

Work and Pensions Committee

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Realising potential: Delivering the Child Poverty Strategy, HC 75

Wednesday 3 June 2026

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Work and Pensions Committee members present: Debbie Abrahams (Chair); Steve Darling; Damien Egan; John Milne.

Education Committee members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Sureena Brackenridge; Rebecca Paul; Mark Sowards; Peter Swallow; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 72-121

Witnesses

[I](#): Tom Drake, Business Head of Community Programmes, EFL in the Community; George Looker, CEO, Babyzone; Beatrice Orchard, Head of Programme (social security and work), Trussell; and Annabel Smith, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Stakeholders, West of England Combined Authority.

[II](#): Charis Chittick, Head of Policy, Strategy and Communications, One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS); Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Head of Advocacy, Praxis and Chair, No Recourse to Public Funds subgroup, Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium; and Lynn Perry, CEO, Barnardo's.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Drake, George Looker, Beatrice Orchard and Annabel Smith.

[DEBBIE ABRAHAMS *in the Chair*]

Q72 **Chair:** A very warm welcome to this joint Education Committee and Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into delivering the child poverty strategy. It is a pleasure to welcome our panel of experts today: we have Tom Drake from EFL in the Community, George Looker from Babyzone, Beatrice Orchard from Trussell and Annabel Smith from the West of England combined authority. As I say, a very warm welcome, and thank you for joining us.

I will start the questions: from your perspectives, working with families locally, what do you feel are the challenges that these families face?

Beatrice Orchard: At Trussell, we support a network of food banks right across all parts of the UK, providing emergency food provision and other practical support to families who are unable to afford food and other essentials because of extremely low incomes. That is why they are coming to the doors of food banks.

Some 62% of the emergency food parcels provided by Trussell food banks are for families with children, despite the people living in these families making up just 42% of the population. We know that the over-representation there is largely driven by families with three or more children. Our evidence is really clear that insufficient incomes—extremely low incomes, particularly from social security—are the main reason driving families to the doors of food banks.

On that basis, scrapping the two-child limit in the child poverty strategy is a hugely positive step. We know that is going to protect hundreds of thousands of children from experiencing severe hardship and needing support from a food bank in the way that too many do currently. We are already hearing from food bank staff, volunteers and parents that that is a really life-changing decision and will change lives, because those parents will be able to feed their families. We also know that health problems, housing costs, insecure and badly paid work, and significant life events are all notable issues for the families coming into food banks.

It is important to say that food banks are also telling us that they are seeing—we are seeing it in our data—more entrenched levels of hardship, with people and families needing more frequent support. For example, the number of people referred to a food bank four or more times in the same year increased by 56% between 2019 and 2025, so more entrenched hardship is an issue as well.

Q73 **Chair:** Would anybody like to add to that?

Annabel Smith: From the perspective of the west of England, which covers Bristol, Bath, north-east Somerset, south Gloucestershire and soon

north Somerset—a diverse geographical region—we are a net contributor to the UK Treasury. We are the fastest-growing regional economy.

Q74 **Chair:** Could you fix particularly on what your families are saying?

Annabel Smith: Twenty-seven per cent of our children are in poverty. That rises to 50% in certain areas. As a high-cost region, we have a particular story to tell about housing, which is a major challenge. Child poverty increases by 10% once you bring in housing costs in our region—that is a key driver. On our labour market structure, although we have significant economic strengths, 57% of the workers in our region are in the everyday economy, where we find challenges with skills development, progression and insecurity. From our perspective, we find really significant unequal distribution regionally. Within a four-mile radius in Bristol, there is near-universal progression into higher education among children growing up in affluent areas of the north, whereas in certain areas of the south, it is between 2% and 6%. I would emphasise that even within tight geographies, there is significant variation intra-regionally. I am sure we will come on to that in terms of the funding.

Q75 **Chair:** George, I know that you were trying to get in.

George Looker: Babyzone works with about 1,500 families every single week across nine different hubs in the UK. I would amplify what Annabel and Beatrice have both said: we meet a really wide variety of challenges that face our parents with very young children. It can be food insecurity, but also the lack of access to high-quality services. Time and time again, we hear from parents that they have a lack of confidence in accessing the services that they need and the support that they want. It is about how they can navigate different parts of the ecosystem—whether it is GP appointments, access to mental health support and services, or other types of high-quality provision that they need. I think it is very fragmented for them and difficult to navigate.

Q76 **Chair:** Tom, in your role with EFL in the Community, what are you noticing about the needs of the families you serve?

Tom Drake: EFL in the Community covers the 72 football club charities connected to the football clubs, and we engage with over 1.1 million participants a year. For some of our families—without repeating what others on the panel have said—it is about educational inequality. Socioeconomic disadvantage is directly linked to lower attainment, higher absenteeism in schools and increased risk of exclusion, and we have many of our football club charities delivering alternative education provision to prevent adding to the NEET data that we have recently seen.

In addition, we have some football club charities that are delivering independent schools to directly address that. In addition to what the panel have already said, there is a higher risk of vulnerability. Young people in deprived areas face greater exposure to youth violence, exploitation and antisocial behaviour. Again, we have some great examples across our network where football club charities are directly delivering programmes to tackle that.



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Q77 Chair: Thank you very much. Thinking about the child poverty strategy that the Government have produced and, as you have described, different areas, the difference in child poverty rates, and different groups of people experiencing child poverty as well, how well do you feel that the child poverty strategy will address the needs of the families that you serve? Who would like to have a go at that? I encourage succinct responses; I will be very grateful.

George Looker: From our perspective, we welcome a lot of what the child poverty strategy is doing around income. The second leg that we want to focus on today would be around infrastructure and ensuring that there is that high quality provision across the country, especially in very localised areas. That goes to some of what Annabel was saying about the discrepancy, even within a local authority or a ward—we look at it from a postcode-by-postcode standpoint and identify the families that need support in a very narrow geographic area to ensure that our support is going to those that need it most.

It is about making sure that there is the infrastructure for those families, whether it be healthcare visitors and midwifery teams or other types of infant feeding—other types of support—that they might not have access to.

Yes, the child poverty strategy is moving everything in the right direction. With the Government, we are looking to ensure that there is a sustained partnership for charities and other voluntary sector organisations such as us to ensure that there is that joined-up approach for families to ensure that, wherever they may be, they can come to places like a family hub or a Babyzone and get access to the wide range of services they need, rather than having to navigate through quite a fragmented system.

Q78 Chair: Possibly more targeting geographically and to particular cohorts.

George Looker: Yes, more targeting.

Q79 Chair: Anybody else? What is the view on how well the child poverty strategy will address the needs of your families?

Beatrice Orchard: As has been said, addressing those extremely low incomes that are driving people to food banks is absolutely fundamental across all parts of the UK. There are some really welcome moves in the child poverty strategy, particularly on the scrapping of the two-child limit, expansion of universal free school meals and support with childcare costs. Obviously, there is a lot within the child poverty strategy about trying to ensure that there are good local services in place that can be tailored to the needs of different local communities, i.e., recognising local variations in poverty and the experience of poverty and the differences in deprivation in that sense.

One of the things that has been touched on already that I would really echo is that one of the key causes of local variations in poverty is the housing market. High housing costs are absolutely driving people and families with children to food banks in certain areas. One thing that we

would like to see that has not already been addressed in the child poverty strategy is an end to the freeze in the local housing allowance. There is not sufficient action at the moment on tackling housing affordability. That is something that food bank staff and volunteers are telling us very clearly is driving people to them, particularly in large cities with very high housing costs. That is because they are not able to afford the cost of their rent.

Chair: Annabel?

Annabel Smith: Very briefly, our mayor very much welcomes the strategy, unsurprisingly, particularly the role of mayors in joining systems up locally and regionally. We would welcome that sort of strong alignment with mayoral strategic authorities as implementation partners to the strategy to have that connection between national policy and place-based delivery, particularly on funding flexibility, which I know we will touch on, and data sharing, which is a challenge that comes up consistently. From a strategic authority perspective, there is a lot that we can do in relation to adult skills, including that ability to tailor and really target geographically, and from a cohort perspective, employment and skills support locally. It is positive, and we look forward to being a delivery partner.

Q80 **Chair:** Tom, do you want to add to that?

Tom Drake: There are three key areas from the strategy that we were really welcomed by EFL in the Community. The first is driving down the cost of essentials, particularly in relation to the holiday activity and food programme, which is delivered across our network—more than 22,000 young people benefited last summer. Strengthening local support was really welcome. The Pride in Place fund is a significant investment, and our club charities are currently joining up at a local level, and we are supporting them with that from a national perspective. On children's futures, in terms of the inclusivity of breakfast clubs, our club charities engage more than 2,500 primary schools, and they are well positioned to deliver against key parts of this strategy, so it is really welcome.

Q81 **John Milne:** We have heard in evidence that charities are being asked to do more and more. There is greater demand on them, against a context of tight council budgets and now cost of living pressures. What is your experience of that? Do you think the balance between what we ask of charities and what the state should be doing is fair?

Beatrice Orchard: The first thing to say is that food banks are absolutely facing capacity constraints, like lots of local charities. Some are absolutely at the limit of what they can provide after many years of very high levels of need. The costs of operating are high. Food banks need to purchase stock to meet the gap between the food that they need to give out and the donations that are coming in. That has led to some needing to close or reduce some of the sessions that they are running, so the capacity constraints are very real.

The other key thing to stress is that advice services are under real strain. That is really important when we are talking about child poverty and ending the need for children to come to food banks. When advice services



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are overwhelmed, people are less able to get the support they need at an earlier stage, before the crisis point of needing to come to a food bank. Lots of advice services are referral partners of food banks, so if they are not able to support everyone who is trying to get in touch with them, it can be harder for people to receive a food bank referral.

On the balance between charity provision and state support, it is absolutely the case that food banks and other local charities are having to pick up things that fundamentally seem to fit better with the role of the state, and are having to invest time and energy into things like feeding people and ensuring they are not going without the essentials. That is the result of failures at national and local government level. If that was not the case, our 40,000 volunteers across food banks in the Trussell community would be able to invest all that time and energy in things that charities are really good at—some of the slower and more messy stuff, including building community connections and relational work such as befriending and running community groups that reduce social isolation. Those are protective factors against severe hardship. It is really key that we get a better balance there. That energy and support from the voluntary sector doesn't have to go into some of those fundamental tasks like actually ensuring that families are fed.

John Milne: Thank you—a very good answer.

George Looker: I agree that charities have had to step up where local infrastructure has been decimated. Obviously, that is well evidenced around Sure Start and children's centres. Over 1,000 have disappeared, and charities like ours have had to step into that.

The positive case is that we are able to be more innovative and ambitious than local services and Government bodies. That enables us to be rapid in the way that we fill gaps, identify need, and share that knowledge and best practice. We would love to do that more with the Government and with other bodies and other charities, and we welcome other partners coming into our sessions—we work with over 300 different organisations across our network. I think there is also a positive case for empowering charities and ensuring that they are well funded by the Government and supported from a commissioning standpoint.

What we see across the network we have is that we can have some great partnerships with local authorities where they have resources and they can share healthcare visitors, midwifery teams and infant feeding teams, but some local authorities cannot—they do not have the bandwidth; they are overstretched. I have found that there is a lot of disparity across the country in terms of what is available for parents and what we are able to bring to the table. That is probably identifying where those gaps are. Charities can also do a lot of work on the frontline to support the local authorities and commissioning teams to ensure there are not those gaps.

Annabel Smith: From a regional perspective, we have a very sophisticated voluntary and community sector ecosystem in the west of England. I think there is a critical role to play for mayoral strategic



authorities in bringing together a lot of those support networks and support systems at that ameliorative crisis point to ensure that as a region, we are providing support in a way that is much more holistic, much more joined up, much more coherent and much less fragmented.

For example, the mayor is currently in the process of working with charity partners to set up a regional distribution hub that serves our entire region. That will be for food and essentials, and it will co-ordinate redistribution of clothing, bedding, furniture, school supplies and household goods. That is in collaboration with FareShare South West. It is the first of its kind to be designed by a combined authority. There are many other examples of where, as a regional authority, because we sit at that functional economic geography level that reflects the realities of how people live their lives across local authority boundaries, we have a duty to ensure we are doing that convenorship at that level.

Tom Drake: The demand for support is increasing across multiple challenges, but football club charities are actively responding to that. Clubs such as Port Vale, for example, are delivering a baby bank, which supports parents facing financial and emotional pressures. It provides a real stigma-free environment for people to come to and gain access to support.

I will not echo the points that the panel has made, but one challenge that remains prevalent is that demand often exceeds the current capacity and funding. We have a limited scale and consistency of support that charities can offer. Football club charities need that longer-term investment, rather than the short-term, fragmented funding cycles, to allow us to meet the need but in a sustainable manner.

Q82 John Milne: Annabel, you touched on this already to some extent, but are there things in the strategy that you think could improve working relationships between local authorities and the third sector?

Annabel Smith: Yes, definitely. For us, it is recognising that regional leadership role that we play. There are obviously specific funding opportunities. For example, the youth guarantee fund will provide £5 million for us. We are also supplementing that with £2 million to work with voluntary and community partners, including our football trusts, to ensure that it is those organisations that have the trust and have the hyper-local relationships that are working with young people who are at risk of being NEET, for example, or families on the brink of crisis.

There are other opportunities that come through devolution and through our single settlement, and having more flexibility in our funding, to enable us to work with voluntary sector partners in a much more flexible, targeted way. Pride in Place funding is another important example, as is the better futures fund. I would just say that the better futures fund is currently due to come on-stream in 2028. It would be helpful to have that earlier, to enable us to do that targeted partnership work.

Q83 John Milne: I am overrunning my allotted time. Are there any other



comments?

Beatrice Orchard: I concur with what colleagues have said about the importance of partnership working. I would just add the crisis and resilience fund to the list of policy interventions that create specific opportunities for those improved relationships. Again, that three-year funding—that slightly longer-term funding—really helps create those opportunities for that more strategic approach.

On the role of charities and the value they can bring, one of the things is ensuring that the families, children and communities who are impacted by decisions that are being made are closely involved in that decision-making process. That is something that the child poverty strategy has tried to do, and that is really important. One food bank volunteer I was speaking to very recently, who has used her own experiences to raise awareness of hunger and hardship, said, “Children are learning the language of struggle and hardship far too early, while decisions made by people in power that shape reality are made miles away from it, and that should not be normal.” Recognising the role that charities can play, working in partnership with Government at all levels to bring the voices of children and families into those decisions, is really important.

John Milne: Thank you very much.

Q84 **Sureena Brackenridge:** My question is to Tom. Football can play an important part in supporting the community, through trusted stigma-free environments; I have seen that first hand with the brilliant work by the Wolves Foundation. I have heard about the power of the badge. Can you elaborate on what that means and share examples of good practice with the Committee?

Tom Drake: Across our 72 football club charities, as I said in my introductory statement, we engage with more than 1.1 million people a year, with a social value figure of £1.42 billion, which is significant. If I roll back to my previous role as head of a football club charity, I saw first hand the impact that the programmes can have on individuals. We took a young person who had spent their life in the criminal justice system and poverty, in a single parent household. We provided educational, household and financial support, and that person is an employee of that football club to this day. That is something I am really proud of from my time at that football club.

There are multiple examples of that. The programmes our football charities deliver run from nought-year-olds in pre-natal support at Doncaster Rovers all the way up to a 102-year-old who accesses our walking football provision. We really span every age group. There is some fantastic work going on. I could probably spend the vast majority of the remaining time talking about the work that happens up and down the country. There is just one example.

Q85 **Helen Hayes:** The Government have made some quite big changes to the arrangements for funding local government, to try to weight the funding more towards disadvantage so that local authorities are better equipped to



meet needs and to tackle child poverty.

In relation to data collection, monitoring and reporting information provided by Government to local authorities, do you think local authorities are properly equipped to deliver the most targeted and effective measures to tackle child poverty in their local areas? Annabel, would you like to start?

Annabel Smith: There are still significant challenges from a workforce perspective. In the west of England, with our unitary authorities, the mayor has put forward a NEET zero ambition, to ensure that all young people, from cradle to career, have those pathways. However, a challenge at the moment is that we do not have a clear picture of what those NEET numbers look like precisely. From that perspective, there are challenges around workforce and labour market data.

From an education perspective, given academisation and different types of education delivery across our region, there can be fragmentation. Again, at that regional level, sitting at the intersection of what is happening locally and nationally means that a lot of work is happening across regional authorities. Liverpool city region has done some great work on this with DFE to improve data sharing. Obviously, it is critical to have that preventive structural approach.

George Looker: I have talked broadly about measurement and making sure that we are setting targets. Again, I am conscious that there is no explicit numerical target, but we welcome all of the new analysis of deep material poverty, for example.

I advise you to make sure that you look at inputs, outputs and outcomes. We obsess about the inputs to make sure that we serve the right level of families and know which families are coming, but we also measure outcomes and look at things like parental confidence—really observable statistics that can be seen by charities at a small scale, and then at local authority and Government levels—making sure that that is tied to verified postcode data. Again, our concern would be that you sometimes lose these things in the averages. A lot of our work is about tying it right back down to the communities that we serve by being able to categorise by postcode.

Q86 Helen Hayes: The Scottish Government require local authorities and NHS boards to deliver child poverty action reports on an annual basis. Do you think that is a helpful requirement and should be rolled out in England, and if so, should it also apply to strategic authorities? I am thinking about how we get accountability for the reduction in child poverty at a local level, and about the opportunity that data-driven reporting provides in highlighting where there might be a need for future changes in policy and emphasis to equip local authorities to do that work.

Annabel Smith: Absolutely. I think that having an emphasis on that is critical from a policy perspective. Where my concern would sit in relation to unitary authorities is that, given the deep challenges around funding and the cost savings that local authorities are being asked to make, we



should make sure that we are not simply burdening local authorities with another area that they need to be reporting on, and that they have the adequate capacity, capability and support to be able to do that.

Regional authorities and mayors have a critical role to play there. We bring together economic and social policy and interventions as two sides of the same coin, so we need to measure them holistically. Obviously, we know that if the transport is not there, parents cannot get to work. If the skills are not there, they cannot progress. If secure housing is not there, families cannot build financial security. We need to have a holistic approach to that, so what we have done at the regional authority, which some of our counterparts are doing already, is embed our own child poverty strategy, aligned with the national strategy, in our economic growth approach.

Fundamentally, we see tackling child poverty as a key human capital driver of inclusive growth in our region. Yes, it is positive to have that emphasis at the local level, but we also need to be looking at the broader structural challenges, which are economic. I would encourage mayors to have a clearer role there.

Beatrice Orchard: Yes, our view is that there should be a requirement for local authorities and strategic authorities to produce child poverty action plans as a way to improve accountability and increase co-ordination. We need to ensure that there is further impetus for continued action on child poverty across all levels, and the child poverty strategy should be used to drive and spread best practice of what is working at the local level.

Tom Drake: We have an opportunity to better join up where data is collected. For example, the young people and families who access provisions across the 72 club charities will often access variable touch points, where there is an opportunity for us to work together to better collect that data. Local child poverty strategies can absolutely be stronger. They can involve the voluntary sector much earlier to provide those strategic contributions. Often that can come at the end point in terms of the delivery aspect, and I think that they can be involved at a much earlier stage.

Q87 **Damien Egan:** I have a question for Annabel to get the perspective from WECA. Building on Helen's point, the Government is introducing changes to local authority funding allocations, so we would be keen to get your views on those proposals and on how they will impact and hopefully reduce child poverty. How important are long-term funding settlements to you? Are there any worries or risks that you have with these changes?

Annabel Smith: On the fair funding review, for our unitary authorities, as you will know, Damien, representing part of our region, it is positive. It is positive that implementation is being staggered so that we have time to ensure that we are bedding in nuanced approaches.

As you will know, across our region the picture is mixed both economically and geographically. That means that the current allocations with regard to

local authority funding do not always reflect the true distribution of need in our region. That is particularly the case given that, even at a unitary authority level, the fair funding review may not assess one of our unitaries as being of significant need or having significant high deprivation.

However, across all our unitary authorities there are major pockets of poverty at the LSOA and hyper-local level. With high-cost areas such as Bristol and Bath, child poverty can be masked by overall prosperity and intra-regional inequalities. That is particularly the case engaging with our stakeholders at the rural level as well. We need to ensure we embed nuance around intra-regional inequalities as we roll that out.

Your second question was about long-term funding settlements. This is the first time in a decade that we have had multi-year funding settlements for unitary authorities, which is incredibly welcome. Obviously, that enables them to plan in a way that they have not been able to do before and, as all of our UAs are doing, move towards a much more systemic preventive public service reform approach and away from having to constantly be in reactive crisis-prevention mode. That is welcome.

That will also be critical for us at the regional level in terms of how we target our investment funds towards child poverty as a real economic lever to drive sustainable long-term growth. It will be critical to us as the West of England combined authority that we get towards our single settlement and that there is flexibility in terms of things such as adult skills provision and 16 to 19, to ensure that we can target and target earlier in the life course.

Q88 Jess Asato: What is your view on the Government's decision to shift emphasis from payment-by-results models to social outcomes partnerships for the commissioning of services to support families in poverty?

Annabel Smith: That is very welcome from our perspective. Again, being able to develop those social outcome partnerships with our voluntary partners and embedding that in the model speaks to George's point about outcomes rather than outputs as the measure of success. It is very welcome.

Tom Drake: I certainly echo that. Without labouring my earlier point, the longer-term investment and commissioning models for our football club charities would certainly be welcome, to avoid the challenges that Annabel has just touched on and that we are now facing as a network. It would be really welcomed.

George Looker: We really welcome the focus on social outcomes and how we can ensure that we observe the right things from parents and families in the greatest need over a long period—a 10-year horizon, but also in the moment. It is about joining those two things up. We welcome the shift.

Q89 Jess Asato: How can the Government use the better futures fund most effectively? Annabel, do you have a view?



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Annabel Smith: The better futures fund is a significant opportunity for us. It does not come into train until later in the decade, which, from our perspective, is a missed opportunity to unlock some of that opportunity early. However, we are working with our voluntary and community sector and the Office for the Impact Economy in the Cabinet Office to ensure that we are using that public money to leverage private, patient capital to target some of the greatest need in our region.

In Bristol we have the city funds model, which pools corporate social responsibility spend. We are keen to roll that out on a regional basis with support from better futures. From that regional perspective, it is about how we target public funds and ensure there is coherence in how we deploy them in order to drive capital into the areas where there is the greatest need. It is a major opportunity for us, but we would like to see it earlier.

George Looker: We welcome the fund and we would like to see support for charities and voluntary sector organisations that have a track record of delivery—the ones that are innovating and are on the frontline talking to parents. We are keen that those are put forward as part of the fund and identified as successful partners.

The other thing to think about, as I said earlier, is the infrastructure that supports them. Obviously, there is funding for capital and the buildings that the hubs might be based out of, but there are also local resources and the people supporting those families and ensuring that there is a joined-up approach so that all the services that those families need are available and accessible. That will mean they can help with navigation and getting the resources to the frontline. That is critical for the success of the programme.

Q90 **Mark Swards:** The crisis resilience fund, which, as I am sure you know, merges the household support fund and discretionary housing payments, launched in April. How effective do you think the CRF will be as a mechanism to reduce child poverty? Do you think that any changes should be made? Beatrice, I will start with you because Trussell has previously spoken positively about the CRF.

Beatrice Orchard: That is right. We are extremely positive about the CRF; it is very welcome and has the potential to help reduce child poverty in England. We know that effective and dignified crisis support for people facing financial shocks, such as the crisis payments that councils are expected to deliver under the CRF, are crucial to reducing reliance on emergency food parcels.

Importantly, a really welcome aspect of the CRF—among many others—is that it starts to join up that crisis support with wider advice and support that can help build financial resilience. The crisis and the resilience sides need to go hand in hand and can help make it less likely that families will need crisis support in the future or, ideally, at all.



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As I said before, the three-year funding commitment is key and is a vast improvement on the household support fund. We are hearing from food bank colleagues and local authority officers around the country that that is enabling a much more strategic approach. That long-term approach to delivering local crisis support and services that build financial resilience can start to make a real difference for families on very low incomes.

Compared to the household support fund guidance, the guidance is very positive, setting a much clearer strategic intent, desired outcomes and a principled approach. For example, there is guidance on prioritising cash payments for crisis payments over shopping vouchers or in-kind support. We know the evidence says that providing that choice and flexibility for families to cover the costs of the essentials they need in that moment is much more effective.

There is guidance on making support accessible, providing payments within 48 hours, putting in place a joined-up, "no wrong door" approach to local support. If implemented well, all that has real potential to make a significant difference to those families on low incomes. It is still very early days for that implementation, and the picture is a bit mixed. There are lots of positive signs that local authorities are running with this already and crisis payment schemes are available for people to apply to on websites already. There are some that are a bit further behind, but those plans are to come.

On what comes next, I spoke positively about the guidance; we really welcome that. Obviously, it is not mandatory, but we hope that it is closely followed. There is a clear role for DWP, LGA, the sector and other stakeholders who are coming together in a new CRF alliance to closely monitor and evaluate the implementation of the crisis and resilience fund. We want to see that happen to ensure that, where there is effective practice, that is being adopted more widely, particularly in areas that are perhaps not completely following the guidance in the way that we would want.

Finally, we think there must be more work to establish a more permanent solution beyond the three-year current funding round. There are lots of positives. As I said, it is obviously a challenge that there are no inflationary increases in the funding over that three-year period. It's great that there is that three-year period, but we have spoken about long-term certainty being key. We really want to see a permanent system of crisis and resilience support for people on very low incomes, alongside all the other long-term solutions that are needed to make sure people and families can weather financial shocks, so that a financial crisis does not escalate and become more sustained hardship when it does not need to.

Q91 Mark Sewards: That comprehensively answers my point about what changes you might want to see to the new CRF. My second question is pretty simple: how can local authorities be best supported to use the crisis and resilience fund to reduce child poverty, and how should they measure the impact? If you want to come in, Beatrice, that is fine, but it is open to anyone.

Beatrice Orchard: The close monitoring and evaluation of local delivery plans is key, and we want to see DWP continue to play a close role in that. We would like to see the gathering of good practice and best practice, with that then used to drive more effective practice in areas that are perhaps not taking that cash-first, but not cash-only, approach as far as we would like; where there is not such a focus on trying to make sure there is a really close connection between crisis support and the advice and wider support services that are key to reducing the need for crisis support in the first place; or where there is not such good partnership working between the local voluntary and community sectors and local authorities. We have heard about the mixed picture there so far. This does create real opportunities for good positive relationships, but, again, where we have seen progress most quickly on the local delivery plans for the crisis and resilience fund is where there are existing relationships and where there has been a good history of partnership working.

Other local authorities have said to us, "Yes, it is year 1. It's early days. We have plans to further involve the voluntary and community sector going forward," and I hope to see that. Getting all those bits of the puzzle in place is what will really help local authorities understand how to reach the families on the very lowest incomes in their areas and make sure they receive support in a timely way in line with their needs. That is what will fundamentally help ensure that the CRF does its bit in reducing child poverty. It should be closely linked in to local child poverty action plans.

On your point about how it should be measured, it is important to see those local delivery plans for the crisis and resilience fund as fundamental to local areas' drive towards reducing child poverty and having measures and targets around child poverty. The CRF being brought into child poverty action plans is really important.

Q92 **Mark Sewards:** Thank you so much. Any further comments?

George Looker: I would echo what Beatrice and Trussell were saying. For our families, early intervention—making sure we are trying to support these families before a crisis emerges—is key, so we need to ensure that elements of the CRF are focused on that as much as possible.

We also need to make sure that families who are receiving support are not just signposted but connected to other resources. Whether it is accommodation, mental health support or other challenges that they are facing, it is never one thing that brings someone to this level of crisis. We need to make sure that those people feel they are able to connect with the wider ecosystem and that that loop is then closed, rather than people just being handed over to another service. That is what we see with the families we work with—they do not feel listened to, necessarily. They feel they will have the same challenge, and they will have to repeat it several times before they are heard. We need to make sure that, as well as the CRF, there is a follow-on and that that loop gets closed.

Tom Drake: We know that 99% of our neighbourhoods with the lowest average net annual household income sit within 10 miles of an EFL football



club. We know that, as trusted local anchor institutes, we can play a key role in cascading that message across our communities. To give an example, the network supported the DWP pension credit campaign, helping to reach an estimated 800,000 pensioner households—around 37% of those eligible who were entitled to, but not accessing, pension credits. We have examples of previous work where we know we can support the cascading of the message, and I would really welcome that.

- Q93 Caroline Voaden:** I would like to ask you about Best Start family hubs. Some might say that we are slightly reinventing the wheel—we have been here before—but George, what do you think will be necessary to ensure that the roll-out of Best Start family hubs can help to reduce child poverty in local areas? Some have opened, and more will be opening over the next couple of years.

George Looker: We really welcome the Government's ambition to roll out more family hubs. The Minister has been to Babyzone and has spoken about the direction of travel and what they are aspiring to achieve. I believe that you need to have quality in order to get the volume of families engaging, and they need to be barrierless, stigma-free environments that are warm and welcoming and that parents feel proud to go to with their children. That is a fundamental principle that we cannot let be watered down.

It is about ensuring that every single Best Start family hub, voluntary organisation or charity that is providing a similar support ecosystem for a family is aspirational for those parents—that they are in high-quality buildings and have a wide array of different partner services available to them, as well as high-quality, evidence-informed sessions taking place to support parents. There is a lot of risk around disparity in provision. It is about ensuring that every single one of these settings has access to really high-quality early educators, but also other early help teams, to do that intervention right at the beginning before it becomes a challenge later on.

- Q94 Caroline Voaden:** There has been some concern in evidence that the strategy's emphasis on early years has left a bit of a gap with regard to interventions for older children aged between four and 10, who sort of fall between two stools. Does anybody have anything to say about that and about whether Best Start family hubs have a role to play in that?

George Looker: I would emphasise the value of investing early. Even the "Young People and Work" report that was published last week said that children who were not school-ready aged four or five were nearly three times more likely to be NEET at 16 to 17, and deprivation then multiplies that by a factor of eight.

I understand the sentiment around making sure you can spread it across the age range and support children through school as well, but I think the clarity of the Government's ambition in terms of investing early in the nought-to-five age range is fundamentally important.

Annabel Smith: From our perspective, we welcome that early years approach. In our region, there is a 27 percentage point gap in early



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development between children who are eligible for free meals and those who are not, and 48% of children on free school meals are achieving good outcomes, so there is a huge gap there.

From our perspective, there needs to be a structural, holistic look at the early educators and early years workforce as critical to ensuring that all children across the country are able to access really high-quality early education. We have significant workforce challenges. As a mayoral strategic authority, we, along with some of our counterparts, see developing the early years workforce and early years offer as critical to our economic success, from both a workforce perspective and a productivity perspective, in enabling parents to go to work, but also as a social mobility driver in improving those long-term outcomes. To us, from a skills perspective and an employment perspective, Liverpool city region are doing some fantastic work with their football clubs about how we get more men into early years as early educators through sports. That has to be a critical piece of the puzzle if we are to improve early outcomes—nought to five.

Q95 Caroline Voaden: Perhaps paying people working in early years the minimum wage is not going to give us the outcomes that we would like to see.

Annabel Smith: Exactly, so how do we make that an attractive profession, with progression opportunities?

Q96 Caroline Voaden: To finish, what is your connection with family hubs, Tom? Is EFL working with them?

Tom Drake: It is quite an inconsistent picture across the country. We have some really strong examples, such as Port Vale's baby bank, which I have already alluded to in terms of the support that they are providing. The inconsistency comes in where things could be better connected at local level. I'm not sure we are quite there yet.

I completely agree that the early years element is welcomed. I just think that alone it is not sufficient. I think we need to look at improving social mobility. It requires a sustained, place-based, adolescence focus, and I think one way that can be achieved is by making sure it is joined up at local level. We have our football club charities. Their bread and butter is delivering provision for young people, as I have already alluded to, from nought up to high school ages. How we connect that at local level is what we are working on nationally.

Caroline Voaden: Brilliant. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you so much, everyone. That concludes our questions for this panel. Tom, George, Beatrice and Annabel, many thanks.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Charis Chittick, Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz and Lynn Perry.

[HELEN HAYES *in the Chair*]

Q97 **Chair:** Welcome to the second panel of witnesses in our oral evidence session, which is a joint session between the Education Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee for our joint inquiry on delivering the child poverty strategy. I invite our second panel of witnesses to introduce themselves, please, starting with Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: Good morning, everyone. My name is Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, and I am head of advocacy at the charity Praxis, where we work with migrants experiencing destitution and poverty. We are also a member of the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium, where I chair the sub-group on the no recourse to public funds condition.

Lynn Perry: Good morning, everybody. I am Lynn Perry. I am the chief executive at the children's charity Barnardo's. We run over 600 services for children, young people and families across the UK, with reach to over 350,000 children, young people and families annually.

Charis Chittick: I am Charis Chittick. I am the head of policy, strategy and communications for One Parent Families Scotland. We provide advice and support for single parent families across Scotland.

Q98 **Chair:** Thank you all for being with us this morning. I will start the questioning with quite a broad question: how ambitious do you think the Government's child poverty strategy is? Are there any particular groups of children for which you think there is a gap in ambition, or who might potentially be left behind by the strategy as it stands at the moment? Lynn, I will start with you.

Lynn Perry: I think the scale and the impact of the child poverty situation we are facing at the moment should frame our ambition and the assessment of it. Across the UK, and particularly in our services, we are seeing very high levels of child poverty. Over 2 million children and young people are in deep material poverty, going without some of the very basic essentials. In that context, we are also seeing a real increase in the pressure experienced by families. Even increases in income and social security are not covering the basics for many of the families we work with. We are seeing things like bed poverty, which we have written reports on, and families being unable to afford the basics for babies. Those experiences are not evenly distributed across groups—I will say a little more about that shortly.

To come to the question on ambition, I think the strategy is a very positive first step. There are lots of welcome measures in it, but we think it could go further with a focus on some specific groups of children and families. That would make sure that support is targeted and achieves real impact, and that we can measure it in relation to specific groups and answer

questions about whether the impact is distributed evenly, or whether we see widening gaps or the maintaining of current levels for some families.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: I think the first thing to say is that the data relating to migrant children in the UK is very poor. There isn't really accurate data available on the number of children who are affected by no recourse to public funds conditions and are experiencing poverty. But the data that we do have about migrant children in poverty is pretty striking: of the 4.45 million children who are experiencing poverty in the UK at the moment, 40%, or 1.75 million, are children whose parents were born outside the UK. Not all those children will be affected by no recourse to public funds conditions—some of their parents will already be settled in the UK and some may have citizenship—but it gives us a sense of the scale and the reach of poverty amongst this cohort of children. Taking into account the picture indicated by those figures, we would say that the strategy is not sufficiently ambitious for this particular group of children, although the strategy itself is, of course, welcome. A lot of its key measures, such as the lifting of the two-child limit, are extremely welcome, as is the inclusion of a whole section on children who are affected by no recourse to public funds restrictions.

The ambition in the strategy does not match the picture that we are seeing as organisations that work with migrant children across the UK. I think the strategy unfortunately fails to acknowledge the disproportionate risk of poverty and deep poverty that this cohort of children face. It does not recognise the role that Government policy, specifically immigration policy, plays in restricting household incomes and imposing high essential costs on migrant families. Most concerningly, it does not really offer any concrete action that will materially reduce poverty for children who are affected by no recourse to public funds restrictions. It does include some important enabling steps—for example, around improving the dire situation when it comes to data relating to this group—but in terms of actual actions that will help to lift these children out of poverty, there is not enough there, in our opinion. That is particularly concerning given the direction of travel in immigration policy overall, where we are looking at proposed reforms to the immigration system that will leave families in poverty subject to NRPF restrictions for 10, 15, 20 or even 30 years. That is a big concern, and we would have liked to have seen more ambitious action through the strategy.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Charis Chittick: I echo what has been said. We warmly welcome this as a first step and a first child poverty strategy, and we really welcome the decision to scrap the two-child limit, but we are concerned by the policies that remain in universal credit that will limit the impact of that, including the benefit cap, the five-week wait and the young parent penalty, where under-25s will get a lower payment. For us, there is concern that it is not going far enough.

We welcome the inclusion of child maintenance in the child poverty strategy. At One Parent Families Scotland, we have conducted in-depth



research into child maintenance over the last three years. We conducted a research project in partnership with IPPR Scotland and Fife Gingerbread called Transforming Child Maintenance, where we worked with parents who are both paying and receiving child maintenance to see how it works for them and to look at what solutions we need. As part of that project, IPPR Scotland conducted some modelling, which showed that over 200,000 children across the UK could be lifted out of poverty if they were able to access the child maintenance owed to them. That is a significant tool in the reduction of poverty, but we need deeper reforms to the system than are laid out in the strategy. We are concerned that, at the moment, too many children will be left behind.

We have approximately 2 million single parents across the UK. That is one in four families with dependent children, so it is a significant amount. In Scotland, we have identified priority families, and single parents are one of those priorities. It is about looking at what further can we do in the UK strategy. We would encourage the inclusion of priority families as a way to target families and groups that are at greater risk of poverty. That would be including single parent families, families with more than two children, and many others. I am sure will get into more detail on that.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q99 **Jess Asato:** The Scottish Government have identified six priority groups of families at risk of child poverty, but there are differences of opinion as to whether the UK Government should take a similar approach. What do you think about the Scottish Government's approach? If you agree with it, what do you think the priority groups should be?

Charis Chittick: We have six priority families in Scotland: single parent families, ethnic minority families, families with three or more children, families with a baby under the age of one, families with a mother under the age of 25 and families with a disabled person. A lot of people fall into more than one of those groups—there is a lot of overlap. These are families who have been identified as at higher risk of poverty because of their increased costs or limitations on earning higher incomes placed on them.

For us, identifying priority families recognises the gendered nature of poverty, as well as the link between children's poverty and women in poverty. Not having these categories makes it harder to identify and target support where it is needed. Without them, it is also harder to measure the impact of poverty. In Scotland, we measure poverty across those different groups, so we can track progress for those who are at higher risk. In the data from 2025, we found that approximately one in four families in Scotland were in poverty; for single parent families, that was 36%. It gives you a very clear comparison between those who are at greater risk.

Lynn Perry: The focus on the specific groups, as has already been outlined, is quite helpful. There are two key principles. One is to recognise the importance of the intersectional approach and to recognise that

children's experiences of poverty are quite often complex and multifactorial. It is also important, as the second point of principle, that if that targeted approach is to work effectively, it has to sit alongside a whole-population approach, and that we do not lose sight of some of the universal measures that are essential to keep an eye on in respect of child poverty.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: I have nothing further to add.

Q100 **Damien Egan:** To follow up on that, in the work to reduce child poverty, how do you take into account the intersectionality and overlaps between different groups? And a question for Lynn on something we discussed at the previous Committee. Do you have any thoughts on those six targeted groups from the Scottish Government? Perhaps Charis might want to comment on this. How do we ensure low-income white British/white Scottish families are captured? In my constituency in Bristol, that would be the group that teachers say they are most worried about.

Lynn Perry: That speaks to my second point. We need a twin-track approach. There is merit in targeting specific groups, where we know there is deep and persistent poverty, and also where some of the drivers of poverty and its intersectional nature need to be better understood. I don't think that can be at the expense of having a whole population approach, in respect of enhancing rather than limiting the areas of focus. That is the right way to approach it. Universal measures remain essential, to ensure we are lifting all children out of poverty. But there are some children who are in greatest need, and it is critical that they do not get left behind.

Charis Chittick: I would add that it is not an either/or, but a both/and approach that we need. We see that in Scotland through measures such as the Scottish child payment. That is a universal payment that goes to all families on qualifying benefits with children under 16. It is a payment of £28.40 a week for every child under the age of 16 in that household. That is a universal payment, not just for priority families. Next year we are trialling an additional payment for families with a baby under one, to reflect the increased cost and risk of poverty in that first year. For those families, the payment will go up to £40 from the next financial year, that is from 2027.

Q101 **Damien Egan:** And that is universal.

Charis Chittick: Yes, the Scottish child payment is universal.

Q102 **Chair:** Can I just check? You mentioned universal for families on qualifying benefits, so not completely universal.

Charis Chittick: No, it is not like child benefit. It is for low-income families—sorry—but it is universal in that it is not just for a priority family group.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: Could I add to that? Thinking about priority groups, when we have a group of potentially hundreds of thousands of children who are entirely legally cut off from the social security system by immigration policy, there is a strong case for treating

them as a priority group. By definition, many of the levers pulled in the strategy around improving or extending access to the social security system to other groups will not include those children or benefit them. We would like to see migrant and refugee children included as a priority group, if that is the approach that is taken.

Q103 Debbie Abrahams: Before I move on to my substantive question, I would like to ask Charis about the six priority groups. How long have you had them, and what have you recorded on the prevalence of poverty in those groups?

Charis Chittick: That was set up as part of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. That enshrined in law legally binding child poverty targets that the Scottish Government have to reach by 2030. As part of that, we identified the priority family groups and key targets—that less than 10% of children should be living in relative poverty, less than 5% in absolute poverty and less than 5% in combined low-income and material deprivation.

Q104 Debbie Abrahams: What shift have you in the priority groups to bring them up to the Scottish average?

Charis Chittick: What we have seen is the difference that having support makes in Scotland. Having measures like the Scottish child payment has made a significant difference for families. In the most recent child poverty stats, we see that in Scotland we have one in five children in poverty, compared with one in four across the UK. That shows the difference that having those different policy choices can make.

Q105 Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry to be pointed, but what difference has it made to, for example, disabled children or children living in a disabled household? Have you seen a closing of the gap for those children who, on average, live in poverty and those groups who, as you defined, are more likely even than that to be living in poverty?

Charis Chittick: The most recent data is not as accurate as we would like, given the change in the way of reporting poverty this year. We do not have the breakdown for priority families in this current year, so it would be difficult to give a very up to date answer on that at the moment.

Q106 Debbie Abrahams: Thank you. Moving on to my substantive question, our predecessor Work and Pensions Committee undertook an inquiry during covid on the impact of no recourse to public funds on families. That affects predominantly migrant families, but not exclusively—it includes anybody who has been out of the country for a certain period. A British citizen who returns after a year is not entitled to public funds. Not everybody knows that. In addition, not everybody knows that migrant families with a right to work do not necessarily have the right to a recourse to public funds. The political rhetoric around that is very unhelpful.

How helpful is the child poverty strategy on that? If it is not—Josephine, you mentioned in your opening remarks that you think it could probably do more—what specifically would you like to see change?



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Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: Let me start by clarifying, as a broad statement, that almost all migrants who come to this country will be affected by NRPF restrictions. They include people who are here on a visa and people who have leave to remain, potentially as a family member, a worker or a student, but NRPF also affects people who are in the asylum system. Although asylum seekers are entitled to a separate system of support, technically, they still have NRPF and are not able to access the mainstream benefits system. In addition, you have people who lack regular immigration status. It is very hard to know how many of those people there are, but estimates put it between 600,000 and 800,000.

Finally, there is a group of British citizen children who are affected by NRPF, even though they are citizens, because their parents are affected by NRPF and access to benefits goes via the parents. Again, we have absolutely no idea how many of those children there are, because the Home Office has no idea. The largest group is those who are affected by NRPF as a condition of their visa. As you rightly point out, that includes people who are working.

In terms of the strategy and what it offers for that group of children, as I said at the start, the sort of enabling steps that the strategy sort of lays out are really welcome. We desperately need better data, so it is really welcome to see the commitment to include a question in the family resources survey next year, which I understand will include a question about both immigration status and about NRPF status, which is critical.

There is also a promise of some improved guidance on section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and how that relates to local authorities' duties to destitute families affected by NRPF. Again, that is welcome, but the support provided under section 17 was never intended to provide long-term poverty protection. It is meant to be short-term crisis support where there is a child in need. The levels of support that councils provide are often below poverty level, so it is not a kind of support that will lift families out of poverty as a general rule.

The other issue with section 17 support is that local authorities do not get any additional funding to provide support to families with NRPF that they are supporting, so it is an unfunded commitment that they have a duty that they have to carry out. Local authorities then have to draw on their already overstretched social care budgets to provide the support. Again, there is not clear data on how many families are being supported in this way and what the cost is, but analysis done by the University of Oxford's COMPAS a couple of years ago put the figure at £100 million a year at least. That commitment is welcome in the strategy, but it will not be lifting families out of poverty.

As I said at the start, in the context of the reforms coming down the track in the immigration and asylum policy space around the earned settlement reforms, which will see families enduring no recourse to public funds restrictions for significantly longer, we had hoped to see more ambitious offers for this group of children. In terms of what we would have liked to have seen, we know what works to reduce poverty for families. We know



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that access to the social security system is key. We know that access to local crisis support services is key. Families who are affected by no recourse to public funds do not have either of those things. They are legally barred from accessing those things. That is really what we would have liked to have seen in the strategy, and I hope it can be taken into account moving forward.

Ideally, we would like to see families who have children under the age of 18 not subjected to NRPF restrictions. That would be the best way to make sure that as many children as possible are offered poverty protections. It would not mean that all migrant families are able to access benefits. They would still be subject to the same system of means testing as everybody else, but they would at least be entitled to access crisis support if they needed it, and the top-up function that the social security system plays when families are earning low incomes that are not enough to make ends meet.

Q107 Debbie Abrahams: Could you write to us about how we could improve the data collection, so that we have a more accurate understanding of the numbers?

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: Absolutely.

Q108 Peter Swallow: We have heard a range of ideas for how the Government might better support children from single parent families, such as work allowances, the extension of free childcare entitlements and changes to the child maintenance service. From their casework, many MPs will know how necessary it is to fix child maintenance. What do you think the Government can do better to support children from lone parent families? Charis, you have mentioned many things already. Is there anything you wanted to add?

Charis Chittick: Single parent families have been disproportionately impacted by cuts to the UK social security system, including the benefit cap and the two-child limit, which is now being scrapped. We would love to highlight the young parent penalty. That is where under-25s are paid a lower rate of universal credit than over-25s. That used to be mitigated for young parents; it is not any more. That is why we call it the young parent penalty. The costs are still the same for those young people. It costs the same amount to raise a child whether you are 22 or 32. We really need to see that policy changed to protect children and families as well.

The other thing I would highlight is stricter work requirements that have been introduced by the last UK Government. That now requires single parents in receipt of universal credit to work up to 30 hours a week when their child turns three. Single parents are sole carers and sole earners. They face a number of barriers when it comes to sustaining employment, so that is a real concern for us. Across our services at One Parent Families Scotland, we see families struggling with that and facing greater economic hardship because of that—the high cost of childcare. Childcare is a devolved issue, so I will not get into that in too much detail. There is the cost of housing and basic necessities as well.



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There are the barriers to sustainable employment faced by single parent families as well. Those include things such as inflexible work hours and limited opportunities for career progression. We have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment among single parents as well, and many of them are in lower-paid jobs, so are reliant on social security to top up income there as well.

Q109 Peter Swallow: Lynn, you have championed universalism today, but is there anything in particular that you think we should do to support single parent families?

Lynn Perry: The benefits cap is one of the issues that disproportionately affects lone parent families. We see and hear that from a number of families that we work with in Barnardo's. Lone parent families make up 70% of capped households. Clearly, that consideration would be very helpful in alleviating poverty for that specific group. There is also some evidence to indicate that only a small proportion of capped households are able to move into employment as a result, and that is for some of the reasons you have already talked about in respect of structural barriers—things such as flexible work and affordable childcare—and some of those assumptions are quite challenged by the lived experiences of parents we talk to. We think that the benefits cap is pushing some lone parent families into deeper hardship, and removing that would have a really significant impact.

Q110 Peter Swallow: Josephine, is there anything you want to add?

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: No, thank you.

Charis Chittick: Can I add something on child maintenance? I realised that I missed that as well. We can send over the research we have done; we have 14 detailed recommendations. Don't worry—I will not go into all 14 of them today, but there are four key areas we are looking at in child maintenance. We are looking at transforming the system so that it works for every family and not just a few, so that involves things such as removing the fees that exist at the moment.

We are looking at improving the support outside the system so that parents can get help at the right time. We found in our research that there is a lack of advice and support around child maintenance; it is not necessarily included in general income maximisation or financial inclusion work, and that is because advisors are not confident in knowing how to support people to access it. We are rolling out a project across Scotland with specialist advice for single parents for child maintenance, but we will also be running training for local citizens advice bureaux and places like that to increase confidence in supporting parents to navigate that system as well, and we would encourage the same.

We are looking at updating the formula to make it fair, up to date and reflective of real living costs—it is very out of date at the moment—and at making the social security system work better for separated families working in partnership with child maintenance. I am happy to send over more detail on that.

Q111 Steve Darling: I thank you all for coming today and for all the incredible work that your organisations do. My question is for Lynn from Barnardo's. Can you reflect on the strategy and whether it goes far enough for care-experienced youngsters? Some thoughts on that would be really helpful, and then I have a follow-up question.

Lynn Perry: We know that care experience really compounds poverty and poorer outcomes for that population of children and young people, and we see that show up statistically in poorer educational attainment, higher levels of mental health and the 40% of care-experienced children and young people not in education, training or employment, which of course has a longer-term bearing on their ability to earn. Financial hardship is widespread among the care-experienced young people we work with in Barnardo's. One of the things that young people repeatedly remind us of when they are making the transition to independent living is that many of them do not have the bank of mum and dad to fall back on.

One of the things that really compounds the situation for young people leaving care is that they can only receive the under-25 rate of universal credit, yet many of them have very expensive housing, energy and transport costs. I have spoken to young people who talk to us about being at the outer edges of communities because of the availability of accommodation that is affordable for them, and that then has a compound impact on things such as transport costs to access community support networks and some of the levers that might lift them out of longer-term poverty. It is particularly difficult. There is a cliff edge at 18, which many young people describe as being the point at which they start to experience real, deep poverty and report rising debt.

Q112 Steve Darling: So where would you say the greater levers should be at play in the strategy?

Lynn Perry: This is where the intersectionality is really important. For considerations about the universal credit rate for under-25s, there is a really important intersection with a focus on housing and the cost of housing and transport for young people who are care experienced.

One of the things that young people talk to us about in particular is not being able to get a deposit for a house and not having a guarantor. There are particular levers and a cross-Departmental approach that we could draw on in order to improve the financial situation of young people in care.

Q113 Steve Darling: You have talked about a cross-Departmental approach, but in my personal experience of trying to support care-experienced youngsters, it is about how you get the whole of the community to support cared-for kids. Where could this strategy could go further as far as trying to get the whole of communities to support care-experienced youngsters, rather than thinking, "It's the state's problem"?

Lynn Perry: I think children who have been taken into care consider the state to be their corporate parent. Therefore, I think one of the most important things for them is to see priority from their corporate parent reflected in policy levers. Access to support beyond the age of 18 is more



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limited. There are lots of transitional challenges in moving to adult services. Many young people describe a cliff edge at which all support drops off for them.

To be fair, there have been some really good measures in policy to try to increase support through Staying Put arrangements and longer-term support, but we could do more around things such as food, transport, reduction in energy costs and digital access for young people. We work with some corporate partners to provide things such as pathways to employment for targeted groups of young people and in particular care-experienced young people, but there are policy levers and structural solutions that young people themselves want to see from the state as their corporate parent.

Q114 Caroline Voaden: In 2022, Wales launched the first basic income pilot for care leavers and for a couple of years was paying young people £1,600 a month to help them with the transition that you have been talking about and to gain some independence post leaving care. There were some issues with it, and the pilot has been ended now. Is there anything you think the rest of the UK could learn from that experiment and are there ways to improve on it?

Lynn Perry: In some targeted areas. I talked about housing as an example. We know that young people really struggle to get suitable and stable housing. Financial surety in relation to that is really important. There are particular points in a young person's life where that additional support really enables longer-term change.

In some of our employment, training and skills work, as an example, we have something called a springboard fund. One of the things that enables is young people using money that we provide to them in order to do things like buy a transport ticket that might cover them for the first two months in employment until they are receiving a salary. Similarly, if they need a pair of boots, a coat or a bike for work, they are able to afford some of those things. There are some essential things that funds of that nature can help young people with.

There are also some quite creative and innovative approaches to providing support to young people through things such as corporate partnerships. For some young people, that is working with others around setting up home and managing some of the associated costs. That type of fund is generally used for real essentials in the transition to independence for young people. A focus on that that applies a lens of poverty and long-term change by setting young people up at the outset is a really positive thing. We should take the positive learnings from that and think creatively about how we can marble that through policy, partnerships and approaches to improving outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Q115 Caroline Voaden: Thank you. I have a quick follow-up for Charis. One thing that you have not mentioned, in talking about your priority groups, is that among the cohort of lone parents are bereaved parents. Widowed parent's allowance was changed in 2017 and replaced by bereavement



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support payments, which last for only 18 months. That has made a radical difference to people with young children who are bereaved, some of them very suddenly. They often lose the main or only income earner in the house and can be plunged into poverty at a really difficult time. Do you have any thoughts on that? The payment has not been uprated since 2017.

Charis Chittick: We are deeply concerned by that change. We see the impact of that on the parents we support at One Parent Families Scotland. I am aware that there is a parent-led campaign that is calling for that to change, to be uprated and to last for longer, so that families are not put at that cliff edge and risk point at a time when they are still grieving and still finding their feet after a very difficult loss. We completely support that campaign, and we have added our name to it. We would absolutely be in favour of changing that.

Q116 **Caroline Voaden:** Just to clarify, you do not think 18 months is long enough.

Charis Chittick: No.

Caroline Voaden: I declare an interest, having received that payment for many, many years. I do not think it is long enough either.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: May I add one point on care-experienced young people? As others have said—this is more in relation to the earlier question—the Government have laudable aims when it comes to improving outcomes for care leavers, including reducing poverty, but at the moment the Home Office is pursuing consulting on proposals that would actively push a significant cohort of care leavers into destitution. You may be aware of the family returns consultation that the Home Office is running at the moment, which proposes cutting off normal care-leaving support from young people without secure immigration status. That will include care leavers who have sought asylum and been refused.

In the experience of the members of the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium, these young people are often extremely vulnerable and have experienced significant trauma. Often their claims have been refused not because the claims are not valid, but because they have not received proper legal advice. There is also a wider group of care leavers from migrant backgrounds for whom the local authorities responsible for them have failed to resolve nationality and immigration status while they were children in care. These young people may include some who have been born in the UK. Under these proposals, the support that will be available to these groups of young people will be extremely limited and will be a significant change from the current system. We expect that they will result in care leavers being cast out, essentially, and left to experience destitution without any support.

I make this point not only because it is pertinent to the question, but because it highlights a bigger problem, which is that the Home Office is consistently designing policy that is driving up child poverty and destitution, without having to account for those impacts. Yes, the data



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question is there. Having spent the last five years trying to get better data out of the Home Office, we would say that there has been a lack of political will in trying to answer questions about how many children have NRPF and what proportion of them are living in poverty. We would hope that the strategy can become a mechanism by which the Home Office needs to account for the impact of its policies on children and, specifically, on child poverty.

Q117 Sureena Brackenridge: My question will be to Lynn, but other panel members should add anything that they wish to share. Lynn, could you outline your experience of how child poverty increases the risk of children and young people coming into contact with the criminal justice system?

Lynn Perry: I spent a number of years working as a youth offending team officer and have some experience of seeing how the intersection of risk and need results in too many children and young people having their needs met through the criminal justice system. Part of that picture is that we do not have sufficient investment in prevention and early intervention services.

A significant proportion of the children's social care budget is now spent on crisis and late intervention. As a result, there are many families including young adolescents who are not getting the right support at the right time to meet their needs in a way that might prevent them from being exposed to further harms and risks. We wrote a report back in 2023 called "Invisible Children" that highlighted a very clear link between poverty and an increased risk of criminal exploitation.

One of the challenges is that there are increasingly sophisticated means of grooming children and young people. We saw a proliferation of online grooming during the pandemic. Organised criminal gangs are very good at coercing children and young people who find themselves in situations of need. One of the things that we know drives young people's involvement is financial hardship. That is particularly challenging when those children and young people are then dealt with as criminals within the criminal justice system, when in fact they are often in very desperate need of support.

We have seen poverty as a risk factor for exploitation, particularly where families are struggling to provide necessities. Children find themselves in financial hardship. We live in a culture where comparison is rife, and lots of children and young people are seeing others who have access to things that, for those in poverty, are just not open to them. I think those things leave children at risk.

We are also increasingly seeing smaller debts being used to exploit children who find themselves in those situations. It is a real challenge when families are struggling, and children are sometimes feeling that pressure to step up and meet their own needs and sometimes the needs of siblings, parents and carers. We know that that group of young people in poverty are also more likely to face school exclusion. They have unmet additional needs and often poor mental health and instability in their home



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environment. All those overlapping pressures increase exposure to harm and reduce access to protective support at the right time.

Sureena Brackenridge: Charis and Josephine, do you have anything you wish to add?

Charis Chittick *indicated dissent.*

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz *indicated dissent.*

Q118 **John Milne:** There are lots of causes of poverty. Some of them, such as higher housing costs, are by necessity a long-term fix. However, the risk of criminal exploitation is happening now to today's kids. Is there anything the strategy is missing to help with that very real problem today, or is it doing the job we hope it is? If I could turn to Charis—who, coincidentally, I am meeting next week—first.

Charis Chittick: Everything Lynn said highlights the issues we have here. It is too easy to look at the cost of poverty as simply the cost of social security. Actually, we know that poverty costs so much more and inaction on poverty is more expensive than prevention. We would call for greater investment in prevention, and we see the benefit of that. If we go back to the Scottish child payment, we have seen the impact of that for families in Scotland, but it is not enough. We should not need to have a Scottish child payment; it is there because of the inadequacy of universal credit. What we need to see is incomes increased and families having enough to live on.

When the Scottish child payment was first introduced, it was only £10 a week per child. However, families told us at that point that it paid for things such as swimming lessons that they could not otherwise afford. Now families are telling us that they could not live without it. They are having to use it to pay for their food shop because the cost of living has gone up so exponentially, yet we have not seen universal credit rise alongside it to help guarantee covering the essentials. We have got to look at that kind of preventative maximising of incomes.

The other thing I would say is that we should not be looking at the child poverty strategy in isolation from the universal credit review. The two things should be happening together to make sure that there are not any unintended consequences from the universal credit review.

Lynn Perry: Access to affordable housing is, of course, an important part of this. But we hear from some of the families that we work with that even when they have access to suitable housing, they are struggling with basic essentials like furniture. I have heard of families with very young children who are unable to put them down on the floor because there are no floor coverings. Those things are impacting children's development—how soon they can crawl or when they can take their first steps. Having identified an issue arising in our services, we did a lot of work around bed poverty—the numbers of children who do not have their own bed or are sharing beds with siblings or parents, or of parents who are sleeping on the couch and then getting up to try and do a day's work, which is challenging.

Access to housing and good social security are important factors, but we are increasingly finding that people cannot meet basic essential needs in their homes. Inevitably, the money runs out before the end of the month, so when the washing machine breaks, parents are washing school uniforms at the sink. They are in desperate and dire need of financial support to address some of those bigger issues. I think it is important to understand that shelter is critical at a foundational level, but there is also something about the suitability of those homes for children.

Q119 **John Milne:** Josephine, do you have anything to add?

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: I have talked a lot about the role of immigration policies in driving poverty for migrant families. To be a bit more specific, we see immigration policies that restrict family incomes, impose high costs and constrain families' access to local services. There is a range of areas in which the strategy could potentially act.

In terms of restricting family incomes, restricted visas make it hard for people to switch employers so they cannot get into high paying jobs—they are stuck with one employer, often at the same level. We have a system that relies on a series of short-term visas—even when people are in this country on pathways to settlement, which currently are around five years on average. But that is not a five-year visa, it is a series of 30-month visas that have to be renewed regularly. Again, that makes it hard for people to progress at work.

As I have said at length, there are also legal barriers to accessing the social security system, which is a key way that families earning low incomes access top-up support, as we have heard. But we also see families that do not have the same access to, for example, support with the cost of childcare. Although migrant families can access the universal offer for three and four-year-olds—15 hours a week—and some families that are struggling are able to access the 15-hour offer for disadvantaged two-year-olds, they do not have access to the newly rolled out 30-hour childcare support for children from nine months and up. Last year, IPPR and Praxis jointly published a piece of analysis that showed the impact that that has on families' ability to earn. It has an impact across different family structures, whether in dual or single earner households, but single parent families where single parents are earning low incomes are facing the biggest challenges. Our modelling found that a single parent who is affected by NRPF and therefore cannot access the 30 hours of childcare is 38% worse off every year compared to a parent in exactly the same circumstances who is earning the same amount but is able to access the social security system and the 30-hour childcare offer.

The immigration system imposes extremely high costs on families. These are essential costs; if you do not pay them, you lose your immigration status. It is hard to generalise because the costs vary a lot across different types of visa, but for families that Praxis works with, who tend to be on what is called the 10-year route to settlement, it currently costs a family of four—two adults and two children—more than £70,000 over the course of ten years. That is equivalent to about an extra £600 a month that these

families need to find on top of their housing or childcare costs, or whatever else it might be. One of the problems is that it is not a monthly cost; it has to be paid in full and upfront at every visa application for the coming two and a half years. It is a really significant cost that we know is associated with higher levels of debt and financial hardship.

There are a range of things that the strategy could do when it comes to addressing these problems and preventing poverty for migrant children. Extending access to the extended childcare entitlement is a really obvious one that I have talked about. When it comes to people who are in the asylum system, allowing people to work at an earlier point is a really obvious one that would enable more parents to be able to support themselves and their children. For families where parents are working but incomes are too low, access to the social security system is the really obvious one.

When it comes to the costs, one of the things that Praxis has advocated for is visa fees not being charged above the cost to Government of processing people's immigration applications. At the moment, an extension application for one visa currently costs three times the administrative cost—a family is paying three times what it costs the Government just to extend their leave to remain. When it comes to applications for indefinite leave to remain, the price that families pay is six times the administrative costs. That is another area in which the Government could choose to act if they wanted to help to reduce some of the costs that families face.

Q120 Steve Darling: How can the Government build trust around this strategy, both for the delivery and the future monitoring and development of it?

Lynn Perry: The first thing to say is that we recognise through our services that there is a huge amount of stigma attached to living in poverty. For lots of families, and some of the particular groups that we have talked about today, there is sometimes a fear about requesting help and support. Trust is absolutely critical for families to be able to come across the threshold of services in their local communities and build trusted relationships with individuals. It is critical that they do not have to tell their story multiple times and that they have single points of contact they are able to go to.

One of the things that our practitioners tell us is that the language that is used to describe families who are in poverty is too often detached from their reality and experiences, and they can find that quite dehumanising. More empathy in the way in which we talk about poverty and the impact of poverty and social security is really important, and we welcome the shift in language in the strategy; we think that is a very positive start. There is a clear role for Government in showing continued leadership in that vein, and a really explicit commitment to treating people with dignity and respect, which we are pleased to see is at the heart of the strategy.

It is also about listening. I was really heartened to see some of the engagement that had taken place in preparation for the strategy. It is

really critical that that continues during implementation, and that when we are looking at measures of success or barriers to progress, we hear directly from children, young people and families, and they feel that they have a continued role in shaping the strategy and its implementation in practice. We do a lot through co-production and co-design with children and families. I have not yet known it to not lead to better outcomes to have their participation, engagement and influence in that work, so it is absolutely critical.

You would expect me to say this as the chief executive of Barnardo's, but the voluntary sector has a really important role to play. We know that people who live in our communities are often more likely to come and engage with a voluntary organisation than with a statutory organisation.

My final point is that we need to be quite assertive in our outreach to families. Not all families will find their way to the threshold of our services. It is really important that we are cognisant of those groups that need additional help, and that we find ways to reach and effectively support them. There are very few groups that are hard to reach, despite being characterised as such. It is about our approach to delivering services in local communities.

Q121 Steve Darling: Anyone else?

Charis Chittick: I agree with what Lynn has said. The voices of people who have lived experience of poverty should be central. I would add that we must ensure that includes people from all four nations of the UK, to make sure we get the experiences of the different UK nations and regions. We must also ensure that it is a deliberative participatory approach—not a tick-box exercise where people are retraumatised in having to share their experience, but one in which they are part of co-creating solutions.

The other thing is building the right monitoring and evaluation, right from the start, into the delivery on the strategy. For us, that goes back to the priority families. Having priority family groups established would provide a baseline for poverty levels, which would allow us to get the data to report on each year. We would also encourage the development of legally binding targets, as we have done in Scotland. That gives accountability to the plan and its delivery. We would encourage the UK Government to work collaboratively with the devolved nations in creating those strategies, and to make sure they are working in partnership and collaboratively on the targets that already exist in devolved nations.

Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz: The Government's child poverty strategy was published a week or 10 days after the Home Office published its earned settlement proposals and a set of sweeping reforms to the asylum system. Thinking about building trust, I think a more cross-governmental approach to poverty reduction for children that includes the Home Office would be really welcome.

The earned settlement proposals will extend the standard settlement pathway from five years to 10 years, 20 years or even 30 years, and they



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will specifically target longer routes to families that earn lower incomes. Care workers, as we know, earn very low wages, and they have a dedicated 15-year minimum route to settlement. The earned settlement proposals include a range of penalties for people who earn their incomes. The way to shorten routes is to earn a higher income, and as we know that is not in reach for many people.

The settlement proposals also include proposed penalties for people who have already accessed benefits. As you know, the Home Office's earned settlement proposal is that they are applied retrospectively to people who are already in this country. Where a family has needed to access benefits for a period of, let's say, 12 months, they would now be looking at a standard 10-year route to settlement plus an extra five-year penalty, simply for accessing benefits, which is something they cannot undo because they have already accessed the benefits.

If that family has needed benefits for more than 12 months, they will be looking at an extra 10 years. From a child's perspective, that is their entire childhood—an entire childhood spent in this country locked out of access to the social security system. The point is that these are families who are on pathways to settlement; their future is in this country. Their future is in this country.

From the perspective of no recourse to public funds, our immigration system treats someone who comes to this country to visit the tourist attractions in the same way that it treats a family who is here, from the outset, on the pathway to settlement. We carried out some analysis to try to understand what the poverty impact of the earned settlement proposals might be. It is hard to do because of the data gaps and because a lot of the details of the proposals is still unclear, but we found—looking only at the children of parents who are on work visas and on the pathway to settlement, so not everyone—that by 2029, around 130,000 children will still be in poverty if these proposals go ahead.

By dropping the earned settlement proposals and allowing these families to access settlement after five years, as is currently the case, the Government could lift 90,000 children out of poverty—if their parents were enabled to get settlement after five years, they could access the social security system. When we think about building trust, the positive and welcome intention behind the child poverty strategy—lifting all children out of poverty, reducing poverty for all children and not punishing children for decisions made by their parents or circumstances that are entirely outside their control—needs to be applied to all children and across all areas of policy.

Chair: That brings us to the end of questioning for today. I thank you all very much indeed for coming to answer our questions this morning. If there are points of detail that you were not able to get across to the Committees today, please write to us afterwards. That would be very welcome. That brings our session today to a close.