HOUSE OF COMMONS

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: Child Food Poverty, HC 1112

Thursday 21 January 2021

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Watch the meeting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asYW8-qF1-I

Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Nick Fletcher; Jonathan Gullis; Mike Hill.

Questions 29-47

Witnesses

Henry Dimbleby, Lead Non-Executive Board Member, Defra; and Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England, Children's Commissioner's Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Henry Dimbleby and Anne Longfield.

Chair: Before we start our questions, I will ask you both to introduce yourselves.

Anne Longfield: I am Anne Longfield, and I am the Children's Commissioner for England.

Henry Dimbleby: I am Henry Dimbleby. I am the independent lead of the Government commissioned national food strategy. Prior to that, in 2013 I was the co-author of the School Food Plan, which was also commissioned by Government and led, among other things, to the introduction of universal free school meals, which you have just been discussing, and the addition of cooking to the curriculum as compulsory for every child up to the age of 14.

Q1 **Chair:** Great. I know you have both been involved in debates about children's access to healthy food for a long time, and that you are both strong spokespeople in this area, so thank you for the work that you do. It would be interesting to hear from you why you think the public's response to Marcus Rashford's campaign has been so high. Why is the number of signatures so high? How has he managed to make the impact that he has? What are the reasons? What are the lessons that we can learn from it?

Anne Longfield: I think Marcus Rashford has captured the mood of the nation at a particular time, during the pandemic. It has been a huge shock to people, even those who have had a relatively secure lifestyle. A lot of people have suffered financially during this period and know people who have suffered. I think more people have got a taste of what it is like not to have security around food. Some people have had to apply for universal credit who never thought that was part of their world.

Marcus is a well-known individual who can tell that incredibly powerful story, about the difference it made to his life and why it is so important. He has been relentless with that, in a very positive way. That has revealed that the nation wants to care for people and is concerned. The pandemic has shone a light on what vulnerabilities mean. I sometimes struggle to get that over in real-life terms, but we have all seen what that means during the pandemic.

The mood is one where people want to reach out and do their bit. We saw that when the cafés did their bit during the October half term, even though those are some of the people who were struggling the most, as hospitality was really hit during this time. They knew what it meant, they wanted to do their bit and they knew people in that situation. Having got there, with the nation, we are not going to go away from that. It is now part of what we can rightly define as the way we think.

Chair: Henry, have you got any thoughts to add about that?

Henry Dimbleby: Yes, two things. First of all, good policy meets in the combination of anecdote and story, with evidence and data. You have to be constantly playing those off against each other—looking at the data, understanding what you think it means, then going back to life stories and anecdotes, and playing them off against each other, until you get something that will actually work.

Marcus, in a person, exemplified that. He gave voice—a voice that is rarely heard—to those stories. People who have that story are rarely given the access that he has. He did that very powerfully. The most powerful thing that he said, all the way through, which constantly strikes me, was a line about people not feeling embarrassed to ask for help with their maths, and yet it is embarrassing to ask for help when they can't feed themselves. He did a lot to remove stigma from people in those positions.

That brings me to my second point. I think we all—or almost all of us—know people who have lost their jobs over the past year, and many of them, as Anne said, could not believe for a minute that they were the kind of person who would rely on the state for support. I think that has changed people's attitude towards people who rely on the state for support, almost completely. That is one of the things that has happened in this pandemic very quickly.

Q2 **Chair:** What lessons do you think the Government should take away from this period of stepping up to support vulnerable families during Covid-19? Beyond this pandemic, what lasting impact do you think there should be? What things would you put down as being short-term support that has been offered throughout this crisis, and what should we see as more sustainable long-term changes coming out of it? Henry, do you want to start?

Henry Dimbleby: Clearly, the Government got themselves into a bit of a muddle before Christmas and, actually, before the summer, when the combination of the dynamic between the two parties and long-term political positions got confused with what actually needed to happen. With their response to the second of Marcus's campaigns, the Government have really got themselves out of that space and moved towards structural solutions—albeit short-term at the moment. I am still working on part two—I am looking at a number of these issues again, including the free school meal extension and so on—and it now feels to me like a very different dynamic within Government.

A lot of thought is going on in respect of the combination of what you were talking about before—the money and ensuring that the universal credit system supports those people who most need support—and where benefits in kind might also help. That is the space: thinking very deeply about where there are welfare issues and where benefits in kind can provide something that simply money cannot provide. If you look at Healthy Start, the holiday activity fund and free school meals, they provide something that cannot be provided simply by a cash extension. But they are not a

substitute for it; they are something that in the long term should be seen as a solution to a problem in themselves.

Q3 **Chair:** You just said that benefits in kind cannot be provided by cash instead, but is that not a choice, really? Potentially, everyone could pay for these services—their food, their holiday clubs—and if they had enough income to do so, that is what they would choose to spend their money on. Is it that they cannot be provided, or is it just that some things in the system now are provided as a benefit in kind rather than putting more money into the universal credit system so that parents can pay for holiday clubs, childcare, food and school holiday meals?

Henry Dimbleby: There is definitely a school of thought that everything should be in cash and that cash is the most dignified way of providing support. I think that is very largely the case, and you have to be quite careful about how you think about things that are not cash supports.

For example, if you look at universal infant free school meals, which we argued for very strongly in the school food plan and which were put into place for infants—I would like to see them extended to all in primary school—they provide, as you were just discussing, some specific, provable benefits in terms of school culture, healthy eating and the way in which you bring together pupils from all backgrounds. Likewise, whatever you think about Healthy Start, it is demonstrable that if you provide people with Healthy Start, the families eat significantly more healthily versus the equivalent in cash.

Finally, with the holiday activity and food programmes, you are trying—this is in the short term initially, but I hope it will run for the long term—to bridge that gap for children in the holidays, which is when children from less affluent families fall behind and have less support. Again, there is evidence that shows that that is more effective than the same amount of cash. I think you have to be very careful about not being paternalistic and trying to enforce a particular view on what people should spend money on. But at the same time, you have to think about what is best for the children. In certain cases, the evidence pushes you very strongly towards doing something over and above benefit support.

Chair: Thank you. And Anne?

Anne Longfield: I have got a bit of a list, so you might have to just stop me. The first thing is the scale of families who do not have the assets at their disposal to draw on when things get tough. I think we have seen that now. People can see what that means. They can understand that some people live in big houses and some people live in tiny places with not enough rooms, outdoor spaces and the like. The scale of the need is something.

We need to draw from lived experience what that means for children who are in that experience. I certainly found it incredibly shocking and very moving to hear some of the stories from children. The first time I walked into a school and saw a food bank, I was startled. It was a shock. It is not

what you expect in the entrance to a secondary school. We now see those in many secondary schools, and I do not want that to become the norm. I do not want us to think that it is okay that we just have to have that as part of the norm. Obviously, I am very pleased that they are there and doing a very supportive function.

So there is the scale and what the lived experience is. What we have also learned is that this will not go away. What we have seen over the last year is a number of times where this has seemed to be a surprise. As Henry said, there have been a number of occasions where a half-term has popped up and there has been a problem, or where a summer has popped up and there has been a problem. What we really need to see now is a long-term plan not just for food, because food—a lot of people were saying this in the last session—is almost the last defence of poverty. Actually, we need a long-term plan for poverty. It has to come out of the whole party system—it needs to be cross-party, and it needs to be for 10 or 20 years. Within that, we need a long-term food plan. The Government can get ahead and can be modelling what the impact of the pandemic or employment is on families' needs and children's needs, and they can have the measures in place to do that.

A really important part of that is some form of what Henry is talking about here: rebuilding the infrastructure around families. Jobs are important, income is important and the safety net is important, but so is the infrastructure around children and families. That means there are things in your area that can help alleviate the situation for you, which are around holiday activities. They can be there for you. I was interested in the discussion you had in the previous session about universality and what a private school would operate, with extended activities, sports and the like. I would like all schools to operate in that way for all children—just to be the norm. I am not trying to frighten any school leaders who might be listening and who are worried about having to stay open at the moment, and it does not need to be teachers who do that, but we should use that community asset to offer support for families who need help. If we can look at building that kind of infrastructure as normal, with a long-term plan to reduce poverty and to help alleviate in the meantime, we are going some way to the place we need to be.

Q4 **Chair:** That infrastructure comes down to funding, which goes back to Henry's last response about whether universal credit is the way to support families and empower them. At the moment, they are not supported through universal credit, and the last witnesses explained clearly why universal credit at the moment is not functioning quite as well as it could, in terms of ensuring the right levels of support for families who are using it. The Government seem very committed to universal credit, but there are gaps. What is your solution to this? Do we put more money into universal credit, or do we fund more benefits in kind, as Henry puts it?

Anne Longfield: You have to do both. That doesn't mean that you just turn the tap on and never turn it off. You have a safety net through welfare that is strong enough and is strengthened from where it is now.

Again, as you have already discussed, the theory in universal credit is a very positive theory, but there are underfunding points throughout it, which means that families do fall through those gaps, and families with children are more likely to. Alongside the uplift there are also the issues where we know there are pressures within universal credit, around the benefits cap, the number of children and the wait, so families start their whole journey into universal credit already owing the five weeks. We could have an up-front payment that was actually payment in advance, which I know will have various people worrying a lot, but it is a completely different starting point. So we need a strengthened security system.

The kind of infrastructure that I am talking about is not just investment for no ends. It is an infrastructure that helps families flourish. It will provide the holiday childcare that will help someone go to work, which will mean they can become financially independent and will not have to claim the benefits in the long run. I know that most of the people who are classed as poor are working, but you can follow my theory within that. This is about enabling families to get on, and enabling children to get the best start educationally before they start school, so that they have the best chance of getting the grades that we know they need to be able to flourish in later life. At the moment, half of those children that are on free school meals are not getting more than the basic grades, or even the basic grades, when they get to 16, and 40% of that is set before they start school.

There is an awful lot known about how you can help children get ahead to be better financially independent as adults, but also about how you help families. On looking at the cost of what a holiday play scheme would be, it is an incredibly cost-effective way of helping people. If you look for a childcare scheme, it would be costly. If you look for a food scheme by itself, it would be costly. You get it all with a holiday play scheme. I am not saying that it is all that is needed, but it is a very cost-effective way of being able to help.

Chair: Henry, have you got anything to add on that?

Henry Dimbleby: No.

Q5 **Chair:** That covers it all. I want to quickly ask one more question about the current food package that the Government have announced for those facing food poverty for the remainder of this year. We know that there have been lots of changes in the Government's approach to this, but at the moment they seem very clear that they have announced the package, and it is staying that way. The position at the moment is that they will be withdrawing the £20 uplift to universal credit as well, unless they are persuaded otherwise. So far, they haven't said so. Do you think this is enough to get people through the winter, or do you think they need to be looking at additional support to get us through the rest of 2021, given that we can't predict what is going to happen with this pandemic, but we can hope that, with the development of the vaccine, there is at least some foreseeable light at the end of the tunnel and we can certainly make plans for how it is going.

Anne Longfield: Shall I kick off with that one? I think the winter Covid fund was welcome. Again, I am always frustrated that there has to be at some stage a row about these things before they come in, but I think that was very welcome, and thanks to Henry for his part in helping to make that happen. Clearly, the theory is that this covers this period up until April, although there is confusion over whether it was meant to be spent on this or other things, so the fact that there is scope for confusion is worrying in itself.

Some councils have done fantastic work and have really ploughed their energies into this where there have been gaps. The fact that councils have used this opportunity to extend their support in this way is really welcome. As always, some councils will be able to achieve this more than others. It is another factor—another stage, if you like—between the families who need that help and the money being committed.

I think that most families would actually prefer cash transfer—that is what has happened in Northern Ireland—but a voucher actually puts the decision into their hands. That is not to undermine what the councils have done, because I think that has been really powerful in a lot of areas, but I do think putting the money into families' hands is the best way to go about it.

In terms of the universal credit uplift, I am firmly of the view that that was a really powerful, generous move. It made a lot of difference to a lot of people during the pandemic. We are not out of the pandemic, and that needs to remain. When we look at the amount that it costs, it costs about as much as furlough does for one month to extend it. I think we can all see that the furlough scheme is very much needed, and the money was found at that point, so I think the argument remains, why could it not be for this?

Chair: Henry, do you have anything to add to that?

Henry Dimbleby: A little bit. On the winter fund—I campaigned for it, so I would say this—I think it was clearly the right thing to give local authorities the decision about how to use the money. They know the families best. A charity I founded has been working with 30 schools, initially delivering food packages. Our approach, working with those schools, has changed and shifted as their needs have changed and shifted. There are some, for example, who live two bus stops from the supermarket, so they don't want a voucher, and they like the chef to cook the food. It is a local thing, and it should be done locally.

I have been trying to get hold of Richard Watts, who is the head of the LGA. I don't think there is a confusion over what it was meant for. There was a line saying it wasn't meant to be for free school meals, but that was because free school meals during term time were funded out of school funding. I think really the question on that is whether it is enough. I don't know the answer. If it has run out and genuinely run out, clearly it should be topped up. That is a question for the Government to address with local councils.

On the universal credit uplift issue, I am not an expert on the specifics of universal credit. I have spent quite a lot of time in food banks, so I know quite a lot about the five weeks and benefit caps and so on, but all I would say on that is that for some of the families in the wards that we work with in Hackney, it has been a complete lifesaver. Also, on the fact that the Government are saying that they are not going to do things, there are clearly a huge number of balls up in the air before the Budget in March. There are all sorts of things they are saying they are not going to do, so I wouldn't be surprised if that doesn't get extended.

Q6 **Mike Hill:** Hello, Anne and Henry. It is good to see you and very interesting to listen to what you have got to say. Anne, you have previously said that money given to councils to help vulnerable families "gets tied up in processes, in distribution, in bureaucracies". What can be done to tackle that problem?

Anne Longfield: I think I was saying there what I have just said now—it is another stage in the chain of getting the food to children. I think some councils have done brilliant things over recent months. They have really taken this to heart and have seen their responsibility as being really needed for those families. That is really helpful. Locally, in some councils, the children's element has not been as close to the emergency response as some of the other aspects of the council's work. I hope that that would be something that would change.

The kind of partnerships we have seen grow locally over the pandemic, where local agencies have worked together much more than they might have done in the past—not least schools and children's services working together to support vulnerable children—have been really powerful. Then I think the agencies that can help to supply some of the food needed are in a much better place.

Throughout all of it there needs to be centralised help within the local area that can co-ordinate different partners and ensure the food is getting where it needs to get to, but we now have some good examples from councils that have done very well during this period that we can look to and draw from.

Q7 **Mike Hill:** That is interesting. There is quite a demand on social services, particularly because of lockdown. Obviously, they have to deal with the child protection side of that, but you make the point about efficiency. My local authority runs a hub and organises, with all the volunteers, the distribution of food through that hub. It is far more efficient than leaving it to people operating in their own silos, as it were. Equally, the distribution of Government food to doorsteps bypasses that, so there needs to be dialogue between Government and local authorities in that respect as well. I recognise that. In a nutshell, would you have preferred to see the £170 million, given to councils through the Covid winter grant scheme, spent on other interventions which you think could have a greater impact? Could they have spent the money for better purposes?

Anne Longfield: I think the money was really necessary at that time, so the £170 million needed to be spent on this in my view. There was a question about whether it went on vouchers or direct to families' incomes. For the longer term, there is a case to be made about direct payments into bank balances for families. In terms of building up community resilience, it has been incredibly important. The areas that have done it very well will often have—I do not mind what we call them, whether we call them Sure Starts or family hubs—that infrastructure in a local community. Families know it and do not have a stigma around feeling that they cannot go there and ask for help. Also, they have people who will work alongside them to support them, and families do not, again, feel the worry that they might have if they were talking to children's services. So I think there you have a ready-made co-ordination centre in a local area, and I would be the first to say that you need more of those.

Q8 **Mike Hill:** I go back to a point you made earlier, which was a great point, that Covid really has united communities in a way we have not seen for a long time. Within that, there are many voluntary groups supporting those communities as well, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which does good work in my constituency. Let us hope that we learn from those strengths and continue on in the same spirit.

Henry, if I may, I will ask you a question. In "The National Food Strategy: Part One", you recommended an expansion of the holiday activities and food programme, which I am well aware of, and the Government included that in their announcement in November. Why do you think that this is the best way to tackle the long-standing issues of holiday hunger? What should be done during half-term holidays, which are not covered by that programme?

Henry Dimbleby: I think that food poverty, IT poverty and all the forms of poverty are poverty. There is a massive issue with poverty in this country and in the western world. Inequality is increasing, and that is going to continue for some time. Angus Deaton's commission is constantly producing very gloomy reports on the topic. I would not dream for a moment that the holiday activity and food programme is the best way to deal with poverty, but there is a link with food between inequality and ill health.

I think there are certain interventions where what I call in-kind support—not just ensuring people have enough money—has a direct, provable, evidenced impact on the prospects of children. I like the holiday activities and food programme and, to your conversation earlier, I think it should include all children. I intend to send my children to ours in Hackney, but I will pay for them. Nevertheless, I think that the schemes run by the schools should definitely not just be for children on free school meals.

The reason I like these schemes is that, during the holidays, not only do children from the least affluent families go hungry, but they also go backwards educationally. This is a fantastic opportunity to feed body and mind, which is why it is a very powerful programme. But I do not think it is a substitute for resolving the problems of inequality in our society.

Q9 **Mike Hill:** I agree that it is not a substitute, but it has been a necessity for some time. Some local authorities have run holiday food schemes, or what we call holiday hunger schemes, for a long time now; my own local authority does the same.

An interesting fact that I picked up from an earlier Zoom meeting that I was on with the NHS is that it appears that a lot of children who are in school now are not only the children of key workers; there are also vulnerable children, and that vulnerability includes hunger—lack of nutrition.

Henry Dimbleby: Yes, and that is why the headteachers like these programmes as well. In fact, for a lot of the headteachers who I spoke to, one of the reasons they like the box schemes rather than the vouchers is because they were very worried in the early stages of the pandemic about losing touch with some of the children in the most vulnerable homes. I am a governor of a federation of schools here in Hackney, and that was a real concern of the headteacher. So there is definitely that issue as well that feeds into it, and that again is a good reason why I like holiday activity and food programmes.

Q10 **Mike Hill:** Yes, and it just shows you how much the schools are very much part of the community.

Henry Dimbleby: I agree. I was very interested in the conversation—the previous thing—about state school versus private school, and this idea that these things should not be seen as extras. Schools are the hubs—primary schools particularly are massive hubs—of local communities. We should be thinking all the time at how we can add on more, in my view, universal benefits. I think I wouldn't make holiday activity and food a universal benefit; it would be too expensive. But I think that, generally, our inclination should be towards the universal, in primary schools in particular, rather than the targeted.

Q11 **Mike Hill:** Yes, it is food for thought.

Another proposal recommended in part one of the strategy, but it has never been adopted in the Government's winter support package, was expanded eligibility for free school meals and Healthy Start vouchers. In light of the other support that the Government have announced, do you think that is still a valuable recommendation, especially given the significant investment that it would require? You have just touched on that, I think.

Henry Dimbleby: Actually, I will go back to that in part two of the food strategy. When we did the work on free school meals in 2013, if you look at the school meal spend, the group of children in the poorest households who aren't eligible for free school meals have the lowest take-up of school meals and spend the least. Basically, you have got a group of children who are really struggling to feed themselves; where they are buying school meals, they are spending their money on snacks. So there is a clear case to expand the eligibility.

The discussion that I am having at the moment is whether that should be to universal credit, or whether there is some point in between the £17,400 and universal credit. What I am trying to do for next time round—actually, DWP is being very helpful with the data—is to describe the group of people in work and out of work who are on universal credit, and get away from the tropes about, you know, the rich people on universal credit, or the people in Wales getting much more than the people of London and so on, and to try to draw that line a bit more finely. But I still definitely think eligibility should be expanded. The question, for me now, is expanded to where, and can I paint that with a slightly finer paintbrush in part two.

Q12 **Mike Hill:** It is fascinating. Sorry: if I disappeared, it's because my battery is running a bit low—modern technology.

I would like Anne to comment on that, but first let me say that the very idea that school meal vouchers are being exchanged for anything but food is anathema to me. I can absolutely guarantee that that is not the case in my constituency, and certainly not the case in my region. It is a modern myth that, unfortunately, stigmatises people, and it is not acceptable. Anne, do you have anything to say about what Henry just said?

Anne Longfield: I support the extension. I am really pleased that Henry is doing that work. I would see this as part of a long-term plan about food, food poverty and poverty, so getting it right will need several different aspects. I think that that is a really powerful one and I am really looking forward to it.

Just to go back slightly—sorry—to the universality around schools and that extended support that you could get around schools, it would not just mean that you have to pay for it. As Henry rightly says, you could have a charging mechanism—most childcare schemes for holidays do that already—which should have some free places. You would be able to offer it to all kids, making sure that those kids that needed it most were able to get that place.

On what parents are going to spend their vouchers on, I always find this a really dispiriting part of any conversation that comes up because, in my experience, most families who do not have much food want to buy food for their children. The vouchers are not meant to be spent on anything other than food. There will be a way in which someone, somewhere has done that—it is possible; I am sure that someone has done it—but we cannot base a policy on alleviating poverty and food poverty on someone who is breaking some rule somewhere, allegedly. It is one of those things that gets in the air. It is part of that stigmatising and part of that demeaning place in which so many families feel themselves. With the food boxes we saw last week—accepting that they were probably some of the worst ones on social media—it was the demeaning aspect of it that I felt was the most awful. Alongside that, you see areas that have really got together in terms of holiday food, and they are doing their absolute best to fill boxes with great things. That is what we should all be trying to do—actually doing our best for those children who need that extra help.

Mike Hill: I totally agree. I had a constituent come to me with a similar food parcel last week. I put it on social media, but they did not want to come forward or to be named because of the effects on the mental health of their child, who would feel stigmatised, so I totally agree. Thank you; that was very informative.

Chair: Thank you, Mike. Henry, do you want to come in on that?

Henry Dimbleby: Yes. Anne said something that reminded me of what I hope will be a long-term lesson for the Government from this pandemic. So many good policies are ignored because of worries about a very small number of people using them inappropriately, and, in a very serious way, that stops us helping people. If you look at furlough, CBILS, or any of these schemes, the Treasury realised that these schemes are defraudable to much larger degrees than stuff would be in the normal run of things, but made the calculation that the benefit is so much greater than the harm that would be done by the fraud. Particularly in these areas of poverty, there is often so much time spent thinking about how a small number of people may abuse a scheme, which actually does not matter. The question is: what is the net benefit? I think that in so many of these things, the net benefit is huge, and we should stop worrying about a small amount of fraud.

Q13 **Chair:** I agree. I do not expect you to comment on this, but one of the other frustrations that has been expressed to me is that the Government have been less than careful with their procurement. Significant amounts of money have, arguably, been wasted on contracts. Obviously, arguments and discussions are going on about the contracting process during the Covid period. The level of public procurement that has happened as a result of the pandemic has been enormous and then there has been, in a sense, penny pinching on the food that has gone to children to be able to eat during this period. I do not expect you to comment, because I appreciate that that is a political comment, but that has been a frustration that has been expressed to me. It also feeds into what you are saying, Henry, in terms of this worry that some small amount of money may get misused outweighing the benefit of making sure that children grow up with healthy food. We do need to get that balance right. Obviously, no money should be wasted, but the fact is that the Government are spending money—*[Interruption.]* It is where you are comfortable with that waste and then suddenly uncomfortable. I think that that is where some of the questions have been raised. Sorry, Henry, were you going to say something?

Henry Dimbleby: I was about to say that saying that no money should be wasted is completely wrong. You have to accept that money will always be wasted, and then you have to work out what the most efficient way of getting the result you want is, accepting that money will be wasted. If you think that no money will ever be wasted, you will never spend any money.

Chair: You have to at least aspire to it.

Anne Longfield: If we are going to have food parcels, we should be obsessed with what is in them. We should be obsessed with checking what is in them. We should be obsessed with making it clear what should be in them and then with checking every aspect of that.

Henry Dimbleby: One of the things that frustrated me about the way the narrative went over those latest pictures of food parcels was that, to me, the parcels exhibited a problem that exists in school meals generally. It takes care, attention and passion. We all know how difficult it is to feed our own children and to get them to eat healthily. It is difficult, and doing school food is difficult. Some people do it very well, some people do not and some people do not care enough. I would have liked to have seen the debate around that particular food package become a debate about how leaders in schools and companies serving schools can serve better free school meals. It was frustrating because, for me, that is a really important debate and it suddenly became another debate about Government funding, which actually it was not. Another big issue is how do you get schools to serve their children well.

Q14 **Chair:** I think the fundamental question is: would you serve that to your child; would your child eat that; would that be good for your child; and is that enough for your child? That is a fundamental question that everyone needs to ask themselves.

We do not have much longer, so I want to get down to action in terms of what we need to do now. In your opinion, do the Government already have all the tools and the information that they need to tackle these fundamental drivers of child food poverty? What are they missing? I guess I will put this directly: is it that they are missing the information; is it that they are missing an individual in government who is driving this as a strategy; or is it something else?

Henry Dimbleby: One of my recommendations was that the Government should keep a taskforce in place whose job it is to look at the information closely, by which I mean things such as hospital admissions for malnutrition and polls on where around the country food insecurity is increasing or decreasing, so that they can react in real time. They can have adaptive management and be ahead of the game.

Q15 **Chair:** That is in terms of having the information—the facts, the figures and the data.

Henry Dimbleby: Having the information, exactly.

Chair: Then it comes down to who are they presenting that to and who is answerable for it.

Henry Dimbleby: Exactly. I think that the first one is more important than the second, because if you have the data, it will be stark when it is going wrong and someone will pick it up, although you do need to address both. There is still work ongoing on the former, but I am reasonably optimistic that that will be happening. It is not yet decided exactly how it

will work and where it will happen, but it feels to me that there is good progress being made on that. We just need to push it across the line.

Q16 **Chair:** Okay. Anne, you have previously said that you do not believe that the Government have a long-term strategy for dealing with this, but the Government believe that they have a holistic strategy, so where do you see it?

Anne Longfield: This has the makings of a holistic strategy, but it is pretty fluid at the moment and it is very much focused on the pandemic. I am talking about a long-term plan to reduce poverty, and also to reduce food poverty as a part of that. We are still in the reactive phase. There is enough of all those things you have said—the data, the evidence and the like—to be able to put in place a plan for the future. I am talking about poverty here, rather than food poverty—food poverty has been forced into the dialogue, if you like. With poverty, there is still almost this sense of squeamishness about it, and it still seems to fit in the "too difficult" box. I think that, actually, across the political divide, this needs to be seen as one of the biggest social and economic issues of our time, and it needs to be tackled as such.

I do think, however, that there needs to be a long-term food plan over the next three to five years. That cannot be just to deliver food better and more efficiently; it has to be about reducing the reliance on food for poor families. I would like to see that as broad as it possibly can be in terms of delivering, again, that national conviction and that local support.

There used to be a poverty unit in the Government, which sat between DWP and Education, but that has not been there for some time. I asked the question as to whether there was a poverty strategy and where it lived, and of course no one can answer that, because there is not one as such. Those mechanisms are important—they are a means to an end, but they are important with it. Henry's taskforce, clearly, is involved in really important work as part of that, but it needs to go beyond that.

Q17 **Chair:** In terms of your taskforce, Henry, the asks in Marcus Rashford's petition are based on part one of the national food strategy, which you led. You argued that these steps would "shore up the diets of the most deprived children" during the pandemic. Obviously, the Government have adopted many—well, some—of those asks. In terms of part two, where are you going next to build on that momentum?

Henry Dimbleby: Part two is much broader, so it is dealing with the environment, the eutrophication of rivers, the carbon footprint of our agricultural system and international trade, but I am increasingly convinced that, if you look at inequality and poverty across the western world, it is something that in the absence of mass conflict has increased in every society. It will be around however hard the Government fight it—we will have these problems for the foreseeable future.

I am also convinced that poverty makes particular choices much harder—food choices much harder—for those who are in it. There will need to be an unwelcome section, in some ways, in part two of the strategy: until we

solve the societal problems that we have with poverty, what specific food policies do we need in place?

I will be criticised, I am sure, by people who will say, "Ah, well, this is taking the effort away from what really needs to happen," which is solving societal inequality, but I think you will need to have some more long-term plasters—long-term, but still plasters—to stop the food system presenting itself in such an unattractive way to those who have already been dealt the worst hand by society.

Q18 **Chair:** This is the final question, because we are running out of time. What scale of intervention do you think will be required to end child poverty within this Parliament—so, by 2024?

Anne Longfield: I would say a scale that matches the level of need, which has been exposed during this period. Within this Parliament, I think we are looking at a food plan for the Parliament; we need to look at the whole issue of being ready to respond to the increasing number of families who are the new poor because of the pandemic, those who are likely to come on after furlough ends and the like. I know the DWP is modelling that very strongly, but to get on the front foot with that there needs to be a real commitment to helping families to get back on their feet. Some of that, of course, will be about alleviating food poverty—I agree with Henry that both parts of that response are really needed. Remember that children have been out of school for so long now and are likely to have disturbed schooling for some time, so it is being able to get them the support they need to have the routine in their lives, if they are back in school, of being able to rely on free school meals within schools and out of school as well.

The pandemic will not end at the point when we all have a vaccination, whenever that is; it will be building back from that. There is a serious rebuild on all fronts throughout this Parliament, but food poverty needs to be a central aspect of that.

Q19 **Chair:** Thank you. Henry, do you have a final word?

Henry Dimbleby: If you are serious about ending child food poverty in this Parliament, the Government need to make a fundamental separation. They need to realise that their initiative to level up and reduce inequality is the most important thing facing our society, but that it is not failure to realise that that will be the job of many Parliaments. On Marcus's very simple call for one meal for every child if they need it, which means extending free school meals and ensuring the holiday activities and food programmes work, they need to say, "We are doing this—that is not failure," and to put things in place such that, as wealth increases, the number of people eligible for them goes down, but also ensure that that safety net is there and that it is strong.

Chair: Great. Thank you. That is all we have time for today, but thank you so much, both of you, for taking the time to speak to us. As a Committee, we will be considering this issue further. We are waiting for a response from the Government to the letter we have written to clarify their long-

term plans to end child food poverty, which is what Marcus's petition and campaign are calling for. We will announce as soon as we have that response and our next steps, which are a little dependent on the current situation in Parliament, in which we do not have Westminster Hall debates at the moment. As soon as we can put this to the Government, we will take all your evidence on board and present it to the Government. Thank you so much for your time and for the very rich evidence we have taken today.