

Education Committee and Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: [Realising potential: Delivering the Child Poverty Strategy](#), HC 1683

Tuesday 24 March 2026

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Debbie Abrahams (Chair); Jess Asato; David Baines; Lee Barron; Johanna Baxter; Sureena Brackenridge; Amanda Hack; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sewards; Peter Swallow; Chris Vince; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1-40

Witnesses

[I](#): Dame Rachel de Souza DBE, Children's Commissioner for England.

[II](#): Thomas Cave, Head of Policy, Child Poverty Action Group; Laura Hutchinson, Head of Public Affairs, Citizens Advice; Priya Edwards, Head of Policy, Research & Influencing, Save the Children UK; and Henry Parkes, Principal Economist and Head of Quantitative Research, Institute for Public Policy Research.

Examination of witness

[HELEN HAYES *in the Chair*]

Witness: Dame Rachel de Souza DBE.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome this morning to this joint evidence session of the Education Select Committee and the Work and Pensions Select Committee for our joint inquiry on the Government's child poverty strategy. It is the first oral evidence session we have held since the publication of the strategy.

I am Helen Hayes, Chair of the Education Select Committee. Halfway through this session, when we hear from the second panel, my colleague Debbie Abrahams, Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, will take the Chair. We are pleased to hear from, first of all, the Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza. Dame Rachel, would you like to say anything to the Committee by way of introduction?



Dame Rachel de Souza: Obviously, I am the Children's Commissioner for England. I promote the rights of children across the country. I was delighted to be asked by the Child Poverty Unit to bring children's voices to the poverty strategy, which is what I did. We heard close up from 186 children all throughout the country, with deep qualitative work, and then from about 270,000 children by survey, so we really are bringing their voices here.

Thank you, Helen—we brought those 186 children who live in poverty to Parliament for an event, where they were able to speak and hear from Helen, Jess and Gordon Brown, who beamed in and gave them a little speech. They had a fantastic day and were able to be a bit empowered, which was great.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. In doing that work, was there anything that you found particularly surprising or striking from those conversations with children that you would like to draw our attention to?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes. I have been a teacher for 32 years, and a headteacher, and had been running a group of schools in underserved areas for 20-plus years before I became the Children's Commissioner. I thought I had seen it all.

I have surveyed about 1 million children, and when I came into the role in 2021 and surveyed about half a million children, none of them spoke about poverty. By 2023-24, pretty much all of them were talking about the cost of food on the table, so I knew the pendulum had swung. But what surprised me were the experiences of children in what the strategy calls deep material poverty. That was what I was shocked by. That is particularly in cities, particularly where you have a conflation of housing, disabilities and a range of things. That is where children were talking to me about not having food.

We hear about it, but actually hearing it up front from children is different. A little girl told me, "My mum only has enough tonight to feed my sisters, so I will go out and try to find something to eat." Children were in terribly insecure housing, which was really shocking. One little boy said, "I can't have my friends around, and I am so ashamed because a rat bit my face in the night." There were children with mouldy homes. One little boy said, "I curl up in bed at night because my bed is not big enough."

There were other, less extreme-sounding things, but children—this is all over the country, but particularly in cities—said to me, "I have no bus fare so I have to walk home," which we would think is fine but then, "I have to walk home through unlit, crime-ridden parks, by parks and roads, and it's dangerous and scary." The children's experience was quite shocking. I think we should not underestimate that.

Q3 Chair: Were there any groups of children you were not able to include in the research? Your research was quite extensive, but 186 children is not



comprehensive. Were there voices that you felt were not there? Do you think further research is needed as we go through this process of scrutiny?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Obviously, we talk to children not just for this piece of work for the poverty strategy. We have done a massive piece of work recently, the children's plan, where we talked to thousands and thousands. I think we had 98,000 children with special educational needs. We talk to children, and I have just published yesterday a piece of work on children who cannot get out of hospital, often because of poverty issues, because care packages are not working.

We really have dug deep, but I would say the data is so difficult. It is so difficult to know who these children are. If you ask me whether it is, for example, asylum-seeking children in deep material poverty—well, we know that children from families seeking asylum are more likely to be in poverty, but we don't know the exact figures and the data is not great. My challenge would be that we have to get better at the data on who these children are.

We know that most children who fall into the poverty category are British born. We know that, but it was quite a challenge to make sure we had really understood who these children were, which is why we went out and talked to them.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q4 **Peter Swallow:** Last year you said there was an almost Dickensian level of poverty facing children today. Do you feel that the child poverty strategy contains the right policies to begin to address that and to solve the problem of child poverty?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Again, I was pleased to see the child poverty strategy identify children in deep material poverty, and when I talked about Dickensian poverty and gave those examples, that is exactly what I was talking about. I think it goes some way.

I was pleased to see the two-child limit lifted. I argued for that. That was a change for me. My experience of talking to children over the years and seeing things change, from 2021 to 2023, made me think, "This is actually the best way, the most efficient and widest reach way of doing this," so I was pleased to see that. I was pleased to see family hubs. I think that is putting back in that service bit, and I was pleased to see the B&B limited to six weeks.

Now, do I think it goes far enough? I think there is some great vision there. There are a lot of initiatives, but what will really lift children out of poverty? This is the bit that is hard to do. I was Tony Blair's 69th academy principal, so I was there when we did that piece of work of eradicating child poverty the first time. Do I think that this goes far enough? I think we need whole-scale reform and accountability and investment into developing local services. Until we have a proper



outcomes framework, which all public service leaders are working to in local areas, we are not going to be able to deliver this. Children do not say, "Hi, I'm here. I'm Fred. I'm poor." What children do is they know if they cannot afford their dinner, if their school is not very good, or if they are waiting for a health appointment. It is how we are delivering local services that really impacts on children's experience.

I do not want to pathologise low-income families—I was from a low-income family and had a great upbringing—but when things go wrong or when services are not working is where it gets difficult. The child poverty strategy is a start, but there is a lot more to do.

Q5 Peter Swallow: So the best way to have a long-term impact on addressing child poverty is to invest in public services.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Public services that work together locally, properly. A couple of years ago I did a piece of work in Manchester for Andy Burnham on running his attendance alliance, and we got it to move, but I got all the big heads in the room—there were 400 schools, but also nurses, doctors, police and social care. What I realised was that none of them were seeing each other's data and none of them had a shared outcomes framework. That is the bit we need to grip if we are going to make a poverty strategy work, which we should.

Q6 Johanna Baxter: I am interested in what you are saying about what more needs to be done. Does the strategy do enough to lift children from the deepest poverty, moving them from just below the poverty threshold to just above it? What more specifically needs to be done to make sure they are above that threshold rather than just below it?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Lifting the two-child limit is a really important move in terms of impacting on the largest number of children, and I have also talked about needing a good outcomes framework and the public sector working to address all the things that feel like poverty to a child. We need to give local authorities more scope to be able to intervene with things like emergency funds, to make sure that no child is facing a situation of terrible poverty because of something that happens. We then need to get really ambitious, which is in answer to your question.

A couple of years ago I did an independent family review for the Government. The families in this country—low-income ones as much as others—said that the thing that mattered most to them was their family. When they felt they needed something, they wanted to turn to family first, and friends. They wanted services to feel local and familial. They wanted to work. They were ambitious for their children. When it comes to children, our ambition should have no limit.

What would a really ambitious poverty strategy look like? It would be an outstanding education for every child. I am pleased to see in the latest schools White Paper and SEND White Paper that we are now talking about bringing back statutory additional help.



I surveyed every single headteacher in this country, and they are committed to being ambitious for children. They said their five biggest worries included social media and the online world, and mental health services. I was shocked that they were more concerned about the budgets of wider services for children than they were about their own budgets. As a former headteacher, to get 90% of headteachers to say that is pretty incredible, because we normally just moan about our budgets, right? I think there is something quite strong and powerful in putting the additional needs that we need around a school to support children so that they can have that outstanding education.

Let me underline the importance of education, because most of your childhood is spent in school. I have spoken to a million children, and I am about to survey a million more in my final year. When I ask them, "Is your mum worried about putting food on the table?", every hand goes up. When I'm going around the country and I ask them, "What is your ambition? What do you want to be?", it is everything from Prime Minister to engineer to whatever—how do we get there? How can we rocket boost that ambition for the children and for the families?

Q7 David Baines: You have already mentioned the challenge with data and knowing exactly what is going on on the ground. Do you think the Government, and we generally, know enough about how child poverty affects different groups? In particular, I am thinking of those with SEND.

Dame Rachel de Souza: First off, I think there are different ways of knowing. There is the numbers knowing, and there is the deep, qualitative work that shows us how children actually experience it. I have been very involved in trying to support the SEND White Paper. Earlier in the year we launched a big children's plan that floated lots of the ideas that came through to the SEND White Paper.

For example, one group that I completely missed—I knew the numbers, but I completely missed them, and I published something on this yesterday—were children with serious illnesses and disabilities who are not getting the care plans they need. They might be stuck in hospital. I had examples I never thought I would see. One mum, whose child has died now, told me that for three years she had had a very sick son who she wanted at home. He had an oxygen tank to help him breathe and she had narrow stairs. For three years, while she was waiting for the local authority to get her a lift or sort her stairs out, she used to have to take his oxygen tank off at the bottom of the stairs, so he could not breathe, take him upstairs and then put it back on again—for three years. No number is going to tell you that, right?

The work we did for this is a model for every piece of policy we are doing about children and about groups of children. We have to go out to speak to them, because we will find things that totally surprise us and take our breath away, with how and what parents are putting up with.

Q8 Manuela Perteghella: In your opinion, do you think that the strategy



includes appropriate interventions to address the differences regionally and locally, but also different groups? For example, I represent a very rural constituency where children live in isolated villages, where some houses are off grid, so families are not even protected from the energy cap, and where the use of the food bank has gone up so much. Some anti-poverty organisations are calling for auto-enrolment, for example, for free school meals, so that you catch all the children. What do you think about that?

Dame Rachel de Souza: The strategy is a good first step and it sets a vision and a direction. I have identified some of the things that I think are good in it, but it is not exhaustive. If I have one strong point, it is that we need a target of zero for deep material poverty. In order to get that, we need local plans for public services to ensure that they are delivering to the particular needs of every child. I hear that in different parts of the country, and we see different problems in different parts of the country.

I would say that it is a good start, intentions are right, but it has to be built on deep reform in local areas. It cannot just be a great discussion up here. Many poverty strategies have died in rooms like this. They are great, but they must not be built on sand.

Q9 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, Dame Rachel. You have just mentioned what you think about targets. In a recent paper in the *BMJ*, Professors David Taylor-Robinson and Kate Pickett are making exactly that point. There were legally binding targets in the previous child poverty strategy, and those countries that have carried on in that vein, such as Canada and New Zealand, have seen massive ongoing reductions in child poverty. You agreed in your answer to Manuela that there should be targets; do you think they should be legally bound and have a timeframe around them?

Dame Rachel de Souza: As Children's Commissioner, I have had a great opportunity. I have been able to look at child poverty and child services in both Canada and Australia, as well as in the Nordics and in Europe, so I have seen some of those differences. Of course, we are a different country. We have made different choices and had different economic shocks at different times. I was there the first time around and saw us eradicate child poverty, and I saw the commitment to that. I am a former academy principal and trust leader, and I do believe targets can be deeply motivating if they are done right and thought through properly. You have to measure it and we have to know what we are working for, so I am very positive about targets.

The only thing I would say is that the 2000s were really different from now in terms of where the public sector is. I think there is a job to do as well that is building back the public sector locally, working together and accountability on leadership. Otherwise, we will set targets and nothing will happen underneath. I am in favour of targets.



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On targets being legally bound, I would choose my time to do that. If I were making decisions, I would be investing like mad in developing public sector leadership, working together on the ground, on an outcomes framework with clear measurements, so that we know exactly how many children we have, what we are dealing with, what the groups are. Then, absolutely, let's have some tough targets to motivate us and work towards, because no child should be living in deep material poverty in this country.

Q10 Debbie Abrahams: I take your point. It is a very wise point to make in terms of the timing. What we currently have is a not particularly ambitious programme with no targets, which may reduce about 10% of child poverty.

I have another paper on targets before the strategy came out. It modelled what would be the outcome—you have talked about an outcome framework—of a 35% reduction in child poverty. They have estimated total decreases in infant mortality of 293 children. For children who are looked after—we must not forget these children—there is a massive outcome: a reduction of nearly 5,000 looked-after children. And there is a reduction in emergency admissions of nearly 33,000 a year, so massive impacts there.

Ultimately, when we think about targets, what do you have in mind? You mentioned zero; I do not think we achieved that in the previous strategy, even in the good times. What do you have in mind in terms of what you think is a realistic target?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Again, I am sticking with zero for deep material poverty, because we are the sixth richest nation in the world and we should be able to do it. I am not going to budge on it. It would be immoral of me to say otherwise.

One of the reasons I have been talking about an outcomes framework at local level is to address just the things you are talking about, including the fact that only one in five children in relative poverty achieve five good grades at GCSE, whereas it is 75% or 76% of other children. We should be narrowing the gap educationally and in health outcomes. I could sit and plot the targets for you, but basically there should be no gap, and we should have a set of targets that narrow the gap.

I am sticking on getting deep material poverty to 0%, and I hope everyone in this room will, because what I have seen and what we have seen we just should not allow.

Q11 Lee Barron: Good morning. Do you think there is enough practical detail in the strategy to support its implementation over the 10-year period?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Look, I could get into the nuts and bolts about the strategy, but my simple answer is no. There is good intention, but what we need to do now is to pull the whole public sector to sit underneath it with a strong framework for delivery. We need to unpack



what we mean. We are talking about a poverty strategy, but we are talking about lots of different things. I think we need a strategy to deal with education gaps—it is great to see the new White Paper trying to do that—and gaps for kids with SEND, and all the groups that cross into this group that we talk about when we talk about poverty. That, again, is a whole public sector job.

With the housing plans, with the poverty strategy, with the new White Paper, we are starting to move in the right direction. It is pulling in the right place. It feels good for the first time, but to actually deliver this is going to take a huge amount of detail and commitment from everyone. You should not be afraid of asking public sector leaders to deliver. Everyone in leadership is paid quite a lot. We should be challenging them and making sure they are accountable and do deliver.

Q12 Chris Vince: Thank you, Dame Rachel, for coming in and for your evidence so far. It struck me when you spoke about young people talking about their aspirations, and wanting to be the next Prime Minister or to be a pilot or whatever it might be. In my constituency of Harlow I think you would probably get that at primary school, and then somewhere along the line they would lose that ambition. It is about how we keep that.

I think you said the strategy must not be “built on sand”, which was really important. What do you think will be necessary to ensure that the child poverty strategy is sustainable, not only for this Parliament but for the next Parliament? Surely we need to get in place structures that cannot be eroded.

Dame Rachel de Souza: At the risk of repeating myself, I have mentioned some of the most hopeful things I have seen. We can go top down or bottom up. I think top down we have been talking about targets, measurement, really understanding the situation, using data to make sure we are narrowing the gaps, every single Government Department working towards that and pulling in the same way, and making sure every piece of legislation hears from children so that it is accurate and is dealing with a real problem, not what Westminster perceives the problem is.

Then there is the bottom-up bit: we have to build up real localism. I say this in a completely non-political way. Frankly, having seen it myself, if the police are not in line with the GPs, with the teachers, with whatever, in terms of understanding what we are trying to do with children, we are not going to get anywhere. There needs to be a real commitment to getting good local working together.

Wrapping around that, I am so pleased to see in the new SEND White Paper and the schools White Paper that we are starting to talk again about—and I pushed really hard for this in the children’s plan, because of all those headteachers and children who have spoken to me—bringing additional needs back on to a statutory footing. We have to address what



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is genuinely holding kids back from achieving and thriving. That would be really important. Again, I think I said that earlier.

- Q13 **Johanna Baxter:** What is your view about the Government's decision to move the Child Poverty Unit from the Cabinet Office to DWP? Do you think that is going to have any impact at all?

Dame Rachel de Souza: What we need is prime ministerial commitment. If there is proper prime ministerial commitment—the commitment from the Prime Minister to drive it around the Cabinet table—I am not sure of the ins and outs but the Cabinet Office feels more central. Maybe DWP is a recognition that lots of the decisions are around income and around supporting income. I can see swings and roundabouts, but if we have prime ministerial—No. 10—and Cabinet commitment, it will happen.

Johanna Baxter: Do you think we have that?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am hopeful.

- Q14 **Jess Asato:** In similar vein, now that the strategy has been published, do you think this work is still a priority for Secretaries of State? It is really important that this is truly cross-governmental. I guess the nature of the question you have just heard is speaking to a concern that, now that it does not have that unit, it will be less able to poke into the Prime Minister in No. 10, because people will think it is safe with one Secretary of State at the DWP. You will know that the nature of government is that there are many other pressures on Departments, so essentially this might fall away and lose its priority. Do you have a concern that that is going to happen?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I go back to my last point. I have been blessed and challenged by working with many different Governments and many different—I was going to say headteachers—Prime Ministers. For all the discussion, basically, what the leadership believes is important is what happens. It would be a travesty if child poverty was not absolutely top of the list with this particular Government.

I am heartened when I speak to, for example, Gordon Brown, who—even when retired—is still phoning me up about child poverty every few weeks and beaming in and talking to children. That is the level of commitment I would expect from this Cabinet and this Prime Minister. Despite the disbanding of the poverty unit, which seems a shame, I hope that level of commitment remains. I will certainly be holding the Cabinet and the Prime Minister to account on what they are doing on child poverty, because that is my job.

- Q15 **Amanda Hack:** The unit has been moved to the DWP; what mechanisms do we need to put in place to make sure it works in the DWP? The decision has been made; what do we need now to move it forward?



Dame Rachel de Souza: Coming from being a public sector leader—an academy principal, a trust leader, a teacher for many years—for decades to coming into Westminster, my absolute shock was about siloed working. How many times—whether it is a child that has been killed and we do a review—do we say, “Joint working wasn’t happening”? The only way to make joint working happen properly, and multi-agency working happen properly on the ground, is if we do it up here.

My exhortation to DWP would be to say, “Okay, it might have come to you, but actually it needs to be everyone, and you need the power and to be empowered to pull the levers to make sure that every single Cabinet Secretary is thinking about child poverty and held to account on it.” If you cannot do that here, it is not going to happen there.

Amanda Hack: That is useful; thank you.

Q16 **Darren Paffey:** Good morning, Dame Rachel. In terms of monitoring and evaluating the strategy, the Government say they are going to be publishing their first baseline report in the summer. You said a moment ago that you have to measure it. In your view, what should be set out in that report?

Dame Rachel de Souza: If you want a proper, technical answer to that, I will write to the Committee. I am happy to do that. I will do that and look at what has been promised, because I do not have it at the top of my head.

I would say that we cannot just have, “We delivered 25 initiatives.” That is the danger. What we need to truly look at is how many children, who are the children, and what are their outcomes in education and in the narrowing of the gap in education, in health and in disability? We need to be looking at something far bigger than, “We have promised to do x initiative. Oh yes, and—tick—we’ve delivered it.” That is not change on the ground that the people and children who are living with this feel. I would go for the big things and involve the whole Cabinet and say, “Look, this is our strategy.” I will write to you about exactly what has been asked.

Q17 **Darren Paffey:** I am sure that would be welcome. From the work that you did—the consultation with many hundreds of thousands of children—are there very clear key indicators that you think emerge that ought to be leading the monitoring and evaluation work?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Some of the things that struck me when looking around the world—again, I am very happy to share more detail with anybody who wants it—and in Australia was just how fantastic health was at leading multi-agency working for poverty and children. It was amazing. Go to Brisbane children’s hospital—it is unbelievable, improving work on poverty, indigenous rights. It is just fantastic. It is something we don’t see. I urge all our bright paediatricians to be doing that.



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In Canada, I think it was a strong regional Government, and we saw that in Australia as well. You know my argument about localism. There are some problems if you have a particularly difficult area like Alice Springs or the Northern Territories in Australia, but in the main localism—really good local decision-making—seems to produce far better outcomes.

I think our data is strong. Although I have been criticising us on data, looking around the world our data is pretty good. We can be proud of that. In the Nordics—I know money might not be an issue there—there is the absolute commitment to the best interests of the child, and the embedding of UNCRC and making it a reality, so that everyone I spoke to, from the chief of police to people running hospitals, to nurses, to politicians, talked about the best interests of the child, and that being how they make decisions and make decisions first. They would be the big lessons I have seen around the world.

Q18 **Caroline Voaden:** Thank you for your answer to Darren. On monitoring and evaluation, who do you think should be responsible for monitoring the progress of the strategy? Is there a voice or a role for either the Office of the Children's Commissioner or for children themselves? How would you like to see them involved in monitoring the strategy?

Dame Rachel de Souza: You just answered my question. One thing the Children's Commissioner's Office gives you is totally independent, impartial monitoring. We are not afraid to say what needs to be said and, whether we are asked to monitor the strategy or not, we will monitor the strategy and make absolutely clear what we think about it.

I am so proud of the Government and the poverty unit for asking for children's voices. Let's keep that going. Let's make sure that children's voices are involved in all of it. Again, what I would like to see is all the places I have been talking about, all the Departments that have something to do with children, actually seeking children's views on their policies, not to do everything they say—because that would not be fair—but to make sure that they are heard and visibly seen to be heard, and to open their minds to think a bit about whether the Westminster discussion we are having is really reaching the kids that we need to reach, the children and families we need to reach. Yes, the Children's Commissioner's Office is always happy to be of service and will be whether it is asked or not, and children, absolutely, yes.

Q19 **Chair:** Dame Rachel, before we finish, you have spoken quite a lot about leadership in various different areas of the public sector and in the Government. You have spoken quite a lot about the measures to increase income and deliver more income security. You have mentioned some distressing examples around housing and the fundamental role of housing in the security of children in their material situation. It is the basis, really, for everything else they need to do in life.

I represent a constituency that is at the heart of the housing crisis in London. We are in that firestorm. Do you have anything more to say



about what the Government need to be doing to make sure that where children sleep is better for children living in poverty, and that essential security? It strikes me that that is an issue that goes beyond leadership and beyond income poverty, and it is a hard challenge to solve. I would welcome your further thoughts on that.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Again, I think about this a lot, because it is strange that we even have to try to make the case for families with children having somewhere secure and decent to live whereas, for example, on arguments around pensions and things, and the elderly, everybody agrees: "Yes, we should support that." I think we need to put as much support into having a healthy, happy childhood as we can. A bedrock of that is having somewhere to live that is safe, clean and secure, not mouldy and not rat infested, and that you are not moved from every six weeks.

There are schools just down the road and many in your constituency where more than half the children are in temporary housing, being moved every few weeks. It is great that in the poverty strategy they have talked about the six-week limit for being in B&Bs. That is mega. It is something that I and many others called for. What I think we need to do is make sure that is really happening on the ground for starters, but we also have to invest in housing for our young and support our young families. It is nigh on impossible.

I have an office full of young professionals who have two working parents and young children, and they can barely afford housing, let alone families in cities who are on lower incomes, who are on UC, or who find themselves struggling or have no recourse to funds or whatever. We have to invest in housing, be creative about it and prioritise it. We cannot have kids living in rat-infested, mouldy, health-denying accommodation. Often kids who are disabled or have a disabled parent end up there. We must invest in this.

There are a number of ways we could do it. That could be at the national level, building more housing, more council housing, whatever. It could also be at the local level, giving local government the ability to be a bit more creative to get this sorted and funding them to do it—however it is done—and, sitting alongside that, making sure that these families can get out and get good jobs that can pay for them to be able to have a decent house and somewhere to live and bring up their children.

Q20 Chair: Do you think more can be done from the children's sector—from the whole sector of organisations that champion children's rights and that work on child poverty—to change the debate about house building in this country? We often hear objections about new house builds from people who are already well housed, and we have children who have to curl up because their bed is too small for them to sleep in. Is there something wrong with the state of our debate across the country that is not prioritising children's rights enough in the debate about house building?



Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes. In my investigations, and speaking to children, housing and poor quality housing is a key issue. What I would say is that if you are in, say, Sheffield, where my family live, the housing stock is cheaper, better and way more plentiful than if you are in London, or certain parts of London, and parts of wherever. We should be having a sensible and nuanced discussion that shows the difference around the country of the quality of housing stock and the availability of housing stock and its impact on children.

It really is in the cities, like London, Manchester and others, and in the south-east that I have seen the absolute worst. That is where we have to prioritise decent quality housing, whether it is private or council—I don't care. What I care about is that we do not have children living like this. It is for you all to have the political debate. Yes, absolutely, the children's sector should step up to the plate on this, because income and housing are the big things when you look deeply into the children in deep material poverty.

Q21 Caroline Voaden: Last week, the Education Select Committee went to Estonia to look at kindergartens. Some 95% of their children attend kindergarten, and it was quite amazing to see what they are doing there, preparing children, ready to learn, so that all children are closing that gap. You were talking about education being a really important part of the poverty strategy; do you think that is the model we should be looking at in order to give those poor children a better chance of better outcomes later on in their school journey?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes—particularly poor children, but all children. As an educationist, I know that the one thing the data is totally secure on is that high-quality early years education is the biggest factor to impact outcomes at 16. We should absolutely be focusing on a high-quality offer.

I was pleased to see an announcement—I think it was last week or earlier in the week—about more school-based nurseries. Again, there needs to be much more sensible, thoughtful thinking about what early years' experience looks like. I would rocket boost childminders, but also have good school-based or wider early education kindergartens that could match around that and give children a much better experience than some of the experiences we hear about. Yes, absolutely.

Chair: Thank you very much, Dame Rachel, for coming to give us your evidence. I am going to suspend the sitting so that we can switch Chairs and hear from the second panel.

Examination of witnesses

[DEBBIE ABRAHAMS *in the Chair*]

Witnesses: Thomas Cave, Laura Hutchinson, Priya Edwards and Henry Parkes.



Q22 Chair: Welcome to the second oral evidence session of this joint inquiry between the Education Select Committee and the Work and Pensions Select Committee. It is a pleasure to welcome Tom Cave from the Child Poverty Action Group, Laura Hutchinson from Citizens Advice, Priya Edwards from Save the Children and Henry Parkes from the Institute for Public Policy Research. A very warm welcome to you all.

I hope you heard the questions that I asked Dame Rachel about targets. What do you think of the absence of targets? Should we be looking more broadly at what targets we should have, whether they should be legally bound, whether there should be a time limit to them and so on?

Thomas Cave: Targets are a really good way for the Government to drive change. They enable accountability and a continued focus on an issue. Without targets, it is harder to achieve those. One of the reflections on the strategy is that quite a lot has happened immediately in the strategy, and those are a positive step forward but, actually, there is not a great deal of detail about, say, further investment in social security. In the absence of those, targets would be really important in maintaining that focus and allowing for further action down the line.

I feel like within a strategy you need to be able to measure your success. Without that, it makes it much harder, and it makes it much harder for other people to scrutinise the success of the strategy and the measures that you are bringing into it. To actually embed the strategy within the machinery of government, targets would be very helpful in everyone being able to see the strategy being used, reflections on what more can be done, and ensuring the longevity of the strategy over the long term.

Q23 Chair: Thank you. Does anybody have a different view?

Laura Hutchinson: Not entirely different. I can certainly see the value in targets and metrics, but Citizens Advice was less wedded to them as part of our formal engagement process in the strategy.

I found it very interesting what the Children's Commissioner was saying in her evidence session around metrics having limitations. They do provide very valuable indicators of projections and what is happening, but they do not always provide a live picture and they do not always provide a very accurate picture about the complexity of people and children's lives in particular.

With any reporting that will be done in summer and then subsequently annually, what we are keen to see is that human story at the heart of the reporting and a painting of the picture that really gets to the root causes of the difficulties that children and families face, and the complexities of how they move through life, because that is not always evident just through data and metrics. We do think that having an accountability mechanism in the strategy is certainly a very important thing, and perhaps we can come on to that later.



Priya Edwards: I would agree with Laura and add that involving children in the monitoring and evaluation is one of the central ways you can monitor its effectiveness in real time, because the most important thing we want to see from the child poverty strategy is whether it is making a material difference to the lives of children in poverty. We would encourage the Government to focus on how the monitoring and evaluation can be as effective and as robust as possible.

Henry Parkes: The Government have identified two headline metrics. They are a good complementary set, so it does make sense to monitor them. There is probably a third around very low incomes that is potentially missing—we know that very deep poverty is caused by certain policies like the benefit cap and so on. If we just use those two headline metrics, we might lose sight of this group of people who have severely low income, which is also a group that we want to substantially reduce.

A third headline measure of that would be welcome and, yes, to be very specific about where you would like to get to and when. What the scale of the Government's ambitions are is best communicated by where they set those targets at different points. So yes, I agree with the other panellists: clearly data will not be able to capture everything. You need to have qualitative insight.

Another thing is that most of our existing metrics have pretty big lags, so we need to think about metrics that are a little bit timelier. We have the child poverty statistics coming out this Thursday, I believe, but they will relate to the period March 2024 to April 2025. It is a year ago, and we need more timely understanding of what is going on. There is probably a role there for more timely data collection.

Q24 **Chair:** Given that the strategy will currently cover an impact of about 10% of children living in disability at the moment, would you want to see a target that is a bit more ambitious?

Priya Edwards: We have an ambitious baseline. This is the largest number of children who will be taken out of poverty in a single parliamentary term. That is a monumental achievement, and we should really give credit for that.

What remains to be seen is the longer term of how we continue the momentum. In the next Parliament, and the Parliament after, how do we continue to ensure that the same number of children, if not more, are taken out of poverty? That is something that we want to see, not necessarily a target but a robust plan of how we get there and what the structural change is that is needed to get there.

Q25 **Manuela Perteghella:** Do you feel that the measures in the child poverty strategy reflect the key themes that were discussed by the people and communities you have engaged with?

Laura Hutchinson: I think the themes were very well reflected. There was quite a big chunk of the strategy dedicated to community



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engagement, and that was a theme that emerged very strongly in all the work that we did: that need for the Government to understand what is happening in different regions, what that demographic looks like, what that poverty looks like in that area, and then how you build very tailored, localised support systems and networks that can help address that.

It was definitely something recognised on the delivery front. We are still waiting for quite a lot of guidance and information on how that will be implemented and how, as community organisations, we can work with local authorities, for instance, and with other partners in communities to enable the delivery of that side of the strategy. A lot of that hinges on successful community engagement and buy-in from local partners.

I very much appreciate the intention of the Government devolving that power to communities. That is really important, but a bit more steer from the centre around best practice or just guidance on implementation would be very welcome.

Thomas Cave: As part of the engagement work, we hosted two roundtables with Ministers, sector experts and people with lived experience. One of those was on social security specifically and one of them was on employment. A common theme throughout all the engagement work was the critical importance of social security as a way of supporting families at a time where they have greater costs when they have children. I think that is seen in the strategy. The strategy definitely recognises that the two-child limit was the single most effective investment in social security to lift children out of poverty. Similarly, some of the other measures, like extending free school meals, were beneficial. I do think that there is a need for more of that down the line.

If we are looking at some of the policies that break the link between need and entitlement within the system, there are three of them: the two-child limit, the benefit cap and local housing allowance rates. The strategy has done a great job at removing one of those issues, but the other two still remain and are still going to have a negative impact on families' abilities to meet their costs.

Priya Edwards: We did 25 engagement sessions with local partners, with children, with parents and family members on better local support, but one of the central things that came up was social security. Again, echoing what Tom said, it is welcome that the strategy recognises that.

The other thing that, to some extent, I am surprised but pleased to see in the strategy is children and parents talk a lot about the experience of living in poverty, the experience of interacting with public services and, in their own words, that often feeling dehumanising and degrading. One of the things that we are pleased was recognised—particularly in some of the work around family hubs—is that support needs to be more person-centred. It needs to be more child-centred and we are pleased that there is a shift towards that.



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Henry Parkes: We worked with Changing Realities, a lived experience group with experience of life on low incomes, to determine what we thought the immediate priorities for the strategy should be. There was some good overlap in terms of specifics around describing the two-child limit and the extension of free school meals to all children on UC—huge things that were clearly top of the list and priorities.

There were also, for instance, movements on things like child maintenance. We got lots of feedback that basically child maintenance is pretty broken and that it needs reform. It is good to see that the Government are taking action on that and see that as part of the anti-poverty strategy picture as being a source of income there.

There was also good recognition on things like wider school costs, which were huge, like, “I don’t want my kids to miss out. Every time I have to buy a new school uniform it is a big cash shock.” The Government recognised that in their strategy through some action on uniform costs and some better stuff on enrichment, basically—the idea that just because children are on low incomes they should not miss out.

On that, I would say specifically we would have liked the Government to have gone a bit further and provided ringfenced support so that children who were on free school meals or universal credit could get automatic access to enrichment activities, support for costs with school trips and so on. At the moment, the system is very discretionary. It all works through individual schools. Let’s have an automated, “If you’re on these benefits, you’ll get this support.” The Government did not go as far as that, but that may be something that they can take forward when they are looking at how to ensure that the opportunities for enrichment are consistent across the piece, with more of a systematised approach to making sure people don’t miss out from being on a lower income.

Q26 **Manuela Perteghella:** Are there particular groups of children, families, or organisations who you were not able to engage with, or areas—you mentioned a bit more research and engagement on enrichment—where you think further engagement may be needed?

Laura Hutchinson: For me, one of the biggest gaps in the strategy was around no recourse to public funds. There was a section on NRPF in the strategy, but it did not go as far as we would have liked it to. It mainly centred around providing new guidance for local authorities around how to enforce section 17 of the Children Act when children are seen as destitute.

Then there was a commitment to do better reporting and data collection on no recourse to public funds to try to get a better picture of how many children actually sit in this demographic and live in poverty, because it is genuinely shocking that successive Governments have not collected this data before. It is a hidden level of poverty and often a very deep level of poverty in this country.



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It can be a very difficult demographic to engage with sometimes, because there is a hostility sometimes or a distrust in public services or official services among this demographic. Because obviously they are not going through the same eligibility entitlements, they do not often come into the same contact as you would with, for instance, the DWP or your jobcentre or those types of services, so trying to get a better understanding of what is happening to these children and how they could be supported by the Government would be a welcome step. We hope that the Home Office takes this forward along with groups like the DFE and DWP as well.

Thomas Cave: I would briefly add that there is a bit of a tension between some of the priorities in the child poverty strategy and some of the proposed changes to settlement for migrant families. The plan to extend pathways for families who do receive financial support from the state will ultimately lead to some families choosing not to seek help when they are destitute, which could then basically extend the length of time in which children are living in real deep poverty as a result. A better understanding of how the two interact would be positive.

Manuela Perteghella: Thank you. Does anyone else want to add anything?

Priya Edwards: I would echo both Tom's and Laura's points.

Henry Parkes: Likewise. Having more data is going to help. That is a good first step for us to understand this problem, but we do need action. We do need children without recourse to public funds to get access to support that would lift them out of poverty. Yet we do not fully understand the scale of it, and they do need to do more work on that.

Q27 **Sureena Brackenridge:** Following on from the points that you have just shared, just to be a little bit more specific and give you the opportunity to give a more considered commentary, how ambitious do you think the child poverty strategy is with regard to policy steps and actions and funding commitment?

Henry Parkes: Basically, when the Government took office, they had this projection that poverty was going to rise significantly. That was obviously driven by the two-child limit, which affects more and more families over time. When they took the policy action that they have, particularly on the two-child limit and on free school meals, what they were largely doing was countering that rise in child poverty that we were expecting to see or that modellers were expecting.

What that means is that, even though we have done all this—and it is great and we are happy that the Government have done it—the actual poverty rate by the end of the Parliament will not be terribly much lower than when the Parliament started, because of all these positive headwinds that are going on. In effect, yes, poverty will be down by the end of the Parliament compared to the start of the Parliament, but not by a huge amount in terms of number of children. Yes, it is great that they



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have done it, and that does reduce poverty relative to a world where the two-child limit remains, but the bottom line is that poverty numbers will still be not that much lower.

We think the Government probably do want to go further if they want to achieve a substantial decrease in the number of children in poverty relative to when they took office. In terms of the forms that that could take, there are lots of options. One, for instance, is that we still have benefit levels that are affected by the decisions of previous Governments on the freezing and sub-inflationary uprating of benefits, which we could start to slowly undo over time so that we have increases in things like the child element, over and above inflation, to try to restore the levels of benefits to where they should be had those freezes not taken place. In particular, if you were thinking about where you would put money in the social security system, the child element is probably the most attractive.

We see a version of this in Scotland: the Scottish child payment is a top-up of over £100 a month per child at the moment. It has risen significantly since its introduction. It is possible to do this. The Scottish Government thought that it was a priority, and they have substantially reduced the poverty rate in Scotland—maybe not enough to hit their targets, but they have made a good dent. That has happened in Scotland. Organisations like the Institute for Fiscal Studies have looked for evidence of whether this is affecting work incentives and so on, and they are not finding evidence of that. It is quite useful that, in Scotland, we have a situation where the child element is effectively more generous through the Scottish child payment and things are ticking along, and the poverty rate has been reduced. There are probably some learnings there for the UK Government in terms of where you might want to put additional investment in social security.

Very quickly on housing support, one of the reasons the poverty rate is, by default, drifting up over time is that we have local housing allowance that is still frozen at a historical rate. Rents are obviously rising fast. The Government have plans to increase the availability of affordable homes and so on, over time, and that is all well and good, but children are here right now and they need that support right now. The longer we leave that, the more people will have experienced shortfalls in support in their housing, and that erodes their disposable income. That is another key area.

We think the Government are pretty comfortable that they should uprate general benefits by CPI. That is taken as a given. It is a collective wisdom. In housing, for some reason, it is seen as discretionary whether we should increase housing support, even though the exact same logic applies. You have costs rising, benefits should change to reflect those rising costs, and increasing LHA is the way to do that and stop this upwards drift of the poverty rate that we will expect to see over the Parliament if we do not take action.



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Priya Edwards: The scrapping of the two-child limit and the extension of free school meals is an ambitious keystone for tackling child poverty. If the two-child limit were to remain in place, we would see the catastrophic levels of poverty that Henry just described, so that is to be commended. That is an ambitious thing to do. Not all children are going to benefit right now from the scrapping of the two-child limit because of the benefit cap remaining in place and because, as Henry said, LHA rates are not being uprated in line with local market rates for housing.

The other thing we want to see is a long-term vision for tackling the structural drivers. Wealth inequality and in-work poverty are still rising, and wealth inequality is locked into the housing system. We would also like to see above-inflation re-uprating of children's benefits. We have a policy at Save the Children around thinking about a "child lock" for children's benefits, which I would be happy to write to the Committee about properly after.

The other things we would like to see in terms of ambition is making sure that ambitions around child poverty are embedded in future reviews and strategies that the Government introduce. For instance, in the parental leave review that is currently happening, there is much that can be done for pregnant mothers to ensure that child poverty is tackled before a baby is even born. We want to see more in the childcare system to tackle some of the barriers to work and barriers to good, well-paid work for families.

In the long term, investment in housing is necessary. We need a lot more social homes. We do think that this is an ambitious first step. We want to see the second, third and fourth steps.

Laura Hutchinson: To echo everything that has been said on the two-child limit, we were extremely pleased that the Government took the decision to lift the two-child limit. If you look at the data in the strategy, it is very clear in terms of numbers how much of the heavy lifting that single policy lever actually does in terms of numbers on child poverty. Without that, we would have been in a very different situation.

The main area that I would touch on is private renters. We had a section in the strategy dedicated to children living in temporary accommodation. It talked through how we could get better guidance out to local authorities to stop illegal practices around temporary accommodation. There were policies in there about preventing the discharge of new-born babies into temporary accommodation, all of which we would support.

It is very important that you get downstream of this problem. Temporary accommodation is astronomically expensive to the state and to local authorities. It is a terrible situation for children to find themselves in. It is terrible from an education point of view, but it is also terrible from a labour market perspective, in terms of the impact that it has on parental employment.



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To get downstream of this problem, you have to look at policy levers in the private rented sector, and the big one of those is uprating of local housing allowance. We were disappointed not to see that commitment made in this strategy. It has been frozen since 2024, and since 2024 private rents have risen by around 14%, 15% or 16%. That gap between LHA and rent is becoming increasingly wider for families, and it is causing a lot of homelessness. It is reflected in our data. We helped around 13,000 families last year facing eviction from the private rented sector and facing imminent homelessness.

Yes, we appreciated the focus on temporary accommodation and understand why the Government were so passionate about doing that, but they need to do more to get downstream of the problem to stop that flow of children into temporary accommodation in the first place.

Thomas Cave: Again, I would echo a lot of what has been said already. The two-child limit and free school meals extension were a massive step forward.

As Henry was talking about, there has been a series of cuts, freezes and sub-inflationary rises in the social security system that have now actually led to the Government spending £50 billion less on social security than they would have done without those in place. In particular, the child benefit is worth 20% less in real terms than it was in 2010.

While there is a bit of a theme in the strategy about some big measures being taken by central Government, the next bit of the implementation seems to look almost to push the next bits of implementation towards local actors, which is a positive step in enabling them to take positive action in their region and address some of the differences that you get there. The reality is the big levers that work are things that central Government needs to look at, which is more investment in social security, so we would push for that. As I mentioned before, the benefit cap and local housing allowance are two of those issues, as well as greater investment in social security for children.

Q28 Sureena Brackenridge: It has become quite clear from all on the panel that uplifting the local housing rate is critical. That is not a policy that is in the current child poverty strategy. Is that the most effective policy that could deliver the best return on investment to tackle child poverty? Or is there something else that would give a better return on investment?

Chair: We are getting a little bit time pressured. Could one of you pick up on that? If there are any dissenting voices, please just give a quick, one-sentence response.

Henry Parkes: There are different routes, but local housing allowance is particularly effective because it channels money to people with the biggest housing shortfall. The money flows to people who are suffering the most and are most affected by the freeze. On that basis, yes, it would be a priority area for investment first.



Q29 **Chris Vince:** Thank you to the panellists for the evidence so far. Priya Edwards, in Save the Children's written report to this inquiry, it recommended framing poverty reduction as a core outcome of family hubs. Could you describe what you envisage by this?

Priya Edwards: One of the things we heard a lot in the engagement work that we did is that families struggle when services and support are not joined up. That is across public services, but also across the voluntary sector. One of the ways that you could best support children and families in poverty through family hubs is by making sure that child poverty outcomes and local child poverty reduction are considered to be part of the success framework for family hubs. That would enable and encourage family hubs to make sure that things like welfare advice, debt advice, other forms of income support and crisis support are properly connected to family hubs locally. We are not necessarily wedded to an exact framework of how that would work right now. What we want to see is the two areas drawn together, educational outcomes for early years and child poverty together.

Chair: Apparently, this joint inquiry session will finish a little later than when my Committee normally finishes. My apologies to Sureena for that. We have a little more time flexibility.

Q30 **Mark Sowards:** Do the Government understand how child poverty affects different children—for example, children with special educational needs, children with disabilities, children who live in different localities? We heard in the previous panel about people who live in rural areas having lower access to fuel or having to spend more money on it. If the Government do understand it, do they have the strategy to address these differences?

Priya Edwards: Where we are now with the child poverty strategy is the Government have a far greater understanding, through the engagement directly with children and families that has been done by us, by the Children's Commissioner and others, of the differing experiences of child poverty. I would encourage the Government to continue to do this and to embed listening to children and listening to parents in the monitoring and evaluation of the child poverty strategy.

There is more that can be done, and a lot of what we would like to see going forwards is the localism that the Children's Commissioner talked about in her evidence, empowering local authorities and combined authorities to have oversight and powers in order to make sure that they are meeting the needs of the children in poverty in their areas. We would like to see the VCS more involved in that. We want to see communities directly involved in shaping what that looks like locally.

Laura Hutchinson: On the rural point, which is an interesting one, the Child Poverty Unit was talking to us about that throughout the process. There was definitely that will to try to understand how different demographics and different regions are impacted by this.



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You mentioned fuel being one thing. We also heard from a number of people who live in rural areas about the price of what we would term daily basics—things like groceries—and the fact that your essentials in terms of groceries track consistently higher if you live in a rural community because you perhaps do not have access to a bigger supermarket. You might be more reliant on your village shop or one of the smaller branded supermarkets that do not always stock more affordable foods. The levers the Government have around that are tricky, so there is still more work to do in trying to assess what can be done around grocery pricing in rural communities and how that disparity is felt across different regions. I appreciate that it is a sticky issue and it is a very hard problem to solve.

Transport is something that the Government could and should be doing something on in terms of how that impacts different regions and the impact that that has on child poverty. We heard a lot that things like fare freezes are great, but they are only great if you have a bus in your local community. For many people, they could not take public transport because it did not run through where they lived, and therefore they could not get to their childcare provision and then they could not get to work, let alone get to crisis support or a food bank.

There is an infrastructure point that needs to be thought of through more of a child poverty lens than it is currently at the moment. Part of the strategy does talk about the Department for Transport taking on more of a poverty lens—I cannot remember how it is described exactly—across some of the work it does. That would be welcome, to see how that impacts, because it is a sticking point to accessing loads of different things in rural communities.

Mark Sowards: Of course, yes. Does anyone wish to make any further points?

Thomas Cave: When we are looking at what is in the monitoring and evaluation framework, having some real breakdowns in demographics—so things like black and minority ethnic children, households containing someone with a disability, lone parent families—is important, but similarly, some form of regional focus within the reporting would be helpful. Perhaps sections that are looking at different regions, and not just the stats, but actually what is being implemented there. If we are going to devolve some of the implementation to a local level, there will be lots of different things happening in different areas that might be addressing particular issues there. There is loads of learning that can be taken from that and applied to other areas as well.

Henry Parkes: The Government produced a pretty chunky evidence pack around who was at higher risk of poverty, and household composition is a major driver, with large families and lone parents being the most significant groups. We have had a big policy movement on the two-child limit, which will affect the larger family poverty rate, but lone



parents are going to continue to have a very elevated poverty risk. There is a question mark about what we should do about that beyond what is in the strategy.

One thing that we discussed was whether universal credit should treat lone parents a little bit more favourably. For instance, should they be able to retain more of their earnings before they are hit by a taper, given that their ability, particularly when their children are younger, to work a large number of hours is constrained? Similarly on childcare, we have had lots of extensions of free hours, but there are still questions that are most significant for that group around access. For example, can I actually get the childcare hours where I need them for the work I need to do? The free hours are also not actually covering the full cost of childcare settings with things like top-up fees and so on. These have risen significantly and mean that those free hours are not so free, and that can have an impact on the ability of single parents to participate in the labour market and get out of poverty.

- Q31 Mark Swards:** None of you would disagree with the fact that the Government do understand the differences between these different groups and the things that affect poverty among these different groups.

Laura Hutchinson: With the exception of no recourse to public funds, as mentioned earlier—they need to do much more work to understand that demographic.

Mark Swards: That is good. With that exception in mind, are there any others you want to flag? No. That is incredibly helpful; thank you very much.

- Q32 Caroline Voaden:** My question is for Thomas first, and then anybody else if they have anything to add. The Government are using relative low income after housing costs and a new measure of deep material poverty as their two headline measures to monitor progress. What is your view of this approach?

Thomas Cave: On the headline measure of poverty, it makes absolute sense. On the material deprivation measure, we see benefits to it, but we would probably prefer a slightly different approach. It is based on those 13 items that are deemed essential, but that makes it a needs-based measure. It is much harder to understand the impact that a particular new policy might have on that; it is harder to track that. Similarly, because it is methodologically different to the main poverty measure, understanding the interaction that a particular policy might have between the two is harder. We would probably look to supplement it with a relative measure—say, 50% of household averaging income, which would enable you to track that. We certainly see why having that deeper measure is really useful.

- Q33 Caroline Voaden:** Are there things in that 13-item list that could be affected by all sorts of outside forces? For example, if the local swimming



pool suddenly decided to offer free swimming for all kids under 10, suddenly you are ticking a box that you were not ticking before, but it does not necessarily mean that you have moved out of poverty.

Thomas Cave: Yes. As well as that, it is static in time. If we look back 10 or 15 years, I think people would be less likely to say that access to the internet was a real, essential part of being able to interact with modern society and things like that. At this point in time, we probably would say that if you do not have access to that you will struggle to get by for many different reasons. If we are looking 10 or 15 years down the line, we cannot predict; what is essential could change a little bit.

Q34 **Caroline Voaden:** Do you think those items should be able to change over the 10 years, or would that then make that measure unusable?

Thomas Cave: It does make the measure more complicated, I would say. You certainly would not be able to compare to different periods in time on it. That is why we would favour supplementing it with a deeper relative measure.

Caroline Voaden: Okay. Does anybody else have anything to add?

Priya Edwards: To add to what Tom has been saying, one of the most helpful things you can do, from an accountability perspective as an organisation like ours, is track the trends in child poverty, because the actual understanding of the numbers can be a little bit more complicated. The relative poverty after housing costs is an internationally comparable measure and you can track the trends across time, so you can understand what dynamics are at play when understanding child poverty.

Where I would differ from Tom is that we do encourage a wider suite of measures to understand the complexity of child poverty. Deep material poverty, as a supplementary measure, can be helpful in understanding whether children have essential needs. For the record, I would push back against what the Children's Commissioner said earlier around deep material poverty, and emphasise that we need to focus on relative poverty after housing costs as the headline measure of what child poverty is, because that enables us to understand the trends over time.

Henry Parkes: Yes, I agree that relative poverty is the key measure. There are lots of things about children's lives that are not being captured by that measure, and therefore having supplementary measures makes sense. I think it is a good thing to include them, alongside a relative poverty measure and a deep poverty measure, which Tom has already mentioned.

To give an example, there are certain things, like overcrowding, that do not show up in income. If you are crowded in your house, it is terrible, it affects your opportunities and so on. Overcrowding is generally a consequence of people not having enough money for suitable housing, so they end up in a house that is not suitable. From an income perspective they might look great, or they might look fine, but they are not fine



because the housing that they are forced into is inappropriate. It does make sense to have measures that are slightly wider than the income measure, not only the qualitative evidence that we have already talked about. Yes, I think there are some metrics out there, and the deprivation measures are getting at some of that. We do want to give the Government credit for when other things improve, which are not going to be captured by that conventional headline—the AHC measure of poverty—even though we would say that should be the primary measure.

Q35 Amanda Hack: Thank you to the panel for coming to speak to us today. Laura, you mentioned previously in your testimony about capturing the human story, and Priya, you were talking about experience and how we get that children's voice. Reflecting on that, what do you think should be set out in the baseline report this summer and the subsequent annual reporting on the child poverty strategy? I am interested to see how you would capture those things that you would identify as maybe less able to be measured.

Laura Hutchinson: I am afraid I do not have an exact answer. I can talk through what I would like to see represented in the reporting this summer. What I do not want to see, and what I do not think would be helpful, is a very heavy data report. I do think getting across, in whichever way, that sense of what it feels like to grow up in poverty is incredibly important, not just from a sentimental point of view—far from it—but from a very practical point of view of understanding where the pain points are in people's lives, and the complexity of which a problem like poverty can impact so many different areas of education, your access to services, your housing and how that all interconnects. I would very much be in favour of anything that tries to capture that holistic picture of what it is like for a child and a family and parents to grow up in poverty and how that connects to the labour market, educational systems and that type of thing.

I would like to see, perhaps, a discussion about how we could better capture children moving throughout the whole stage of their life. At the moment, the strategy has been positioned as a 10-year strategy. I cannot say for certain, but I would assume that that was done because it is based on two successive Government terms, as opposed to actually being mirrored on taking a child through 0 to 18, say, which would be a much more effective way of trying to ascertain what happens to children as they go through every stage of their life. We have heard about different demographics, but children go through different stages of their own life, and there are different hurdles and barriers facing them at each one of those, so trying to capture that better would be important.

Priya Edwards: I would agree with everything Laura said. In terms of how you could do this practically, locally and regionally, things like poverty truth commissions do an effective job of understanding what the picture is. There could be a national one, there could be a children's one. We could have a summary of the poverty truth commissions that already



exist, or there could be a national children's board that is part of the accountability mechanisms, and that is actively monitoring what the strategy is feeling like for children.

Save the Children has experience with this. I am sure other panellists do. There is a lot of experience out there and we would be keen to work with the Committee, work with the Government, to support the enabling of children's and families' voices throughout the monitoring and accountability.

Q36 Amanda Hack: The Children's Commissioner talked earlier about devolution and looking at localised solutions to progress on child poverty. How should the Government's approach to devolution and local progress be looked at?

Priya Edwards: One of the things we would like to see is combined authorities having more statutory authority and more statutory powers on child poverty, in order to encourage child poverty action plans across all local authorities. There is a lot that has already been done at combined authority level. We commend what is happening in the north-east. We would like to see central Government encouraging and empowering combined authority level to do that so it is embedded in growth plans and in the work that is already happening in transport.

Then, very locally, what we would like to see—and this is at community level, not even necessarily local authority level, though local authorities have to be involved—is families, but children as well, being involved in some of the local decision making. For example, where is the park? Where is the play space? How can I get to it? They are the things that are felt in a child's life. The more that can be done locally to enable children, parents and families to have a say in shaping what local solutions are the better.

Laura Hutchinson: The Government are already doing pilots and programmes that will hopefully make a difference on that point. Things like the Pride in Place programme, where you are giving power and agency back into the hands of communities, can have a transformational effect, not just in the experiences of people living in those communities but in outcomes as well. Anything that sees those schemes rolled out more would be welcome.

On localised solutions, there are so many amazing pilots and initiatives going on across the country. There is a challenge for Government on how they capture what is happening and what is done at a local level, and how they can share that best practice and learnings much wider. In an organisation like Citizens Advice, where we have the benefit of being very spread out across the country and seeing all these local initiatives, it is not always apparent how we feed those learnings back into central Government. There is an attempt to try to rectify that through appointments like Richard Walker as the cost of living champion, for instance. That could be a position where it is very much go out, see,



learn and then report back to Government about what is going on in communities and what works and what does not.

Q37 Amanda Hack: My constituents are in a devo desert and, even worse, it is right next door to a devolved mayor in the east midlands, so the inequity feels much greater. I am interested to see how this evolves, but we have heard recommendations that the Government should incorporate public involvement into the monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. What do you think that would look like in practice?

Henry Parkes: Yes, it has already been alluded to. In our annual reporting, we would see a substantial qualitative component where you actually ask people, "Are you feeling the effects of these policies? Are they working as intended?" It is a way to both hold the Government to account, but also to improve the quality of policy. The Government have done this ongoing exercise to begin with, and they should carry on doing so to sharpen up policy and make sure that it hits the mark.

In terms of how that should be done precisely, there could potentially be a standing panel, basically, of parents and young people who are recruited from across the country. You have to ensure they are representative, with a good distribution of the issues that young people and parents might face. To commit within that annual reporting cycle to those qualitative findings, you might need to source that out so it is an independent assessment of that evidence, for obvious reasons. You do not want cherry picking of qualitative research, but there is probably a way forward for us to supplement that other data.

There is a role for good data collection and presentation as well, particularly at regional and local level, using administrative data. There is a big data part of this. It will only be complete if we have an independent qualitative assessment with a standing panel. That is how we see it.

Q38 Darren Paffey: Ultimately, we all want a strategy that deals with the issue and gets it done effectively. The Liaison Committee has said that effective strategies are those that bring together policies, activities and resources over time to achieve a stated outcome. With that definition in mind, how effective do you believe the child poverty strategy is?

Thomas Cave: I have already mentioned that it is a great start. It has identified the most effective policies that can be immediately implemented on it. The longer-term picture is a bit more challenging, because where it is enabling local implementation, that is a little bit less clear about what is happening, which is a good thing in terms of allowing devolution, allowing different approaches in different areas, but, as I have said, central Government need to maintain a focus on it. They need to understand what is happening in those local areas. Putting things in a monitoring and evaluation framework can help with that, in terms of tracking outcomes locally.



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At the same time, there needs to be a sense of what central Government might do in the longer term within that as well, which should either be commitments to further investment in social security or targets that will necessitate that commitment further down the line. Without one of those two things, there is a danger that the strategy will lose momentum in the longer term.

Laura Hutchinson: In those three buckets, the place where it could be slightly stronger is in the activities one. In all the stuff that Tom was just talking about in terms of the implementation and the roll-out in communities, there is still perhaps a bit of uncertainty around exactly how that is going to be driven from the centre and what Government can do to make those services in communities much more joined up than they currently are.

We took evidence as part of our engagement, and one thing that came out strongly from local communities is the sheer number of hoops they have to jump through in order to access support in their areas. It will not surprise you that Sure Start came up a lot as this idea that you can go through the doors of a service and you can come out with the right support that you needed, whereas now it is much more fragmented—it is much harder to navigate those systems yourself and know where to go. There is a role for central Government in advising and providing guidance, whatever that looks like, but helping to shape that joined-up connectivity between services.

Priya Edwards: I agree with what both Tom and Laura have said on the activities and join-up of services and data sharing between central Government Departments to enable this locally. I am sure it comes up all the time, but the more that can be shared, the easier it is for families downstream.

The other thing I would add is on the outcomes bucket. We have not talked about the fact that there are child poverty strategies in both Wales and Scotland, and Northern Ireland has anti-poverty measures in place. Making sure that all four nations' work on child poverty is pulling in the same direction and that Westminster enables what is happening in Scotland and what is happening in Wales to continue to thrive while also ensuring that England can catch up is really important. We would like to see with the outcomes that eventually the child poverty rates in all four nations are all lower but equivalent, so there is no disparity across borders.

Henry Parkes: The child poverty strategy has some of the hallmarks of a good strategy in the sense of a good problem diagnosis. They have clearly spent a lot of time thinking about that, and there is a clear flow through of some of the policies from that diagnosis. From that angle, it is a good strategy.

Where it does fall short, and it relates to Tom's point, is that for it to be a strategy you need to know how it has been successful and what success



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looks like. I think that is still quite vaguely defined, so I would loop it back to the conversation about targets. There are lots of targets to choose from, but you need to know if your strategy has been successful, and that it needs to be better defined.

Chair: Thank you. We have four more questions, folks, so could we focus our minds?

Q39 **Lee Barron:** Good morning and thanks for coming along. Everybody knows that a strategy like this will not be done and dusted within one Parliament. It is probably going to need at least two, and then some form of continuation. How can we move this forward? What can be done to gain public support, but probably more importantly cross-party support, to make sure that this goes into the long term and we can deliver for the future of children?

Thomas Cave: I think there is more consensus than we often believe there is. I think everyone agrees that every individual child matters, and that no one supports child poverty as an outcome. We know from research we have commissioned that 89% of the public supports action to address child poverty. Where it becomes slightly more difficult is what measures we actually take to address that issue.

A useful approach is probably a bit more of a greater recognition of the fact that investment in children's futures has a lot of positive impacts on them individually, but also on our economy as a whole. There is massive potential that we can unlock in young people. Child poverty costs our economy £40 billion a year in loss of future earnings potential and additional costs to public services, as a result of basically not using things like social security as a prevention, and it leading to worse health outcomes and worse educational outcomes. Lots of the other issues that the Government are trying to tackle at the moment, such as rising issues around mental health and declining wellbeing in children, and a link to other agendas like NEETs, and looking at child poverty as a bit more of an underpinning foundational block to basically support our society as a whole, would be very beneficial.

Laura Hutchinson: Yes, I completely agree with that. The rhetoric that the Chancellor used in her autumn budget when she was talking about the reasons for scrapping the two-child limit were important. That central theme about the impact child poverty has on public services is something that is very strongly evidenced, and talking about it through that lens can help people to understand just how important a problem this is to solve.

A lot of it is a framing point, I think. Tom spoke about NEETs; I think most people would agree that what is happening with that demographic in society now is shocking. If you go downstream of that problem, that is a problem of children growing up in disadvantaged backgrounds, so the need to tackle things early on costs the state much less as you go down the line. I know that is an obvious point for many in this room, but it is



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an important one to keep making very consistently. Poverty is extremely expensive.

Another point that is particularly compelling in recent years, after the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, is the narrative around people's change in circumstances and how easily that can happen to people. That can help to build support and consensus, particularly in things like the social security system, with more of a narrative and an argument around the fact that this is a safety net for people, and you never know at this point, with this volatility, with what is happening in the world and what could potentially come down the line, when your circumstances could change and when you might need that extra support. Positioning it in that framing would be helpful.

Priya Edwards: I agree with what both Tom and Laura have said. What I would add, which has been alluded to quite a lot in this session and with the Children's Commissioner as well, is that there is a quite widespread recognition that in lots of different ways childhood in the UK is in crisis. We talk to parents and they are worried about their kids. They are worried about other people's kids. More could be done to articulate a greater ambition for what childhood should look like in the UK, and tackling child poverty is the foundational piece of that.

Children have to be able to eat. They need a good home in order to have their own ambitions and enjoy their childhoods. I think more of a conversation about how every child deserves a good childhood, however woolly that might sound right now, can do a lot to tackle some of the stigma that parents tell us about. I very specifically encourage the Government and others to challenge more actively the stigmatising rhetoric that can come out around the children, and the parents, in poverty. First, because it damages the argument we are trying to make, but also because it has a detrimental and direct impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those kids, and that is not a state of affairs we should accept.

Q40 **Lee Barron:** We heard a lot earlier about where this sits in Government. As you know, the Child Poverty Unit now has come out of the Cabinet Office and gone into the DWP. Does that concern you in any way in relation to it being a DWP issue and therefore not an issue for other Departments? Could it get a little bit lost?

Laura Hutchinson: I do have some concerns over it. The reason it was placed in the Cabinet Office to begin with is because child poverty needs to be recognised as something that has to be tackled from a cross-Government point of view. Re-siloing the unit into the DWP, regardless of what mechanisms or accountability structure you give them, does send a signal across Government Departments that this is a DWP issue. I would have liked to see it either remain in the Cabinet Office or to see a greater team being built out through No. 10 that focuses on the monitoring and accountability of the progress and delivery of the strategy.



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Thomas Cave: Yes, and the day-to-day reality of working in Government is that it is basically just easier for the Cabinet Office to get people to engage with them on something when individual Departments have lots of different competing priorities and things like that. One thing on top of where it is actually located that the Committee might be interested in looking at is what the staffing capacity within the child poverty team is and whether that is enough to maintain and continue momentum on this.

Priya Edwards: The only thing I would add is that if it is in DWP, what can we do now to ensure that it is as cross-governmental as possible? It does need to tap into MHCLG, it needs to tap into Education, it needs to tap into Transport—I am going to forget Departments. What can we do now to ensure that the unit, wherever it sits, is empowered to do that? That comes from support from the Prime Minister and from the Chancellor to continue to drive forward a story about the Government tackling child poverty, and a commitment to tackling child poverty for the rest of the Parliament and beyond.

Henry Parkes: Yes—my point was going to be that I think it can work at DWP. I understand why it is there: it holds a lot of the levers that we would probably all emphasise in that regard. Yes, political commitment will be required for it to work and it still be based at DWP, and that is not about machinery of government; that is just political commitment. It can happen.

Chair: Thank you so much, everyone. That concludes our second panel for this child poverty strategy implementation inquiry. Thank you.