

Education Committee

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: [Child Poverty Taskforce](#), HC 894

Wednesday 10 September 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 September 2025.

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Education Committee members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Dr Caroline Johnson; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Caroline Voaden.

Work and Pensions Committee members present: Debbie Abrahams (Chair); Johanna Baxter; Mr Peter Bedford; Steve Darling; Amanda Hack; Frank McNally; David Pinto-Duschinsky.

Questions 34 - 72

Witnesses

I: Nicola Killean, Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland; Rocio Cifuentes, Children's Commissioner for Wales; and Alex Tennant, Interim Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

II: Professor Stephen Sinclair, Chair, Poverty and Inequality Commission (Scotland); and Steffan Evans, Chief Executive Officer, Bevan Foundation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicola Killean, Rocio Cifuentes and Alex Tennant.

Q34 **Chair (Debbie Abrahams):** A very warm welcome to this child poverty strategy inquiry hearing, a joint inquiry of the Education and Work and Pensions Select Committees. It is a pleasure to welcome our guests today from the devolved nations, who are going to share their experience with us. We have Nicola Killean from Scotland, the Children and Young People's Commissioner there, Rocio Cifuentes—I hope I pronounced that correctly—from Wales, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and Alex Tennant, who is the Interim Chief Executive of the Commissioner's Office in Northern Ireland. Again, a very warm welcome. If you would like to make any further additional introductions, then we will move on to



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questions. Who would like to start?

Nicola Killean: Good morning. I am happy to start, and thank you very much for inviting us to come here to share our experiences and learning with you all today. From our perspective, I am keen that we always start by grounding this conversation on what the impact of child poverty is on children and young people. We know in Scotland that there are still children who are hungry, there are still children who are cold because their families cannot afford to put the heating on in their homes and there are still children who are becoming unwell because the inappropriate temporary accommodation that they are being put in is making them unwell and feel ill. There are children who cannot engage in their education because the supports have not been put in place to meet their needs, but there are also children who, because the needs of their family have not been met—if their parents are carers—are worrying about them and are carrying a mental load in their day-to-day life.

We know that child poverty is the most significant human rights issue facing children and young people still in Scotland today and, at its most serious, poverty can affect a child's right to life. Thank you for inviting us to share our experiences today.

Q35 **Chair (Debbie Abrahams):** Thank you. Rocio, would you like to make your brief introduction?

Rocio Cifuentes: Thank you. It is a privilege to be here with you today and thank you for the opportunity to bring the voice and experience of children living in Wales in poverty to this important group. I will not add to what Nicola has mentioned about the impact on the experience of children. We know in Wales that that experience is very stark and unfortunately the Welsh picture is significantly worse than other devolved nations for the levels of child poverty and also the lack of levers and powers that the Welsh Government have to address and mitigate that.

Alex Tennant: Thank you again. I am delighted to be here. The Commissioner sends his apologies; he had a family emergency. It is important to hear from the devolved context because I think there are differences, so we are looking forward to being able to present on those.

Q36 **Chair (Debbie Abrahams):** Lovely. I will kick off the questions and then we all have some questions for you. I wanted to pick up on something that Nicola just raised and to try to understand the differences and also the uniqueness of child poverty in the devolved nations. What are the differences in the causes and experience of child poverty in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales? Also could you expand on the unique challenges that you face in the devolved nations. Who would like to kick off there? We will go that way.

Rocio Cifuentes: One of the differences in Wales, as I have mentioned, is that levels of child poverty are significantly higher and worse than in the other nations. The most recent figures show that 31% of children are living in relative income poverty, which is a slight increase from previous



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years. However, that figure of around 30% has not shifted significantly for 20 years now, ever since devolution, but what is unique to Wales is how bad it is, which is not a great way to be unique.

Q37 Chair (Debbie Abrahams): Why do you think that is?

Rocio Cifuentes: Wales is a poorer country in many ways. There are higher levels of deprivation generally, jobs are more insecure, there is the rurality factor. There is a rural premium, where if you live in a rural area, the cost of living is higher for transport, while public services are poorer and job availability is less. Significantly, there is the lack of levers and powers that the Welsh Government have to address poverty with social security, and I think that is very significant to the uniqueness.

Nicola Killean: I have already touched on the impacts on children and young people. I think we would all probably agree that the impact is so devastating on children and young people and it is across every element of their life, regardless of where they live. Rocio has touched on the rurality and Scotland also has many children and families who live in rural areas and island communities. There are the additional costs: the lack of infrastructure such as transport and ability to have a variety of shops to be able to buy healthy food at a low cost. There is an impact on what investment has been made in infrastructure for more rural and island communities.

I want to stress that causes of poverty are partially or wholly outwith parent or carers' control and they are completely outwith a child's control. Although children feel this impact across every element of their life, the causes are outwith their control. Some of the obvious causes, as I am sure the panel will be aware, are linked to low-paid employment, the lack of flexible employment, particularly for parents, the mismatch between the social security benefits that are available for families and the reality of the cost of living, and access to social housing. It is very noticeable in Scotland that there has been an increase over the years in families living in in-work poverty.

For some of the less obvious causes, we have touched on the public transport infrastructure and the lack of investment in infrastructure to bring down the cost of living for families, but there is also the lack of early intervention. You have families who may have had adverse childhood experiences or have lived in multigenerational poverty. If there is a lack of early investment and early intervention to support them to recover from that, that can compound or keep families in poverty. One of the less obvious elements, where there has been some very interesting research in Scotland, is the way that public debt is collected. It can tip some people into debt or it can compound and maintain families in debt because of how that can build up over time and people get locked into a situation that they find very difficult to get out of.

Q38 Chair (Debbie Abrahams): Scotland in 2024 had a child poverty rate of just over 16% and if you compare that to your neighbours in the north-



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east and north-west, it is nearly half. What do you put that down to? I am conscious that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has done a report in 2024 specifically looking at Scotland and says that housing is the key factor there, but do you agree with that?

Nicola Killean: In Scotland, the most up-to-date percentage is 22% for relative child poverty figures. That is still nearly one in four children who are living in poverty. However, the really positive difference in Scotland is that we have had a child poverty strategy for several years. The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament introduced the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act in 2017 and they created a strategy. They have, from that legislation, had to have a child poverty delivery plan that has been created. That has had a ripple effect of ensuring that both NHS and local authorities have a child poverty locality plan that is connected to that and that has absolutely been a positive factor in this.

You mentioned housing. The Government recently committed to additional investment in housing. It is not enough yet in Scotland, so there is still a gap between what is needed, but a lot of the research points to the additional social security benefits that Scotland has used through some of its devolution powers and particularly the child payment that has been brought in. I can touch on more of that later, if that is helpful.

Alex Tennant: When we look at this, there are a lot of commonalities across the UK in general. There are core vulnerabilities that make children more likely to be in poverty. For example, lone parent families, workless households or those where there is somebody in the household with a disability are twice as likely to be in poverty than in couple households that have two parents working. As Nicola said, the majority of children now in poverty are in working households, so jobs do not lift children out of poverty necessarily.

There are core common vulnerabilities there, but I think the differences are in what is happening and what Governments are doing in some ways. As Nicola said, the child poverty strategy and some of the cash transfers that the Scottish Parliament have put in place are delivering. In Northern Ireland we also see lower levels of child poverty than in other parts of England and Wales, and the mitigation measures are likely to be responsible in part for that.

In Northern Ireland, some of the differences are that we have larger families. One in five households with dependent children would have three or more dependent children, so they are more likely to be affected by the two-child limit. We also have the conflict, and if you overlay the areas that are most affected by the conflict and the areas that are most affected by poverty, they match quite closely. Then also for us there is the political context. We have the mandatory coalition in Northern Ireland, so it can be quite hard to reach agreement with political parties that vary quite hugely in their political perspectives, and we have also had the lack of a functioning Executive and Assembly for quite a time.



That has meant that the policy development and the responses have not been able to keep up or to respond as they should to what we are seeing on the ground.

Q39 Johanna Baxter: Thank you all for coming in to speak to us today. On devolved and reserved powers, can you tell us about what opportunities and challenges you think the devolved settlements pose for reducing child poverty?

Rocio Cifuentes: I will start. The key challenge I have mentioned already is the fact that the Welsh Government are not allowed to introduce a payment as Scotland has been able to, such as the Scottish child payment. I would very much like to see that be possible and for conversations and negotiations to take place to enable that. Ultimately it has been shown that the Scottish child payment has made a significant difference to child poverty levels in Scotland. Projections show is one of the most effective ways of getting money right to the places where it is needed the most and would have the most direct and immediate impact. I have called for the Welsh Government to look at ways of doing that but am very conscious that currently it is not possible within the current devolution settlement. That is a key challenge.

On opportunities, the Welsh Government are able to make grants and discretionary payments to families in need, but those are not entitlements, and they are limited in how much impact and reach they can have. There is also a limited amount of money available to offer to families but the Welsh Government have, for example, introduced universal free school meals to all primary schools. Those are things that are within their gift, within their current powers, and something that I have welcomed. The statistics and the projections unfortunately show us that even with all those measures that they have taken, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation project that by the end of this decade child poverty levels in Wales will reach 34%, which is staggering.

Nicola Killean: The first thing that I want to focus on is that devolution means that different powers sit in different places. Some of the major levers and powers still sit within the UK Government for the ability to tackle child poverty with social security and Universal Credit. I am certainly looking for the UK child poverty strategy to address and remove the two-child limit and the benefit cap, and the projections are that if that happens, 20,000 children will be lifted out of poverty in Scotland. I just wanted to start there.

However, for really clear legislation in Scotland, the Scotland Act 2016 also gave Scotland powers to introduce additional social security benefits and to top up some benefits as well. It created Social Security Scotland and we have touched on already the Scottish child payment, where I think the evidence is really powerful, but we absolutely believe it will need both. The ask for the Scottish Government is for them to do more and increase the Scottish child payment but the ask to the UK Government is to remove the two-child cap and the benefit cap as well.



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A number of additional benefits have been created through Social Security Scotland and been put in place. I will just touch on a couple of them, but I am happy to follow up with any additional information. There is the best start grant, pregnancy and baby payment; best start grant, early learning payment; best start grant, school age payment; best start foods; the Scottish child payment that we have heard about already; and a young carer grant. That is just a few examples of where Scotland absolutely has made major financial investments and policy commitments. Of course I believe that there is more that they can do and should be doing on this as well.

Q40 Johanna Baxter: Before we turn to Northern Ireland, can I come back to you on that? You referenced earlier the housing crisis, for example, that exists in Scotland, and there certainly is a housing emergency in Scotland. How do you see the Scottish Government's powers in that being a contributory factor to child poverty in Scotland? That policy area is directly under the control of the Scottish Government and, as you have referenced, that is one of the drivers of child poverty in Scotland. What do you say to that?

Nicola Killean: I absolutely believe that there is more that the Scottish Government can do and there are clear calls across civil society for the Government to do more in their investment in housing. If we touch on where we started earlier, if you look at the impact on children and young people of living in poverty and you look at the causes, there is not one strand that causes this. We touched on income maximisation being very important but also the ability to have access to a safe, warm home. These are children's rights. They are set out in the UNCRC and are entitlements.

Coming back to what the UK Government can do with their strategy, I think it is about looking across all our children's rights, all of the causes, and ensuring that there is a strategy that addresses all of those, and implementation plans are critical and measuring the impact of that over the years moving forward.

Alex Tennant: Northern Ireland has the most extensive range of devolved or transferred powers of the three devolved Administrations, so most of the policy levers for child poverty are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. These include health and social services, education, employment and skills, housing, economic development, transport and social security, pensions and child support. The only remaining excepted or reserved matter is the UK-wide taxation in how it relates to national insurance, tax rates and tax credits. While they hold responsibility for social security, the Assembly and the Executive have chosen to maintain the long-standing parity principle because the cost associated with setting up a different social security system is quite significant. They have put in place welfare reform mitigations for some of the measures that were brought through from 2010 onwards, unfortunately not all of them and



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not the ones that are hitting children and their families most, including the two-child limit.

We talk about a UK-wide social security system. There is an interesting study that I have heard about recently called the Safety Nets Project that is looking at how devolution has affected the social security systems across the UK. As one illustrative example, they looked at household incomes for a typical out-of-work couple with four children in 2023. They found that if they were living in York they would be entitled to £22,000, in Belfast they would receive £32,000 and in Glasgow they would receive £37,000. We can see that there is quite a lot of work being done particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland to try to mitigate some of the worst cuts that have come through in welfare reform. We feel this is the area where the UK child poverty strategy can bring the most benefit to children in Northern Ireland in reforming the social security system.

Q41 Johanna Baxter: I am really struck by what you said there and I am thinking about to what extent will the effectiveness of a UK-wide child poverty strategy be affected by the delivery in devolved policy areas such as health, housing and education. What do you think about that?

Rocio Cifuentes: As Nicola and Alex have made clear, it is so important that all Governments across the UK work together and work together coherently and with the child's interests at heart. This must be about children's fundamental human rights. They are enshrined in the UNCRC and that should be the driving force. Children's rights and children's lives should never become political. Of course to achieve that we need really good communication and clear understanding of the opportunities and the challenges within each devolved Government's powers but it is important, as you pointed out, to explore where the impacts of the devolved areas may be for housing, education and so on.

I must echo what has already been said, that we cannot get away from the fundamental and central role that social security plays, particularly in the lives of the most vulnerable children. In Wales, we know that 11% of children are directly impacted by the two-child limit. That is 65,000 children who are being effectively deprived of an equivalent of £3,500 per child per year. We know also that statistics and more and more research is showing that it is not just about 30% of families being below the poverty line, but in fact more and more of those families are experiencing deep and deepening poverty.

Recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Bevan Foundation has shown that a family living in deep poverty, a family with two children in primary school, would need an additional £13,400 per year just to reach the poverty threshold, so that is just to reach the bare minimum standard of what is acceptable rather than anything else. To be over £1,000 short per month to reach that, you can start to understand the impact on children's lives. I am probably straying from your question now but it shows the importance of having an effective UK Government



strategy to address child poverty that works effectively with the devolved nations is absolutely critical to change that.

Nicola Killean: I echo many of Rocio's comments, but I think it is critical for the UK poverty strategy to be in place because the UK holds some of those crucial levers and the Scottish Government hold other levers. By bringing those together, you are maximising the available resources. That is part of the ask from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is that Governments should use all available maximum resources to deliver on children's rights. You are upholding your international obligations as well, but it is absolutely critical at this stage that Governments work together to agree the targets, the measures and the implementation plans.

It is absolutely clear that the ask is to use everything available to you, but it must be complementary. The timescales should align because we do not want confusion. We want to know what works. We want to know if there are things that are not working and what needs to be done more of or less of. Ultimately, when there is confusion, it is children and families that lose out, when the benefit systems become even more complicated and they are not sure what they can access or what happens. Ultimately, we are absolutely looking for it to align with what is in place for Scotland, for the targets to align, for the timescales, for the measures to be really clear, and this is the opportunity to do that now.

Alex Tennant: While in Scotland and Wales they have child poverty strategies, we do not in Northern Ireland. We have a draft anti-poverty strategy and it does not have a particular focus on children unfortunately. We need to see how this child poverty strategy can work with Northern Ireland in the absence of a child poverty strategy.

Q42 **Amanda Hack:** Thank you so much to the panel for coming in today. Each nation obviously has its own strategy. How useful have those strategies been, from the starting point to where we are now, in reducing child poverty in each nation?

Rocio Cifuentes: The Welsh Government have a duty to produce a child poverty strategy. That is in the legislation and it has recently published one. I will start with the positives. There has been very good civil society and community engagement in producing that strategy and particularly welcome engagement with children and young people with lived experience of child poverty. The Welsh Government made small grants available to facilitate that engagement and that was commendable. However, it was disappointing to not see the issues and priorities raised by children and young people in that engagement clearly reflected in the final strategy.

Another weakness of the strategy, in my view and in the view of many civil society organisations, is the lack of clear targets and milestones in it. Without setting out those clear targets, the strategy lacks an accountability framework. It is very difficult to hold the Welsh



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Government to account on the progress, or not, of the strategy and that ultimately weakens it, in my view and the view of many others in Wales.

Nicola Killean: From Scotland's perspective, and in general, I think a child poverty strategy is critical for Governments to be able to set out, first of all, how much of a priority it is to address this. It makes it absolutely crystal clear that the levels and the impact on children are completely unacceptable, so as a starting point I think it gives a framing for Government to say that this is one of the top priorities. In Scotland the legislation that was put in place for the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act in 2017 set duties on the Scottish Government to create the strategy but to create a four-year delivery plan and to make clear what actions they were going to take. They must report annually on what actions have been delivered and, if actions have not been delivered, why not, and again report annually on progress towards those targets.

Before I move on to the accountability element, it also then has duties for local authorities and for the NHS to create locality plans that are aligned to those national targets as well. It allows for, and we do see, co-ordination across different portfolios and for different services to come together and think, "If this is the target, what needs to happen in different areas to drive towards that?" It can also serve as a tool for culture change across society to say, "These are children's rights. What needs to happen?", and it gives a higher level of accountability.

Scotland is not meeting its interim targets at the moment, and that is not good enough, but we know that, so it gives the ability for organisations and civil society to come about that and make clear calls for what more could be done and it allows those who are in scrutiny positions to hold Government to account. The most important thing, though, is that if a Government are not meeting their interim targets, they must do more. They must think differently, so having clear targets, clear measures and a regularity allows for that work to happen, the calls to action to come and for a rethink on what more or what different should take place.

There are also elements that could be better, of course, but for me there are very clear benefits in having a strategy. From Scotland's perspective, the fact that that is in legislation has put clear duties on the Government and others for how they must report on that.

Alex Tennant: When the Northern Ireland Assembly returned in January 2020, the New Decade, New Approach agreement made commitments to produce an anti-poverty strategy and a child poverty strategy. The Minister at the time came out and asked the sector if they thought they needed two different strategies. In general, we responded by saying that we believed that one anti-poverty strategy could do it if there was a significant focus on children, if it took a life cycle approach. There has been quite a bit of engagement with the sector. There was an expert advisory panel of academics established to produce a paper on the key recommendations of what could be included in the strategy and there is a



lot of focus in that on child poverty. There was a co-design group established, on which we were represented, to advise on the specific actions that should be included in the strategy.

Unfortunately or fortunately, the strategy was published in June and it has moved away entirely from what had been discussed and it is not taking a life cycle approach. There is no major focus on children, which is very disappointing, so we do not think the anti-poverty strategy is sufficient for tackling child poverty. I am happy to get into some of the things that we think should be in there but there is a gap in Northern Ireland for delivery and child poverty.

Q43 Amanda Hack: Thank you. That has been very useful. What do you think has made the strategies that you have effective or, in the case of the comments just made from Northern Ireland, what do you think the barriers have been to making the policies effective?

Alex Tennant: We did have child poverty strategies that came out of the Child Poverty Act 2010, and the Public Accounts Committee did a report and looked at the delivery of these strategies and found that really nothing major had changed. There had not been a real change in child poverty, there had not been clear targets and clear measures, and the implementation was very problematic. I would recommend that report to this Committee to look at some of the problems.

I think there are some basic standards that seem very obvious for what should be in a strategy. We believe it should take a life cycle approach with a focus on children. It should focus on lifting children out of poverty instead of just mitigating poverty, making them happy while they are in poverty. It must include actions; it seems quite obvious, actions that are funded rather than just actions that are already being delivered. There must be dedicated resources and, as we talked about, experts by experience must be involved in the development of the strategy and the monitoring, implementation and accountability processes.

Nicola Killean: We touched on some of this earlier, that a strategy can only be fully effective if all the levers are available, That is why we view the UK poverty strategy as so essential and so important and we have been very clear in what we are looking for to enable other strategies to complement and use all of the different levers. Alex has also touched upon the importance of lived experience and ensuring that any implementation plans, policies or actions that are committed to also involve those who have experience of poverty. I would include children and young people in this, conversations about what from their perspective are the most important elements.

Another interesting part of the child poverty strategy plan in Scotland, but probably not fully evaluated yet, is elements that have looked at how some services are delivered as well as what is delivered. There has been a move towards more dignity-based, place-based services that have a wraparound. Historically, if a family needed support from multiple places,



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they would have to engage with multiple services and there has been a move towards having very much one person who would hold that, with connections for the families. It is still at a pathfinder stage and still being tested, but when I touch back on what the factors are that cause people to be in poverty but can maintain them, how services are delivered and how those can be done in a much more efficient way, but with a more human rights-based way for families, is still at an early stage of development, but would certainly also be of interest for the Committee to look at.

One of the issues that I have raised with the Scottish Government is that children and young people were not involved in the original creation of the child poverty strategy in Scotland, and therefore I believe that there will be some gaps from their perspective. We touched on the impact it has on them, so it is essential. The Government are taking some steps now to rectify that as they are updating the next delivery plan. It is critical that children and young people's voices and experiences form part of that.

To raise one example in Scotland, there is an approach about looking at families who are living in poverty but then drilling down to six priority family groups and asking which families are more likely to experience poverty. Is it families with a disability, single-parent families and then, at a more detailed level, policy discussions happen around that. How can we get access to support those families more readily?

I have been raising concerns about older young people, young people who may be care experienced, who might have been unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who may have become independently living at an earlier stage of life and are there enough supports in place for them? Universal Credit is less for young people, income is less for young people, but if they are living independently the costs are not less for them. This is where it is important for priority families and a whole family approach and getting support to parents is ultimately correct. It is not "and/or" but "and", but who has slipped through the gaps there? If you take a children's rights-based approach and look at priority children and young people as well, you can layer on and make sure you are filling any gaps.

Rocio Cifuentes: At the risk of repeating myself, the lack of targets and measures has been the key weakness really. In fact, the Welsh Government previously had a child poverty reduction or elimination target and dropped it in 2016 because they felt they were not going to reach it. I personally do not think that is a good reason to drop a target. We have seen since poverty measures getting worse and projected to get even worse again. Without those ways of measuring clearly what is working and what is not, which elements of the strategy are working, the strategy risks becoming a list of very laudable objectives that nobody can disagree with and a list of very well-intentioned actions, activities and programmes that Government may be funding, but there is a very weak



ability to connect and measure which specific activities or interventions are having the most impact.

There is also a challenge around tracking how and where money is spent on tackling poverty and this has been flagged by the Audit Office in Wales. There is a complex governance structure in Wales and making it easier to see exactly where money is being spent and what impact that money is having would make a huge difference.

The second aspect is about the accountability mechanisms and structures to include civil society organisations, but crucially children and young people, in being part of the monitoring framework, in enabling their voices to be heard in measuring and monitoring the progress, asking them how it is going, how are these interventions affecting them. Building that into a structure and framework has not happened and I hope that the UK Government would look at that.

Amanda Hack: Thank you. In the interests of time, Chair.

Chair (Debbie Abrahams): Thank you. We just need to speed up in time, if that is okay.

Q44 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** No problem; thank you, Chair, and I will very much take that admonition on board. I want to come back to an issue that I think all of you have touched on, which is the role that targets and measures play in child poverty strategies. You have all been pretty clear on their importance, but can you expand a bit on that role and, secondly, touch on if there are any particular measures that you favour? Nicola, for instance, talked about how she wanted to see a broader range of levers pulled. What are the measures beyond relative poverty itself that you think are important in setting those targets? Rocio, maybe, to kick off.

Rocio Cifuentes: The measures as actions or measures as ways of measuring the actions?

David Pinto-Duschinsky: Measures and targets. You talked about the fact that the Welsh poverty strategy does not have targets in it, so I am asking you what roles you think targets play and, if so, what measures do you favour?

Rocio Cifuentes: The target that we are most used to using is the relative income poverty target. I think that one should remain. It is a useful way of tracking the overall picture. However, as I have alluded to already, it does not really show what is happening for the cohort underneath that 30%. I would recommend introducing more specific measures to track and look at deep poverty that I have touched on already and how many children and families fall into that category. That is a specific measure that I recommend.

Q45 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Would that be based on the JRF 50% of relative income target?



Rocio Cifuentes: Yes, but 40% is the figure I have.

Nicola Killean: I have probably touched on already the importance of targets in ensuring that there is accountability. It is so important that the targets set in the UK poverty strategy align with the targets that are already set in Scotland. That is probably the clear message from me, that it must be complementary. One of the things that I will touch on, though, as I have mentioned already, is that a child poverty strategy has to look across income maximisation and other elements. I think there could be specific targets set that align across the different elements of the strategy whereas the focus is often on the percentages of families with income maximisation. That is an area that could be considered, but the stress for me is that it absolutely must complement what is happening in Scotland.

Q46 **David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Could you give an example of a measure that could be, as you say, one of the non-income measures?

Nicola Killean: It is almost difficult to respond without considering what the options might be, but we have touched on housing already and if there should be targets. Essentially, we have more families that need social housing than have access to it at the moment, so whether there should be targets around that.

There are also some elements in the child poverty strategy in Scotland and I have raised this with the Scottish Government. There are three different sections and one of them is particularly focused on what is delivered specifically to children and young people. There have been commitments made in that on access to digital. These are things that help children to grow up not feeling excluded in multiple ways. Young people consistently raise the fact that they become socially excluded from a young age because of lack of opportunities or stigma and shame. I have already raised with Government the fact that I think that element of the plan has fewer specific targets and measures allocated to it and, therefore, it does not come under the same accountability if some of those slip in resources or implementation.

For me, it is about looking at what is in the plan—and because we do not have it yet, I cannot give you a specific measure on that from your own perspective—and making sure that there are clear measures aligned to each section of that.

Alex Tennant: Looking back at the Child Poverty Act 2010, there were four measures in there. I think it was relative poverty, mixed measure, material deprivation, depth and persistent poverty. Each of those tells us something different and each requires slightly different interventions. We were talking about free school meals. Provision of free school meals is not going to decrease the number of children in poverty, but it might impact on material deprivation, so I think it is important to have those different measures so that that reflects the range of interventions that are required.



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I am interested in targets specifically for Northern Ireland as well. The Child Poverty Act had targets set for each of the Governments. Obviously Scotland has its own targets and we have heard Wales do not have targets but it would be interesting to see what should be done for Northern Ireland, whether there should be targets set for the Northern Ireland Executive as well.

Q47 David Pinto-Duschinsky: Thank you. One final question and then I will hand back because I am conscious of time. Should the targets be legally binding and, in asking that, I would ask what does that really mean? Normally when we say targets are legally binding, all that means is that if the Government misses them they just need to explain why. You cannot make a target that forces Government to spend money. That would be taking over control of fiscal policy. Given that, what is the value of making them legally binding and is it worth it?

Nicola Killean: I can certainly answer that from Scotland's perspective. Being underpinned by legislation, as I mentioned earlier, means that Government are held to account for ensuring that the targets are clear, reporting on them, delivery plans are in place and there are duties placed on local government as well to come around that. I think that having it underpinned by legislation is powerful and ensures that this happens. The annual updating galvanises Government and others to have public conversations about how this is not okay and more has to be done. I think it is really important that they are legally binding.

Alex Tennant: Yes, I think it is important. It focuses minds. We have a statutory requirement for an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland that was put in place in 2006 by the St Andrews agreement. We have only just seen that draft anti-poverty strategy published, so we are aware of the limitations of statutory duties for this. We think it focuses minds. There also has to be political leadership and the mechanisms to join up. We heard at your evidence session in May the importance of that under the previous Labour Government, the importance of those mechanisms to join up the different Government Departments and the devolved Governments with the UK Government. All three are needed, but one of the key things would be statutory targets, yes.

Rocio Cifuentes: I agree with what my colleagues have said. The UNCRC is partly enshrined in Wales and there is a duty on Welsh Government Ministers to consider children's rights in all their decision making, but there are currently no legally binding measures around child poverty. As has been said, that would focus minds, focus effort and ensure that consideration and accountability is involved in reporting back on progress and where we have got to with those targets. I think that is a really important part of making sure that we give this our best effort and do everything we can to change the experiences of children that we hear about so often in our work. If a legally binding measure is something that the UK Government could take, I think it should.

Q48 Manuela Perteghella: I want to talk a little bit about the process of



developing a child poverty strategy or, in the case of Northern Ireland, an anti-poverty strategy. You already talked about aspects of this process. Rocio, you talked about the importance of lived experience and getting those voices into the strategy. Nicola, you talked about alignment with UK Government policies but also with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Alex, you talked about the fact that you would have wanted to see more focus on children as well in the anti-poverty strategy. I want you to tell us your views on how the UK Child Poverty Taskforce is developing its child poverty strategy and if there is anything missing from its approach from your experience, but also what involvement the devolved nations had in the development of the UK Child Poverty Taskforce strategy.

Alex Tennant: It is a difficult one to answer really, isn't it? Certainly, we have not yet had an engagement or the commissioners have not yet had an engagement with the taskforce. A meeting has been arranged a number of times and had to be cancelled because the plan was it should be once the long list of actions had been developed so that the commissioners could provide advice on it. There was a meeting arranged for yesterday and that had to be cancelled because of the ministerial reshuffle. There has been quite limited engagement with civic society as well. I think there have been visits to the devolved areas but we are not aware of a great deal of engagement in the devolved areas.

Rocio Cifuentes: Similarly, yes, cancelled meetings and very limited and sometimes seemingly very last minute visits to Wales is how it has felt. I think that could certainly be strengthened.

Nicola Killean: I would say a similar experience. However, again, because Scotland is in a place where it has clear targets and measures, I think there are some very clear calls from Scotland, certainly from civil society and some that we put into our report that we pulled together for the taskforce as well, around what could be possible. We are now waiting to see the response to that.

Q49 **Manuela Perteghella:** What would you like to see in this strategy?

Nicola Killean: We have touched on some of it: the changes to social security levers; the removal of the two-child limit; the removal of the benefit cap; also consideration around no recourse to public funds for families that are living in poverty there; co-ordination with good understanding of the fact that both Governments hold different opportunities to maximise this; and an absolute coming together and using maximum available resources and clear communication on what is expected by whom and by when and sharing the accountability for monitoring those.

Rocio Cifuentes: I won't repeat what Nicola said; I agree with every point she has made. I will add that it really needs to be grounded in the children's rights approach. The UNCRC concluding observations said



clearly that Governments or state parties need to strengthen measures and do everything they can to address child poverty.

Q50 **Manuela Perteghella:** How can the taskforce ensure that children's voices are meaningfully represented in the strategy?

Rocio Cifuentes: We stand ready to support that, but the drive needs to come from the people implementing that strategy. We very much hope that opportunities are created to ensure that those with lived experience of child poverty, children who are living in poverty and their families, feed into the strategy and that those opportunities are systematic, not scattergun or ad hoc, and that those engagement opportunities are ongoing so that those children can also have opportunities for feedback on the progress and are part of the conversation for the longer term.

Nicola Killean: Again, I echo what Rocio said, but on a very practical level—I probably should have said this earlier—this should be one of the measures, systematically gathering the feedback of children and young people and using that as a monitoring impact measure long term. It also makes me think about the importance of the third sector and the opportunity to look at secure, long-term funding for the third sector. They are often the organisations that are working and supporting children and young people who are experiencing poverty. Having a structural approach with them as partners embedded into the plan to secure that feedback long term and resourcing that would be impactful.

Alex Tennant: I will just point out that the Children's Commissioner for England has produced a report and has engaged with children and young people to feed into the UK child poverty strategy.

Q51 **Darren Paffey:** Good morning to the panel. I think it goes without saying that we talk about strategies, we talk about targets, but what we are after is not just moving money around, it is making a material difference so that children's life chances are better. Could we dig into a bit more detail on what we know works? What has proven to be the most effective policy interventions that you can share from your experience in the devolved nations?

Alex Tennant: We have to start with cash transfers. The best way of lifting families out of poverty is to provide more resource. We have talked and we will keep on talking about the two-child limit and the impact. I think it is striking that three out of four children in poverty are in working households, so work is not paying for those families and we need to look at that. How can we target some of those working families with benefits with additional cash transfers to lift children out of poverty? There is also the social security system in general, looking at how to make changes there towards a more compassionate social security system. The Scottish Government have set a goal to become a more compassionate social security system.

Darren Paffey: Sorry, are you saying that those are policy interventions



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that you have made in this case in Northern Ireland that are not yet there in the UK?

Alex Tennant: No, these are the calls.

Darren Paffey: Yes. I was really after what is most effective.

Alex Tennant: I think we will need to pass over to Scotland then.

Nicola Killean: Picking up where Alex started, getting money to families and ensuring that they have enough to be able to live lives with dignity. From a Scottish perspective, the Scottish child payment is the strongest evidence about the impact that it has had and the fact that Scotland's rates are lower than they would have been if that had not been in place. I certainly welcome as well the drive towards whole family support. I touched on it earlier, but looking at services that are taking a child rights and human rights base and looking at what additional supports are required to be around the family. If you have lived in poverty for a very long time, you can have lost your confidence. The impact on you on just a human perspective—there are additional supports that need to be around families to understand what the complications are with transport, self-esteem and how people can be supported well to enable them to maximise the opportunity.

Fundamentally, we need to ensure that people have enough money to live and cover all those basic needs. I think that the Scottish child payment has the most evidence at the moment of an investment from Scottish Government and a policy intent.

Rocio Cifuentes: We do not have very clear evidence of what the most effective interventions are in Wales, partly because of that lack of clear measures within the child poverty strategy. We do know that during the pandemic, for example, with the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, child poverty levels improved in Wales and that was widely thought to be related to the £20 uplift in Universal Credit. Additionally, there was direct cash payments made to families to cover the cost of school meals during school holidays during the pandemic and for a time after that period, which was shown, from all the evidence that I have collected in talking to families and children, directly to make a huge difference. The ending of that measure was widely criticised.

The provision of free school meals, as has been mentioned, to primary schools in Wales will not necessarily impact on that relative income poverty measure, but it will feed children and stop their tummies from rumbling and enable them to concentrate and enjoy their school day. Equally, the transport costs are a huge barrier and are making the experience of families and children far worse. I have significant evidence of how that impacts children. I carried out a national survey in Wales in 2022 where 8,500 children responded. How much they were worried about the ability of their families to meet basic needs was striking. I had 45% of seven to 11-year-olds telling me that they were worried about



having enough to eat and 50% of 12 to 18-year-olds who were worried that their families did not have enough money to meet their basic needs. The correlation with children and young people's mental health cannot be ignored, and there is a lot of evidence that I have in Wales that I could share with the Committee on that.

Q52 Steve Darling: Thank you so much for coming along today to share your experiences. On 9 July, Children's Commissioners across the United Kingdom came together with some statements around child poverty and how it could be tackled. Two urgent steps that were identified were ending the two-child limit as well as increasing benefits with inflation for those with children. Can you put some more flesh on the bone about the impacts of that? I understand the clarion call that goes out there, but are you able to evidence what that impact would be? I suspect from Scotland, with the changes that have been made around the benefit systems there, that there may be some useful evidence, particularly if I come to you initially. Manuela had some useful questioning around hearing the voice of the child. I would be grateful if you could just expand a little further and talk about how it could be baked into the child poverty strategy even further. Any further reflections on that would be helpful.

Rocio Cifuentes: I can start with some specific evidence around the potential impact of removing the two-child limit. I have mentioned already that in Wales we know that 65,000 children are directly affected by the two-child limit, which is 11% of all children who live in Wales. As some further data or stats for you, in one of the constituencies in Wales, Cardiff East, which has the highest percentage of children impacted by the two-child limit, 17% of children are directly impacted, so that is one in five children. If the two-child limit were to be removed, it is calculated that Cardiff East, that constituency alone, could benefit by £4.5 million annually. I can share more with the Committee on that.

Nicola Killean: I mentioned it briefly earlier, but it is worth reiterating that there has been some modelling taking place in Scotland that says if the two-child limit was removed, 20,000 children would be lifted out of poverty. You will also likely be aware that the Scottish Government are at the moment proposing to mitigate some of the impacts of that. Not only does it lift those children out of poverty, it allows for resource to be directed into some of the other areas that we know need to happen in Scotland. So there is a win-win and it has to happen, in my opinion.

Alex Tennant: I think the evidence is there, and I think you have heard it before, from the IFS study that found that there would be a four percentage point decrease in child poverty across the UK if the two-child limit was removed. I think that equates to 550,000 children across the UK. This is not an opinion; this is very clearly in evidence.

On the child benefits and increasing the child benefits as well, I wanted to touch back on the inquiry that the Committee for Work and Pensions did back in 2022, I think, which looked at child poverty in relation to children with no recourse to public funds. I know that there was talk then about



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making sure that all British children should be eligible for child benefit. There were a lot of recommendations in there and there was recognition that Government at that time would probably not be willing to get rid of the no recourse to public funds condition on children. We would urge the Committee to look at that report again and look at those recommendations. We believe that the condition of no recourse to public funds for children should be lifted.

Q53 Caroline Voaden: There is clearly some frustration on behalf of the devolved nations that you are tied into the two-child benefit cap because of the relationship with the UK Government, but maybe I could just ask you what you think the lives of poor children would look like. How would their lives be different if every Government Department, from Education to Housing to Transport, was mandated to look at their policy and decision making through the lens of lifting children out of poverty?

Nicola Killean: I will finish where I started. Right now we have children who are hungry, who are cold, who cannot engage in their education. We have to believe that it is possible for that not to exist in Scotland and across the UK. We have to have children whose tummies are full, who are warm and cosy, who are enabled to have social experiences and are not socially isolated. What gives me belief in that is the fact that you have levers that have not been used yet. In the UK Government and the Scottish Government there is more that can be done to drive those forward.

Rocio Cifuentes: The 45% of children who are young children and the 50% of older children that I mentioned earlier would no longer be regularly worried about their family's ability to meet their basic needs.

Alex Tennant: One of the challenges of talking with children in poverty about poverty is the stigma associated with it. What if our conversations, instead of being focused on pity and charity for poverty, were focused on the value that we are placing on these children? What if they felt invested in and prioritised by Government and by all the professionals and all those adults working with them? How transformative would that be for them?

Rocio Cifuentes: I will add that we really need to consider the long-term impact of childhood poverty. There are lifelong implications that ultimately will cost the public purse far more in the long term. We really need to consider the costs of not acting and what those children's lives will look like if we do act and how much better they could be.

Caroline Voaden: It needs to be seen as an investment.

Rocio Cifuentes: Absolutely.

Q54 Mrs Brackenridge: In your previous responses you have referenced the rights of the child, but as we come to the final question of this session, I would like to give you an opportunity to add anything in particular that



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you think is important and critical when we further consider the UNCRC. You have all called for the Governments to take a child's rights-based approach to tackling child poverty. What should this actually look like that it does not at this time? I will open that up to Alex.

Alex Tennant: Rocio has a lot to say on this because Rocio has produced a report specifically on this. I will come back to the two articles in the UNCRC that particularly relate to children's rights in relation to poverty. Article 27 talks about the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. It places primary responsibility on parents to deliver for children, but it does place a duty on the state to work with parents. It is very much about Government coming alongside children and alongside their parents to support them.

Article 26 relates to children's rights to social security. It says that every child has the right to benefit from social security, and we are coming back to the point we have come back to a number of times: the two-child limit is discriminatory, discriminating against children where they have two older siblings. The UNCRC and those two articles in particular talk about working with parents, providing the support. Primarily, it is the parents' duty to deliver for children, but it is the state that needs to come around and support parents to do that. On social security, every child has a right. It is not because of their parents and what their parents do or their place in the family or anything. Every child has a right to social security.

Q55 **Mrs Brackenridge:** One thing that I would add, Alex, is you have made reference to the biggest impact being seen by cash transfer directly to parents. I would suggest your consideration about the importance of quick and equitable access to services and support. Is that something that you have given consideration to?

Alex Tennant: Absolutely. If I was doing a longer list, I would have got to that as well. On support for the costs particularly related to children—so free school meals, transport, school uniforms—there have been a number of different policy developments and across the different areas. It is access to services as well, certainly the supports that families who are particularly in persistent poverty need to lift themselves out of poverty. They may need access to many different services, so I agree entirely with that.

Nicola Killean: From our perspective, a children's rights-based approach recognises that the state has multiple roles for children. It has a role to provide, it has a role to protect when they need that, but also to participate fully in life. How that can impact on a UK Government poverty strategy is that it enables it to think holistically about how you enable children to participate and when you need to protect them. It makes you think about children's rights to have a safe, warm house, to have mental and physical health supports, to the education they need and the additional supports that need to be built into that and, importantly, the



opportunities that children are entitled to and they need to have as they grow to be able to develop. As children develop different ages, stages, agency, they need to have a right to access extracurricular opportunities and culture. All that is set out in a children's rights-based approach.

The beauty of this is that it comes with a framework to allow and help you to understand that and look at the strategy as well. If you look at a children's rights impact and wellbeing assessment on any proposals, it allows you at the outset to consider groups of young people—I have already mentioned older young people—and how they have the supports that they need, but you can identify early through the children's rights and wellbeing impact framework to also see if things need to be designed differently to enable every child to have all their rights. If it comes down to financial allocation, you can also take a children's rights budgeting approach to enable that.

Rocio Cifuentes: On the work that Alex references, my office has produced over a number of years a series of guides entitled "The Right Way", which is all about helping public bodies understand how to implement a children's rights approach, so exactly your question. We have recently produced a specific guide called "The Right Way to Tackling Poverty". "The Right Way" is an approach based on five human rights principles, which take you through a process of working out what you need to think about if you want to implement a children's rights approach.

Very briefly, those five principles are: embedding children's rights in the core of everything you do; the principle of equality and non-discrimination, so thinking about how your strategy in this case would impact on different groups of children and young people with different protected characteristics; the principle of empowering children and young people, so what measures are contained within the strategy to help the users or recipients of that strategy to understand and utilise that approach; the principle of participation, which we have spoken about, how to make sure that children and young people in this case are enabled to participate meaningfully in the development and scrutiny of any piece of work; and the fifth principle is accountability, how a proposed strategy enables that effective accountability to take place. We have already shared this document with the UK taskforce and are very happy to share it with this Committee, too.

Chair (Debbie Abrahams): The Chair of the Education Select Committee would like to put a brief question to you, but could you be succinct in your answers? Thank you.

- Q56 **Helen Hayes:** We have heard a lot and it has been very interesting to hear from you all this morning. We have heard quite a lot about the frustrations about the relationship of devolved Administrations with central Government, some of the policies of central Government that affect the devolved Administrations, and some of the difficulties of



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delivering. Rocio, you mentioned that we have not shifted the dial on child poverty in Wales for 30 years, so that is an indication that there is no single measure that can be implemented that is a panacea for this issue.

I want to turn very briefly at the end of this session to what good looks like, a good strategy for the long-term alleviation of poverty that gets beyond the need to top up the income of many families across the country, to take them just over a threshold, and really gets to a situation where children across the nations and regions of this country are thriving and we are in a much better situation. Could you briefly focus on: are there structural aspects of the devolution arrangements that you have that are barriers to that? What does a long-term strategy look like? I think there is a lot of sympathy in this room for the measures to alleviate the child poverty that we have now, but we want to have bigger ambitions than that and that is what I have not really heard from you this morning.

Rocio Cifuentes: I suggest that “The Right Way”, the children’s rights approach that I have just outlined, would be a very good framework for ensuring that a strategy is effective and addresses all the nuances and details that it needs to specifically. Thinking about the equality and non-discrimination principles, that there is sufficient detail within a strategy to respond to the specific needs of those from different protected characteristics and there is a clear way of measuring and holding to account on the progress of that strategy. I suggest that the framework that I have outlined would be a good way of enabling a strategy to be an effective document that could serve as a vehicle for meaningful progress on this important topic.

Nicola Killean: I agree with Rocio. As I touched on earlier, a children’s rights approach to this allows for a strategy to look at what the state can provide to lift children out of poverty and their entitlements and rights within that. When we touched on participation earlier, we talked primarily about how children and young people can participate in creating solutions and monitoring the strategy, but how can the strategy enable children to fully participate in their life within their communities and within society? That is about looking across education, third sector, social engagement, making sure they are not socially isolated, as well as looking at what their fundamental needs are that have to be addressed. A good strategy, in my view, would look across all those and have clear targets and measures and an implementation plan aligned to that.

Alex Tennant: We would like to see eradication being the target or the focus of a child poverty strategy. The UNICEF wealthy nations report that was published in 2023, “Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth”, ranked the UK 37th out of 39 countries in the levels of child poverty and the progress made between 2014 and 2021, which is bad news obviously. The good news is that a number of countries had child poverty rates half of what we have in the UK. It is possible, it just requires persistence and determination, and resources being allocated to this. One of the things



that we will need to see is constant tweaking, constant review and change and new ideas, and if things are not working, that they are changed and adapted. We have talked about the role of civic society and children and independent voices in scrutinising and advising as the strategy is delivered.

Chair (Debbie Abrahams): Thank you so much. This has been a very useful session. I am going to bring it to an end and we will have a brief break while we switch panels.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Stephen Sinclair and Steffan Evans.

Q57 **Chair (Helen Hayes):** We are back broadcasting from this joint session of the Education Select Committee and the Work and Pensions Select Committee looking at child poverty. I am very glad to welcome our second panel of witnesses: Professor Stephen Sinclair, who is the Chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission in Scotland, and Steffan Evans, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Bevan Foundation. I should say that we were due to be joined by a representative from Barnardo's, Trása Canavan, who is Chair of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Group in Northern Ireland, who unfortunately has had to pull out of the session due to ill health. We wish her all the very best. We will just be considering issues related to Scotland and to Wales in the second panel. I will ask our witnesses to introduce themselves to us very briefly with any opening remarks that they would like to make, and then we will go into questions.

Professor Sinclair: Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about the UK Government's child poverty strategy and plans. I do not have any general opening remarks. I listened with great interest to the previous session and read the notes of the session that was held in May. I will try not to repeat too many of the points that have been raised by previous witnesses, but there is quite a lot to share from the Scottish experience that could inform the UK strategy.

Steffan Evans: Good morning. Much like Stephen, I am happy to get into the substance of the questions. This is an area of particular interest to us, not just because of the work around the child poverty strategy at the UK level but the Welsh Government's own child poverty strategy is due for renewal very shortly. It is an opportune moment to have a bit of reflection and to consider what steps we should take next.

Q58 **Chair (Helen Hayes):** We are having some issues with the volume level in the room here in Parliament. We can hear you but only just. We are trying to see if there is a technical fix for that, but could I ask in the meantime that you really try to speak up because there are some members of the Committee who are struggling to hear what is being said. My apologies for that. It is a problem at our end, unfortunately.

I will begin our questioning. Could you describe the experience of children



in poverty in your respective devolved nations? Are there any unique circumstances that contribute to the experience of child poverty in Scotland and then respectively in Wales as well? I will start again with Stephen Sinclair.

Professor Sinclair: I know that the previous witnesses referred to the particular challenges faced by families in rural areas. These are especially acute in remote and sparsely populated parts of Scotland. There are particular issues about the nature of the labour market in rural areas. The jobs are often seasonal, short term, insecure, low paid. There are considerable infrastructure challenges in access to services and transport. There are quite significant higher costs in fuel for those in rural areas. Those are distinctive challenges that we face in Scotland.

There are particularly acute challenges that are not unique to Scotland in some of our larger urban areas. We have quite high levels of concentrated poverty in some of the larger cities of Scotland, in Glasgow and Dundee. Layered on top of those, we have quite a distinctive feature of health inequalities, high levels of infant mortality, morbidity and early death, which are very troubling. Those are some of the distinctive features that drive poverty in Scotland.

The other areas that are quite broadly shared with other parts of the UK are employment, social security and the cost of living, and I am sure we will talk about each of those in further detail.

Steffan Evans: I second that. The point around rurality obviously applies for many parts of Wales and the issue is often overlooked in those areas as well because the numbers of children may be smaller but the effects are not less than pronounced. You also have issues around the labour market in some parts of Wales, in particular the south Wales valleys where there is still an issue of people being able to access work and the impact that is having on child poverty. As Stephen said, we have issues around living costs and house prices in places like Cardiff, where the employment rate is doing a bit better but the number of children in poverty is very high. That often links to maybe some increased living costs that people face. The underlying drivers are the same across Wales, but the way that they manifest themselves differs depending on where in the country you are.

Q59 **Johanna Baxter:** Thank you to you both for joining us this morning. I will ask a similar question to one that I asked the previous panel. What opportunities and challenges do the devolved settlements for Scotland and Wales pose for reducing child poverty?

Professor Sinclair: Again, I heard the testimony of the previous witnesses so I will try not to repeat too much of that. The two principal challenges with the current reserved and devolved power settlement relate to taxation and revenue-raising limitations that the Scottish Government face and, in particular, employment regulation. There is a great opportunity with the Employment Rights Bill, which is a UK



reserved matter. We have a labour market across the UK at the moment that does not help families who are doing the right thing from sustaining a livelihood out of poverty. We don't have a labour market that is compatible with current family and care responsibilities. There are limited powers within the gift of the Scottish Government to address that.

Seriously, though, far more important than powers are policies. It is not so much what can be done, but the choices that have been made. I know that these Committees will be fed up hearing about the two-child limit, but that is a choice. There is a limited amount that the Scottish Government can do. They are going to mitigate that. They are going to commit £155 million in the course of the year to address that. That is just one significant egregious measure that has been chosen by UK Governments, but we also have a Universal Credit system that generates poverty by the five-week wait, by conditionality and sanctions. We have a benefit cut and an under-occupation penalty. The Scottish Government have limited capacity to address and mitigate that but, as I say, it is not the powers, it is the choices that have been made. The UK Government could choose otherwise and it would help greatly across the UK if they did so.

Steffan Evans: To build on that, we have seen the Welsh Government take positive steps with things like universal free school meals in primary school. The discretionary assistance fund has provided important support for families in crisis; the EMA as well, the increase in the cash value of that support for young adults from low-income backgrounds, 16 to 18-year-olds, to stay in education. All those are positive steps but, as Stephen said, while powers over the social security system and over the labour market are reserved at Westminster, in a way it does not matter what the Welsh Government do, they will not eradicate poverty in Wales if the UK Government do not take those measures that Stephen has touched on around the social security system and the labour market.

That is not a reason for the Welsh Government not to do more. It can take steps to alleviate and to mitigate the effects of those changes and that is something that we are holding them to account on, but unless we see those two things happening at the same time, any ambition of the Welsh Government in this space will be curtailed by the devolution settlement and the choices being made through that.

Q60 **Johanna Baxter:** As a supplementary, I was stopped by the phrase that you used, Stephen, that it is not about the powers but the choices. I think that would resonate with people of all parties around the table. The UK Government have some levers; the Scottish Government have other levers; the Welsh Assembly have other levers. How do we get over the blame game here and get everybody pulling the correct levers at the correct time with a focus on children? To be honest, what it sounds like sometimes is one Government saying, "It's not the Scottish Government's fault, it's all the UK Government's fault" and vice versa. Surely everybody should be putting their shoulder to the wheel and going



in the same direction. I am interested to hear what you think can be done to get over that and make sure everybody is pulling in the right direction.

Professor Sinclair: That takes an element of political will as well. We can hope that there will be discussion and agreement on what is required to be done. If there is good will, co-ordination comes from a shared understanding of the causes of poverty and how best to address them. I think there is agreement that the three principal factors that are at the centre of the Scottish Government's success with child poverty strategies are the key ones that lead to deprivation. It is increasing income from employment, reducing the costs of living and increasing income from social security. We can come up with diagnoses addressing each of these. The Poverty and Inequality Commission and a great many other organisations offer advice and commentary on how to tackle some of these issues.

The key thing to ensure that reserved and devolved powers co-ordinate effectively is to ensure that we genuinely have a strategy that is based on a diagnosis of what we understand to be the factors and not just a list of things that are being done or have been done. That is not a strategy; that is just a compilation of activities that a Government could point to as justification for addressing this issue. A strategy requires a cohesive, integrated analysis and then a set of steps that address the known causes of poverty with plausible levers. A phrase that was used in the previous Scottish Government strategy is about a line of sight. What is the rationale? What is the justification? What is the theory of change that if we do this particular act it will have these particular consequences? Does that stand up to scrutiny? Crucially, do we have the indicators that we are on target and going to achieve that? That approach can bring the different Governments together with political will.

Steffan Evans: I have a couple of things on that as well. One is that there needs to be a culture shift in further devolution and the willingness to share information so that we know things like whether DWP is sharing all the data that it holds that would help the Welsh Government or Welsh local authorities to process benefit payments that are within their gift. Is that happening as often as it should? I am sure there are examples in other Departments where improvements like that could be made.

I also think that there is an element about the role of Committees and the third sector in holding the relative Governments to account. The reality is that in politics Governments look to blame the other tiers of government for why things might not be happening. In some cases there will be a reason for that, there will be some justification, but we can still ask the question, "That may be so, but are you doing everything you can at the same time?" and continue to ask those questions and to make those points, rather than maybe buying into the narrative that the other Government are letting us down all the time. Whichever way that works, I think it is something that is important that all of us try to do.



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helping to reduce child poverty in each nation? To you, Steffan, first.

Steffan Evans: We have done a bit of work looking at the approach taken in Wales. We think there have been two, maybe three, flaws with the approach we have taken. One has been around targets. That is something that we might come back to. The target that the Welsh Government set themselves originally was to end child poverty. Given the issues we have already touched on, that was always likely to be a real challenge given the powers that they had. There were also no interim targets that you could measure in between. I think that has been a failure and has led possibly to the fact that we do not have any targets now and I think that needs to be revisited.

Another failure, in the sense of things that we could be doing better, is that we tended to take a one-size-fits-all approach to our child poverty strategy. Over half of the children living in poverty in Wales live in a family with a child under the age of four and that is because families in those circumstances face particular pressures, for instance around maternity pay, increased costs and childcare. Those challenges are very different to the challenges faced by parents with children in secondary schools or parents of disabled children. I do not think the strategies that have been put in place in Wales to date have taken enough of a nuanced approach to looking at the different needs of those children differently. That is a lesson for the Welsh Government going forward, but also for UK Government and their strategy.

Touching on things that Stephen Sinclair has mentioned, these strategies have tended to fall mid-Parliament when they have been up for renewal and when they have been done. A lot of the budgeting decisions have been taken around that point. That lends itself to accumulating a list of things that have already been committed to financially and could have put in a narrative around that rather than necessarily thinking about if we are trying to develop a strategy for the longer term, these are the projects we would put money into, these are the things we would do. There is something there about trying to move away from that list approach to something a bit more strategic. That is another area where there is room for improvement.

Professor Sinclair: The Scottish Parliament Social Justice Committee investigated the Child Poverty Act in Scotland last year and concluded that having a legally binding act and a strategy was important and decisive. This was also a sentiment shared by quite a number of the stakeholders who had provided evidence and testimony to that. The reasons are that it provides a sustained, long-term focus. The 2017 Act has targets for 2030. They were unanimously supported in the Scottish Parliament so all parties are morally bound to do what they can to contribute to it, to hold the Scottish Government to account, to keep child poverty at the top of the agenda and to suggest policies which may be more effective.

The strategy as a published document, which is updated every three years, also increases accountability and scrutiny. That has the impact of



improving data and evidence. For targets, we need to have better intelligence at the national level and at the local authority level, including quite detailed local data on, for example, single parents and black and minority ethnic communities. All of these measures ensure that there is an accountability and if there is a failure to meet the targets, as there was in Scotland this year in fact, we can try to diagnose the causes of that failure and propose solutions. I believe having a written strategy and cross-party and civil society commitment is a very important contribution.

Q62 Manuela Perteghella: Thank you. You have already touched on my next question: what role should targets and measures play in child poverty strategies? Steffan, you talk about being more strategic and rather than having a list of things, but what role should they play and what should we measure as well?

Steffan Evans: Yes, I think targets have a role. The Children's Commissioner touched on that in her session just now as well. Absolutely, we think targets have a role.

I think there is possibly a space to think differently within a Welsh context. Given the discussion we have just had about levels of power and so on, if a UK Government does not take action on the two-child limit, does not take action on some of those issues around Universal Credit, the powers that the Welsh Government have to make a real difference to the relative poverty measure will be a challenge. It will not make a huge dent in the way that they might want to.

What it can make a difference in, though, is the depth of poverty experienced by children. Therefore, at the Bevan Foundation we think that there is potential to look again at a new Welsh strategy and when we come to doing that, to have a target that looks at depth as well. That would be more within the gift of Welsh Government and we could more accurately measure our actions in the differences that it is creating.

That is something to consider at UK level as well. You would want to keep the relative poverty measure as a target, but is there something around depth to consider the worst impact of child poverty and to make sure that those children are benefiting, that the strategy does not just take the easy pickings, those children who are the closest to the margin of poverty, taking those out to make sure that the action gets to grips with those who are facing the greatest challenges around poverty as well.

Professor Sinclair: Briefly, targets are vital and important. I think it is plausible to say that we would not have the Scottish child payment were it not for the targets and the Scottish child payment has been the single biggest contribution to addressing child poverty in Scotland. Its effect has been something like a four percentage point impact on child poverty in itself. It was introduced because I think there was an awareness that it was very unlikely that we would get close to the interim targets were such a measure not taken. In Scotland, we did not meet the interim targets that were reported on in May. That will require us to redouble our efforts. There is agreement that we need several more policies, two or



three policies of the scale of impact of the Scottish child payment. Those are the sorts of discussions that are on the agenda because we have targets that we did not deliver on.

One final qualification about targets—I am sure these Committees are very aware of this—is that it can be possible to be trapped rather narrowly by targets. Where we have income-based targets, four of them, which we adapted from the UK Act in 2010, it is a primary but not exclusive focus when the Poverty and Inequality Commission offers advice. As Steffan said, we need to look at the depth of poverty, those who are particularly vulnerable. It will not make a huge impact on the targets to look at children and families with no recourse to public funds, for example, but that is no reason not to give consideration to such families because they are very vulnerable to quite extreme deprivations. Targets need to be supplemented by a wider consideration of those who are not captured by those targets.

Q63 Caroline Voaden: To what extent will the effectiveness of a UK-wide child poverty strategy be affected by the delivery of devolved policy areas such as health, education and housing? I will go to Steffan first.

Steffan Evans: This is part of the million dollar question really in what are we expecting in the UK Government strategy. If the strategy includes stuff around the social security system and the employment market, you can see how that will have a direct impact in Wales, regardless. If for budgetary or political reasons the strategy morphs more into looking at stuff around the education system or the health system, what on the face of it is a UK strategy, naturally becomes an England strategy in practice. That is a little bit of the unknown.

It is crucial that the strategy considers which bits within it are an England-only approach, in which case we can hold the Welsh Government to account for the bits within their purview of having the responsibility for, and which would be foreseen as having an England or Wales or a UK approach. A strategy setting that out very clearly will be vital to measure the impact of some of the delivery issues that you asked about.

Professor Sinclair: Referring to my previous answer, if we agree on what the causes of poverty are, if we have a shared diagnosis, I do not see that the division of reserved and devolved powers is intrinsically a problem. It would be a question of finding the appropriate level or instrument of UK or Scottish and devolved Governments to deliver those mechanisms and policies.

One of the intended or hoped for benefits of devolution going back 25 years is that we would have policy laboratories in which we could learn from effective practice in each other's nations. One of the reasons that Scotland has a Children and Young Persons Commissioner is because Wales had one first and the benefits of that were demonstrated. I am sure there were political considerations as well but the institutions of government can work effectively together if there is a shared political will and a shared understanding of the principal causes and the most effective



levers. These are social security, jobs and household costs—things such as a social tariff for fuel costs, consideration about the distribution of resources when it comes to transport infrastructure, addressing the fares and fees that young people in particular face in accessing jobs. Those sorts of diagnoses can be shared across parties and between Governments. I do not anticipate intrinsically that the division of powers would be an obstacle.

Q64 Caroline Voaden: I have another quick question for Steffan. The Bevan Foundation has repeatedly made the case for a Welsh benefits system to streamline the provision of Welsh Government benefits. Could you tell us what impact you think that such an approach might have on child poverty, specifically in Wales?

Steffan Evans: That work grew out of a sense of frustration, going back to one of the first questions we had around the two levels of government talking about each other. We heard a lot from the Welsh Government talking about the UK benefits system but at the same time, things such as free school meals, council tax reduction schemes, schools essential grants are essentially benefits. They are means tested support that local authorities or Welsh Government provide to people in Wales. This is not about devolving more power; it is about making more effective use of the tools the Government already have.

A consequence of the devolution settlement is because benefits have not been devolved per se, these were all viewed as independent policies, independent schemes, different from each other, which meant it became very complicated for people to have access to each of these schemes. By pulling them together into a Welsh benefits system, we would be able to streamline that process, make it much easier for people to get the benefits or access the Welsh schemes that they are entitled to. We think that can make a big difference, certainly in reducing the depth of poverty, making sure that children get all the entitlements that they are entitled to.

The schools essential grant, for example, is a grant that gives children and parents support to buy school uniforms at the start of term. Making sure that all children who get free school meals get that one automatically is a no-brainer in our mind in making sure that the take-up of those schemes is as high as possible. There is good work going on in the Welsh Government at the moment to try to make that happen, working with local authority partners. It is an area where working between the Governments, making sure that DWP gives the data that they might need to streamline the system even further, would further enhance the benefits we think that could have for children living in poverty.

Q65 Dr Johnson: I am very interested in what you are saying. You are talking about eliminating poverty, and we certainly want all children to thrive. I think everybody of all parties wants that, but to eliminate something, you have to define what it is. As I have listened to you talking about the policies, you have switched between various different



definitions of what you want to achieve. The clearest things seem to be an absolute definition of poverty where you look at the money or the circumstances that people have and define them, but they change over time with rising living standards and inflation and we have seen them change over the generations. Relative poverty can be effectively solved by making the middle-income and high-middle-income groups poorer without helping any poorer children at all. What do you think is the most important thing to look at, to define, in achieving a reduction in children who are poor or feel poor relative to their peers? What would you focus on? What would your target ultimately be?

Professor Sinclair: I will take that question first, if that is okay. I know that previous witnesses referred to the UK Act of 2010, which had four measures of poverty. The headline was the relative poverty measure. The Scottish Act of 2017 took those on and committed to them as well. You are right, there can be certain anomalies in a relative measure but it is really just a way of trying to ensure that we have inclusion, that those who are of a lower income can have the opportunity to participate in society, which really does, in large measure, come down to resources. If we hang all our commitments, energy and focus entirely and exclusively on that target, I agree that it would in large measure come down to resources. If we hang all our commitments, energy and focus entirely and exclusively on that target, I agree that it would be mistaken.

I think that it is important to have a range of targets. The so-called absolute one is a fixed point measure, but the other two measures that are in the 2017 Act and were in the 2010 Act, are combined low income and material deprivation. We look at the essentials that families with children need to ensure that they have the basics necessary for them to have lives of dignity and to be treated as equal citizens. We also have the persistence and continuation of poverty.

The relative figure gets the most attention. and I think rightly so. It has certain advantages of clarity, of being internationally respected, of being able to show trends over time. However, the Poverty & Equality Commission and most of the commentators and interest groups who look at child poverty are aware of its limitations and the value of supplementing it with wider understanding of the circumstances that children and families face. Also, although we can look at fixed points in income, as previous witnesses have said, it really is with an interest to looking at the long-term wellbeing of children and families. If we address child poverty now, we help people over the course of their lifetimes.

That is why it is important to regard it as an investment. We would save the estimated £29 billion a year that Donald Hirsch and his colleagues at Loughborough University estimate to be the costs of poverty. While I share caution about focusing on relative child poverty, I think we should see its value, particularly when it is supplemented by a richer understanding.

Steffan Evans: I agree with Stephen Sinclair. I think we touched on deep poverty as well and the role of that as a target. Deep poverty is



50% of the relative medium income. Very deep poverty is a 40% measure and we think that has potential to be brought more to fore. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's recent publication, "Poverty in Wales", draws out quite starkly that while the child poverty rate and the poverty rate in general have stagnated for 25-plus years, the depth of poverty has worsened quite a bit. Over the last decade or so, we have seen that people who were already poor have become poorer. That is easy to miss when you are looking at only the relative measure. That is where looking at some of those depth issues and the material deprivation measure that Stephen touched on as well are important to bring into that conversation. Relative income does have that clarity. It looks at stuff more broadly. However, it also tends to allow you to miss some of the key trends that are happening if that is the only thing that you focus on.

Q66 Dr Johnson: Thank you. That is helpful. Is it possible to reduce relative poverty completely without causing a reduction in the benefit from work? I ask because people have said that they get trapped in poverty. Particularly if you give people a large amount in benefits, they find that they cannot work because if they go out to work, they will lose those benefits and they will be worse off. Therefore, you have trapped them in a situation where they cannot improve their life chances. If you work on the relative term, does it exacerbate that or do you think not?

Steffan Evans: I think the major problem with the UK social security system, as it currently is, is that it just does not give people enough for them to make ends meet. Changes to the social security system are predominantly what have driven the increase in the number of people living in poverty in Wales, things such as the two-child cap. The rate of poverty among families with three or more children has increased dramatically in Wales over the last decade and that is directly linked to that policy decision. The primary problem is the sufficiency of benefits, that they are not giving people enough.

There is, though, always a question about the interface with work and making sure that the taper-off is set at a level that allows people to have opportunities through work. It is clear from some of our work on child poverty that getting a second parent back into work is possibly the thing that would make the biggest difference to child poverty rates. In a household where one parent works and one does not, if you get that second parent, usually the mother, back into work part-time, that could make a significant difference to child poverty. That is where policies in childcare become very important, because they give people the opportunity to take it up.

There are things beyond the social security system, but we need to make sure that those interfaces work. However, the primary driver of the deepening levels of poverty that we have seen is the lack of sufficiency within the benefit system rather than it creating a trap and keeping people on benefits.

Professor Sinclair: Can I add briefly to Steffan's point?



Chair (Helen Hayes): Briefly, if you can. Thanks.

Professor Sinclair: The relative child poverty line bears absolutely no resemblance to social security payments. Social security, as this Committee's previous investigation a year or so ago looked at, is just a historical accident. It is what the Government of the day can get away with, rather than any justification that relates to living standards or average incomes or the needs of families. There is no evidence of a disincentive effect from, for example, excessively generous welfare payments.

There are complications to the system, the tapers that Steffan pointed out, but the biggest inhibitor of people moving into jobs is concerns about security, not about disincentives. Jobs are insecure, they are precarious, there can be no guarantee. Even if you get a job, the work intensity is often quite low, you cannot get enough hours. Those are the things that are stopping people taking up jobs, as well as barriers such as childcare and transport. The benefits system is not a problem to getting people into work; it is a problem of keeping people in poverty, which is what it is currently doing.

Q67 **Chair (Helen Hayes):** Thank you very much. Briefly, I have a question for Stephen Sinclair. What impact does the organisation that you chair, the Poverty and Inequality Commission, have on the Scottish Government's efforts to reduce child poverty? Are there lessons from your organisation for how the UK Government should monitor the UK-wide child poverty strategy once it is published?

Professor Sinclair: At the risk of being immodest, I could say a great deal about the value of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, but I will leave that to others. I will refer again to the report from the Scottish Parliament Social Justice Committee and some of the other witnesses who spoke about the role of the Poverty and Inequality Commission.

Having an independent body that holds the Scottish Government to account, which reports to Parliament, in which there is an instituted parliamentary debate on our report, is all valuable. Other examples of this beyond the Poverty and Inequality Commission, which addresses your issue about lessons, include the very long-standing Social Security Advisory Committee. I spoke to a member of that committee many years ago. He argued that the very existence of that committee stopped certain things from happening in the UK Government because the committee might not acquiesce or might be critical. That sort of silent capacity is difficult to document, but I think it exists.

We did, of course, have a Poverty and Social Mobility Commission at UK level. I think it became, I am afraid, a rather toothless organisation, but in its early days it did have that advisory, scrutiny and accountability role, which I think is very important. The lessons there are that you need an organisation that has credibility and resources to comment on progress and offer advice.

Q68 **Mr Bedford:** I am picking up on a few points that Caroline Johnson made



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earlier about getting trapped in cycles of poverty. I do not approach this from a privileged position. I grew up in a single-parent family, I had three younger brothers, I know what it is like to live in poverty and I know what it was like on my estate to live in poverty. I get frustrated sometimes when I hear politicians or commissioners speak about poverty and how to get out of poverty from perhaps a more privileged and academic position. I want to know your views and what you believe Governments should be doing. I mean at a high level. I am conscious of the time. At a high level, maybe a list of two or three things that you think Governments should be doing to get to the root causes of child poverty.

Steffan Evans: Fundamentally, you have three drivers of work, so first making sure that parents can actually work. I touched on the childcare issue. Make sure that it is not a barrier that prevents people from taking forward work that they might want to do. Then you have an issue around the social security system, which we have discussed. You do need it. You need to make sure that the money is there to give people a starting place to be able to look for work, to make sure that they have enough money to make ends meet.

Then you have a point around costs. Improving housing affordability is an obvious thing, but there are also particular extra costs that those children will face. Childcare is an obvious one but we do not provide parents with a lot of support when a baby is born, for example. Maternity pay is a bit of a Cinderella service, and that puts people on the back foot right from the start. If you have had to borrow money to get the stuff together, to get the cot and all of that on the birth of your child, it all adds up to pressure. We need to be thinking about those extra costs that parents with children face, and how we can support them to meet those costs, either by facilitating them into work or by giving them a little bit of extra support. As we have heard from the other panel, that is an investment to save money down the line because it is easing the pressure faced by those children and their families.

Professor Sinclair: It is a very important and interesting question. I think we would have to debate and discuss our understanding of the causes of poverty. In my view, these are largely attributed to factors beyond individual control. There is the nature of our labour market, for example, which has very poor quality jobs, particularly entry level. We have a Universal Credit system that penalises people, makes people wait five weeks before they get their first entitlement, which puts them into debt. That is a poverty-inducing policy that could be addressed but it cannot be addressed by the individual. We could address all the things that are associated with very extreme poverty—drug misuse, what people used to call troubled families in a programme that was quite high profile.

Even if we address all those problems, we would still have poverty in Britain. Poverty is not caused by drunkenness or disreputable behaviour. It is caused by the nature of our economy and the fact that we do not have decent jobs. It is addressed by the fact that we do not have proper



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serious investment in childcare. Childcare is still largely considered to be an individual matter for families, which is ridiculous because we do not do that with education. Education is regarded as investment in human capital, a way of families earning for themselves, but childcare is not. We need to move in that direction where it is an essential part of social infrastructure and investment. Then you might get people being able to take opportunities, particularly if we had higher quality jobs.

Q69 Mr Bedford: I think you have touched on a few things that I was hoping to hear. In the previous panel, we had a lot of different ideas and views, and a lot of that was very much based on the kind of historic view of solving poverty, which was essentially to throw money at it in some form of benefit rather than looking at the root causes. Some of the things I was hoping would come out of the panel today was stuff like life skills, the impact of having a job—I think you have both mentioned having a job and breaking that cycle—financial education, discipline, all those things that perhaps you cannot actually put monetary values on but that help to break the cycle of poverty rather than just throwing money at a problem. I think one of the panel members earlier mentioned that in the last 30 years we have not really shifted the dial on this.

What I am trying to get at, the nub of this, is that Governments, the central Government, the devolved Governments, the civil service in actually addressing this problem are not working cohesively together on a joined-up approach, but rather doing the easiest thing, taking the easiest approach for the Government, to throw money at a problem, be it through a benefit of some kind. What are your comments on that?

Professor Sinclair: Can I come back on that briefly before Steffan, because I am aware we have only two minutes. I very strongly reject the idea that we throw money at this problem. Actually, the social security system, globally speaking in the UK, is not particularly generous nor expensive. I would much more regard it as investing in people, addressing their needs, a preventative upstream intervention, which stops much more egregious and serious problems in the long term. I also would very strongly suggest—and I know that these Committees have done this, so I commend them—listening to people with experience of poverty.

Poverty is very stress inducing. We may have what appear from the outside, from what you have described as a privileged and academic position, a view that some of the coping mechanisms are harmful, but unless you understand, as you no doubt personally do, the personal circumstances of the people and communities in these stressful circumstances, it is easy to misdiagnose and see the consequences of poverty as their causes.

We need to spend money to address problems now. If we do not, we just spend it in social security, mental health, criminal justice systems and on other much more serious problems. So it is not throwing money. It is spending money wisely to prevent much worse things from happening.



Steffan Evans: To add to that, we did some work last year on products called money management apps. So these are apps that fintech are developing that promise to allow people to save money and build up a financial resilience. I am sure you have seen some of these products on your banking app now, but if you spend £9.95 in a shop the app will put 5p away in a savings account for you as a way to build up your savings. What came through clearly in that was that people valued the ability to use some of the technologies to see the benefit of them, but the people who could really benefit from them are people right on the margins of poverty, people who had a job but it was low paid, had a little bit of money left after every month to use it.

There is stuff around that that we could be doing much more with to help people in that position, but a lot of people are living on a negative budget. That means that the money they have got coming in through the benefit system and so on is less than what is going out the door. It does not matter how much you teach people to manage money better, how much you come up with new technology, if the benefit system does not give you enough to meet your living costs, there is no way of making that add up.

There are opportunities to look at different things to help people but that comes back to the point I was saying earlier about looking at the depth of poverty and thinking about how the interventions we are developing help different people in that. Some of the stuff around financial lessons and so on would be great for people right on the cusp of a relative income measure but it is not really going to touch the sides for people in deep or very deep poverty. What will make a difference there is the stuff that Stephen touched on about the social security system.

Q70 **Jess Asato:** Could you talk about what effective partnership working with charities and other delivery partners to combat child poverty looks like? Are there any specific lessons that we can learn from the devolved regions?

Professor Sinclair: The Scottish community groups are essential in addressing child poverty and there are some very good examples of effective local practices, one of the advantages and benefits of having a statutory reporting duty between local authorities and health boards. Some of the groups that are so-called hard to reach or, as some other commentators point out, difficult and easy to ignore, can only really be reached by using trusted intermediary organisations. This is particularly the case with some younger single parents, with white minority ethnic communities.

If you want to have a big effect of an employability support programme, an active labour market programme, getting people into jobs, you need to understand their perspective and their circumstances. NGOs, charities and community groups are best placed to do that. One example—and there are many across the UK not just Scotland—is Gingerbread, which has a great and effective support mechanism targeted at the very



particular circumstances of younger single parents. It gives holistic support and there are no sanctions. It is about enabling, looking at people's capacities, looking at what they can do rather than what might be disabling conditions that prevent them from getting into sustainable work. Listening to experts by experience and listening to the groups that represent them is crucial to improve delivery of some of the mechanisms.

Steffan Evans: This is something that the Welsh Government has been really good at in developing its own child poverty strategy. It has provided funding for organisations to do work in their own communities to gather evidence about what people want to see and feed that back in directly. They have not just relied on the usual suspects, if you like, being in the room together discussing this stuff. They have gone out of their way to provide the stream of funding to enable that to happen.

A challenge we come across all the time is the co-ordination between the different services. There is a tendency sometimes that some parts of Wales—and I am sure this is the case across the UK—where lots of services score very highly in whatever model of poverty or deprivation you look at. That sometimes leads to duplication of services. There is no local authority in Wales where one in five children live in poverty. Poverty is a problem in all boards. It is just how significant the problem is differs and the risks sometimes that some communities miss out on having that support. Some of our rural communities, for example, never score particularly highly on some of those measures for any particular town or village and sometimes the third sector is not as established in those areas to provide those services. There is a co-ordination role there where there is scope for improvement and that goes across the board.

Professor Sinclair: All the charities and community groups emphasise the importance of sustainable long-term funding. Annual reporting, annual accounting, annual bidding prevents them having a strategic long-term effect. I advocate that strongly.

Q71 **Jess Asato:** My next question was going to touch on to what extent you feel that charities and other stakeholders feel able at the moment to deliver the support that is required to reduce and mitigate the impacts of child poverty? How does it feel to charities on the ground at the moment?

Steffan Evans: From talking to organisations that we work with closely, I think there is a fatigue. People have been working flat out since the pandemic, basically, and then the cost of living crisis and things have not eased up. There is a sense of frustration that it is still in crisis management mode and possibly some of the longer-term stuff that you might want to do—a lot of these charities are set up to try to think about longer-term changes. They are not able to do that as effectively as they would like because they are still in crisis management mode, making sure that people have food on the table and heating in the home rather than being able to do the longer-term work with families that they might want to do.



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Professor Sinclair: I echo that and I have nothing further to add to what Steffan said.

Q72 **Steve Darling:** We heard from the previous panel about hearing the child's voice. I would welcome some reflections from you about how we hear the voice of the child through the strategy and then how we bake this into the policy long term so we continue to hear that. I will go to Stephen first.

Professor Sinclair: I strongly echo the comments of Nicola Killeen, the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland. I am sure the other commissioners as well but I am more familiar with Nicola's position. You can't have an informed analysis, understanding and action unless you are engaged with the experts by experience—the service users, the communities, in this case children. In particular, many of the refinements we have seen in very small measures to reduce the cost of the school debt, which is a UK-wide set of initiatives, have been informed by dialogue with young people about how to address things like school trips, fees and kits and unseen costs. In fact, I argue that this should be standard beyond schools to colleges and universities because some of those are barriers to people taking up their opportunities.

As to baking it in, those insights have to be integrated and committed to within a long-term strategy. The Scottish Government have to publish their next three-year delivery plan in March and I very much hope that the views and experiences of young people will be reflected in that. I think the fact that we have a Bill in Scotland, the UNCRC incorporated into Scots law, will reinforce that.

These are the sorts of institutional practices, but fundamentally it is about the culture and a belief that experts by experience have valuable insights. You have to pave the way and address how they can be engaged with in a respectful and effective way. There are many good examples of poverty commissions, for example, that do that across the UK, so we have good experience and practice that we can learn from.

Steffan Evans: To add to that, as I touched on in previous answers, working with the organisations that are already in those communities is vital. Rather than expecting them to come to you, you need to be working with the people who are already there.

On baking in, when we talk about interim targets, there is space for some sort of qualitative measure in there as well. As Stephen said, interim targets have a crucial role, otherwise how do you measure what is going well and what is not. If it is just looking at numbers, the tendency is to just worry about the numbers and if you do some of that work, talking to communities, do children and young people feel better off, do they still face all the same concerns. That may point to the gap between what the numbers are telling you and what communities are feeling. That is just as important for getting a sense of how communities are feeling about effective the strategy is. Thinking about putting something like that into



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the strategy as well as numbers interim targets is one option for baking in some of that stuff.

Chair (Helen Hayes): Thank you very much. I thank Steffan Evans and Professor Stephen Sinclair for coming to give your evidence to us this morning. It has been interesting and helpful to hear from you. If there is anything that you did not feel you were able to adequately convey in the time that we had available this morning, please feel free to write to both Committees afterwards and we would welcome that. That brings our proceedings for this morning to a close. Thank you.