q319 Ian Mearns:** An awful lot of this has been touched on, what schools have been involved in in supporting children and their families outside of school in the lockdown, when schools were closed and during the school holidays. I am more interested—having already heard an awful lot of answers about that—in what schools have received around equipment, funding and other support to make sure that no children are left behind.

At the Education Select Committee yesterday we heard the Schools Minister say that, of the original promises in terms of devices, laptops, tablets and so on, only 20% ended up being delivered because they found a more flexible way of moving them around the system when needed. Certainly I have had experience of schools here in my own patch that have not received any. I am interested from the different perspectives of the headteachers around the country and any evidence you have, Anne, of what has been happening with that additional funding to support schools to provide the services that they need to provide but also the equipment.

Additionally, just one observation, and this very germane to the DWP Select Committee, surely it cannot be beyond the wit of man or woman that policies like the bedroom tax have meant that some youngsters in poor accommodation do not have a quiet place to work when they need to do work at home. Is there any experience of that?

**Q320 Chair:** Kathryn, you made the point that you had obtained lots of laptops early on. How did that come about? Tell us what happened.

**Dr Hobbs:** We had decided as an academy to invest in laptops prior to lockdown so in many ways that was a fortuitous position that we found ourselves in. We did have 130 devices in the academy and by the end of lockdown we had lent out 122 of those. We were down to our last few. We did invest in more laptops over the summer from our own funds. We were exceptionally disappointed with the original allocation that was announced for the year 10 pupil premium children and looked-after children. The looked-after children did get their devices, they came through the local authority. For the pupil premium allocation, that seemed exceptionally low for our numbers of children. However, on a positive, the second allocation that came out in September we had a full allocation. I am well aware of colleagues who have had that allocation taken off them or have not received them but we were overjoyed to receive a huge number of devices at that point.

In fairness, I do not know what has triggered that. We did have a number of Covid cases quite early on in September and obviously our pupil premium numbers are high, but they were delivered exceptionally promptly, so promptly that it took us a little time to process all of the devices but that was fantastic.

Where we have struggled with access to support is, like many heads, I was led to believe that there would be compensation for any Covid expenditure during the original lockdown, but when the detail came out about that, the parameters were so tight that there was very little of the



expenditure that we did spend. It was genuine expenditure on dealing with the lockdown that was encompassed by that scheme. We are working our way through the finer details of the second scheme. That is only applicable from 1 November. We have been dealing with large numbers of staff absence who are self-isolating for all sorts of reasons, many that are not linked to within the academy at all. Again, the parameters for being able to claim some of that money back are so tight that it will take us a long time to work through. I fear that will not provide that money that I know is being set aside to support schools.

A mixed bag. I am very grateful for that allocation that we received in September of devices and I am unsure why we received them and other colleagues haven't. That certainly has helped us greatly through this term. The supply issue is one that is daily becoming more of a burden on our school and our ability to deliver high quality teaching and learning.

**Q321 Ian Mearns:** Kathryn, just to get this spot on for the record, you received your allocation but you are aware of others that did not?

**Dr Hobbs:** Yes, others in the local area. I am not entirely sure of the criteria and why we were allocated out of that. Ours came out the third week in September. Full credit to whoever organised that scheme from our point of view, and I was very surprised but very pleased. Yes, for the record, we did receive a full allocation of a very generous large number of devices in September.

**Chair:** We are starting to get a little bit behind schedule so I will bring in Chris Stephens to raise a question. I appreciate that other witnesses may want to add to Ian's point about the bedroom tax. There will be an opportunity for that as we go through.

**Q322 Chris Stephens:** I would like to ask the panel about issues in relation to support they are getting from the Government. Obviously the winter package has been announced, which is probably similar, I think, to the package that the Government had put together in the summer. What measures have you seen in the summer that you think will happen in the winter that will help children? Are food vouchers the most effective and secure method of providing food to needy children? Ben.

**Ben Levinson:** Crossing over both of these, you are asking about that support. We, much like Kathryn, have not received any funding or money back for what we have invested. I have been led to believe it is because we ended last year with an underspend, which as a headteacher is pretty much the bottom line on my job. We made a lot of sacrifices last year in order to end in that financial position. We are talking a couple of thousand pounds on a nearly £4 million budget for our school. As a trust we have invested £150,000 in our schools and as schools we have invested about the same again for additional cleaning, resources and so on that we have needed. But none of that money at this point is coming back.



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With devices, we have 2,500 children across our schools, we are about a third free school meals, about 5% no recourse to public funds and then probably 20% or so of those families who we have talked about who are working but on that borderline. We are talking probably 1,400 children, and we were allocated 125 laptops for those children. Our allocation was significantly cut if we had not already taken it up, so as a school we had an initial allocation of 32 for our 650 children, which was then cut to 10.

That side of it has been very difficult. The vouchers for free school meals was very much welcomed by our families. Obviously there was the initial difficulty around the distribution of those, but once we took control of that and moved over to our own supplier and did that ourselves, that worked effectively. Probably much like I said about other things, whether providing food vouchers in the 21st century in this country to allow parents to feed their children because they are not at school is the way we should be living I think is a big question. We should not be in that position, in my personal view. Given the circumstances we are in and children and families who are struggling, I do think it is probably a good solution as it stands at the moment. It is something I know that has been welcomed by our families. That has been a positive and one that I am glad is continuing.

Just picking up on Ian's point on the bedroom tax, I do not know about the bedroom tax, but certainly I have lots of families who are living in one room. There are families I know of, parents, four children, who live in one room in shared accommodation and obviously during lockdown. I find it hard to imagine what it must be like and I know how challenging that was and the impact that had on them and their children.

**Q323 Chair:** Ben, in the Government's winter package that was announced two or three weeks ago, do you know what is coming to Kensington in terms of food vouchers and so on?

**Ben Levinson:** Absolutely. We have food vouchers for all of our children who receive pupil premium and we receive an extra 10% on top of that. For us that is 12 or 13 children who we can then allocate that to. The first time around—because of the no recourse and because of the families who are working but not reaching that level—part of what we invested in as a school is a trust for providing food packages and food parcels to those families. Ultimately we gave food to people who needed it, which was not fully covered by those vouchers. Those vouchers went a long way and covered a significant number of families but we were providing 60 to 70 weekly food parcels or daily meals to families who would not receive that funding for a variety of reasons.

**Q324 Ian Mearns:** I will just point out that yesterday Nick Gibb referred to the distribution of laptops as a phenomenal success.

**Joanne Ormond:** Going back to the laptops, we were informed that our allocation was five laptops, which we can only apply for at the point where a bubble closes and it is only for key stage 2 as well. Therefore



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only half of our school can be eligible to get one and it is five out of about 200 children, so it is not great. We have had nothing. Cumbria also had a scheme where children who had a social worker were supposed to be getting laptops during lockdown. None of our children with social workers did. It obviously sounds like a very mixed bag and a very mixed picture across the country as to how the laptops have been distributed.

In terms of the winter package, within Cumbria the local authority has taken on board the logistics of all of that. Schools have had to provide the numbers for how many vouchers we need within each of the schools. That seems to have been organised quite well. Every school submitted their numbers and free school meal vouchers are being sent out direct from the local authority at the end of next week when we close for Christmas.

What the local authority has also done is organise community groups and the fire service, so if any bubbles close, the burden on schools to deliver the free school meals to those children who are not in school while the rest of the school is in has been taken on by community groups. That has been organised by the local authority as well, which has been very good.

In terms of those children who I spoke about earlier, the ones who are not eligible for free school meals but are still on that borderline of really struggling financially, certainly within our town we have lots of community groups that are providing help. They are not putting any stipulations on who can access that help. We had one group contact us a couple of weeks ago to say they will provide everything required for a full Christmas dinner—so it was turkey, stuffing, all the veg, the dessert and the whole thing for a Christmas dinner—for any families that we felt would appreciate it and would deserve it, whether they were free school meals or not. We have signposted quite a lot of our families to that and they have taken up that offer.

**Chair:** Smashing. Chris, I know you want to come back, but I will get Anne Longfield to comment first and then I will come back to you, Chris.

**Anne Longfield:** Thank you very much. I wanted to comment on the point about the role of schools. Obviously schools are doing a fantastic thing here, but of course it should not be just schools that are doing this. Schools are obviously in every community, they are centre-points to the community, but what I would want to see are support systems around that school to help them do what they are doing.

There is something about the scale of difference of what you see as a school, knowing communities and the level of vulnerability and those who maybe social services see, which would define it more as having a social worker. There is a school in Walworth that I have visited a few times and, of a 400-roll primary school, they told me they have 250 schoolchildren who they felt were highly vulnerable. I asked them how many had a social worker—so, they would fall into a definition where they would get help from elsewhere. I expected them to say 150 or so—I knew there



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would be a difference—and they said eight. What schools are seeing is that scale of difference of those families who are not on the books of social services. What we are seeing at the moment is, because schools are now having to go back of course to their day job, if you like—teaching of children in school—there is a gap here of children who are falling through because they are not in crisis enough to get help from the council in social services terms but they still do need help.

In terms of the free school meals, other countries have gone a different way to vouchers in some instances. In Northern Ireland they did financial transfers straight into benefits, in Wales it was a mix of that and vouchers, and in Scotland they have added an additional £100 payment for families in poverty over Christmas. There are a number of things they are doing. The thing with the free school meal voucher—of course it is the last line of defence, if you like, against poverty and ensuring children have food—is it does what it says on the tin: it gets it to those children there and then who need it.

**Q325 Chris Stephens:** I want ask the heads one other question. Looking at the kind of support you have had during the pandemic, what do you think should become a permanent feature in terms of the Government support you are getting? In terms of school lunches—you may be aware particularly, Joanne—in Scotland the intention is to make free school meals available to all primary school children from May 2022. Is that something that should be considered in other parts of the UK?

**Chair:** Let us ask for some brief answers, if we may.

**Joanne Ormond:** I would certainly welcome with open hands if all primary schools got free school meals. Obviously at the moment in England it is just key stage 1. What we find is that once the children come out of year 2, move into year 3 and suddenly have to start paying for their meals, an awful lot of them then revert to packed lunches that are not necessarily as healthy as the hot free school meals. It tends to be lots of chocolate, crisps and things. We do get a lot of children bringing Greggs in as their school dinner because they get those on the way to school and it is not nutritionally as good as well. Therefore that would be a very good option, certainly.

Any things we would want to continue. What would be very good and very beneficial—we have all spoken about our pastoral teams—is if that was made a priority in the Government funding of schools; if they accepted that schools do need very strong pastoral support teams working. We do not have things like education welfare officers anymore, so having extra money within our budget so that we can make sure every school has somebody—even if it is just at least one person, depending on the size of the school—whose role is dealing with pastoral concerns and being that contact point for parents if they have worries as well.

**Ben Levinson:** Thanks, Chris. We are in a very fortunate position in Newham in that the local authority, as Steve will know, has funded free



school meals for key stage 2 children for many years. My big concern, because of the financial situation and the difficulties that local authorities find themselves in, is that we are about to go into a consultation whereby it is highly likely those free school meals for key stage 2 children will no longer be available. Therefore we are heading in the opposite direction, having had many, many years. It has made a huge difference. The vast majority of our children have a free school meal every single day, which is life changing for our communities. There are so many issues that will come out of taking that away, both in terms of diet and also in terms of safety. We are going to have a lot more children who are going to go home for school dinners, which presents a whole raft of other issues. That is something I desperately hope we can hang on to.

I agree with Joanne, what we need from the Government on that is the agency to make the right decisions for our communities. So many school leaders I talk to feel like they need to, want to and should be spending more time on that pastoral role, on making sure that children are healthy, are happy and are well looked after. If you look at what parents want, particularly from primary schools, they are more interested in their children being well cared for, being happy and enjoying their education than they are about them getting the best SATs results. However, some of the accountability measures—Ofsted is trying to move in the right direction, but it is a slow process—still drive schools down a route of focusing on making sure we are narrowly focusing on reading, writing and maths rather than on that wider pastoral role. Therefore having that agency to be able to make the right decisions that we want to make, which we know are best for our children and our communities, would be something very positive that could come out of the last year or so.

**Chris Stephens:** Thanks very much indeed.

**Chair:** Apologies, we are running a bit short on time. Can I bring in Apsana Begum?

Q326 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the panel for joining us today. It has been very useful for us as members of the Education Committee to have joined today to hear from you, particularly on the issues around the laptop provision, because that is something we picked up in the Committee and it is always helpful to get an even wider picture of what is happening.

My question is about specific circumstances that families may have faced that have meant some children may have fallen behind during the pandemic. In your view, does the winter package that has been announced go far enough to address the concerns about how children might have been left behind in the pandemic or do you think that some families may continue to fall through the gaps in support? I will come to Ben first, if that is okay.

**Ben Levinson:** Thanks, Apsana. I think the bottom line is no, I do not think it does go far enough. There will still be families who fall through the gaps. We are in a very challenging time for everybody so there are



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always going to be those families who really struggle. Unfortunately for a lot of families they started from a difficult position. They started off in poverty, they started off in overcrowded housing and they started off with all of these challenges. Yes, of course I think the winter package will make a small difference, but only a small difference.

The concept of falling behind is a really interesting one and again one we do not have time to really explore. What is falling behind? We set some reasonably arbitrary endpoints for children for the end of year 6 that is totally different to what it is five years ago or 10 years ago, and completely different to what it is in Germany, America or Singapore. Therefore, for us, we always have children who are falling behind. That is what we do in school every day. Every day we are looking at where the children are and where they need to go next. Some children have fallen further behind their peers I guess in our school context than had previously, but other children have done very well from having that time with their parents. I think from an educational perspective there is a whole discussion around this concept of falling behind.

There are going to be families who are struggling now. I know there are families who are struggling now. I know there are families who are very anxious about the future. We have somehow managed to avoid Brexit today, but clearly there is the potential for the impact of that as well, particularly on some of our families.

**Q327 Apsana Begum:** What do you think the long-term strategy should be then? There has been an awful lot of discussion throughout the pandemic about child poverty and development. Like Stephen, I am in a constituency that has one of the highest rates of child poverty. What do you think can be the long-term strategies around effectively tackling child poverty and development? It is a big question.

**Ben Levinson:** It is probably slightly outside my expertise. I am sure there are people far better qualified than me debating whether we spend our way out, save our way out or what we do around it. However, clearly targeting money and resource at those families, those children who most desperately it and those areas that most desperately need it, I would say, is absolutely crucial. The growing inequality in the country and across society is a real concern. Trying to redress that in some way would be a good first step, but I feel like I am straying well outside my expertise.

**Chair:** Can we bring in Kathryn to bring us a second perspective on this?

**Dr Hobbs:** Thank you. In terms of the winter package, I agree that will obviously support a lot of families. The local authority in Derbyshire is providing those free school meal vouchers directly to children. My one slight concern there is that obviously we did have a system in the summer that was run from schools and that worked. My feel over Christmas is if parents do not receive those vouchers, who will they contact? I imagine their first port of call will be schools and we will not be here necessarily to pick up those queries. Therefore I am concerned that



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some families may not receive those vouchers or know how to get support.

In terms of long-term support, I have taken part in some research with Teach First and some case studies with some other headteachers in terms of how we can support disadvantaged children. One of the recommendations that came forward from that report is about having some sort of social work capacity embedded in schools, whether that be an extension of some of the pastoral work that we have all described or a specific social worker. There does appear to be a disconnect between us as an agency and other agencies that are obviously working with the same families. That could very well be our fault and maybe we need to be working harder to have a little bit more joined-up thinking, or maybe it is just a case that all the agencies have had to respond so rapidly to current events that maybe we have lost sight of trying to work closely with each other to support families.

However, certainly from our point of view, continuing to expand that provision that we can provide ourselves rather than relying on outside agencies is something I will look to invest our money in going forward—whether that be early help, whether that be social work, whether that be pastoral care—because I do not think those needs are going to go away. While this has just exacerbated previous needs for us, they are impacting on children’s anxiety levels, on their happiness and their wellbeing and all of that impacts on how well they will achieve at school.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. Can I bring in my colleague, Neil Coyle, to raise his question before coming to other witnesses?

Q328 **Neil Coyle:** Thanks, Chair. Ben, you already touched on no recourse to public funds. The Committee recommended to the Government that no recourse conditions were lifted during the pandemic. The Government’s response was that they did not need to because families had access to other support. What have you seen, as our witnesses, in terms of the impact on children and families and no recourse to public funds? Have they had sufficient other support? I wonder if, Ben, you want to come in first.

**Ben Levinson:** Sure. No is the bottom line. We are just starting a project now working with the local authority and a local charity that is focused on supporting people with no resource to public funds in an effort to help them navigate the landscape so they can get the support they need. There is some support out there, but the ability of families to access that with all of the challenges they are often facing generally in my experience does not happen.

Q329 **Neil Coyle:** You say no. Perhaps you could say a little more about the conditions. You mentioned families living in one room. I have seen that in my own constituency, I have had schools report that and I have had families come to see me—whole families living in one room with a shared kitchen and bathroom with other families living in the same premises.



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Perhaps you could talk us through the circumstances that leave people experiencing that, for the children you are trying to teach primarily.

**Ben Levinson:** It is so hard for those children then coming into schools. They will often have not had enough sleep, they have teenage siblings who will have different bedtimes who will be staying up later. They will not have had sufficient food. We are often having children coming into school who we are finding breakfast for, giving food to when they come in because they have not had that breakfast. Then there is going home and the organisation around that, losing books, losing letters because, again, there are overcrowded and cramped conditions.

Bear in mind often a lot of these families are families who have just arrived in the country. We have a significant number of mid-phase admissions, children who join partway through the year. Often they have very low levels of English or no English at all. They are trying to adapt to a new language, a new environment, trying to make friends, and within all of this they are going home to some of those challenges. It is incredibly hard for those families to then have the time, the knowledge and the skill to be able to navigate what is a pretty complex system and get some of the resource that is there and available to them.

Q330 **Neil Coyle:** Chair, before I come on to Anne, do any of the other heads want to come in on this? Do any of you agree with the High Court suggestion that no recourse potentially leaves children and families at risk of degrading circumstances?

**Chair:** Joanne or Kathryn, any comment on this, briefly?

**Joanne Ormond:** I would say there are a lot of families who do have no recourse to public funds and they are really struggling and are the ones that are falling through the net. Certainly within our community they are the people who are reliant on the food banks and reliant on other community groups. I have to say our community was absolutely fantastic during the lockdown and since in providing things. People stepped up and helped out wherever they could, whether it was with clothes for children or whether it was food, and people put together toy boxes to keep children going. The community did an absolutely fantastic job, but at the end of the day, is it the community's job to do that?

Q331 **Neil Coyle:** Anne, perhaps you could come in on your work as Children's Commissioner. It is estimated there are more than 100,000 of these children. Where do they sit in your at-risk register and your work covering children in poverty?

**Anne Longfield:** Thank you. These are children who are very high risk. These are desperate situations. The clue is in the title, no recourse to public funds. Families are left often in limbo for up to eight years while their cases are processed, when it was very clear they would have a right to stay in the first place. There is something here about the process and what priority this gets, which clearly it does not. They are often living in very dreadful housing conditions, temporary housing and cramped



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accommodation, as you say, and have been moved around. I intervene on some of those cases and am able to get housing for them, but it should not rely on a post like mine to do that.

Sometimes they will be moved an hour and a half away from the school, parents want them to continue to go to school so they travel an extra hour and a half a day. All of those things, the insecurity and what that means for children in terms of their outlook on life, are absolutely devastating. That is something that needs to have absolute clarity and priority. I have heard of parents who are living on buses at weekends, which is no way that anyone should have to live. It is a desperate situation.

On the question of what we do about it in terms of strategy, some of this will be about getting a stronger safety net. Certainly Universal Credit and the uplift has made a big difference during this period, and I am one of those who are arguing for that to continue. The whole issue about families getting into debt is becoming clearer and clearer. The impact of the five-week advance payments that have to be repaid means people set off on Universal Credit already struggling to keep up, so there is a need for a stronger financial safety net. Certainly that family support and that support to alleviate poverty, including of course food poverty, is absolutely essential. I think this is just one thing that needs to be part of a recovery package if we are going to help those families not only to get back to where they were but also to get into a much better place.

**Q332 Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, everyone. My first set of questions segues very nicely from the last one and is specifically to you, Anne. I think in your last report, "Childhood in the time of Covid", you have recommended continuing the uplift, but also adding to that, as well as adding to the two-child limit. What sort of evidence do you have in terms of how this would impact on children's life chances and reducing the inequalities that we see between different children?

**Anne Longfield:** The uplift itself clearly has made a significant impact in terms of money in the pockets of those who are claiming Universal Credit. It is estimated that, for £67 million, 700,000 children could be removed from poverty if that was to continue. There is also, I am sure, lots of modelling, and I would say probably more modelling needs to go on across Government about the impact of children in poverty as the recession hits on children over coming months and indeed years. There is something about the uplift being removed in April that will hit at the same time as the recession starts to peak in the middle of next summer, so that is a double whammy for children and for families too. There is also the practicality that a lot of families will now be getting furlough support and that too will be coming to an end.

I think there are now emerging reports that the debt that families are facing when they enter Universal Credit is something that is having a devastating impact. They start in debt and cannot catch up. One of the things that people have asked me over this period where there has been



a welcome debate on food poverty is, “How can this happen? How can it get to the stage where a family cannot buy six eggs or go to the supermarket and get the basics?” However, we know the number of families where someone in the family is having to go without food is significant—350,000 families. It is also this level of debt that families fall into, so that they are in a position where they just cannot find any money, there is none left to be able to pay for the basics. There is a JRF report out today on destitution that puts the figure at 550,000 children living in destitution.

**Q333 Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you very much, that is very comprehensive. You made some comments earlier around the relevance of vouchers as opposed to direct cash transfers. What would your personal preference be in relation to that?

**Anne Longfield:** I think cash transfer is much more positive for families because they do not have to go through the process of asking for vouchers and spending them locally. I am told that it has worked very well. There is much better access in Northern Ireland. It was put into place very quickly and those families have high take-up, so virtually all families who were eligible had good take-up. Therefore my preference would be financial transfer.

There is something about this voucher system that leads to families having to feel very grateful. Many feel stigmatised by that, and it is something that really shouts that we do not trust families to make the right decision. I would say that, for those families who do not have money, they will virtually always be prioritising their children’s food first. There is something within all of that, acknowledging this is a long-term problem and we do need a joined-up solution, but also working with families and trusting families to make good decisions here for their children and supporting them to do so.

**Q334 Debbie Abrahams:** Thank you, that is very helpful indeed. I am going to move on to my second set of questions now, which relates to children with special educational needs or disabilities and also the impact on their parents. I met with some parents from my constituency with SEND children who described the real issues they had experienced over lockdown and the lack of support that has been available. I think Joanne mentioned that in her earlier remarks. There has been a whole range of different surveys and so on. From your experience—we will start with Anne, but then move on to the heads we have with us—what has the experience been first of all for SEND children and then in relation to their parents?

**Anne Longfield:** What we have heard is how difficult it has been for a lot of parents with children with special educational needs. There were often assessments made in schools and schools did not feel they were able to provide support for children so they were largely at home. A lot of the support services around that and respite care fell away so parents were having the double whammy of having to become home educators and



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also providing the support for very complex needs where they would have had wider support. That is something that has been very stressful for parents and for children during this period.

A good thing is that as children return to school the number of children with special educational needs who have been attending has held up well. That is something I do not think we could have assumed, but since September there are good figures on that. However, certainly the impact of that on families of course has had a devastating impact on the ability to work for families and their income as well.

**Chair:** Debbie, can I just interrupt?

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Let us carry on.

**Chair:** I was going to say Sir Desmond was going to raise something, but I think you are covering the point already. Debbie, did you want to pick something up before going to the heads?

**Debbie Abrahams:** No, I was wanting to go to the heads now, Stephen, thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you. Who wants to start on special educational needs and what has happened there?

**Dr Hobbs:** Thank you. Obviously schools stayed open for children with EHCPs and for looked-after children and we did remain open throughout all of that time and through the holidays. What we did initially find is that for a number of SEND families they chose not to send their children to school. That did require a lot of one-to-one conversations with families to allay their anxieties and to assure them of all of the safety procedures that were being put in place for schools. For some families—because of other issues with other family members, particularly underlying health conditions—they did not feel that sending their children to school at that time was the most appropriate for them.

We did work with every single individual family and our uptake of those places did increase throughout lockdown. I think we set off with quite a low level of attendance, 11% of our EHCPs initially were attending straight after lockdown and we increased that up to 37% by the end of the summer. However, obviously that was a lot of children working from home. As we have already said, remote working was very challenging for those children and for those families. Some of that was linked to technology, some of that was linked to the amount of written material that was being sent home and the things that children were being asked to do, some of that was to parents' confidence and them feeling they could support their children well and some of it was also exacerbated anxieties. We had a number of our SEND children who were very, very anxious. They were anxious because the world had suddenly changed for them and the world had become a very scary place and all of the things that we put in place to keep things stable for them had suddenly changed.



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I would agree with Anne; our experience is that many of those children have come back and come back very successfully. We have only had to put a number of bespoke packages in place to support children, sometimes with a part-time timetable to transition them. Sometimes we did virtual tours of the academy so we could remind them of the building or brought them in for a tour before they came back. I would say for many of those families it has proved a challenge. For some parents the respite of school is something they really do need to keep their family intact and obviously that support was missing. However much we tried to put in place over the phone or the occasional visit, it is not the same as that day-to-day contact and stability.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. There is one more question that we need to raise but time is pressing. Can I bring in Selaine at this point to raise her question?

Q335 **Selaine Saxby:** Thanks very much, Chair, and thank you to the panel. It was really to take your views and thoughts on the relationship between the schools, local authorities and the DWP, how we work together to combat child poverty and child development, whether we have the mix right in there or whether there are other ways the balance could be shifted.

**Chair:** Have you heard much from the DWP in all of this? Ben, do you want to comment on that?

**Ben Levinson:** We have worked closely with the local authority, particularly with social care, trying to work together to support those vulnerable children, children who are subject to child protection plans or children in need plans, so that has been an area of work.

Moving forward, one of the key areas that has definitely been, in my experience and my opinion, neglected over a period of time has been the first few years of life. That nought-to-five age group is so crucial and so many of those services have gone, being able to access parent-toddler groups, baby groups and also where those were held, such as libraries. So much of that infrastructure has disappeared so that I think is then very difficult.

For some of the things we have heard about—children turning up in nappies when they are starting school and some of those challenges that are there right from the beginning—if we could work together to start to address that and put back some of that support mechanism so families are getting that support right from birth, or even pre-birth, that would go a long way to starting to address a number of the issues we have heard about today.

Q336 **Chair:** Ben, have you had any contact with the DWP in this period?

**Ben Levinson:** No, we have not.



**Joanne Ormond:** I have to say, up in Cumbria the local authority has been working very well in partnership with the schools throughout the whole Covid situation. It has kept us updated, it has sought headteachers' views continuously and they have set up panels that have headteacher representatives on there so that is a very good relationship at the moment. Same as Ben, as far as I am aware, there has been no contact with the DWP in any of the schools within our area.

I also echo what Ben said there are, services such as children's centres are a massive, massive miss and certainly for those younger children—from birth until they start school—there is a massive gap that needs filling, which was there and sadly is not anymore.

**Dr Hobbs:** I have had no contact with DWP either. I would say perhaps our joined-up services are not quite as strong as Joanne has just described there. I am not aware of many of my children or families accessing other activities, for example, summer holiday activities, and nor am I aware of anything that might be put in place with the winter package other than the free school meals. I think there is quite a big need for those community organisations that teenagers would traditionally belong to. I know that will need a little bit of thinking through and exploring of what would engage with teenagers, but it is the youth clubs and those other places where children would have gone for safety as opposed to ending up sitting at the local park. Obviously with lockdown and children not being able to socialise that has become harder, but that has encouraged them back into their own resources that are not always the places we feel will be most beneficial or safe for them. Those safe places I think probably are lacking in our area.

**Chair:** Thank you. Selaine, I am going to bring in Anne for a final comment, which will be the final comment of this session. Is there a point, Selaine, you would like to raise with Anne?

Q337 **Selaine Saxby:** No, really just looking at that whole interaction between the different parties—around the local authorities and DWP—and whether the mix is right.

**Anne Longfield:** I completely support that there has been better working and positive working that has grown out of this between local authorities and schools, but it is inconsistent and is not the same in every area. There are gaps. I do not think there is much of a relationship with DWP. Certainly in some children's centres or family hubs there would be employment support and the like, but again that is not in every area. What we are missing now is that infrastructure of family support, what you have just heard about, from the early years onwards.

This is directly to the two representatives from the two Committees here, I think what is missing nationally is what used to be there, the policy focus and policy space between the DWP and the DfE. There used to be a policy team, there used to be a policy around poverty. That was then able to look at how the impact of national policies needed to drive not only



alleviation of poverty but a reduction of poverty. At national level I think now we need to recognise that there is a problem with child poverty here, it is twice that now of pension poverty and it is now the time to reintroduce that. Clearly there are local networks that can grow from that but I think nationally it is shouting out that now needs to be there.

**Chair:** Thank you. Thank you all very much indeed for a very interesting session. I think all of us want to express thanks to the headteachers for the pretty extraordinary job you and your colleagues around the country have been doing over the last nine months. Thank you very much for joining us all this morning as well.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Marshall, Matt Dunkley CBE and Nancy Meehan.

Q338 **Chair:** We move on now to our second panel and welcome the witnesses who are joining us for that. I am going to start, as I did the earlier session, by asking each of you very briefly to say who you are at the outset.

**Paul Marshall:** Good morning. My name is Paul Marshall. I am the Strategic Director of Children and Education Services in Manchester City Council.

**Matt Dunkley:** Hello, Chair. I am Matt Dunkley. I am the Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education for Kent County Council.

**Nancy Meehan:** Hello, everybody. My name is Nancy Meehan. I am the Director of Children's Services for Torbay.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much for joining us. We are going to be a bit under the cosh given that we are running a bit late, apologies for that. I will try to keep us moving along. We will start with a question from Chris Stephens.

Q339 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks very much, Chair. Welcome to our local authority friends who are on the panel today. My first question basically is a simple one. How significant is the winter package that the Government announced in terms of supporting vulnerable families with food and bills in your area? Is there anything else that you had hoped the package would offer more support on or work differently? If we maybe start with Paul and Manchester, please.

**Paul Marshall:** Thanks for that. To open this, as a bit of context, I was intrigued by some of the conversations in the earlier bit. One of the groups of vulnerable people really are our care leavers. No one has talked about them and they fall into all but some of those things and it might be something Matt certainly might want to talk a bit around.

In terms of the package, it is welcome and I think it would be wrong not to acknowledge that. In the context of Manchester—I was intrigued by



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what Ben said—44% of our children live with poverty. Living with poverty is really around not having choices in what you do in terms of day-to-day living. Through the winter grant we got £2.5 million into Manchester. How we have tried to use that is creative and I was intrigued by Anne's comments as well. We have opted for a voucher scheme, principally because when we tried to do a cash payment there was a process about how to get this out where you have digital deprivation, you have barriers in itself and you have language barriers.

Doing it through our discretionary screen in the summer, of potentially eligible families we had 6,000 families take it up. If you think about free school meals, there were 43,000 children eligible and we got 6,000, so we knew that way was not successful and that is why we opted for the voucher scheme. We have covered no recourse to public funds, we have covered in-work poverty and we have covered children eligible for free school meals. We have also covered those other areas whereby it is discretionary, there are additional needs, white goods and the like. It is not, if you like, the framework, I think it is the resource that goes with it. It will only go and scratch the surface, in short. I will stop there at this point.

**Nancy Meehan:** I absolutely agree with what Paul said. I was interested that there was no talk about the care leavers. Within the winter grant care leavers fall into that 20% that is not ring-fenced, which I think is a travesty for our care leavers. As corporate parents they are our responsibility, so to have them as part of that grant funding but not ring-fenced I thought was an interesting concept.

In Torbay we have been given just over £500,000 in terms of the winter grant. If you consider that over one in four of our children live in poverty, we are high deprivation area. We are a coastal region and for a coastal region the impact of Covid has been doubly hard. Our income to the region is through tourism, through the hospitality industry and seasonal work. We have had massive impacts on our families, which has impacted on our children in terms of them not being able to work. A lot of our families were self-employed because of the regions and the coast regions demographics. Our families have really struggled during this period of time.

Picking up a point about the DWP in this, we have a DWP worker who works within our Troubled Families agenda area. He has been working with 130 of our families during this period, trying to support them due to issues around poverty and so on. We have had some real challenges because of our coastal region and what comes with that. Thankfully we have got some money through the winter grant scheme but it absolutely is not enough. It has been given to us very late in the day, so in terms of being able to distribute it, it has been very difficult in terms of officers' time.



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We have worked in collaboration with our schools and our voluntary and community sector and we have a food alliance. A lot of our vouchers we have distributed through our food alliance and we have tried to be proactive in identifying our children. We have already identified over 6,000 children who are going to need support during the Christmas period. Yes, it is positive that we have the money but it is not enough. My worry—and it takes in the point made earlier—is the fact that this finishes at the end of March and we go into an Easter period straight after that and I do not think we are going to be in a position where our families have recovered from this.

**Q340 Chair:** Can I ask you something before we move on? You said you have identified 6,000 children in Torbay. How does that compare with the number receiving free school meals?

**Nancy Meehan:** We have 25,000 children, of which 14% in school receive the free school meals. What we know though already is our trend between now and Christmas is we are going to have a 3% increase in children who require free school meals already. What we know is the funding for that is historical so we are going to have an issue going forward because we are already seeing that increasing trend for people applying for free school meals. It is 3% higher now than it was pre-Covid.

**Chair:** It was 14% of 25,000, is that right?

**Nancy Meehan:** Yes.

**Matt Dunkley:** In our situation in Kent we are getting about £4.5 million in winter grants. We have about 50,000 children eligible for free meals out of 250,000-odd schoolchildren, so we are looking at around the 20% rate. I would echo the comments of my colleagues, particularly from Torbay, about the impact of coastal poverty, our income with a lot of similar authorities along the coast. Poverty is very concentrated in coastal communities.

The challenge for us all is to wean ourselves off a hand-to-mouth existence of supporting these families and to focus on making whatever we do moving forward sustainable and sensible, because welcome though the money is, and one never wants to look any gift horses in the mouth, there is the question of what happens next. There has also been a transformation in the kind of poverty that we are looking at during lockdown. Children's poverty was already changing and in particular was changing towards poverty among working parents and the implications of that, as opposed to the majority of non-working parents in poverty. It was focusing more on low-wage earning, long hours, zero-hours contract parents, as opposed to benefits recipients.

Then along comes lockdown and that has changed the nature of the poverty again. It has added a new group of children who have not previously experienced some of this poverty. We have clients who have been working who no longer are working as a result of the pandemic,



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who are new to the system, with all the challenges that that places, as well as people who have already been with us who are poor, and the no recourse to public funds group, care leavers, as some of my colleagues have mentioned.

One thing I would say though about the current package is it is very unfortunate that the Government at the same time decided to end the additional £20 a week Universal Credit allowance, because the two are cancelling each other out. For those families receiving the direct support of Universal Credit, they are getting the additional support from the winter grant moneys but at the same time having their benefits cut from the new level that they received from March. That has been unfortunate and I would plead that moving forward we have a plan for sustainably supporting children in poverty across both central Government and local government that is appropriately targeted with the right people pulling the right levers.

**Q341 Steve McCabe:** I want to ask a little bit about the Covid winter grant scheme. It seems on the surface quite generous but I wondered about the situation where local authorities are expected to set their own rules. This would sometimes be something that might appeal to local authorities, but is there a danger that we are creating the classic postcode lottery where people in identical circumstances might qualify for help in one authority but not in another?

**Matt Dunkley:** I will have a go at that one and throw myself on that grenade. Of course local authorities like flexibility. I would be wrong to deny that. We like and welcome the flexibility that we have to target according to local circumstances. But in a situation as acute as this, there is an issue of postcode lottery; when we have not a postcode lottery, but we have, for example, Kent in tier 3 restrictions in the south-east, surrounded by authorities who are in tier 2. Where you get communities who are on the borders where they qualify for something on one side of the street and they do not on another, that can prove difficult.

What I would like to see is the basic core offer to people who are entitled to DWP benefits moving forward. Where that is universal and everyone is offered them, it makes sense to me for the DWP to deal with that. Where there is discretion to target for local need and some flexibility, that reflects existing services that we have. We welcome, for example, the fact that we can use some of this money for our existing Kent Support and Assistance Service, which is a hardship fund for people with no recourse to public funds. We welcome the fact we can use some of that money for that flexibility to target individual families with particular needs.

However, where there is something universal like free school meals, if there is a way of the DWP handling that side of it nationwide, that would be helpful and would remove some of the burden. Of course we would like some local flexibility to target as well.



Q342 **Steve McCabe:** I am curious about how this is working in practice. Is it possible to give me some idea of what criteria is being used to target this money to any groups? You mentioned anxiety about care leavers earlier, but any other groups that might fall through the gap. Are families being identified proactively or is this simply a case of people who are referred?

**Matt Dunkley:** It is a combination of both, in answer to the final part of your question. Let me quickly run through how we are dividing up the £4.5 million in Kent. That might help. £2.5 million of that is going to benefits-entitled families on free school meals to cover Christmas and the February half-term. We are adding into that, for our own discretion, children who currently do not have a school place, children who are home educated, children who have a social worker and children under four who are known to us through our early help services already, childhood services, and meet our eligibility criteria. That is £2.5 million of it.

£900,000 of it we are targeting through our borough and district councils—because we are two-tier area and we are the upper-tier authority—to families. Using the DWP distribution methodology, they are focusing on families at risk of homelessness, families in temporary accommodation, families in some respects who are identified by local voluntary organisations, parish councils and so on.

We are allocating £800,000 to our service that deals with hardship that the council has always run. To scale that for you, that in one fell swoop is doubling the amount we usually spend on these hardship grants. That is for families with no recourse to public funds, young people with disabilities, care leavers, vulnerable adults and people with multiple challenges. That is for white goods and some of the practical help and no recourse-type help. £500,000 has been earmarked for low-income families who need help with fuel and utilities bills. That is being done in partnership with the utilities companies to target through their hardship funds and make a claim back for families who they have identified as being in fuel hardship.

**Nancy Meehan:** To clarify, we have a criteria as well. Apologies, I gave incorrect data before. It is 12% of our secondary school and 18% of our primary school who have free school meals. Our criteria was very much around the free school meals. We have identified children between the ages of nought to two, children who are currently eligible for free educational childcare at the age of two, Early Years Pupil Premium children, those children for free school meals, children who are in education other than at school who have a free school meal eligibility criteria.

We have also targeted our colleges as well, because we have a high level of poverty within young people attending college. We have a number of young people who have free college meals, free college meals for children between the ages of 19 to 25 who also have a current EHCP. Again, that is within the 20%, not the 80% ring-fenced amount, so we have had to think about how we are using our £500,000.



We are also targeting our care leavers and children who have social workers. If you think of Torbay and the level of deprivation in Torbay, we have a high number of children who have social work intervention. We are the second highest authority of children in care. We have a high number of care leavers and we have one of the highest number of referral rates per 10,000. So in terms of having £500,000, we will not have enough to be able to provide for all of those children and we will be having to use other, alternative methods to support our families.

In terms of that, we are looking at how we manage our section 17 child-in-need money that is the social care element, and we have already doubled the amount of provision using that section 17 budget. So the winter grant is not enough and we are having to think about alternative methods of supporting our families in order that they will not go hungry over this period of time. We can provide them with fuel as well.

**Q343 Steve McCabe:** Nancy, I realise your area is children's services, but who are the 20% who do not have children who the Government say also have to get help from this fund? What sort of people are we talking about here?

**Nancy Meehan:** Those are some of the families, for example, homelessness. Care leavers do not fall into the 80% ring-fenced amount. The 19-plus who have an EHCP are part of the 20%. We are having to think of other ways of managing those. We are lucky in that we are a unitary authority and we are quite flexible in that. We already have pathways around our adult homelessness and so on, but there is part of the fund that can be used for those families who do not have children. That is that 20% element. But as we have a number of care leavers, we are targeting that 20% for our 19-plus who have EHCP plans.

**Chair:** Given the time, let's move on if we can and Paul can come in at a later point.

**Q344 Siobhan Baillie:** I had to turn my camera off because my wi-fi is not quick. You have already touched on this a little bit, but about communication from DWP and particularly as we have a number of new claimants going on to benefit schemes all the time, do you feel that you are getting enough information from either local or national DWP to help you to understand who is in need in your area?

The second question is, I know that the guidance on the winter grant gives you an ability to work with third-party organisations such as food banks and charities. Is that something that you are going to be doing in your areas? How do you engage with them and what is your criteria for deciding which groups should benefit?

**Paul Marshall:** I wanted to pick up a few points on Mr McCabe's previous question. I thought it was an interesting word, "generous", because when we think about who we are talking about, we are talking about people—I will come back to the criteria. You are quite right there is a bit of a postcode lottery. We are talking about how we set ours in Manchester,



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given the scale and breadth of need, similar to what has been said. We are talking about families with an income of £8,000 to be eligible for free school meals and £20,000 for Universal Credit. Sometimes we forget it is not a lot.

Also, leading into that is, what are we trying to respond to? Are we trying to respond to Covid, or in truth are we really responding to something that was already there? What Covid has done is to exacerbate it and it has amplified these families that are struggling most, more than their counterparts. I go with Matt that flexibility is critical because we do know our communities, we do know our families in our local area. We would not want a one-size-fits-all because every community, every local authority is different. This starts to come into the question that I was supposed to answer.

The other bit, which I will come on to, is, in terms of DWP, we do know and we can profile our children and families. We do know what the need is in our areas. The area that is a bit of a blind spot for us are those families who have no recourse to public funds. Clearly they are out there, we know they exist. They do present in many different ways, but they are a bit of a blind spot for all of us. I do not think there is any way of capturing those but we do see them present at food banks and food clubs.

What we have seen in the cities—and I will come back to the question because we did include them in our criteria—is they are coming back. When families come to our food clubs and food banks and our response into there, they are not coming back for a one-off. In other words, poverty is not an incident that you just happen to find yourself in. This is about something that is a constant pressure for families. In Manchester we have a family poverty strategy. It has three elements to it and we approach that in terms of how we think about sustainable employment, addressing the basics, which is the food clubs and food banks. Around there is families, when they access those services, the range of other things that start to wrap around them. Then there is a bit about sustainability and that is developing and building family support networks that take them beyond.

I want to say at some point—but I will say it now because I may never get the chance—is that what it does show, and I have heard myself, is that given the right resource, local authorities can make a massive and significant difference to lots of families. The challenge we are facing is a reduction in the resources that we have. I would agree with Matt that one-off funding will not address this issue. It is likely the impact of Covid will exist for some time and maybe a couple of years ahead. A five-year strategy would be certainly something that I would welcome.

**Chair:** Thank you. Nancy or Matt, do you want to comment on this issue of information from DWP?



**Matt Dunkley:** Could I say something about the issue with DWP and information, because it is specific to upper-tier authorities like Kent, where you are not the housing authority so you are not a unitary or a met? You do not get shared key information from DWP and HMRC about Universal Credit information. We miss out not having access to that information the way we used to have access to housing benefit information. Anything that could be done to allow us to access some of that data would make our life a lot easier, certainly in terms of knowing who we should be targeting, if we are going to carry on with local authorities doing that.

I would also take the opportunity to reiterate what Paul said, that the wider picture for local authority funding must not go unnoticed in this. If local authorities are to continue to successfully support communities, the next funding settlement for the next three years, it is really vital that we are not into another era of austerity.

Q345 **Neil Coyle:** Most of the witnesses today have welcomed the ad hoc measures this winter, but you have all commented that this is piecemeal; this is not a long-term strategy of any kind. Paul, perhaps we could start with you. You mentioned that 44% of children live with poverty in your area. What have been the key drivers for that kind of poverty? In terms of what happens next, Matt, which you mentioned, what specific policy areas would the Government have to change or amend or adapt in order to tackle some of that child poverty in any long-term strategy if it is to be successful?

**Paul Marshall:** There are two bits in terms of the driver. It is clearly economic success, or lack of for some families. We start, as we heard earlier on, around it starting in childhood and navigates all the way through in terms of lack of opportunities through the education system, out of the education system. What we see as we present now is, the underlying driver in the city is about child poverty, but what we are seeing is an increase in in-work poverty. Matt touched on the bit about zero-hours contracts. If you think about eligibility for Universal Credit, you start to see that is the first threshold you hit.

We see a lot of families with a single parent, we see two-parent families with large families, the three-family element. The third-child limit prevents some families, because, believe it or not, those children still need to be fed, clothed, educated and supported in their social development. We are seeing that. What is interesting for us is we have a population from ethnic minority groups and we have seen they are disproportionately reflected in some of those low-paid jobs and opportunities. You could be in work, you could have a parent in work, you want to work, you have pride. The point I want to say here is my experience on the whole is all parents, irrespective of their financial position, have the same aspirations and ambitions for their children that we all have. What they face is the opportunities and resources by which



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to make them realised. Therefore you are into a whole series of a vicious cycle.

I was intrigued earlier on in the conversation because poverty in many respects for me means lots of different things to different families. There are some common denominators, and hopefully I have touched on that, about low resource and high demands. The cost of living for all of us has not reduced. Where you have limited resource, you cannot go for the three-for-two bargain at the supermarket, you cannot go and buy in bulk, you cannot access the lower credit schemes, so invariably you are forced into a situation where everything is going to cost more but you have less and in terms of access to supermarkets and the like.

Those are the things that I see driving poverty and deprivation. The earlier point I made before about a constant pressure, it is not a one-off, it is living with this as a constant pressure. You are faced with choices around, do you heat the house, or do you buy the food, or do you buy the food and not do something else? Choices are limited in themselves. Those are what I would say are the drivers that we are seeing.

What concerns me most is that, for the city, the economic success of the city enables us to go and support those most vulnerable families, and it goes right back to that issue about sustainable funding on a three-year funding settlement so we can plan. I would ask that the MHCLG factor in deprivation as a driver in terms of that settlement.

Q346 **Neil Coyle:** Matt, you mentioned specifically Universal Credit and extending the £20. Is that enough with Universal Credit or what other specific policies would you look for, including in a long-term strategy?

**Matt Dunkley:** I think in the longer term we have to view the impact of poverty on children, the impact of the poverty of their parents on children as a distinct policy issue, which I do not think we are doing in a joined-up way at the moment. To give you an example, I was out visiting with social workers last week, visiting children who are categorised as children in need. That is the category of concern, not as high as child protection but whose parents are struggling and the children have needs related to the circumstances their parents are in. We keep an eye on them. It is not like we do with child protection but we are still concerned with them. In every case I could see the impact, the doubling-down impact—mostly driven by Covid, but not exclusively—of the poverty and the poverty of resources, not just material but social connections and resources of those families and the impact that that was having indirectly on the children because it was happening to their parents.

I visited a young man who is only 21, a single parent to a nine month-old baby, who was two days from his two-weekly Universal Credit payment and had nothing in the fridge. He had enough for the baby, not enough for him. We were able to direct him to support and so on. Some of those basic needs around parents claiming benefits who have children need to be seen in the round with the services that support those children. I



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would like to see longer-term DWP policy for children, through their parents, be joined up with the other support that local authorities offer to them so that we can view the effects of poverty in the round for children, both in terms of the support we offer them and the support to their parents.

I also think we need to look at parents of vulnerable children having priority for other adult services that may ease the burden on them and therefore mitigate some of the impacts of poverty on their children. I certainly think that we have to come up with a strategy for what we would call the newly arrived poor, the people who as a result of the pandemic are suddenly finding themselves in circumstances they have never been in before. Some of those characteristics are different from the long-term poor who we have been dealing with and the effects on children are different.

**Q347 Neil Coyle:** Matt, very specifically linked to what you just said, the children living in poverty due to certain difficulties on their parents, would you include no recourse to public funds on that, the parents who have no recourse resulting in children living in poverty?

**Matt Dunkley:** Absolutely. On that same day that I was visiting, one of my colleagues visited a family who have eight of them living in two rooms and no recourse to public funds. They are relatively newly arrived in the country and all of the issues that were facing the family and the children were driven by the fact that their parents have no recourse to public funds. We were able to target some of our support to them, but it is very hand to mouth and short term. Some of those issues need a long-term resolution.

**Q348 Neil Coyle:** To all three of you, does that emergency support of the children in these circumstances cost more to you than would have been the case than the housing benefit to the parent?

**Chair:** Let's take Nancy on this and then we will move on. Do you have a response to that, Nancy?

**Nancy Meehan:** Yes. Could you repeat the end of that question? My mic went slightly funny at the end of it.

**Q349 Neil Coyle:** I am intrigued at whether the additional support that children have to be provided by councils under no recourse or emergency support measures costs more or less than if the parents were able to access what would have been housing benefit, for example.

**Nancy Meehan:** That is difficult to answer for Torbay. We do not have the same challenges for no recourse to public funds that Paul and Matt would identify. It is not as challenging here maybe as it is elsewhere. Our challenge here is that we are seeing widening inequalities due to our reliance on the tourism trade. I would probably pass that to Matt or Paul around the no recourse to public funds because the areas of Manchester



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particularly and Kent probably have more challenges around that than Torbay does at the moment.

**Paul Marshall:** I guess the short answer is yes. If you are struggling and you do not have sufficient resources in your family household, then it is likely to lead—it was talked about in the earlier session about arguments, domestic abuse, family tensions and stresses. That invariably takes you to the doorstep of those statutory interventions that Matt alluded to before about a family struggling with nothing in the fridge and a child in need. That comes with additional risks and if we do not intervene at that level, then you are into the child protection system. If we do not get it right at that stage, then we are into children being looking after and they can cost in excess of £1,000 a week these days.

If you go right back to the beginning, if we support families and communities to have the right resource to contribute to society in the way that we all would want to do and not be a barrier, for me the short answer is, most certainly that means it costs us less as a society and as a country. But I do not think we are getting it right and I agree with Matt we need to get this right.

**Chair:** Thank you. Steve McCabe had some points on no recourse to public funds. We have obviously covered this to some extent already, but is there an additional point you want to raise?

Q350 **Steve McCabe:** The only thing I would like to ask in addition is it seems to me that the Government, in saying that it is up to local authorities to decide what legal powers and funding they can use to support these people, it is a very permissive power, but it is a great get-out as well. How much energy are local authorities putting into identifying people in real need? It seems to me if it is up to local authorities then it would also be up to local authorities to only act on people who were directly referred to them.

**Matt Dunkley:** I think that is a weakness. Particularly with the timescales that we have had and the sums of money we have had, we have shied away from a blitz of publicity saying, "Come and get it, folks, there is additional money". We have chosen to channel it through agencies in contact with these families. They can approach us directly and approach the fund directly, but on the whole it is agencies that are in contact with these families putting us in contact with them.

Because it is a fixed sum in terms of the winter grant, the choice is that the wider you go, the more you help, the less the individual package of help for the family concerned. The priority obviously is to make sure that the money is spent and spent well, but again it comes back to the issue sustainability. Moving forward, the no recourse group are something that we need to have some kind of national settlement on. Some of the characteristics in there insofar as they impact on children we need to take a view on. There is obviously certain categories of people newly arrived in the country and so on who are predominantly in that group and it is time



to take a look at the needs of the children in those circumstances in the round across state agencies. I think it is inevitable that to some degree it will be channelled rather than widely invited for everybody to apply to. That is the nature of both the level of funding and the timescale in which we have to distribute it.

**Q351 Steve McCabe:** Paul suggested a little earlier that it is only when other events occur, maybe child protection matters, that you pick up some of these things. Would it be at all possible to guesstimate what percentage of people are being left entirely to their own devices and risk?

**Matt Dunkley:** My sense on that when we come across them is that those tend to be people new to the system. Where that happens it is people who have never been in this position before and do not know where the levers are to pull. Those are the people who have been put in this position by the events since March. I would say the majority of other cases are picked up through the various agencies dealing with them.

**Q352 Shaun Bailey:** I want to touch on some of the fraud risks that had been identified. I know DWP has made a bit of a thing about this and particularly last year there was a record level of incorrect payments. As local authorities, are you concerned at all about the risk of fraudulent applications being made and the impact that will have on people who genuinely need this support? What are you doing in terms of profiling that risk and tackling that? Have you had any support from DWP in terms of how you might go about doing that and best practice on that?

**Nancy Meehan:** In terms of the fraud risk, we have children who may be in another authority who come to school in our authority. What we have decided is any payment or request for payment or food voucher would come from the area that they are schooled in rather than the local authority, so that we are responding to families and families' needs via the school remit rather than the wider local authority postcode.

I do not think we are challenged about the fraud risk. We check. As we are supporting families in terms of accessing the food alliance or voucher scheme, we do check with our Troubled Families agenda and our social care to make sure that we are supporting families and not duplicating that support, mainly because there is not enough money to go around all the families so we need to be careful that we do not duplicate support for our families. That is a challenge most local authorities are dealing with at the moment. We are trying to support all our families as best we can, but without duplicating anything, and utilising the various organisations to support that.

**Paul Marshall:** In terms of what Nancy said, my starting point there is there is a moral judgment that people set out straightaway to defraud the system. How we have approached it in Manchester—I did not comment before in terms of eligibility and criteria, but Matt and Nancy covered pretty much what we are doing in Manchester—that has been a targeted approach. Those families that we know are going to be most in need and



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therefore are already known to us, those eligible for free school meals, we already know there is a criteria to accessing that. We also know our schools know who they are. Our schools in Manchester are the distribution agent, so they will know their families, they will know the children. Those other families that fall into a wider remit, like Manchester colleges. We work with colleges, those students who formerly would have been eligible for free school meals, colleges know who they are and we can target directly. We know who our care leavers are so we have targeted them.

For those who come and present, as Matt said, for the first time in difficulties, we will take them through a very simple strength-based assessment to try to establish what they need. If we talk of free school meals payment, it is £15. It is about the wider needs and support. It takes us right back to our family strategy policy around how do we get somebody in to focus on some of the basics and get some resilience built in. The short answer is, no, we have not had a lot from DWP. We have worked it out for ourselves and it is pretty much at a rate of knots. We start distributing this week.

**Matt Dunkley:** I understand people's concerns about the fraud risk, but it is important to scale it, in that there is not a lot of evidence of fraud going on. Any fraud that there has been, in our experience, where it is a claim basis, is totally dwarfed by the people who are eligible who do not claim. One of the problems with having it on a claim basis is loads of people who should have it do not claim it. Sometimes it is hard to work out why they do not. Sometimes it is just information. The point is that there are lot of people in this position for the first time who do not understand what they entitled to, do not know that they are in a group that is eligible.

I would favour, moving forward to a sustainable solution, anybody in receipt of Universal Credit automatically being entitled to free school meals and not having to make a separate application for free meals. Local authorities would be notified they were eligible and that information would be shared with schools. That would spare parents having to make another claim for free school meals and it would make sure that the integrity of the data was fine as far as the DWP was concerned and take out a lot of checking. A simple change like that would make a big difference.

Where it is a claims basis, for example, in the last half-term where we cobbled together a scheme pretty quickly after the Prime Minister's announcement and locally put together a scheme in Kent, only about half to two-thirds of those eligible claimed for their free school meal vouchers over the half-term. There was very little evidence of fraud. There was evidence of people who were confused who they should claim from where they lived in one authority and went to school in another. So we have done the same thing as other colleagues have done about making it school-based for claims.



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If we can take claiming out of the equation where we can, it reduces fraud and it makes it easier for clients and there is a better take-up. For the rest of it, we need to be realistic about what the scale of the problem is in terms of fraud risk.

- Q353 **Shaun Bailey:** You raised an interesting point there about the fact that the number of people not claiming or not knowing that they can claim seems to dwarf that fraud element. The resource and the time that you would have to spend on policing and tackling the fraud element, do you think that if there was more of a co-ordinated support from DWP in terms of doing that, you would then have the resource to be able to further support those people who would not necessarily know that they are entitled to claim or do things more on that local level, notwithstanding the stuff you probably already do in Kent and equally in the other authority areas as well?

**Matt Dunkley:** The short answer to that is yes, Shaun, definitely.

- Q354 **Shaun Bailey:** Paul, what would your view be on that as well in terms of reaching out to people who do not know they can claim? Do you find that is a problem in your local authorities too?

**Paul Marshall:** It is similar to Matt. On the back of the summer arrangement, just to give you a sense of scale, there were about 28,000 children eligible for that claim. It was a claim basis and only 5,000 made the claim, so we had put money aside and we only got 5,000. That gives a tangible evidence base to what Matt has just said. If we get that through the DWP, the Universal Credit and those who are eligible and agree that, that allows local authorities and their resources to be focused and directed into the right place. So, as Matt has just said, most definitely.

**Nancy Meehan:** If I can come in there, I totally agree with both Paul and Matt. I do not think we should be identifying fraud as the issue. Our starting point should be that we need to feed hungry children. That needs to be the starting point. If we can get support through DWP to relieve us of those duties it would be helpful.

- Q355 **Shaun Bailey:** Finally one other point. DWP has said that one of the things it is trying to do is ensure that it engages with local authorities. I know it has been looking at delivering a series of calls with local authorities for questions, clarifications on support and so on. Have these been happening, in your experience, and how useful have these calls been? How can they be improved and what support are you also getting from DWP to measure the success of the new support available?

**Nancy Meehan:** We will be very different from Paul and Matt here because we are a unitary authority and we have DWP representation in our troubled families. We have immediate access to DWP and a named person who supports us who will then help and co-ordinate some of our support via DWP and manage some of the situations for us, so we are in



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a very different position. It is very positive in Torbay in terms of that relationship.

**Matt Dunkley:** It is more complicated in upper-tier authorities, to be honest. We have 12 boroughs and districts that we cover as an upper-tier authority in Kent and our resilience forums are based on those boroughs and districts and we have DWP engagement with those. The issue for us is getting more senior engagement from the DWP as opposed to the operation of engagement and resilience forums. We do find that difficult at a county level. We have a population of 1.5 million that does not equate to a single area of the DWP operations, so as a large upper-tier authority it is more challenging for us to have that engagement at a strategic level with the DWP.

Q356 **Chair:** Has DWP contacted you in this period, Matt?

**Matt Dunkley:** Not me. I could not swear that it has not made contact with one of my colleagues elsewhere in the council. It has not with me.

**Paul Marshall:** We have had contact, not me directly and personally. I would say three points. In terms of the calls, the guidance was relatively okay. We were able to navigate through the guidance. There was a question and answer arrangement that came out and we responded to that. There was nothing in there that we had not already worked out for ourselves or needed any help with. For me it is more about fewer calls and put the resource into the right place, which is money to people who need it and let us do our work where it has the greatest impact.

Part of the arrangement is an audit and return process. We have an arrangement through our internal audit whereby we can track through back to schools and the distribution to make sure it has got back, so I am less concerned on that, but I do think we did not need that support as such. The other point is linked to what Nancy said. We do have DWP linked into our local arrangements through sustainable food and basics.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, all three of you, for joining us for this session, for the very interesting information you have given us and the great work that all of you are doing in supporting families at this time. That concludes our meeting.