HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Children in poverty: Measurements and targets, HC 1138

Wednesday 14 April 2021

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Watch the meeting

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

Education Committee Members present: Dr Caroline Johnson and Kim Johnson.

Questions 45 - 77

Witnesses

I: Professor Paul Bywaters, Professor of Social Work, University of Huddersfield; Professor David Taylor-Robinson, Professor of Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool; and Yasmin Rehman, Chief Executive Officer, Juno Women's Aid.

II: Sophie Howes, Head of Policy, Child Poverty Action Group; Rebecca Jacques, Policy Officer, The Children's Society; and Charlotte McDonough, Policy Adviser, Save the Children.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Professor Paul Bywaters, Professor of Social Work, University of Huddersfield.

CPM0005

Professor David Taylor-Robinson, Professor of Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool

CPM0030

Yasmin Rehman, Chief Executive Officer, Juno Women's Aid.

CPM0013

Sophie Howes, Head of Policy, Child Poverty Action Group

CPM0028

Rebecca Jacques, Policy Officer, The Children's Society

CPM0034

Charlotte McDonough, Policy Adviser, Save the Children.

CPM0021

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Paul Bywaters, Professor David Taylor-Robinson and Yasmin Rehman.

Q45 **Chair:** A warm welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee. I am particularly grateful to all the witnesses for being willing to join us on the two panels we have this morning. Can I first of all ask each of the witnesses on the first panel to introduce yourselves to us, starting with Professor Paul Bywaters?

Professor Bywaters: Good morning, Chair. I am professor of social work at the University of Huddersfield.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Good morning, Chair. I am professor of public health and policy at the University of Liverpool and professor of child health at the University of Copenhagen. I lead a research group addressing inequalities in health and we provide evidence for the WHO on social inequalities.

Yasmin Rehman: Good morning, Chair. I am chief executive of Juno Women's Aid, a domestic violence charity in Nottingham City and South Nottinghamshire.

Q46 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for joining us. Can I put to each of you a question, first of all? Can you tell us what we know about the impact of poverty in childhood on health in later life? I wonder whether each of you could comment on that, starting with Professor Bywaters.

Professor Bywaters: I will leave some of this to Professor Taylor-Robinson, who I think has done more work in this area, but particularly in relation to my area of children's social care, there is some recent evidence about the long-term consequences of being in care for those children in adult life. It has been shown that over the 20 or 30 years into adult life, children who have been in care are much more likely to both suffer from chronic and acute ill health and have shorter lives.

That is relevant to the issue of poverty because the chances of being in care in the first place are so much higher for families living in poverty. A child living in the most disadvantaged 10% of neighbourhoods in England is over 10 times more likely to be in care than a child in the least disadvantaged 10% of neighbourhoods—over 10 times more, not 10% more. These are huge differences that relate to the socioeconomic

circumstances of family life, the conditions in which parents are trying to bring up their children.

Through the care system, that has very profound consequences for those children in adult life. There is much more that could be said about the proportion of children who end up in the prison system, who end up being teenage parents—teenage mothers and teenage fathers—the consequences for educational attainment and all the economic consequences of that in terms of work and so on. Particularly through the social care system, the impact of poverty on those children's adult lives is very profound.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Yes, there is overwhelming evidence that poverty in childhood has lifelong impacts on health. I work in Alder Hey Children's Hospital in a public health role in a city very much at the sharp end of the impacts of child poverty.

Our research group works on large datasets, so we follow up cohorts and whole populations to look at the early origins of health inequalities, which I would argue are a very good litmus test of how we are doing as a society. It is clear that pre-pandemic the large and persistent health inequalities that we see in the UK were getting worse. If you take the life expectancy of a child born in the poorest areas—some of the areas around here, where I work in Liverpool—compared to a child born in the most affluent tenth of areas, there is a gap of about 10 years in life expectancy and a gap of 20 years in terms of healthy life expectancy.

Those inequalities were getting worse pre-pandemic, with life expectancy going backwards in some of the poorest areas. We can say a number of things about these inequalities. First of all, there is nothing natural or predetermined about them; they are a consequence of how we organise ourselves as a society. They are profoundly unjust and they are preventable. We know from years of research that these inequalities have their origins in childhood and that child poverty is a major driver of poor child health right from the moment of conception. That tracks through to influence health in childhood, attainment and then all aspects of life chances, including health in adulthood.

We have done some large studies looking at children's experience of poverty in the UK. A recent study we have undertaken used the Millennium Cohort Study, which follows up 20,000 children born in the year 2000 and is representative of the whole country. Every two years we were able to look at the children in that study and see whether they experienced relative income poverty or not. We were able to look at a very complete picture of children's experience of poverty and then look at their health in early adolescence at age 14. What we found was that 20% of children were in persistent poverty and it is absolutely toxic for a whole range of children's health outcomes. Those children had three to four times the risk of mental health problems, double the risk of obesity and

double the risk of long-term chronic illness. We know that those outcomes track through to influence outcomes in adult life.

Just before I finish, I will highlight another study that we have undertaken using data linkage that was published in *The Lancet* last year, following up over 1 million children, again looking at their experience of poverty and then looking at risk of death into adulthood. Again, what that analysis showed was that even transient exposure to poverty around the time of birth was associated with increased risk of death, a 50% increased risk of death in early adulthood. If children were in persistent poverty, that doubled the risk of death in early adulthood, death from suicide, accidents and cancers.

This evidence that I am describing adds to the wealth of evidence, country studies, systematic reviews of longitudinal studies, systematic reviews that look at all the evidence, from experimental studies, where there has been some random manipulation of poverty levels. It all converges to show that poverty has a profound effect on children's outcomes. We know a lot about the mechanisms. I can talk about that in more detail later perhaps.

Yasmin Rehman: I would completely agree with what the two previous witnesses have said. I would like to add from our perspective at Juno Women's Aid that child poverty is the direct result of women facing poverty and trapped in poverty. Looking at 2018 data for the areas that we cover in Nottingham City and South Nottinghamshire, 39% of children were living in poverty, 33% in the city and 33.5% in South Nottinghamshire. We have no idea what the pandemic is going to result in in terms of a long-term health impact on those women and children who have been trapped in abusive relationships for this extended period of restrictions on our movements, but I also think that we have to start thinking about domestic violence in a different way.

Moving into a refuge, moving into a place of safety, does not mean that the trauma of the abuse ends and it can also mean that women—because this is an issue that affects people of all social backgrounds, of all social classes—will be impacted in different ways; for example, migrant women facing the prospect of destitution. We have other women who then end up on benefits, who may have been working, may have been homeowners and may have been in a financially better situation; the impact of economic abuse and the ongoing issues where economic abuse may have been a factor of the relationship, but then it is ratcheted up, as we see again through contact through family courts, women having to travel and taking children to see fathers. I am not undermining the importance of having that connection if it is safe, but benefits are so tight that anything over and above putting food on the table and paying bills will have an impact on those families.

What we also see is when children come into refuge, our refuge workers do an incredible job, but those families don't often have a social worker,

so they are out of the purview and out of the definition of a vulnerable child. I know that the measure that is often used is around access to free school meals, but if we are not able to get children into school, they are not going to be able to access free school meals.

I also think we need to look at when our women move out of refuge—if they have come into our services by that route—where do they get housed? They get housed in some of the most deprived wards and they are trapped within those wards. Housing is such a critical part of this. That limits life chances for the children and for mums. The cost of childcare: even when you have mothers who want to go into work to improve the financial situation of their families they can't, because the cost of childcare prohibits that and it limits the type of work that they can get and it limits their access to opportunities.

Add to that any of the protected characteristics, disability, ethnicity, lack of language, and if you have a disabled child or you have disabilities yourself as the parent, it adds layer upon layer upon layer. The long-term impacts—as Professor Taylor-Robinson has already much more eloquently said—looking at what happens to those children who have lived in domestic violence situations, they are the ones who end up in the prison system, trapped on benefits, with limited educational attainment and do not have digital access.

That has been a massive issue particularly for those in refuge, but also in our dispersed accommodation, those who were living within private rented accommodation who just simply do not have the funds with which to enable their children to access online learning and also sometimes do not have the skills themselves to support their children with that online learning. I will stop there.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Q47 **Debbie Abrahams:** I wonder if I could ask the panel what the evidence is of the relationship of the adequacy of social security support to working-age families and child poverty.

Chair: Shall we do it in the same order?

Debbie Abrahams: That is fine with me.

Professor Bywaters: I think over the last 10 years the evidence about the inadequacy of the basic social security welfare floor, if you like, has become more and more apparent. Obviously, the sharp end of that is probably best expressed in the explosion in the use of foodbanks. I do not think it is plausible that that explosion in foodbanks is the result of suddenly parents getting worse at managing the money that they have. I think it is much more plausible that it is an explanation of the wider conditions and lack of resources that parents are facing.

I suspect you are going to hear a lot of statistics this morning, but I think it is very important that we remember that each of these statistics reflect

real families and real people's lives. The statistics around destitution, 550,000 children living in destitution in 2019, which has doubled since 2017, and destitution means children not able to access two of the most basic of their needs: clothing, housing, food and so on. It is very clear that there are more and more families in deep poverty.

This reflects a wider picture, which I think is partly because of concerns about not wanting to disincentivise work. Many families are living below the full level of benefits, so the benefits cap affecting 140,000-odd families, the two-child limit affecting 900,000 children, deductions due to advance payments, which have very radically increased during Covid, and families with no recourse to public funds. There has been much evidence about erroneous disability assessments and so on. In a whole range of ways, families are not receiving even the basic level of welfare benefits that are set by Government policy. We can evidence the consequences of that—as we have been doing—in terms of domestic violence, health outcomes, child abuse and neglect, and children entering care.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: We have seen a reduction in child poverty over the period of the English health inequalities strategy, followed by a period of increasing child poverty.

Debbie Abrahams: Could you just remind us what the period of the health inequalities strategy was?

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Yes, so from 2000 to around 2010 there was an integrated cross-Government approach to addressing child poverty and investing in services that promote health for children, so children's centres and the like. We have been involved and our group has been involved in evaluation of the impact of that investment and subsequently the impact of the period of disinvestment and rising poverty that we have seen recently.

In brief, what we see is that there is clear evidence that the English health inequalities strategy was associated with a narrowing of inequalities in both life expectancy and infant mortality, the key targets at the focus of the strategy. Then subsequently, as child poverty has risen, the latest data came out a few weeks ago now and 4.3 million or 31% of children in this country were in relative poverty after housing costs. During that period we have seen a deterioration in child health and a rise in inequalities in numerous aspects of children's health.

Look at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health "State of Child Health" reports. They are excellent. They summarise some of the evidence. We have looked at infant mortality particularly. We published a study that looked at the rise in child poverty and what we saw was that infant mortality had been reducing and then from 2014 onwards we saw an unprecedented rise over a three-year period in infant mortality, a very hard measure, a hard health outcome, and very much the tip of the iceberg. What we saw was that for every 1% increase in child poverty, there was a 5.8 per 100,000 increase in infant mortality, almost entirely

in the most disadvantaged areas, increasing inequality. Investing in child health and reducing poverty improves health for children. Doing the opposite damages child health.

Q48 **Debbie Abrahams:** Professor Taylor-Robinson, when you are saying that the additional increase in child poverty of 1% leads to an additional nearly six babies not reaching their first birthday per 100,000, that is a causal relationship?

Professor Taylor-Robinson: We calculated 6,000 excess deaths above and beyond previous trends, about a third of those attributable to rising poverty[1]. We used robust causal methods to adjust for confounders. This was a natural experiment, essentially, and it corroborates previous evidence. Kitty Stewart, who spoke at one of the last sessions, has done a systematic review of natural experiments and quasi-experimental studies showing that there is a causal effect of poverty on all aspects almost of children's health, thus it is no surprise that when poverty rises we see deterioration in children's health.

Yasmin Rehman: I am going to speak from the position of the lived experience of some of our women. I think just as they are constantly risk assessing their safety and the safety of their children, they are also risk assessing the purchasing of a coat for school for their children against, "Will we have food on the table?" Professor Bywaters absolutely rightly talked about the explosion of foodbanks. They are now part and parcel of the way in which we work and support families and that services are delivered, but it is not just food, it is things like shoes or a coat. It is what we would consider basic necessities.

We are very fortunate in our area in that we have an organisation called Sharewear where women can go, because they cannot even afford to go to charity shops. That is the reality. Sharewear provides free clothing that would otherwise have been sent to a charity shop and sold, and bedding and towels, because women and children often leave with absolutely nothing when they come into our refuge. If they are fortunate enough to get housing, it is then getting the equipment that you need, the very basic equipment for a house, a duvet and crockery for the kitchen.

Again, another fabulous organisation that we have is Tara's Angels, which was set up after the domestic homicide of a local woman. Her family have set this up and they are an incredible support to us. It is not a case of these women not being able to budget, it is the insecurity of the way their lives are unfolding and repeated moves, short-term tenancies, so they cannot establish a home. Every time they move, there is a moving cost and the re-establishing a home cost. You can take things with you, but not everything. I think we need to be factoring that into our

[1] "Correction: Professor Taylor-Robinson let us know immediately after the session that he had intended to say, "600 excess deaths" and not "6,000"."

discussions and our measurements around child poverty and the impact that that has.

Q49 **Debbie Abrahams:** Has this got worse over the last year, Yasmin? Sorry, this is my last question, Chair.

Yasmin Rehman: I think because of the restrictions on movement, it is almost like there is a lid on things. What we are anticipating—not just in our organisation, but I think across the women's sector—is this exponential increase in demand and we will then see women and children who desperately need to move. I think the years to come are the ones that we need to be focusing on and we will see a lot of movement, but there is a housing crisis as well, so where do you move people to? There is a limited number of refuges and dispersed accommodation, so it is a challenge for all of us.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you for all you do. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much. We have quite a lot of ground we would like to cover, so can I ask the witnesses to give us concise answers, if you are able to, to enable us to get through as much as we can? Steve McCabe has the next question.

Q50 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. I want to ask specifically about the impact on disabled children and disabled parents. We have seen quite a lot of evidence that more than half of all people in poverty live in a family with someone who has a disability. The numbers in poverty have risen and it costs more to look after a child with a disability. Can you tell me, from your experience, what is the impact of poverty on disabled parents and disabled children?

Chair: I wonder if we could start with Yasmin. You touched on this in your earlier answer.

Yasmin Rehman: I will keep this concise. I think there is such limited provision within safe accommodation for disabled women and disabled children, so they are trapped in abusive situations. I think that is what I would say. With economic abuse, that often happens in households where perpetrators will retain any benefits that are received as a result of the disability, but for me the biggest issue is that they are trapped in the abuse and cannot get out because we just do not have the provision for those families. I will stop there.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: I completely agree. We know that children who are in households where somebody has a disability are much more likely to be in poverty. Looking after a child with a disability or if you are a parent with a disability incurs huge costs. I think the costs of looking after a child with a disability are three times that of looking after a child that does not have a disability. It is more likely to push families into debt. We know also about the causal pathway and we know that growing up in poverty is a major driver of children developing disabilities.

What I have outlined in the evidence that I mentioned earlier is that in the Millennium Cohort Study, children who are persistently exposed to poverty are more likely to develop disabilities and then their families are more likely to fall into poverty subsequently. It is an example of the layering of adversity and the fact that poverty creates an environment where adversity and misfortune becomes layered over the life course, eventually leading to the large inequalities in life expectancy we see.

It is absolutely critical that we support families with children with disabilities. We know that changes to the welfare system recently have increased poverty particularly for children living in households where somebody is disabled.

Professor Bywaters: I would clearly support what the previous two witnesses have said, but could I just make a very specific point about the children's social care context that our work has covered? It is widely thought that disabled children are more likely to be subject to abuse and neglect and to be in the care system. The problem that we have is—and probably the children of disabled and chronically ill parents—about the data that we have available to us. The DfE collects almost no systematic data about the parents of children in the care system or parents of children who are abused or neglected, so we do not know about a whole range of things.

I will perhaps return to that later if we want to talk about measurement, but specifically there is data collected about disabled children but it is clearly unreliable, because you see between 3% and 30% of children being reported by local authorities as being disabled and it is a range that makes no sense in terms of the wider child population. That data is completely unreliable. We have not been able to do any research on the relationship between socioeconomic circumstances, child disability and your chances of being in care or abused or neglected.

Q51 **Nigel Mills:** Can I just switch to health inequalities and ask the panel whether they think we can measure health inequalities and the impact they have or whether there are gaps in the data or we cannot access the data that we need because it is not publicly available? Does anybody have any thoughts on that as a topic?

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Since we are talking about child poverty, we know that it is absolutely critical that we have high-quality measures of relative income poverty at small area level, and also to have that data disaggregated by other axes of inequalities in terms of ethnicity, disability, geography, huge variation in the levels of child poverty at small area level. I think in terms of the types of studies that we have been doing looking at the impact of poverty on health outcomes, getting that fine-grain data is important. Having consistency in the measurement of that over time is very important and then also linking data.

As well as working on UK data, I work on large linked datasets in the Nordic countries. We have done studies in Denmark where we can link

the type of information that is held within the Department for Work and Pensions and the data within the health system to data within education, so you can get a whole picture, a longitudinal picture of the pathways to inequalities over a child's life. We are making some great steps around linkage in particularly Scotland and Wales. It is happening to some extent in England, but we can definitely link up datasets to develop a better picture of that pathway to inequalities over the life course.

Nigel Mills: Thank you. Does anybody else have any thoughts?

Professor Bywaters: If I could just very much add to that, I made the link with health inequalities by thinking that child maltreatment—which is a dreadful expression—can be seen as a health concern. The big problem that we have in the children's social care analysis is that no data is collected about the socioeconomic circumstances of parents of children who are in contact with the children's social care system, so I cannot tell you—and you cannot tell me—what proportion of those parents are married, how old they are or what their educational background is. I cannot tell you about their income levels; I cannot tell you about their debts, their working. I cannot tell you anything about it. We have a whole children's social care system that we spend £9 billion or so a year on, which absolutely relies on parents being responsible for bringing up their children, yet we cannot plan services on the basis of knowledge about parents. We do not know about parent circumstances.

The DfE is very good at collecting data about children but do not have parallel data about parents. This is extraordinary and I think it is very crucial that we do something about it. That gap is further exacerbated: some countries do 10-year surveys of the parents of children in care who are being abused or neglected. We do not have any of those. The longitudinal studies that David has been talking about on the whole do not identify when children have been in contact with children's social care, so they are hardly useable either.

The major data linkage system that we have, in a way, is the national pupil database, where you can look at which children have free school meals, which is a very crude measure of poverty. It only covers five to 15-year-olds and only a proportion of them. The peak years for child protection and entry to care are the preschool years and ages 16 to 17 are not covered in the national pupil database. Data linkage is almost certainly the way forward but we do not have that yet.

Q52 **Nigel Mills:** What is the reason we do not have it? Is that because the Department for Education want data for one purpose and DWP want it for another and they do not join up the dataset because they do not see a need for their Department, or is it just too hard to do or something?

Professor Bywaters: One answer would be to say I could not speak for them, but clearly it is not straightforward and not easy but, with the political will, undoubtedly all of that could be worked through. There are significant efforts under way, but I think they need to be turbo-charged,

if you like. Other countries do this, as David said. In other countries you can look at the relationship between individual family circumstances and social care type outcomes for children. We simply do not have that and we need to make that a priority.

Yasmin Rehman: I think the point about linking up data is absolutely critical. For very obvious reasons, domestic violence is very centred around a criminal justice response and the data that we, as organisations, are required to submit is based around those criminal justice outcomes. Women's organisations are sitting on a wealth of data about a whole range of things, including health inequalities. That information that Paul was asking for on information around parents, we have some of that, but we are not resourced to draw that off. Often I think we do not have the skills in terms of interrogating our data in the way that we could do, so having some support with that would be very helpful and I think would be informative.

We know about abuse and how it is linked to health inequalities, particularly mental health, and how that has a lifelong impact. Looking at the women's sector as a very valuable resource that has information that could feed into this debate in a much more positive way and open up the experiences of abuse beyond those very constrained criminal justice parameters is crucial.

Professor Bywaters: Would you mind if I came back for just a moment?

Chair: Very briefly, if you would, then I think Chris Stephens wants to ask a question specifically about what Yasmin was just saying, but yes, Professor Bywaters.

Professor Bywaters: Sorry, it is simply to underline why it is important. Collecting data sounds like a nerdy and dull thing to do, but it is very critical for understanding what the mechanisms are that link family circumstances to outcomes for children, whether that is health or social care or in other ways. Without that understanding, we cannot build good policies to make children's lives better, which I am sure is what we all want to do.

Q53 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks to the panel so far. What evidence is there about the relationship between child poverty and child abuse and neglect and what are the short-term and long-term impacts of that child abuse and neglect? Maybe, Yasmin, I could ask you to pick up on that first, please.

Yasmin Rehman: I think just the trauma and the impact of living in an abusive household will impact on health, but also economic abuse. There has been much more, thankfully, of a focus on economic abuse in households. Children are at the sharp end of that, because if mum does not have access to money, then food is not available, there isn't the money for afterschool clubs, all of those sorts of things. When children and their mothers leave abusive households, then it is being trapped

within welfare benefits for extended periods of time, the limitations of that—which we have already spoken about today—and the ongoing impact of that, the repeated moves. The time that it takes to recover from that abusive experience and to rebuild a life impacts in myriad ways, but economically it has a huge impact on families.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Poverty exerts impacts on child health through a multitude of pathways. One of those is through impacts on family stress and family functioning. At the sharp end, children end up getting abused and neglected. There has been a lot of interest in adverse childhood experiences and what we know about adverse childhood experiences is that the environment of poverty places children in an environment where there is more likely to be family conflict, family breakdown, domestic abuse and violence. That itself has important impacts on children's health.

We have been able to look at this recently with the Millennium Cohort Study, where we do have rich data across children's lives to measure these things. The important point is that it is clearly critical to focus on things like domestic abuse and violence, but you cannot decouple the relationship between child poverty and a whole plethora of health outcomes just by focusing on one pathway. The best solution to the problem is to go upstream and address the main driver of a whole range of adversities by reducing levels of poverty.

We have done a study recently looking at children being taken into care. There has been a 24% rise over the last 10 years in children taken into the care system. There has been an increase in inequalities. The increase in children taken into care has happened in the most disadvantaged areas, in areas where poverty has risen most starkly. Again, that is what economists call the family stress model. Economic pressures lead to stresses within families and lead to adverse outcomes in children's health.

Q54 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, David. I think that comes now to Professor Bywaters. I know, Professor, you have done some reports on this, thinking back to your 2016 report about the lack of a common and consistently applied set of definitions and measures. Do you think there is enough joined-up thinking around this, or can you tell us about some localised work that you have had a look at that would help us measure this particular issue?

Professor Bywaters: There are so many things I could begin to say. I think one of the sad things is the way in which we have evidence that what children's social care has been doing over the last 10 years is not fitting with what families need and want. As well as studying large numbers of children in the care system and on child protection plans, we also looked at what is happening in practice to children and between social workers and families. We found that poverty was a kind of taken for granted backdrop, what we call the wallpaper, in practice, so that if you talk to social workers about it, they can have a sophisticated analysis

of poverty, but it was not at the forefront of their mind. It was not happening in conversations with families, it was not being reported in case conferences, it was not being talked about in supervision, not appearing in court, of course.

The most prevalent factor, the key factor, the underlying factor in creating stress in families' lives—poverty and disadvantaged circumstances—just was not part of the conversation. That is leading to a profound mistrust, a mutual suspicion between families and services. You have well-intentioned people doing their best to provide services, but focusing on risk in families when you have families with basic needs not able to be met, not able to have that conversation with social workers, and that is a very sad thing.

There are also some extraordinary examples of local authorities turning that around. Probably the best example is from Glasgow City, where over just a very short period of three or four years it has completely reoriented the way in which its services are seen, so that it is focusing entirely on supporting children's relationships in the long term, supporting parents to keep children, and if children do have to be in care, making sure that their relationships are sustained and long term.

What it has managed to do is to reduce the numbers of children in care by a third, to reduce entries to care by 60% and to reduce placement moves by 70%--astonishing changes. That is partly by reinvesting in services in family support, but it is also about a fundamental change in attitude from a focus on risk, on trying to find children who are at risk, to supporting families.

The Chief Social Worker in England, Isabelle Trowler, has recently drawn attention to the extraordinary explosion in the numbers of families that are being investigated for abuse, 200,000 families a year, but only a small proportion of those families go on to the children being on a child protection plan. I do not know if you can feel what it must be like for parents to have someone knock on the door and say, "We are concerned about whether you are abusing or neglecting your children". That causes this profound breakdown of trust between the state and families.

Q55 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Professor, an excellent answer to give a Glasgow MP, mentioning the great work of Glasgow City Council. I will pass on your comments to colleagues in the council.

What has also been in the news is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Obviously, it has been in the news because the UK Government are taking the Scottish Government to the Supreme Court over plans to embed the convention into Scottish law. I just want to ask each of the panel whether the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a helpful tool in the protective work that is going on. We will start with Professor Bywaters.

Chair: Briefly, if you could.

Professor Bywaters: I am honestly not sure what the mechanisms are that will get the policy shift that we want to have. Clearly, this is a human rights issue and that is about the rights for children. It is also about the right for children to be protected, but the rights for those children to have a family life, ideally with their own parents, and for parents to receive support and have the sufficient conditions to underline their parenting. The context is right, but whether that shifts the policy and practice on the ground is another question, I guess.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: Philip Alston visited a few years ago from the UN, the rapporteur on poverty, and said that poverty was causing misery in the UK and that we were in denial and that it was an economic disaster and social calamity all wrapped into one. We have been working in Liverpool to implement the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative, which is a children's rights-based approach. It is about putting children's voices at the heart of policy and making sure that policy decisions that disadvantage children are critically scrutinised. If you are going to let poverty wash over one-third of children, you need to provide very high-quality early years provision to try to mitigate the dreadful impacts of that poverty.

What we have seen, unfortunately, are huge cuts to services such as children's centres, which support parenting, which support families out of debt, et cetera, at the same time as rising poverty. Our hope is if we have a rights-based governance framework at a local level, that will help push back against those types of policies.

Yasmin Rehman: I could not agree more with having a rights-based approach. International instruments are incredibly useful, but I do not know enough of the detail of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I am obviously going to make a plea for the Istanbul Convention. Where we are talking across the board, across all policy areas, the voice of children and young people is crucial. In the domestic violence sector we have always seen children and young people as an appendage to mum, but thankfully the forthcoming Bill will address that and give children and young people a greater voice.

We need to not lose that. Cuts to services—10 years of austerity and we are about to head into a challenging economic climate—cannot be at the cost of the next generation, of their health, of their mental health and of their safety.

Q56 **Dr Spencer:** We have heard some deeply concerning evidence about that tenfold increase that Professor Bywaters has raised, particularly around in the past decade a 24% increase in children entering the care system. I want to try to understand a bit better the relationship between poverty and children going into care. I have to say I am a bit confused by how poverty is being defined, so can we explore that a bit and the relationship between various factors such as social and economic deprivation and so on and how that relates to the measures of poverty

that we are using and risk of children entering the care system so that I can unpack that a bit and understand where the focus needs to be in tackling this problem? Professor Bywaters, could you help?

Professor Bywaters: I would like to begin, if you do not mind, by talking about the two key ways in which poverty leads to bad outcomes for children, including entering care.

David has already talked about the impact of stress and that is one key element of this. Parenting is not easy for anyone, but if you do not have enough money that stress is much more acute. We know that poverty is a major cause of conflict between parents. We know that it contributes to depression, anxiety and poor mental health. We know that it leads to poor physical health and we know that it can lead to some people trying to deal with stress through damaging use of drink and drugs, as people do across all of society. All of these other factors are in the mix but they are inextricably connected with money, with poverty. If you have money you can mitigate the effects on your children of conflict or poor health and so on.

The other side of the picture—alongside the stress model—is what is called in the jargon the investment model. Almost all parents want to invest in their children's development and wellbeing. The resources you have for that investment are crucial to your parenting. At the wealthy end, parents will pay for childcare, they will pay for private education, they will pay for tutoring and extracurricular activities, sports and music lessons, they will pay for therapy, treatment and care if their child is ill or disabled, and money is very helpful to solve problems. We are fortunate enough in our family to be able to say sometimes, "Throw some money at the problem" where there is a particular difficulty.

At the other end, for families in poverty, the concern is about whether you can provide the absolute basics, food on the table, decent quality affordable housing and heating, whether you can buy clothes and shoes; as Yasmin was saying earlier, those choices between eating and heating, paying the rent and buying them shoes. This investment model makes sense of the idea that it is a social gradient. It is not that most families across the board do not have any children in care and then suddenly it is all about the children in poverty. Each step increase in the resources that you have is accompanied by a reduction in the chances of your children being in care. That is a combination of the resources that you have, whether that is a lot of resources or inadequate resources, the stresses that go along with that, and the ways in which those resources can buy you solutions, if you like.

That is illustrated by the fact that there is a steeper social gradient among very young children. That difference that money makes is greater in children under five than it is, say, at the top end of the teenage age bracket. I cannot point you to specific evidence for this, but I think that has something to do with the fact that you can buy childcare, you can buy things that help you look after your children when they are very

young, even in some families nannies, for example. It is much less easy to buy support for looking after teenagers. That might be one factor why the social gradient is not quite as steep in the teenage years. I hope that gives you some sense of an answer.

Q57 **Dr Spencer:** Thank you, it does. We have had previous evidence in terms of measuring poverty where different multivariant constructs have been proposed in taking measures, which are not just particularly focused on financial issues but other factors. What I am trying to unpick—and I cannot put my paper up to the screen, I wish I could—is where poverty as you are defining it sits on the causal pathway here with children ending up in care. Is that poverty acting as a confound? There are factors that are on the pathway that lead to children in care that are related to financial issues but it is not the financial drivers itself that we need to be focusing on.

I understand what you are saying that money means that you are able to respond to stresses in a better way, but are there other factors that we need to be looking at in combination that are driving children in care and poverty as a confound on that pathway? Do you see where I am coming from?

Professor Bywaters: Of course. I am sure Yasmin and David will have something to say about this as well. The way in which I see it is that poverty is inextricably connected to those other issues, the secondary level issues, which are the things that are often talked about, domestic violence, parental mental ill health and substance misuse. Each of those are more likely and the consequences are greater if you are poor. To my mind you cannot disentangle poverty—by which I mean money—from the consequences of poverty that are all the ramifications in the rest of your life.

Helen Barnard put this very well in the last panel when she said that it is essential to have a measure of poverty that is centrally about income, but you also need measures in order to be able to understand the ramifications of that in all the other aspects of people's lives, health, education, conflict between parents and so on. You need both of those things. It is not an either/or. It is not that you could leave the money bit out and only focus on the second order factors. I think Yasmin and David will want to add to that.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: I completely agree with Paul's analysis. We know from a wealth of epidemiological evidence that household income poverty exposes you to all sorts of other adversities. Paul has outlined the pathways through material factors, through family stress, psychosocial factors, through behaviours, and then all of those together cluster. They are caused by poverty, they cluster with poverty and then, as a result, they have impacts on all aspects of children's health, whether it be mental health, obesity, risk of children dying, risk of children being taken into the care system. There are a huge number of outcomes where we have poverty recognised as a key upstream driver. We clearly need to

measure levels of income poverty but we should also be tracking the adversities that track with poverty.

We are doing a study at the moment using the Millennium Cohort Study that looks at children's experience of a range of adversities, and the cluster of adversities that is particularly harmful for children's health outcome is the combination of poverty and mental health problems, parental mental health problems. We see one in 10 children are exposed to both of those and it has a particularly profound effect on their outcomes.

Almost 50% of children are exposed to poverty and/or mental problems. That particular cluster, which some people have called the syndemic, is where I am particularly concerned at the moment. We are seeing rising levels of mental health problems affecting children. Poverty clearly causes mental health problems in children and then those track through to adulthood. I get where your question is coming from, but epidemiologically we see poverty as the cause and some of these adversities that you are describing as the mediator of the effect of poverty on outcomes.

What is clear is that it is no use just focusing on one of those pathways. Poverty finds a way through multiple pathways. We know that poverty impacts outcomes at birth, low birth rate, preterm birth, complications in in pregnancy. We know the impacts of poverty are embedded in the early years in terms of impacts on immune functioning, brain structure and so on. It is critical that we address the root cause.

Yasmin Rehman: If I could quickly add to that, I agree with what Paul and David have said but I want to raise one issue and that is the assumption that there is a parent there. We cannot deny the data at the moment that one or two women die every week and that is increasing through lockdown.

I heard a frightening statistic this week that six women a week die as a result of suicide, and we do not know how much of that is linked to domestic violence. When a parent dies, whether it is at the hands of dad or not, those children can end up in care. Looking at where a parent is absent is something that we also need to be factoring into our discussions around child poverty and child mental health.

Chair: We come now to a question from Kim Johnson. Welcome to Kim and Dr Caroline Johnson from the Education Select Committee. We are grateful to both of you for joining us this morning. Kim, I apologise, I am out of order. First of all, I will ask Sir Desmond Swayne to put his question and will come to you next.

Q58 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** On a Saturday morning when I hold a surgery, of 10 people that may come through the door, however the problem presents, whether it be debt, housing, problem at school, problems with behaviour, poverty, not being able to make ends meet, whatever it

presents as, scratch the surface and family breakdown is the cause. By family I mean more than a collection of people who happen to share a fridge. It seems to me that there is a lack of recognition of this monumental problem. What is your experience of the contribution of family breakdown to child poverty and how might we better measure its effects?

Professor Bywaters: I am not an expert on the family breakdown as such, but I am not sure I agree with your way of describing this as family breakdown being the root cause.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I rather expected that.

Professor Bywaters: I thought you might. It seems to me—and David has more of the evidence at his fingertips—that there is plenty of evidence that there are higher rates of conflict between parents over money and particularly where money is a critical issue. Obviously, the whole domestic violence area is very critical and I guess that is in the dimension of breakdown.

Again, we know that there is a strong social gradient in domestic violence. It can happen anywhere in society but there is a strong social gradient. I am not sure that I see the evidence for your initial position. David may be able to help.

Professor Taylor-Robinson: As I have said, we have been involved in large studies of whole populations. It is clear that poverty is one of the drivers of parental separation and then, as a result of parental separation, families are more likely to be thrust into poverty. I would argue the causal chain goes in that direction. Poverty leads to a whole range of so-called adverse childhood experiences, which themselves affect health outcomes.

We have done an analysis looking at the extent to which those adversities explain the effect of poverty on subsequent child health and they explain about a sixth of the impact of poverty on child health. Clearly, parental separation is important but it is not the solution to addressing the impact of poverty on child health. If you look at the reasons for secular trends in levels of poverty, if you look at the reasons for international differences in the levels of child poverty, they are not driven by family separation: essentially they are driven by differences in generosity of the welfare benefit system.

Just to add, finally, this has been recognised on the other side of the Atlantic at the moment. The Administration there aims to reduce child poverty by half on the basis of a large review of the evidence that shows the huge impact of poverty on children's health, on subsequent societal productivity. That review clearly puts poverty as the cause, not consequences of poverty such as parental separation.

Yasmin Rehman: I agree with Paul and David in what they have said. The families that we work with were in poverty before they came to us,

prior to the family breakdown. The work of Surviving Economic Abuse, highlighting the realities of families struggling within our communities both in terms of their safety and of their economic and financial situations, is clear and has been presented to many of you in the past.

I always worry when I hear about family breakdowns. Safe families are what I want to see, families where there is no abuse.

Q59 **Kim Johnson:** Following on from the previous question on family breakdown and directed towards Yasmin, you have mentioned that women on low incomes are more likely to experience domestic violence and half of referrals to children's social services are due to domestic abuse. What do you believe are the impacts of domestic abuse on children and child poverty? What do you think needs to happen to better support victims of domestic abuse?

Yasmin Rehman: If I could just clarify, I am not saying that domestic abuse is more likely to happen in low-income households. It cuts across every strata of society. The evidence bears that out.

Regarding a response, I think we need better resourced services. That is not just domestic violence services. Paul has spoken about social care and better resourcing of social care. I think public sector cuts have cut deeply. There has been an overemphasis on the Criminal Justice Act rather than looking at family safety with a wider lens and what that means, so looking at mental health, looking at substance misuse, looking at a better joined-up approach. I think our domestic abuse commissioner, Nicole Jacobs, is doing a good job trying to put forward the need for a much more co-ordinated response, but we need better resourced service. That is not just about having refuges but is about ongoing support in terms of outreach services, very focused services for children and young people.

Within our sector it is very limited; in some cases children's refuge workers are not funded. We maybe have one, two members of staff—and I speak as one of the largest organisations in the country—to work with children and young people. That work takes time as well. Being able to link into youth services and local mental health services is critical.

Q60 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Yasmin. Funding needs to be put on a more strategic level, then. Have you seen an increase in family breakdown and domestic abuse as a result of the pandemic? If so, why do you think that has happened?

Yasmin Rehman: We are still looking at the data. We have certainly seen an increase in the numbers of calls. We run the local domestic and sexual violence helpline for Nottinghamshire and looking at data from 2019 to 2020 and then 2020 to 2021 we have seen a 58% increase in numbers of calls to our helpline and that is across all age groups.

What we are also seeing is an increase in complexity of cases, an increase in severity of violence, and I think that is families being trapped

together. What we would normally see—whatever normal looks like—is an increase after the school holidays or after the Christmas holidays being an extended period. We will have to watch and wait and interrogate our data to see what the full picture is going to be like. We already know what the homicide statistics are, but this is going to leave a legacy for a significant period of time.

Q61 **Chair:** Professor Bywaters, I think you did say to us that the problem of abuse is greater in low-income households. Did I understand that correctly?

Professor Bywaters: Yes, I take a slightly different view from Yasmin. I completely agree with her that you find domestic abuse and violence across the whole of society, but I think that the evidence is that incidence is greater as resources reduce. That may be partly cases coming to the attention of the service providers, the police and so on because families with more resources can resolve some of those problems without recourse to public services in the way that I spoke about before. You are more likely to be in conflict, to be in a violent or abusive relationship, if you have fewer resources.

Chair: Siobhan Baillie will ask the last question for this panel.

Q62 **Siobhan Baillie:** I do not think that anyone is suggesting that family breakdown should be the only measure of child poverty, but when we know that 32% of children in lone-parent families are in the poorest 20% compared to 20% of couples that are together, we know that after a marital split often the mother has a greater impact on her own finances. I fear that we are letting down a really big and important group of people because of squabbling about the term "family stability" and the inability to agree how to look carefully at separating parents.

Secondly to that, policy and support is now not flowing to these families, either to prevent family breakdown or to support separating couples, because of this constant row about it. How do you think the impact of family breakdown could be recorded and measured? If you do not agree with the term "family stability" what would you suggest in its place?

Professor Taylor-Robinson: I would respond along the lines of my previous answer. The question has the order of causation mixed up. There is a nice plot in Michael Marmot's update review looking at the distribution by family income of adverse childhood experiences. I am looking at it now. Parental separation is one of those. Poorer families are much more likely to experience parental separation compared to families in the richest areas.

Equally, as we were discussing before with Paul and Yasmin, domestic violence is more common with income disadvantage. It goes back to my argument about poverty leading to stress, mental problems in families, which we know increase the risk of family separation. Mental health problems in parents has impacts on children, particularly children's mental health.

I will reiterate: income poverty is the key thing that we need to solve to address this problem, but there is no harm in measuring and collecting better data on other aspects of family adversity, whether that be parental separation or domestic violence or other consequences of living in poverty.

Professor Bywaters: I completely agree that we need to do a better job as a society of supporting families, which begins by making sure that all families have basic socioeconomic conditions that enable them to function well.

In the social care field we have got into a vicious cycle of taking more and more children into care and on to child protection plans. That is cutting the proportion of spending on family support and on prevention. The proportion of the budget that used to be spent 10 years ago on family support was around 50% and that has been cut in half over the past decade or so. Meanwhile, the spending on looked after children, children in the care system, has gone up to 50%.

We are in this vicious circle. The more we cut prevention, the more we end up with very high-cost solutions. It is a very inefficient use of state money, apart from anything else, as well as being questionable. In the children's social care world, we need to shift this back around to focus much more effectively on family support and to have strategic responses to poverty, to domestic violence, to parental mental ill health and so on. Inasmuch as this is an argument about family support, yes, absolutely, we need to shift the focus of social care and the wider context to supporting families much better to stay together. Of course, that is going to be a good and important thing for children.

Yasmin Rehman: I would just add I totally agree with David and Paul and think income poverty is critical. Not all single parents are single parents as a result of choice or the result of relationship breakdown, bereavement and so on. It is about also taking into consideration how we support single parents to rebuild their lives and to ensure that they are not trapped in poverty, cost of childcare, supporting single parents into educational training so that they can access better jobs so that they can improve the life opportunities of their families, and affordable housing. I do not mean affordable by the current definition. Shelter has done a lot of work around that—80% of the market value is not affordable to most families, so being realistic about what affordable means, not taking for granted the lives that perhaps some of us lead and the lives that others cannot lead.

I sit back in horror at all the debates going on at the moment about holidays abroad. Some of the families we work with are lucky if they get a day out in the park because they simply cannot afford to buy snacks for their children when they are out there. That is the reality of too many families in this country.

Chair: Thank you all for joining us this morning and for the very

interesting and helpful evidence that you have given to us. Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sophie Howes, Rebecca Jacques and Charlotte McDonough.

Q63 **Chair:** We move on now to the second panel. Thank you for being with us from the start of the session. I will ask each of you very briefly to introduce yourself, starting with Sophie Howes.

Sophie Howes: Hi, everyone. My name is Sophie Howes and I am head of policy at the Child Poverty Action Group.

Charlotte McDonough: Good morning. I am Charlotte McDonough and I am a UK policy adviser at Save the Children.

Rebecca Jacques: Good morning, everybody. I am Rebecca Jacques. I am a policy officer at The Children's Society. The Children's Society is a national children's charity that works to support children and their families that are experiencing a range of issues, including poverty, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and we work with around 10,000 of the most vulnerable children in the country across a year.

Q64 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for being with us. Can I start with a question about child poverty measurement and targets? Do you think we should be aiming to capture child poverty in a single figure? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing that? Do you think there has been an impact from removing from law the targets that were in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and, if so, what do you think that impact has been? Sophie, can you start us off on this?

Sophie Howes: To answer the first part of your question, Chair, talking about measurement, at CPAG we would say that there is a huge benefit in having one primary income-based measure when we are looking at child poverty. At CPAG we use the relative child poverty measure. There are a number of benefits to that measure—which I am sure many of the Committee members will be familiar with from previous evidence sessions—and the ability of the relative child poverty measure to track poverty relative to the society that we are living in now. I think that has been something that has been quite illustrated by the coronavirus pandemic and children's experiences of lockdown and things like having access to digital devices. Those things have been very important in society now but maybe not the same for children 10 or 20 years ago. It is comparable over time. It is internationally comparable. We have a long history of tracking this, so we think having one primary measure, like the relative child poverty measure, is really important.

That is not to say that it needs to be the only measure. We think that there are other aspects of child poverty that are really important to understand if we are going to design the right poverty responses. Poverty

debt is important; absolute poverty and the persistence of poverty are really important things, too, so it is about having a range of measures. The caution I would say about having lots and lots of different types of child poverty measures is the temptation to cherry pick the measures that are delivering on your particular sort of political agenda, so I suppose that would be the caution against too many child poverty measures.

To answer the second part of your question around the impact of not having those targets—I think that was the question—we can see the impact in terms of child poverty has been quite stark, we would argue at CPAG. As the Committee will be aware, relative child poverty has been rising pretty steadily since 2012. That is projected to continue to rise. The Resolution Foundation has done some estimates fairly recently to say that by 2024-25 child poverty will have risen to 4.4 million. That is if the £20 uplift in universal credit and tax credits is kept; 4.7 million without.

We have seen quite big changes in the policies sphere that we would argue at CPAG have been allowed to happen because there has been this reduction in focus on child poverty by not having those targets. Things like cuts to social security, cuts to services for children and families, all of those kinds of agendas have been easier to advance because of the lack of targets.

I will stop there because I am aware that my fellow witnesses may want to say more.

Charlotte McDonough: I would absolutely echo everything that Sophie has just said. It is absolutely important to have a variety of measures. We have heard today that there are so many issues around child poverty. As Sophie said, things like the persistence and depth of poverty are also hugely important. As well as a relative poverty measure, it is also very useful to have measures looking at whether families are able to cover the basics. For example, there are now figures on food insecurity, which are very useful.

The minimum income standard measure produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is incredibly useful in giving an idea of whether families are able to cover those basic needs and the needs that people think that families should be able to cover, but ultimately I would echo the feeling that there does need to be one key measure that should be looking very much at relative income poverty.

It is also very important to get a political agreement from across the spectrum on a particular measure. One of the problems of not having one agreed-upon measure is that it is very difficult to talk about child poverty without this debate always coming up. It makes it much harder to track child poverty and highlight problems around child poverty when every time this debate about the measure does repeatedly get called into question. Having one key measure that is generally agreed upon and everyone looks to as the main measure would be hugely valuable but,

absolutely, that should not come at the expense of having a range of other measures that are looked at as well.

Rebecca Jacques: I agree completely with everything that the other witnesses have said. For us, it is crucial that any measure of child poverty puts income at the centre because poverty is about a lack of income ultimately. Having that at the centre, as an agreed upon measure that focuses on that, would help give us all the same starting place when we are trying to tackle child poverty. Having an agreed upon measure would also help to hold the Government to account when we are looking at how some of their policies are affecting child poverty.

Just on the second part of the question around removing targets, I think that did have an effect on child poverty and moved tackling child poverty down the political agenda. What is important to acknowledge, in addition to that, is the welfare reforms that came along with the removal of targets, the freeze on working-age benefits. In 2019, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that by April 2020, when the freeze ended, around 400,000 people were expected to be living in poverty and people in poverty would be £560 a year worse off.

The two-child limit and benefit cut were also introduced alongside the removal of targets. I am sure CPAG can speak a bit more around the impact of that, but I think that it is important to look at the welfare reforms that came along with the removal of targets when we are thinking about how child poverty has been impacted over recent years.

Q65 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, everyone. I think you have answered a little bit the question I was going to ask, which was the same one that I asked panel one about the evidence of the relationship between the adequacy or inadequacy of social security support and child poverty. Given some of the answers that you have already given, do you think that we should be having details of social security adequacy as one of the measures for child poverty?

Chair: Can I ask again for succinct answers, as I did with the previous panel, to help us get through things? Who wants to start off on this one? Sophie, do you want to start again?

Sophie Howes: It probably will not surprise you to know that CPAG would say that any Government that are serious about tackling child poverty cannot afford to ignore the social security system. It is a huge part of the picture. If we go back to the idea that poverty is ultimately about those resources and about the incomes that low-income families have, there are a variety of different ways to increase household income but social security is one of those key ways. It is one of the key policy levers that Governments have to alleviate child poverty, so it is a really important part of the picture.

Q66 **Debbie Abrahams:** Sorry to interrupt, Sophie. I am not sure if it may be picked up in subsequent questions, but the proportion of children living in

poverty who are in working families, do you have that figure to hand?

Sophie Howes: I do. That is based on the most recent set of HBI stats that it is probably important to say are pre-pandemic. They take us up to March 2020 last year and show that 75% of children are in families where someone works, so that proportion is much higher. It has been rising steadily over time. I think that an important part of this is thinking that just getting families into work is not the end of the story, but also that lots and lots of low-income families who are working are claiming social security benefits at the same time. It is important that we do not think of those two groups of people as separate.

To go back to your original question, Debbie, around whether it is important to be measuring the adequacy of the social security system, I think CPAG would welcome that as a move. We see that as an important part of the picture. I would make the same distinction that the previous witnesses made between having measures of poverty that are about income in one bracket over here, and then I think you have to have the indicators and the things that are tangled up with poverty, so things like education. There probably have to be conversations about where the best place is to put a measure like that, probably putting it in a slightly different category, but having a Government that are measuring that would be a welcome step.

Chair: Before bringing in the other witnesses, I wonder whether I could ask Dr Caroline Johnson to raise a question, as I know you have a question in this area.

Q67 **Dr Johnson:** Sophie brought up the issue of how there were so many different measurements and that you can always point to the one that suits your particular political agenda. That is the point that you raised. I wonder if relative measures can be difficult for some people to understand. We know that if you raise the income of the very wealthy in society you increase child poverty without making those children necessarily any better or worse off. Likewise, if you make the very rich slightly poorer, you can reduce the number in relative poverty without having made them any better off at all. If we want to focus on how to make those children who are in poverty actually less poor, we have to work on an actual measure that measures it properly and looks at them rather than just a relative measure.

Does anyone have a pattern of what they think is a minimum standard of things that people should be able to buy and how much that costs, in order to establish how many families do not have the money to make the choice to provide those things? If we know that children need this much food, this much heating, how much does it cost to raise a child as a minimum standard that you would expect in this country and how many families are living with or without that amount of money?

Chair: Sophie, since your point was touched on there, do you want to respond to that?

Sophie Howes: Caroline, I think there are a couple of things I would point to. You are probably aware of the work that JRF has done around the minimum income standard, which I think is a very good study over time that looks at what people consider is that necessary basket of goods to support yourselves and support your family, so I think that is the one place I would point to.

CPAG also publishes a report each year that looks at the cost of a child. It looks at those basic things that you need to provide for children, the cost of them over time and the number of families that are falling short of those costs. I do not have them right in front of me, but I can get them within this session so that I can bring them into the discussion later if that is helpful.

Q68 **Chair:** The criticism of the relative measure, Sophie, do you want to respond to that?

Sophie Howes: Yes. I appreciate that the relative poverty measure is not perfect but, broadly, the idea that you can cook the books with a child poverty measure is not necessarily that well founded. I think there are so many different factors at play here. When we are talking about tackling child poverty from a policy perspective, gradually lifting more and more families out of poverty over time generally does require quite a concerted effort from Governments for that to happen.

I think that Kitty Stewart talked about this in a previous evidence session, that you could zone in on certain groups within society and push them just over the line or change their household finances just to make things look a bit better. I don't know if that is really reflected if we look back at what has happened on child poverty policy over the last 20 years or so.

I appreciate that things like relative poverty measures are not perfect in recessions when median income drops, so it is not necessarily tracking what child poverty looks like in those times. I definitely acknowledge that it is not perfect, but we think that, given all of the different factors we are looking at and all the different measures that are available, it would be the one that CPAG would say should be the primary measure.

Q69 **Dr Johnson:** Why do you think it is better than the basket of goods, "This is how much it costs to raise a child", to have a relative measure instead?

Sophie Howes: I think it is that ability to track over time that is important and being able to track that relative to other people's incomes in society, the participation in society that I think you get with a relative measure. That is not to say that you cannot add to that by having things like how the cost of the child works to add to the detail, but when you are looking at having one central figure without having to go into that real detail that those other pieces of work offer, I think the relative child poverty measure tells you how children in poverty are doing relative to

other children in society, other families in society, in one central line, which I think is really important.

Chair: We are getting a little bit behind, so before I bring in either of the other witnesses let's go to our next question. Then, if there is anything either of you would like to say on those earlier points, please do when I come to you in a minute. Kim Johnson has the next question.

Q70 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel two. The evidence supports that for many work is not the route out of poverty. The Social Metrics Commission states that almost 60% of those in poverty are families where someone works and 2.8 million people are in poverty where all adults work full-time. How important is worklessness to the overall picture of child poverty and to what extent should worklessness be used as a measure of child poverty? Can I start with you first, please, Sophie?

Sophie Howes: In terms of worklessness, just to reiterate what previous witnesses have said, I would argue that it is not a measure of poverty in and of itself. Paul Bywaters was talking about the secondary indicators. I would put it in that category of things that are both causes and consequences of poverty.

There is definitely a correlation, obviously, between workless households and child poverty and this is something that deserves attention. It is important to understand the reasons why families are workless. If you look at the data in the UK, there are not that many households that are voluntarily workless. Lots of those families have a disabled person in that household, they are caring for very young children or they are actively seeking work. All of those different reasons I have given, I would argue, need slightly different policy responses.

That is not to say that we should not look at supporting those workless families and supporting them into work—we know that work is still a powerful preventer of poverty—but it would just be about making sure that those policy interventions are tailored across those different groups that I have just talked to and also not overstating the importance of worklessness. As we just saw with the previous statistics, the majority of children in poverty are in households where somebody works, so that is also an important part of the picture.

Kim Johnson: Charlotte, do you have anything further that you would like to add?

Charlotte McDonough: Yes, thanks. I completely agree with you that the rates of in-work poverty are extremely high and it absolutely is not just about worklessness. It is also about looking at people who are in work. When we speak to parents and the research we have done about barriers to work is that parents face a whole variety of barriers to work, and they apply to people who are in work as well as those who are out of work.

For example, a parent might be in work but only able to work part-time because they cannot find affordable childcare. That might also be the same barrier to a parent who is out of work but also is not able to work because of that affordable childcare. Parents talk about issues such as a lack of flexibility limiting their ability to find work. It also limits their ability to progress in work. They may be in a job but they are not able to get a promotion or to progress to a better kind of job with higher pay because they cannot find the hours to fit around their children or childcare or that kind of understanding from their employer.

I think it is important to look at worklessness but absolutely to see it as part of a broader package of issues around barriers to work for parents, especially single parents. By tackling a lot of those issues you would be able to help parents who are in work as well as help those parents who are out of work but able to work.

Rebecca Jacques: Again, I completely agree with the points that the other witnesses have made, particularly around the group that might experience barriers to work. I think what the statistics show—around 75% of children in poverty are living in a household where at least one adult works—is that work does npot guarantee a route out of poverty and it would perhaps be more helpful to look at the quality of the employment, so in terms of pay, low pay and job security.

As an example, through our services we supported a family with no recourse to public funds, where the father was working over 90 hours a week and was still struggling to make ends meet and his children were growing up in poverty. That highlights how sometimes work is not enough, and working 90 hours a week sometimes is not enough. It helps build the case for a strong safety net and a strong social security system, which can help support and perhaps top up the incomes of those families who just need extra support because of low pay or insecure hours.

Kim Johnson: This pandemic would have exacerbated a lot of that also. Thank you for your responses and that is all from me.

Q71 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. Just following on from Kim's question, I think there is quite a lot of agreement that work should be the best route out of poverty, so I am wondering if you could say something about how factors like low pay, insecure employment and gender pay factors impact on that and affect child poverty. Also, just on the very last point that Kim raised, can you say anything about what impact you think the changes to the job market following coronavirus will have on child poverty?

Chair: Shall we do it the other way round this time and start with Rebecca because you picked up one of those points in your answer a moment ago, Rebecca?

Rebecca Jacques: Yes, thank you. I think issues around low pay and insecure work are important—as I mentioned in my previous answer—and particularly for families with no recourse to public funds who we know are more likely to work in those types of jobs. There is a real issue

there because those families are not able to access other support from the social security system.

In terms of changes to the labour market following Covid, we do not really know the impacts, particularly the long-term impacts, of what Covid might mean for the job market and for child poverty, but I think we can see from some of the initial figures that have come out and also from evidence from other organisations that there are going to be quite damaging consequences.

One thing we can particularly look at is the recent figures that were published around free school meal eligibility. It showed that around 300,000 children became eligible for free school meals since the first national lockdown, which was around an additional 94,000 children compared to the same period last year. That suggests that many parents have seen a reduction in their income as a result of the pandemic, which means their children now qualify for free school meals.

Similarly, research from the Trussell Trust has shown that there have been huge increases in numbers of families and children accessing support and food parcels from them, which I think just shows the scale of how family incomes might have been impacted by the pandemic.

Charlotte McDonough: I absolutely echo everything that Rebecca said. Low pay, insufficient work, insecure work and those kinds of issues absolutely do have a very strong link with child poverty and are causes trapping parents in poverty even when they are working. In particular, issues around flexibility can lead parents to end up in insecure work because that is a way of getting the flexibility that they need that they do not necessarily get in more secure, good quality jobs, so that is certainly a big issue that we hear about.

It is important to look as well at the role of social security, which I know we have already spoken about. It is a point to recognise that a lot of the rise in in-work poverty has been due to cuts in the social security system. The social security absolutely is not just about supporting people who are out of work. It also plays a big role in topping up the wages for people who are in work but on low incomes. Low wages are also part of that and need to be tackled, but there are limits to how much wage increases can impact poverty.

We know that social security increases can have a huge impact on in-work poverty as well, particularly for people who, for example, cannot work full-time because of caring responsibilities or illness or disability. It is important that we do not necessarily expect everybody to work full-time if they are not able to but that we also look at the role of social security in topping up part-time wages or wages that are not high enough to live on.

In response to your question about the impact of Covid on work and child poverty, I think it is quite early to say at this stage but we do know there

is already some evidence to show that people on low incomes are much more likely to have lost their jobs than people who were on higher incomes pre-pandemic, so that is a real issue. People are also seeing big problems with, for example, the impact of furlough. Even if people have been able to be furloughed they are still living on a reduced wage, which when you are already living on a very low income just pushes you even further into poverty with the knock-on impact of debt and things like that. The hardship that causes over time is certainly a concern.

Lastly, the impact of childcare, which I have spoken about. That is crucial in helping parents to be able to work. Again, it is too early to say what the long-term impact of Covid is on the childcare market, but we do know that there has been an impact, with some childcare providers having to close and concerns around there not being an availability of childcare or that childcare is more expensive as a result of that.

Chair: Thank you. Before bringing in Sophie, I wonder if we can raise our next question, which is coming from Chris Stephens.

Q72 **Chris Stephens:** It is basically picking up the points and the answers to Steve's question. What impact does financial hardship have on children in poverty and how does the depth, the breadth and the duration of that poverty affect the impact on child poverty in particular, Sophie?

Sophie Howes: Thanks, Chris, I will pick up on that. If it is okay, I just want to add on to Steve's question about work. I agree with everything the other witnesses have said but just want to add the gender element that I think is really important within this. Thinking about the groups that will have been most likely to be affected, there is lots of research out there about the impact of the pandemic on women and women working. If you look at low-income families, particularly lone-parent families are much more likely to be living in poverty. Thinking about the policy solutions that are needed in terms of work, we do need to think specifically about those groups. Lone-parent families, women, what Charlotte has just said about childcare, all of those things are very intersecting in terms of how you lift that particular group out of poverty.

To pick up on Chris's question around financial hardship and what the actual day-to-day impact is on children, there is a huge body of evidence out there about the fact that household income has a huge impact on children's outcomes. Kitty Stewart has already given evidence to this Committee so I will not repeat that in terms of the academic research that is out there, but one of the on-the-ground pieces of work that CPAG does is within the education space. We have a project called Cost of the School Day, which looks at encouraging schools to be more inclusive and reducing the cost of actually sending your children to school, so things like uniform costs and cost of school trips.

One of the really interesting things coming out of that work is that part of the project aims to reduce the financial barriers to education. However, when you start talking to children about what it feels like to go to school

when you are poor, they will talk more about the stigma and feeling excluded from friendship groups, not being able to go with their friends to buy a snack at lunch or to do those things. It is the money but it is also about those feelings of stigma. That is just one concrete example within the education space, of which they will have many if you look across all the different areas of children's lives.

Q73 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Sophie. I think the other panellists have had a discussion about measurements. Before I open it up to our other panellists I will ask you about the question of debt and how debt is considered in the measures of child poverty. Would you agree or disagree with the Centre for Social Justice's assertion that debt is a cause of poverty rather than an indicator, and how important is that distinction?

Sophie Howes: CPAG would not agree with that analysis. We would put debt in with the indicators rather than an actual cause. There are a few policy levers that the Government can pull to alleviate debt from the lowest-income households.

You will be aware that last year the Cabinet Office did a consultation looking at fairness in debt management across government. At CPAG we do a lot of work on debt and deductions within the social security system. We would argue that some of the practices used by the Department for Work and Pensions, when you compare it to other debt recovery across government and in the private sector, are hard to justify. A lot could be done there that would make an immediate difference to the incomes of children and families living in poverty.

Chris Stephens: Charlotte and Rebecca, do you have a view around debt and whether it is an indicator or a cause of poverty?

Charlotte McDonough: Like Sophie said, it is important to include debt in any kind of measurement of child poverty. If we are looking at poverty in terms of income—the money that families have, which is a very big aspect of poverty—debt very much plays a part in that. If the family is in debt that massively reduces the amount of disposable income they have to spend on their children and on the basics they need, so it is hugely important to look at debt and to include that.

Obviously, it is also a cause or a consequence of poverty. If you are on a low income you are more likely to get into debt and then that debt itself causes your income to reduce. It is a slightly complicated relationship, all bound up with each other.

If your aim is to look at the money, the disposable income a family has to spend, I absolutely think you should be including debt as a part of that and looking at the impact of that debt.

Rebecca Jacques: On the issue of debt I agree with what the other witnesses have said, it is more likely to be an indicator of poverty.

Similarly to what Charlotte and Sophie have said, debt collection practices can be really damaging to children and families. Some of our previous research has looked at the impact of debt on children, particularly on their mental health. When a family is struggling financially, with financial hardship and debt, it can have really damaging consequences on children. For example, when we asked children living in families with problem debt about how they felt, 58% reported they were feeling really worried about their family's financial situation compared to 31% of children who were not living in families with debt. That highlights the damage that debt can have on families living in poverty and I think it is important to consider it in any indicators of poverty.

Q74 **Chris Stephens:** To bring this all together then, what are the relationships between financial hardship, debt and material deprivation and what impact does this have on children in poverty?

Rebecca Jacques: I am not sure our research and evidence base speaks to the relationship between those things.

Financial hardship, coming back to the previous question, is damaging for children and can have serious consequences for children living in poverty. Sophie touched upon how children can feel excluded. We know from our research that children living in poverty often miss out on opportunities that their peers might have, particularly educational opportunities. That can have a detrimental impact on the children's school attainment, learning and development. We heard from one parent who we support that when his son's classmates are going on a school trip he would not take him to school on those days because he did not want his son to see his friends going on a trip when he would have to stay behind.

While I cannot speak to the relationship between those things, I think financial hardship can have a real impact on children in poverty and can mean they miss out on really key learning opportunities that could follow them later in life. I will see if one of the other witnesses wants to jump in on the relationship between those things.

Chair: Can I just bring in Dr Caroline Johnson who has a question before coming to the other two witnesses?

Q75 **Dr Johnson:** I understand the issues with problem debt, people who are struggling to pay the debt back. How would you devise a measure of debt to include a measure of child poverty? Obviously, those people with much higher incomes are often able to take on bigger mortgages and larger debt so the size of the debt per se is not necessarily the problem, it is whether they can afford it. What sort of measures do you think are available to enable us to assess whether the size of the debt or its affordability is having a material effect on the family?

Charlotte McDonough: I am definitely not an expert in terms of exactly how to incorporate debt into a measure of poverty. However, from my view, I think you are absolutely right in terms of it is not just the size of the debt and it would be about looking at what is left after families have

paid that debt. For example, a lot of child poverty measures are looked at after housing costs, which would include looking at what a family has to pay after they have paid their mortgage or their rent. That is a really important measure of poverty because it takes into account the disposable income that a family has after paying those unavoidable costs like a mortgage or a debt that they need to pay back every month. I think the Social Metrics Commission measure does take debt into account in some way, which I think is really important but I could not go into a lot of detail about how exactly that should be done.

To come back to the question around the relationship between financial hardship, debt and material deprivation, I absolutely echo the other panellists on that. They are hugely interlinked. As I said before, if you are in financial hardship that also means you are more likely to need to take on debt, which causes your income to fall even further and you end up trapped in a cycle of poverty because of that.

The other panellists have spoken really well on the impact on children and there is a huge amount of evidence to show the impact of a lack of money, specifically, on children's outcomes in the short and long term. It is crucial to talk about the day-to-day impact of hardship on children as well. It is not just about looking at the outcomes in the longer term or what is going to happen to them in adulthood. It is also the right of children to enjoy a good childhood, to be able to feel secure and stable and to have the opportunities that all children should have that is really crucial. We know that poverty limits their ability to do that or to experience childhood in the way that other children do.

Sophie Howes: I do not have a huge amount to add that has not been said. In terms of how you look at including debt within some kind of measurement, to speak to Caroline's question, this is not something that CPAG has done much research or analysis on. However, as Charlotte has mentioned, the work of the Social Metrics Commission—where it has looked at how debt might affect those available resources that households have to spend to meet those basic needs—is one area to look at in terms of exploring that area further. It is connected to that.

To pick up on the other question around how these issues are linked, when we think of the area of expertise that the CPAG has, which is around debt within the social security system, these debts must be repaid. They are repaid through the social security system and there is very little choice for claimants within that system about how that debt is repaid. The debt has a huge impact on the available financial resources that families have to meet their basic needs. When you are thinking about things that a Government may do to immediately alleviate the situation for families, some of this could be cost neutral if you looked at reducing the repayment further in universal credit so that DWP still recoups that money but recoups it over a longer period of time. That is something that would make a huge difference to the finances of low-income families.

Q76 **Selaine Saxby:** I know we are tight on time so I am going to combine my questions to the panel, which are around educational attainment.

In your view, should educational attainment be included in measures of poverty and what is the impact of good educational attainment by children in poverty on their later lives? Linked to that, what sort of policies should we be looking at and what should Departments like Work and Pensions and Education be doing to instigate change?

Rebecca Jacques: Similarly to the issue around worklessness, we do not think that educational attainment is a measure of child poverty but is more of an outcome. While I think it is important to consider it in understanding the wider issues around child poverty, we would again say income is a more useful measure of child poverty.

If we are talking about outcomes, of which educational attainment is an important one, it is also useful to measure children's subjective wellbeing and their happiness with their life as a whole. Our research has shown that for children living in poverty time and time again their wellbeing is lower than their more affluent peers. Understanding that on a bigger scale would be really useful for us to understand how children in poverty experience life and their happiness with their life as a whole, and might also help the Government with targeting services as well.

I am afraid our research does not really look at the impact of educational attainment later in life so I cannot speak to that so much, I am afraid.

Charlotte McDonough: I absolutely echo what Rebecca has been saying, particularly around the measure. Similarly, we would not see educational attainment as a measure of poverty itself: it is a consequence of child poverty or a cause of poverty in terms of the parents. It is not necessarily helpful to conflate those two and to use it as a measure.

However, it is absolutely crucial to measure educational attainment as a separate thing, and particularly to continue to look at the attainment gap between children in poverty and their peers at all stages of education and look at how that changes over time, whether it is narrowing or widening. With Covid we are already starting to see some evidence that that gap has widened and is widening, particularly because of issues around lockdown and access to digital devices, which mean that children in poverty have not been able to get the same quality of home schooling or the same access to home schooling as their peers. That is a big problem. It will be interesting or concerning to see how that problem feeds down the line, whether that kind of problem is ironed out over time or whether that then leads to a persistent widening of the attainment gap. That will be really crucial to measure now and in the years to come, to look at the impact of Covid on that.

Something that Save the Children works on, which is often not always talked about in terms of education, is the early years. That is really crucial because we know that the attainment gap opens up at a very

young age between children in poverty and their peers and then persists throughout a child's education, even into later life. There is evidence to show that for children who were behind in the early years it has an impact on their attainment at A-level standard, and even in terms of the jobs they get and their outcomes in adult life. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial to start quite young when you are looking at the attainment gap and to look at the impact on those very young children as well as children who are attending school.

Sophie Howes: I agree with many of the things that the previous witnesses have said.

To add to that, where we would see this falling in terms of addressing educational impact is that we know that children in poverty do less well at school so it is how we address that. The first thing would be having a comprehensive cross-government child poverty strategy and then seeing education as a key pillar of that strategy. That is the kind of approach we would want to see.

If you are thinking about particular policy responses sitting in that kind of education pillar, on CPAG's wish list of interventions would be reducing school costs, extended schools—the idea of having before and after-school childcare, having a range of services for children and families based within the school—and universal free school meals, and then I think Charlotte has already mentioned the early years piece and childcare for preschool children. Those four things would make a huge difference in terms of the educational outcomes of children in poverty.

Chair: We have a final question for you from Shaun Bailey.

Q77 **Shaun Bailey:** I will keep it tight because I am conscious as well of time.

You talked then about the cross-governmental child poverty strategy. I wanted to talk about that and accountability more broadly. Child Poverty Action Group has pointed out that the approach to this in government has been to bat it off to different places. There does not ever seem to have been that accountability there, obviously given some of the failures we have seen in terms of the life chances indicators as well.

I want to understand how you think a cross-departmental strategy would work and then more broadly how we could ensure there is really effective accountability in this space. It seems at the moment that is lacking. How do we go about that? Do you think this maybe needs to be more centralised in terms of a single Department taking ownership, or better ownership rather, of this?

Sophie Howes: Shaun, you pick up on something that is really important and can be the sink or swim factor within a successful child poverty strategy. I think that is around the importance of having strong leadership underpinned by political will as well, which is really important. That strong leadership part is really important. For example, looking at the previous child poverty strategy, there was responsibility within No. 10

for leading the delivery of that strategy. If you look internationally—if you look at the work that is going on in New Zealand—the Minister responsible for child poverty there is the Prime Minister. It is about having that real kind of central leadership within a cross-government strategy to make sure that it is successful.

You mentioned batting it off to different Departments. That does speak to CPAG's experience working on this issue over recent years, the feeling of, "This is not our responsibility, talk to this Department". Those conversations have been very common for us. Therefore, it is having that central leadership and then having that shared understanding that all Government Departments have a role in tackling child poverty. Some of them will be more significant than others. Leading Departments would obviously be the Department for Work and Pensions, Treasury, Education, MHCLG, but other Departments would also have a leading role. It is that understanding that this has to sit across the whole of Government because we are talking about such a broad range of policy areas to see effective change with those targets that we talked about right at the beginning of the evidence session. Those are the kind of things we would want to see in a child poverty strategy.

Charlotte McDonough: I absolutely agree with all of that. I do not have a lot to add.

As Sophie said, it is hugely important and would be really positive to have a cross-government strategy. That would enable all of these Departments to work together and to also provide a mechanism for organisations such as ours to work directly with the Government in a much easier way and to hold them accountable on that.

In terms of accountability, we spoke about targets earlier. Having clear targets, as well as very clear goals and a very clear idea of how to get to those targets, would be really valuable in terms of the mechanism to hold the Government to account and to make sure the strategy is acted on and goes somewhere rather than just being a strategy that does not end up going anywhere or having much impact. That would be really crucial.

The only thing to add from our perspective is that if there was such a strategy we would want to make sure that it involves people in poverty in every way as much as possible. I think having this done without consulting those people limits it and limits the understanding people can have of what the real issues are and what the solutions are. I think it would be incredibly important to work out a way to consult people who are in poverty and also to try to involve them at every stage of the process and to make sure that is really backed into it from the beginning.

Rebecca Jacques: I agree with everything the other witnesses have said. Central leadership for child poverty is absolutely crucial to its success, along with targets as well. That would show that tackling child poverty is a real priority and is taken really seriously by the Government.

Absolutely it should be a cross-departmental approach. We have heard in this session, as well as in the previous session, how child poverty is present in and impacts so many aspects of a child's life and can follow them later into life. It is really important that all those dots are joined up. There are definitely examples of how specific Government Departments are working to tackle their particular aspect of child poverty or to support children living in poverty; one example would be free school meals support. I think definitely having a more overarching strategy would be really important.

Finally, to add to that, it is really important that any strategy focuses on supporting the incomes of families living in poverty in the social security system and proper investment in that as a really effective way to support children and families in poverty.

Chair: Thank you all very much. Thank you for giving us such a large chunk of your time this morning and the benefits of your expertise. That brings our meeting to a close. Thank you to everyone who has been involved.