

# Work and Pensions Committee

## Oral evidence: Children in poverty: Measurement and targets, HC 188

Wednesday 26 May 2021

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

Education Committee Member present: Kim Johnson.

Questions 116 to 156

### Witnesses

**I:** Baroness Stroud, Chair of the Social Metrics Commission; Dr Mike Brewer, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Economist, Resolution Foundation; Robert Joyce, Deputy Director, Institute for Fiscal Studies; and Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation, Office for Statistics Regulation.

**II:** Anne Longfield, campaigner for children and Children's Commissioner for England 2015-2021; and Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Legatum Institute

[\[CPM0011\]](#)

Social Metrics Commission

[\[CPM0010\]](#)

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Stroud, Dr Mike Brewer, Robert Joyce and Ed Humpherson.

Q116 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody, to this meeting of the Work and Pensions Select Committee and an evidence session for our inquiry on children in poverty. I thank in particular all the witnesses who are joining us over



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Zoom this morning. Can the witnesses for the first panel very briefly introduce yourselves, starting with Baroness Philippa Stroud?

**Baroness Stroud:** Good morning, Chairman. I am Philippa Stroud, the CEO of the Legatum Institute and Chair of the Social Metrics Commission, which is probably the most relevant this morning.

**Robert Joyce:** I am Robert Joyce. I am the Deputy Director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies. I run our research around poverty and inequality. I also, with another hat on, have been sitting on the Social Metrics Commission with Philippa and others.

**Dr Brewer:** Good morning. Dr Mike Brewer, I am the Chief Economist at the Resolution Foundation, a think-tank devoted to living standards of low to middle-income households.

**Ed Humpherson:** Good morning. I am Ed Humpherson. I am the head of the Office for Statistics Regulation. We are the UK's regulator for Government statistics and data and we are here to ensure that statistics published by Government serve the public good. Last week we published a review of income-based poverty statistics.

Q117 **Chair:** Thank you. The timing for that was very helpful from the point of view of the Committee.

Can I ask each of you to comment on three points about the measurement of poverty? First of all, do you think we should be aiming for a single measure of how many people are in poverty or is that too simplistic? Do we need a basket of some kind?

Secondly, do you think we should be measuring degrees of poverty rather than simply poor versus not poor? Thirdly, in your view, is there a role for a minimum income standard like that drawn up by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or something similar to establish whether people are in poverty or not? Philippa, can I start with you, please?

**Baroness Stroud:** Thank you, absolutely. Taking those in order, the single measure first of all, I think that when it comes to measuring poverty, there needs to be a coherent narrative. People need to understand what a Government means by poverty and then they need to clearly understand who is in poverty, but within that context we have very much felt that it is right to have a headline measure but then also be able to look at things like persistence and depth and the lived experience of people in poverty. There are different facets and aspects to poverty.

The Social Metrics Commission is a single measure of poverty, but it is also a number of different measurements of poverty within the same measurement framework. It is, in effect, a framework of measuring poverty.

Do I think there should be degrees of poverty measurement? Absolutely. This is completely critical. One of the things that our work revealed was that for over the last 20 years, there have been on average about 14



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million people in poverty. That has been going up and down slightly, but on average about 14 million people—but that has not captured what has been happening below the poverty line.

When we started looking at depth of poverty, we started to realise that there was a growing group of people who were more than 50% below the poverty line. That had not been captured before, so unless you go down in depth with poverty, you won't capture that, and also the persistence of poverty.

Our poverty measurements take a snapshot on a day, but what we and the public are more concerned about is not who is poor on one day of the year but who is poor over time. That really matters, because that has a very significant impact on people's lives. Yes, a single measure but that should be a framework. Degrees of poverty, absolutely.

We debated the minimum income standard at the commission quite long and hard. There is obviously room for a minimum income standard, but it is different from a poverty measure. It is a measure of adequacy. We even discussed this with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation at length, which was involved in the commission. It said to us that this was not designed to be a poverty measure; it was designed to be a measurement of adequacy.

I think there is definitely space for all of these different types of measures. They enrich the debate, they help us understand more fully what is taking place among our most disadvantaged communities, but they are not necessarily substitutes for one another. We value them all.

**Robert Joyce:** First of all to define the terms of it, I suppose if we are talking about how to measure essentially who has low material living standards, which is broadly what I would think of as poverty—one can talk about broader things and causes and consequences as well, which is important, but I would distinguish that from poverty itself—if you are just trying to get a good measure of who has low material standards of living, it is very hard to do it with just one measure. But I don't think you need reams of statistics to get a good handle on it.

First of all, on what you are taking as your metric of who has enough, we know that income itself is a pretty good starting point that is quite partial, but one of the things that we try to do—again with my secondary Social Metrics Commission hat on—on the commission is to think fairly systematically about how you can bring in a lot of other information that is relevant in determining what people have available within a single measure.

You can try to bring in information about savings and costs that are hard to avoid, perhaps debt repayments and so on. You can do a lot of that and get a relatively comprehensive view of who has low material living standards within a single measure without having a proliferation of indices, if you do it carefully.



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Other variants of the analysis that are relevant: people often talk about whether we want things before or after housing costs. I would argue quite strongly—for various reasons that I am happy to go into—that measuring resources after housing costs is rather better, at least when measuring poverty as opposed to living standards more generally. I am happy to not let measures proliferate on the basis of housing costs.

There are other measures, though, that are useful and that we should not forget about. One useful indicator in principle is consumption. What are people consuming; what are people spending their money on? It would be very nice to have more poverty measurement based on that. The ONS has started to do that, which I think is good and is a nice complementary view of poverty. It is very interesting to look at which kinds of households look poor on the basis of income but not on the basis of consumption and vice versa. I think that can tell you some real things about the limitations of one measure or the other.

I also think that the material deprivation measures that we have are a very useful complement. I think we can learn quite a lot about the nature of poverty by looking at who is not materially deprived but has low income and vice versa and so on. There are other measures like consumption and material deprivation, alongside a reasonably comprehensive measure of income adjusted for costs and so on that one can bring in, but I think you can do that with a pretty small number of measures, probably not one.

Even on the Social Metrics Commission, where we were very conscious to think that people tend to at least focus on one measure, we did try to think hard about, “Well, if we are going to have one measure that has to be the headline, what would it be?” but even there we still, as Philippa has said, made the point that you do want to look at other things. I think you want more than one measure involved if you want to measure low material living standards, but I don’t think you need that many.

The other point that is important to raise here is that it is not about what you are measuring—is it income, is it consumption, is it something else—but also whether you are assessing poverty in a relative or absolute sense. That is a debate that was raised for a long time. I don’t think it is ever going to be settled anytime soon. We tried to think about that pretty head on and pretty systematically in the commission and that was very useful, but I point out that there are relative and absolute ways of thinking about poverty.

My view is that a relative way of thinking about it is more relevant if you are assessing long-term trends and an absolute way of thinking about it is more relevant if you are assessing trends from year to year, but there are those fundamentally different ways of thinking about poverty that are both useful and I wouldn’t want to discard either. That is the other thing to bring in.



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Much more briefly, I certainly agree that it is good to measure different degrees of poverty and certainly persistence. I think we are increasingly able to do the latter because of better data that follows the same people over longer periods.

On measuring the severity of poverty, you have to be careful in practice, at least if you are using an income-based framework, and that is because of issues that we maybe will come on to in other questions—I don't know—but issues around the quality of the measurement of income towards the very bottom of the distribution. The measurement down there can be a little ropey, for various reasons. That can mean that if you are trying to measure very severe poverty based on income, you can run into problems of robustness.

On the minimum income standard, I wouldn't say anything more than what Philippa said. I think it is a useful approach to use, to try to have a sort of deliberative approach to try to understand what people think is acceptable, but the JRF would, I think rightly, stop short of describing its current measure as a poverty measure because it is not using the language of poverty. It is asking people what is required to participate in society.

**Dr Brewer:** On the question about whether we should have one or many measures of poverty, my answer depends upon whether we are thinking about these as being a set of indicators of poverty or a set of targets that Government are committing themselves to.

If we think about a set of indicators, I would be in favour of multiple measures because there are many different dimensions to poverty and it is likely that you will miss some if we just put it all in a single measure of income. But when it comes to Government setting a target or saying, "This is an indicator we care about and want to see it move in a certain direction" it is very helpful to have one or at least certainly not helpful to be in the current situation, where it seems people can pick and choose between before or after housing costs and relative or absolute.

I was in favour of the principle adopted in the Child Poverty Act, where there was a single measure that the Government of the day said was the most important but buttressed by a range of other measures, which were deliberately there to capture different aspects of poverty, so the persistence of poverty and the link with material deprivation as well. That is a helpful way of using multiple indicators.

On measuring the depth of poverty, as a researcher I would say, yes, of course we should ideally, but I agree completely with what Robert Joyce said—that there are data issues that mean that one should not go too far down the income distribution. There is rather more noise than signal once you get to households with extremely low incomes, so that makes it very difficult in practice to measure severe poverty accurately.



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I agree with all the witness so far that the MIS is a fantastic thing, but it is not intended to be used as a poverty benchmark and is instead intended to be a measure of adequacy. It is used to inform the living wage and we used it recently to inform a living pension, but it is different from a poverty budget.

**Ed Humpherson:** I said in my introduction that we are focused on whether statistics published by Government serve the public good. The way we think about serving the public good relates to the questions that you have asked in a couple of ways.

One approach that we take to whether statistics serve the public good is the extent to which they answer users' questions, questions that users of the statistics want answered, or another way of putting that is whether they answer the key questions that people in society have.

If we take a lens on poverty measures, I think we can see that there are multiple questions that people want to address and previous witnesses have run through them very well. On the distinction between absolute and relative, there are legitimate questions that people want answered with either of those. Similarly, material deprivation plays a very important role in understanding poverty.

For those reasons of serving this interest, we think a single metric is maybe not the best way and it is better to take a basket of measures. Similarly, we would strongly support a focus on depth and persistence, not a binary in or out. One of the things I thought was great about the Social Metrics Commission's work is how it puts depth and persistence right up front, right alongside the overall measure of 14 million people. I think that is a great practice and it should be replicated across what the official bodies do as well.

The second way we come at the question of public good though is about the use of statistics in public discourse, public debate and political debate. That also bears on the questions that you have asked, because we observe that there would be a danger with a single measure of poverty that it just gets thrown into the debate as a big number and all the nuance and all the depth of understanding gets lost. We think that is a good reason to have multiple measures.

Of course there is a symmetrical opposite risk: that if you have multiple measures it is easy to cherry pick them and pick one measure on one day because it is going in one direction and another measure on another day because it is going in a different direction.

The real key point is something that all of the witnesses have said. It is important in any discussion of poverty to be clear and up front about what your concept of poverty is, rather than just picking a number that happens to be the graph going in the right direction, what do you mean by poverty and what you care about. We think that a single measure probably doesn't meet user needs and may not be great for the public



debate. We certainly think in degrees of depth and persistence is very important.

I have nothing much to add on the minimum income standard, other than to say that we think the process is as important as the output. The process that JRF go through, this deliberative process with people, families and individuals, what it considers to be what people need to live is very extensive. This is not just a single focus group; it is a very extensive deliberative process. I think that is excellent and it gives a better insight into current notions of deprivation than the questions that DWP use, which are now looking a little dated, I think. We really like the process of the JRF for the minimum income standard.

**Chair:** Thank you. Debbie Abrahams wanted to pick up a point quickly.

**Debbie Abrahams:** It has probably been covered, Stephen, but it is related to the recent report from one of the Danish universities. It is not just persistent poverty that has significant and lasting damage but also transient poverty. I think we need to be very clear on the evidence particularly around child poverty. Persistent poverty, yes, but also transient poverty has significant and lasting damage to children.

**Chair:** Thank you. Does anyone want to comment on that or is it perhaps a point that we would all note? Okay, thank you very much.

Q118 **Sir Desmond Swayne:** Philippa, when you spoke to us in October, I think it was, you said that the commission was working on a measure and you also had a model that would be able to measure the impact of Government policy on poverty. Equally, you told us you were looking for some momentum from the Department on that front. How is it going?

**Baroness Stroud:** Thank you so much, Desmond. Yes, we have been working to not only improve the data sources that go into the SMC measure, but we have also been developing a model and working to get the SMC measure adopted and integrated into a Government suite of measures.

Taking each of those at a time, when Amber Rudd was Secretary of State for DWP, as we all know she announced that for the SMC measure they would develop experimental statistics. In that, the Department was also doing great work on developing how debt would be included, how social care would be included, how the costs of disability would be included and how assets would be included. All of these things are vital to understanding poverty and we wanted all of those to be incorporated into the SMC model of poverty.

When Covid hit and the civil servants all went out on to the front line, that work was paused and it has not yet been restarted. All that work on improving the measurement of debt, social care, costs of disability and assets, to our knowledge—and I have kept probing—has not been restarted even separately from whether or not they took forward the SMC measure.



I am given to understand that the Secretary of State favours a material deprivation measure of poverty. Our argument has been that if that helps her on her policy agenda, absolutely fantastic, but having announced out that experimental statistics are going to be developed and also the sector now wanting to be able to use the Social Metrics Commission measure of poverty, this would be a good moment to get going again with the measures.

I was aware that somebody might ask me this question and I checked in with No. 10 and the DWP in the last 48 hours and have had assurances from them that the Prime Minister remains open and understands the importance of poverty measurement as part of his levelling-up agenda and wants to reduce poverty over this Parliament, and that the DWP says no decision has been taken yet.

For the levelling-up agenda, we need a poverty measurement. We can't say that we are making progress on the levelling-up agenda absent of an outstanding poverty measurement. This is going to be essential. My encouragement to anybody who will listen to me is that if you are serious about poverty and you want to reduce it in this Parliament and you are serious about the levelling-up agenda, poverty measurement has to be at the heart of that and I would recommend the Social Metrics Commission.

**Q119 Sir Desmond Swayne:** The question is: what is wrong with the current methods that DWP use to measure poverty? Ed, you have just completed a review of the statistics. What are your findings and main recommendations?

**Ed Humpherson:** We have a whole range of findings and recommendations, nestled within which are some thoughts about DWP's statistics. If it is okay with you, I will run through very briefly the whole picture and then we can focus in on the DWP.

The first thing to say is that we think that there is a very strong foundation of the statistics in the Family Resources Survey in households below average income, very longstanding, very well respected, very well delivered and done by DWP, but we see lots of room for improvement.

Our first main finding is to make poverty statistics more accessible through better signposting and much more guidance for users as to how to interpret the different sources. Secondly—and this is something that touches on the first question we were all answering—we need to look beyond the poverty line. A big part of that is the depth and persistence, but also we encourage DWP to review its current material deprivation measures, which are, as I said in my answer, going back to 2011 now and maybe could be refreshed.

Thirdly, we want to see data gaps identified and addressed, things like poverty by ethnicity and also extending some very good local area work that DWP has done on children in low-income families, extending that to





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adults in low-income families and pensioners in low-income families at very fine levels of geography, constituency and below.

Fourthly, we encourage innovation, improving data quality, particularly by drawing on the huge assets of the administrative data that is held by DWP and HMRC and integrating that with the survey evidence. We think that can help with addressing some of the points that Rob was making about reporting income at the very bottom end of the distribution. We also encourage a review of equivalisation, which is quite technical. The Social Metrics Commission has done some excellent work on what could be done there. While it is technical, it is very important.

Finally, we talk about maintaining confidence in the statistics overall and this goes back to the transparency with which statistical plans are developed. We make a direct recommendation that DWP, together with ONS, should be very clear on how it is taking forward the Social Metrics Commission work into experimental statistics.

To an extent, we think that the way it has been communicated to date has been a little bit opaque and we want to have a much clearer set of statistical plans, "This is what we understand by poverty, this is how we are measuring it and this is how we are going to develop those measures". That is the kind of overview.

One of the things that flows through all of that is this question of coherent explanation. We think that both DWP and ONS can do a much better job of coherently explaining how the various measures fit together so that while we have multiple measures, we know how they relate to each other.

We also think this point about drawing much more on administrative data to enrich the surveys and supplement the surveys is very important. Those are the key findings of our review. Obviously the review has lots of detail that sits underneath it but that is the high-level picture.

**Q120 Sir Desmond Swayne:** Mike, do you have a view on the weaknesses in the DWP's main measure of poverty and what could be done to remedy it?

**Dr Brewer:** I wouldn't have said it has many weaknesses. It certainly has many strengths, such as it provides us with a very long run of data and international comparability.

The weaknesses are related to whether you think that poverty is about more than just income, or if you think that poverty is better measured with long-run measures of income rather than short-run snapshots, or if you think that poverty is to do with the costs that families face as well as just their income. Of course the last of those is one of the things that is highlighted in the Social Metrics Commission measure.

I am quite a big fan of the DWP's current measure. I think it would be good if the Social Metrics Commission was pursued as an experimental



statistic, although there could be comments made about that as well. I don't think that is necessarily a saviour but it does provide a useful alternative perspective and in some respects is an improvement.

**Q121 Sir Desmond Swayne:** On the question of the longer run as against a snapshot, one of the limitations of the statistics that we get at the moment is the time lag. We were only given figures for 2019 a couple of months ago. Is there anything that can be done about that or do we simply have to live with it? Is it a big deal? Robert, perhaps you could start.

**Robert Joyce:** This has been an issue for a long time of course. The timeline has been compressed a little bit in the last few years. It used to be we had to wait until mid-summer essentially to get the data and now it is March, so it is a little bit better.

I have a little bit of direct knowledge of some of the process because the IFS is involved in some of the quality assurance work that goes into the production of the statistics. From that, I would say if there is scope for compressing this timeline further, you can think of this as two steps. There is the survey that is conducted and then the answers are collated and cleaned and in some cases I think imputed. Once that is that done, you take that clean data and you calculate the poverty statistics and so on from it.

We are involved in the second step a little bit. It has been compressed already quite a bit and I don't think it could be compressed a lot more, frankly, but that is not the main lag. The main lag is waiting for the survey data itself to be processed, cleaned and whatever else is done to it within the DWP. That would be the place to look.

I am fairly confident that DWP, if you asked, will say, "No, we can't do that any more quickly" and I think that is a conversation that has been had a number of times in the past. I honestly don't know, because it is not a process I am involved in directly, but that would be the place to look.

It is a fairly common issue. I think we are not the only country to have this issue. There are often lags in survey data of this kind. It may be that we are a little worse than some other countries. I don't know that for sure, but we are not unique in having this problem.

One thing to say, perhaps more constructively, is that there are ways we can think about bringing in quicker sources of data that do not rely on the household surveys. That will be different kinds of measurements. That is one of the ways that administrative data, for example, could help and could give us an earlier view of some of the key trends than what we get from waiting for the household survey to be done, conducted, cleaned, imputed and processed. That would be one way of going if you wanted a quicker view of things.



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Q122 **Chair:** Thank you. I can see that Mike and Ed want to say something. Can I ask you to be brief, if you can? Mike first.

**Dr Brewer:** It is a real problem, yes. The fact that we have to wait a year is not good and does seem surprising nowadays, particularly through the crisis where we have seen people commission online surveys and get the results one or two weeks later. We have been doing that regularly through the crisis, publishing reports five weeks after a survey goes into the field. If there is a delay, it is due to that very intensive data processing, data cleaning and quality assurance that goes on within the DWP and then with the IFS, but it would be fantastic to have faster statistics, yes.

**Ed Humpherson:** Very briefly, I just endorse what Rob said about the administrative data for timeliness. The administrative data is inevitably less complete. It gives a less complete picture of the household than the survey would, but it is faster, and particularly on the income side, the earnings side now with real-time information. I think you could see DWP or ONS doing for these sorts of statistics what ONS has done for economic indicators, producing very fast indicators, which are recognised to be less complete than the fuller piece but give people a quick insight. I think that would be the way to redevelop these things.

Q123 **Steve McCabe:** Good morning. I want to follow on a little from some of the questions that the Chair asked at the beginning. The Social Metrics Commission has been commended, it seems to me, for including things like disability and childcare costs as inescapable costs in its measures, but we have also heard some of the criticisms this morning: availability of data; no comparable social care equivalent to childcare costs; and disability benefits being a proxy for costs that don't reflect changes in the value of the benefits. Is there anything else that you would recommend that you think would improve the Social Metrics Commission approach that is readily achievable? Should we still be trying to distinguish between deprivation and poverty?

**Baroness Stroud:** The Social Metrics Commission put placeholders in it that would at least give a sense of the scale of the problem. For example, on the issue of disability, in the households below average income disability benefits are credited to a household as income and therefore they are not considered to be in poverty. We felt that that needed to be offset by the costs and therefore as a working model we basically just said that the benefits are given to cover costs, therefore they will be deducted as costs. We felt that was a reasonable holding position until the Government could come forward with the actual costs of disability. We would love to support that work, working with charities and people who have disabilities to come forward with the costs.

If I look at where the need is, having just gone through a global pandemic, what is needed is real-time information. You need the Social Metrics Commission of poverty, but you also need to know how we are doing month by month. We have just seen a huge furlough scheme



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introduced to protect people against unemployment. The Government need to know how we are doing. That might be protecting against unemployment; is it protecting against poverty? That can only be achieved through real-time information.

The DWP and HMRC are in possession of that real-time information. Ironically, they have the best access to all the data of anybody who is in poverty now, today. While you would not be able to add in and you would have to adjust annually the lived experience indicators and you would have to make adjustments and do the sort of work that Rob has just been describing in cleansing the data, you could have a real-time dashboard that I think would hugely help Ministers and policymakers adjust policy when going through a major crisis like we have just been through, if that helps you.

Q124 **Chair:** Thank you. We are a bit up against the clock, but let me just see if any of the other three witnesses want to comment specifically on this. Ed would like to.

**Ed Humpherson:** Yes, very quickly. The Social Metrics Commission approach is having a coherent and complete concept of poverty, one component of which is the lived experience of poverty. I think that the indicators the Social Metrics Commission puts forward are excellent and well worth looking at, but in a sense that is just the surface of lived experience. I would recommend two things to go beyond that.

One is something I mentioned already: the Joseph Rowntree very deliberative approach to lived experience, asking people who are living these experiences what they consider they need and what counts as a normal standard of living.

The other is linking multiple administrative datasets can give you a very profound sense of lived experience. If you link an income-based dataset—which you get from the surveys we have been talking about or from HMRC—with an education dataset, a health dataset, a criminal justice dataset, a housing dataset, you then get very rich pictures of not just different types of lived experience, but the kind of subgroups within society and what they experience.

Lived experience is a very important part of this. I think what the Social Metrics Commission propose is a very good start, but we could definitely build out from that.

Q125 **Nigel Mills:** What do the panel think about having more local data so local authorities and other providers can try to intervene locally to tackle issues? Is that useful data to have? Is it data that is readily available or is there more work to do to get meaningful data so that we can work out where pockets of problems are locally and tackle them?

**Dr Brewer:** I think we have covered this already. We hinted at this already in previous questions, but more local data would be fantastic. Yes, DWP and HMRC have fantastic administrative data right now on the



number of children and adults claiming income-related benefits or tax credits, which it uses to produce these local area estimates of child poverty, it just does it with a large lag.

I completely agree with what Philippa said in response to the previous question—that producing that information in real time, some kind of real-time dashboard to go alongside what the ONS is doing with its rapid economic indicators, would be feasible and very useful. It would not give you a child poverty rate last month in a particular parliamentary constituency; it would give you a measure of the number of children receiving income-related benefits, but that is a very good proxy in the short run.

Q126 **Nigel Mills:** How local can you or should you get that data? Having it for the whole of Derbyshire is not wonderfully useful to me, but clearly I can't have it down to the household, because that is probably breaching someone's privacy. Can I get it down to local government ward or down to polling district, just so I can see what the pockets are and what is happening? I suppose that is where it becomes more useful to local authorities rather than just knowing what is happening to a population the size of 1 million or something.

**Dr Brewer:** I don't know. I know it is currently published at the level of parliamentary constituency or local authority, but those are still quite large. I wonder whether Ed might know the answer to that.

**Ed Humpherson:** Yes, you can get it down to parliamentary constituency and I believe to local authority and possibly to super output area as well. I will check that before the end of this session on the super output area, but I am pretty certain you can.

One other thing about this local data is that the surveys are only as powerful as the number of respondents that you get. The more respondents you get, the more confidence you get at lower levels of geography because you are just picking more people. The DWP is boosting the Family Resources Survey to 45,000, which is in fact more than doubling it and is going to be very strong for local area data. That is fantastic news if you are interested in local area data.

We also recommend in our review that DWP and ONS look to align with an ONS survey, which could extend the potential sample even further and get even more robust local area estimates, so I think there is very good news coming down the track here.

**Baroness Stroud:** I think everything I was going to say has been said. I completely concur with Mike and Ed on that.

**Robert Joyce:** In principle you could go very local because, as I understand the way this measure is being constructed, it is mostly information that is coming from the administrative data that the Government have, which of course they have on anyone who is in their



administrative systems, wherever they live, in whatever area. Basically what happens, I think, is that it uses that information to work out variation in poverty across different areas and then it will scale things up or down to match the higher regional level poverty rate that you get from the survey data.

It can look at any area in the north-west and it will scale up or down all the poverty rates of those areas so that they match the north-west poverty rate according to the survey data, but within the north-west in principle, because it is administrative data, I think you could measure variations of whatever level you want to. That would be my understanding of the way these measures are constructed. I don't know what is actually published; I think Ed has already said. I think in principle you can go very local.

I think one limitation of these measures is that they ignore housing costs because you can't measure housing costs with administrative data in any reliable way. That is important, of course, when you are thinking about local variations in poverty rates and we know that is very important if you just compare the before and after housing cost measures in the standard statistics. That would be a limitation. It will tend to bias things in certain directions, of course, the kinds of places that tend to have higher costs. That is difficult to overcome.

One could try to get a sense of how important it might be though with some modelling imputation and so on. That might be a useful exercise for the Government to do if they are going to use these measures. I think otherwise you will get some not entirely accurate impressions of where poverty is highest if you are not accounting for housing costs.

**Ed Humpherson:** I will clarify that you can get children in low-income families at constituency and ward and lower super output area. I have just checked that, so it already goes down to a very fine level of geographical detail.

**Chair:** Nigel, is that okay? Thank you, Nigel. Kim Johnson. We are delighted that Kim is here from the Education Committee this morning. Thank you for joining us, Kim.

Q127 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much, Chair. Good morning, panel. My questions this morning are the causes of child poverty and the link with parental worklessness and educational attainment. The 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act placed a greater emphasis on indicators that measure worklessness and educational attainment. How useful are these as indicators of child poverty? We will maybe start with Ed.

**Ed Humpherson:** To be honest, I think there are probably going to be other members of the panel who will have a better handle on that than I have. That is probably not something I have a particular insight into.

**Kim Johnson:** Who would like to go first? Baroness Stroud, thank you.



**Baroness Stroud:** Thank you. I was in the Department in the run-up to this happening. I think that although there was an emphasis put into the legislation on employment and education, it was never meant to be separate from also a new measure of poverty. We had two if not three failed attempts in Government to try to develop a new measure of poverty, which failed because, as I think I have said here before, it is very difficult for a Government to create a measure that they are going to hold themselves accountable to, because all the incentives are wrong in that equation.

In answer to your question as to why although it is a good thing it is insufficient, if we look at children and we look at where they are found with the working habits of their parents, I think 1 million children in poverty are in households where parents work full-time, 1.6 million are in a full-time/part-time split, 600,000 are in part-time and 1.2 million are workless.

If you only have “work” or “not work” as your indicator here you are missing out on solutions to poverty that are framed around the degree of work that a household has. It is not as simple as being in poverty or not in poverty or in-work poverty. It is the amount of work that a household has as well, and we see that 9% of those who work full-time where both parents are working full-time are still in poverty.

There is something that is not right here and it needs to be addressed. It should not be that a household that is doing everything right, where both parents are working full-time, are still in poverty. This is something that is not picked up if you just have employment as one of your key indicators.

Q128 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Baroness Stroud. Do any of the other panellists want to contribute to this question?

**Dr Brewer:** Living in a workless family comes with a very high risk of being in poverty, so I think it is very sensible for the Government to track the fraction of children who live in workless families, but as Baroness Stroud said it is in no way sufficient to capture the experience of child poverty.

As I think the Committee will know, the majority of children who are in poverty now, according to DWP’s measure or the Social Metrics Commission measure, are in working families. It is definitely by no means sufficient to measure workless families but it is also very useful, as it is a high-risk factor.

In the long run the educational attainment of adults is a strong predictor of their success in the labour market and the income they can bring in. It is right for the Government to try to boost educational attainment, but it is only going to affect child poverty in a generation’s time. It is a very long-run measure and in no way should divert you from measuring income-based poverty right now.



Q129 **Kim Johnson:** My next question is to Baroness Stroud and it is linked to your lived experience indicators. How should policymakers interpret these wider factors and are there causes or consequences of poverty, or does that distinction not matter?

**Baroness Stroud:** When we think of the lived experience indicators we had very long debates as a committee on whether these were factors that were more likely to make a household move into poverty or whether they were a consequence of being in poverty. With each one of them you can see that in some circumstances they are the trigger for a household moving into poverty, or they can also be the cause for them to become even more entrenched.

If you take family breakdown, for example, you can have a family that breaks down where there are two incomes in the family, and that act of it breaking down puts children into poverty, or you can have the stress of being in poverty that causes a family to break down.

In the end we felt that it was much better to call these the lived experience indicators of poverty, that they correlate with poverty but they are not necessarily a cause or a consequence—they are both—although policy solutions to that will be different. Where it is a driver of poverty you will often have one type of policy solution and where it is a consequence you may have a slightly different policy solution. When it comes down to policy solutions it matters, but for poverty itself we felt that these needed to be either, or could be either.

**Kim Johnson:** Thank you so much, Baroness Stroud, and thank you, panel for your responses. Those are all my questions, thank you.

Q130 **Debbie Abrahams:** Good morning, everyone. First to Baroness Stroud, thank you for the clarification of worklessness and in particular when families are doing all that they can to work but are still in poverty and having children living in poverty is something that is definitely going wrong. That was not quite what Minister Quince was saying last week at the Despatch Box, unfortunately.

My specific question is the 2019 paper, and this is a peer-reviewed paper, that with every 1% increase in child poverty an extra six babies per 100,000 will not reach their first birthday. A 2020 again peer-reviewed paper showed that for the relative impact of adverse childhood experiences, or socioeconomic conditions including poverty, poverty was six times more significant in the physical, cognitive and behavioural outcomes for children.

How do we take into account the emerging and strong evidence of these different factors in the Social Metrics Commission's basket of indicators that are being proposed?

**Baroness Stroud:** One of the tables in the report clearly demonstrates that the younger you are the more likely you are to be in poverty in the UK. I find it an unnerving graph because it starts at nought and goes right the way through to pensioner age.





We have made huge progress in this country in pensioner poverty. We have seen I think an 11% reduction in pensioner poverty through sustained policy action, which I find encouraging because it clearly demonstrates that when we want to do something in an area we can. The time has come to look carefully at what is happening with children, and particularly poverty with 33% of children in poverty. That is a huge number.

**Q131 Debbie Abrahams:** Sorry for interrupting. That was not quite my question. I mentioned, for example, the pan-European study by the Danish group—I have just mentioned that this is really strong peer-reviewed evidence of the strongest metadata evidence that you can get to show the different factors that are influencing child poverty. It is a dynamic situation,

How do we make sure that this evidence is reflected in the basket of measures that we have for child poverty, if that is what the Social Metrics Commission is proposing? As I say, adverse childhood experiences as opposed to poverty is one-sixth of the impact on the behavioural, cognitive and physical outcomes of these children. That is the strongest evidence. How do we make sure that is captured and we do not have this victim blaming, “It is because you are living like this”? How do we make sure it is evidence-based?

**Baroness Stroud:** The best place to put that sort of finding is into the lived experience indicators. At the moment we do not have them broken down by adult and child but we could very easily have a set that was broken down by children as well, where you are able to compare the adverse experiences of the cohort that are in poverty as opposed to those who are not.

Some of those numbers are staggering. We already capture, for instance, the difference in mental health outcomes for those in poverty and those who are not. We could capture adverse childhood experiences in the lived experience indicators. We would be more than happy to take a look at that.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Again, that is not quite what I was driving at. We must in all of this be very careful to make sure that we have evidence-based policy and that relates also to the indicators that drive it, rather than policy-based evidence. I think this is a really important point about making sure we capture the evidence and have indicators that reflect what we understand and know about the causes of poverty, including child poverty. Thank you so much.

**Q132 Selaine Saxby:** Good morning, everyone. I think you have already started hinting at some of the answers in this, Baroness Stroud, but to come back to the other points, the Social Metrics Commission’s analysis shows that the UK child poverty rate has been broadly stable since the year 2000, yet the rates of pensioner poverty have fallen over the same period. Can you put any meat around explaining that pattern?



**Baroness Stroud:** As I said, I think this is hugely encouraging that policy can change things. What we have seen in pensioner poverty is an 11% fall and if we look back at the work that has been done around the triple lock and Pension Credit we have been able to see the impact there, but also the lifting of the default retirement age, which has enabled pensioners to work and to keep working. In 2010 pensioners had to retire; there was no choice, whereas now they are able to carry on working.

We have seen also a fall in lone parent poverty over that time. That has been hugely linked to the change in working expectations of lone parents. Again we see policy choices leading to an improvement in poverty outcomes for families. If we could apply the same sort of strategic thinking, which is why I have been calling for a poverty strategy linked to poverty measures, we could stop debating poverty measurement and move on to action on poverty, which would be amazing.

**Dr Brewer:** The rate of child poverty is, as you say, coming out broadly the same now as it did 20 years ago, but there are fluctuations within that. They are rather muted in the SMC's measure but they are there in the HBI measure and child poverty did fall for a bit during the 2000s, but it has been rising in more recent years.

For both pensioner poverty and child poverty the rate of poverty is driven largely by Government policies, because people who are around the poverty line get most of their income from the state, whether that is through the State Pension, Pension Credits, Universal Credit or tax credits. Policy matters enormously for both child poverty and pensioner poverty. With pensioner poverty we had the additional boost of the general increasing affluence of each successive cohort of pensioners, so pensioners are more likely now to retire with their own pension, but the policies have been very important to that.

Q133 **Chris Stephens:** Mike, you mentioned to my colleague the importance of Government policies. Should the Government set a target for child poverty to help shape their poverty reduction policies?

**Dr Brewer:** It would be helpful if the Government could say what was their preferred measure of child poverty, so pick an indicator that they would like to see moving in the right direction and ideally set a target. There was a general debate about target setting across many areas of Government policy.

The good things are that it focuses minds and the bad things are that they can perhaps focus minds too much and what gets targeted gets focused on and things that are not targeted do not get focused on. I certainly saw some of that happen during the Labour Governments in the 2000s because, of course, they did not have a child poverty target of income. Although progress was made in reducing child poverty through income-based policies, I think rather less was done to help children more broadly because targets did not exist in those areas.



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On balance I think it would be helpful for low income families if the Government were to pick an indicator and say, "We want this to move in a certain direction".

Q134 **Chris Stephens:** Robert from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, what grounds do you believe the Government might use to continue opposing the need for targets and do you think there is any validity to those grounds?

**Robert Joyce:** The possible pitfalls of targets are fairly well known, often discussed, and I think Mike has just given a good summary of some of them. For me the master variable is: do you have a clear strategy? I should say that up front and I have a less absolute view on whether you should have a numerical target. I think that you need a clear strategy. A target can be a useful galvanising tool to focus minds and if it works well to rally around the set of coherent policy responses that will get you there.

What you need if you set a target, and perhaps one of the things that has not always happened, is it is set alongside a fairly clear, long-term strategy for how you get there, the envisaged cost of doing so. A fairly explicit acknowledgement that the Government know what the trade-offs are and they are willing to incur those, and a broad sense of what the set of policies are that they envisage will get them there, is quite important. It helps a little bit to mitigate some of the potential downsides of having a target.

What you saw with the targets that existed throughout the 2000s that Mike alluded to is that particularly as you got closer and closer to the target and it was clear that it was looming—I am talking about the 2010 target here—and that there was a lot more work to do, the pressure to just throw more money at the problem through the benefit system became more and more overwhelming because there were fewer and fewer other tools available to make a difference at such short notice. A longer-term strategy set out when the target is set, giving a sense of what the policy tools are that will get you there, might help a little bit to avoid some of the possible pitfalls of having a fairly narrow target that can otherwise distort things.

I do not think I have an absolute view on whether you should have a target. There are pitfalls; they are well known, but I think the main thing is to embed it within a wider strategy.

Q135 **Chris Stephens:** Ed, would you be able to comment on what the evidence shows on the impact of targets around child poverty? Does it make a difference if targets are in legislation?

**Ed Humpherson:** The first thing I was going to say was to supplement what Mike and Robert said. Our own experience, as the Office for Statistics Regulation, is that Government setting targets is good for our business.



If you look at pretty much anywhere where Government set very clear targets, what then follows is a great deal of scrutiny on the numbers that are used to illustrate achievement against the targets and I think the temptation is to move the goalposts. I am thinking of things such as waiting time targets in the NHS or net migration targets. That has kept me and my team very busy over the last year with those sorts of issues. The downsides are very real.

Nevertheless, I think that clarity on what you are trying to achieve and the evidence bases that you use to tell you if you are getting there—that notion of targets: not a big number, but something that is embedded within a clear, conceptual coherent strategy—does have a place. As both Mike and Robert said, it is a really effective way of galvanising effort.

**Q136 Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Ed. Mike, I know the Resolution Foundation looks at Scotland and what Scotland is doing as well, and we will be hearing shortly from the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland. Are you able to comment as an organisation on what the impact of having a child poverty target in legislation has been in Scotland? Is there evidence that the target has had a positive impact on tackling child poverty?

**Dr Brewer:** We can see that the Scottish Government are taking measures additional to what the UK Government are doing to tackle child poverty in Scotland. Again going back to what Robert was saying, we can see in Scotland that the Scottish Government are setting out their intention, their commitment to see these numbers fall and there is also a strategy behind it.

It is not just a target; it is a target with a strategy and with policies and they are all coming together. I cannot say that the target was the most important thing there and I think probably the most important thing there is the strategy and the Government commitment to pursue that strategy. What we certainly can see in Scotland is that they are taking measures additional to those taken in the rest of the UK, which are bearing down on child poverty in Scotland.

**Q137 Chris Stephens:** There is a correlation between a determination to reduce child poverty levels and a willingness to measure those levels?

**Dr Brewer:** What we can see in Scotland is all these three things coming together. The Scottish Government say they are committed to reducing child poverty. They have set a target to measure that and want to be accountable for. They have a broader strategy and in that strategy there are policies bearing down on it, so all the things are going in the right direction.

**Q138 Chris Stephens:** My last question is to Baroness Stroud; I picked up on your answer to Sir Desmond's question earlier. Has there been any progress made in the Government having a conversation around poverty?



**Baroness Stroud:** It is interesting listening to Mike's answer about a measure, a strategy, a target and a determination. These things are all needed. To get off the starting blocks on any issue you need a measure. You then need to develop a strategy and have a sense of what you are trying to reach and where you are trying to get to.

We have seen lots of action by this Government that is seeking to protect the most vulnerable people at a time of a global pandemic. That in effect has been the strategy to date. Now that we are beginning to come out of that what we need are conversations around measurement, strategy and the goal that we are trying to reach. As of yet I have not seen that, although we do have verbal commitments that that is happening.

Q139 **Shaun Bailey:** To wrap up this thread, I will probably target it more towards Mike. We talked in an answer to my colleague, Nigel Mills, about drill-down data. How do you ensure that with these metrics you have targeted and effective interventions? We have seen at times, particularly during the pandemic, that we have had interventions based on good will that sometimes have not been as effective as we wanted because the metric used has perhaps excluded some of the people who for whatever reason do not quite fall within that target but would be vulnerable within it. How do we ensure that these metrics translate into effective interventions?

**Dr Brewer:** I am not quite sure which ones you are referring to. What we have seen in the pandemic is policy-making done at speed, and there are plenty of examples where policies have had rather too many cliff edges and rough edges than we might have liked. In almost all cases I put that down entirely to the speed at which the Government were responding.

We talked earlier about the lack of real-time data on children from low income families. I think that would help a great deal with the geographical targeting, knowing which areas are struggling more. We know from real-time data or nearly real-time data who is furloughed and who is getting Universal Credit, that London saw a bigger rise, more people furloughed, more people on Universal Credit, but we do not have in real-time the same statistics on children, for example, so better data would help.

I think the policy flaws in the pandemic can mostly be ascribed to the speed at which the Government were responding and the scale of the challenge they have faced.

Q140 **Shaun Bailey:** Does anyone else want to come in on that about how we can ensure effective intervention with the metrics?

**Baroness Stroud:** The measure that we created around the Social Metrics Commission was designed to be a framework that would lead to effective policy-making and effective strategy building.



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The reason why we created the total resources available was so that you could capture the total resources, not just benefits but earned income as well. We set that against the costs of the household, so there you have a strategy already: how do you increase income? How do you reduce the costs? Then you move that over time to get persistence and depth. That gives you two other strands to your strategy. Then you have the lived experience indicators that talk about family stability, education, mental health, debt, welfare. That captures all your other strategic levers.

Even within the total resources available and the total costs of a household, you have the levers of debt, childcare, disability. All of these elements create a framework for a strategy and if we can encourage the Government to understand the framework they will very naturally be able to build a strategy with all the levers that make a difference to vulnerable people and enable them to go on to make their own pathway out of poverty, ultimately, which is what we all want.

Q141 **Chair:** Philippa, you have made it clear that you think the Government should have a goal in this area. Ideally would you like the Government to adopt a numerical target based on the Social Metrics Commission's measure?

**Baroness Stroud:** Yes, but I think I am completely biased. I look back over the last 20 years of debate and in reality with everything that we have thrown at poverty over the last 20 years, we have not made sufficient progress. I look at that 20 years of 14 million people roughly, with a few hundred thousand moving either way, and we have to ask ourselves the question: what is going to give us the step change that we want to see, that will enable us to become the country we want to become? Surely that means taking people in poverty with us and seeing their life trajectory changed.

This settlement has gone on for too long and I cannot be the only person who thinks we need a good measure, a good strategy and to be aiming for something high. That would be my view and, yes, while you are at it, adopt the Social Metrics Commission measure of poverty.

Q142 **Chair:** A final question to Ed Humpherson. Ed, you mentioned earlier the ethnicity data gap that you identified in your recent report and you refer in that in particular to people with no recourse to public funds. Can you tell us what the problem is there and what you think should be done about it?

**Ed Humpherson:** I am really pleased that this has come up because I should have mentioned the no recourse to public funds gap when I was talking about data gaps. It is becoming clear what a significant data gap that is right across public services in that it is hard to see a comprehensive count of the number of people who have no recourse to public funds in the datasets and it is difficult to see where they appear in the poverty datasets. They certainly almost by definition would not be in



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the administrative datasets held by the DWP because they have no recourse to public funds.

We think that is a significant area and we definitely want to see some common work to draw together the different sources of information that there are available so that we can get the insight into the experiences of people who have this status of no recourse to public funds. That is a very important gap to address.

I have been reflecting on the question about the quality of the conversation. I would say that the Office for Statistics Regulation is really about two things: the quality and trustworthiness of the measure, the metric, of the statistic and of the quality of the conversation that flows around that, which uses that metric.

What our review really says is that while there is a good foundation there is room for improvement in both the measures that are used and in the conversation that takes place around those measures. That is how I would summarise the work that we have done.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much indeed. That concludes our panel. We are grateful for the great expertise that, between you, you have expressed to us in answering our questions extremely helpfully. Thank you all very much indeed.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anne Longfield and Bruce Adamson.

Q143 **Chair:** We move on now to our second panel, and we welcome two witnesses to join us for this. Can you both please briefly introduce yourselves, starting with Anne Longfield?

**Anne Longfield:** Thank you, Chair. I am really pleased to be with you this morning. I have been working on children's policy and campaigning around children's issues for some decades but for the last six years, up until February of this year, I was also the Children's Commissioner for England.

**Bruce Adamson:** Thank you, Chair. I am the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland. It is an office created by the Scottish Parliament in 2003 to safeguard and promote the rights of all the children and young people in Scotland. It is the best job in the world because I get to spend my time working directly with children and young people and then coming to places of power and decision-making to try to ensure that their rights and voices are heard. I am delighted to be here today.

Q144 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for joining us. We have lots of questions for you. Can I start with a question to Anne? What do you think has been the effect in practice of the removal in 2016 of the former child poverty targets and the shift in focus towards worklessness and educational achievement? Has that made much of a difference and what



in practice has it been?

**Anne Longfield:** The discussion we have just heard about the impact of or the need for a strategy, the need for targets and good measurement is all reflected in what happens when that is not in place. What I was able to see over this period was that the issue was removed somewhat from view of the priorities of the day.

Clearly, there has been very good work that has continued about measurement, all of which have huge merit. There has been activity that has taken place to alleviate some of the symptoms of poverty when they have appeared, especially over the last year, but what there has not been is the strategic push in any way to identify what the lived experience of poverty is, which means that an awful lot of people have continued to have lives where they are not able to reach their potential.

Also, that there has not been the strategic action to have the policy in place to respond to those. It has meant that changes that could have been avoided, such as some of the welfare changes that have been particularly detrimental to children, have not been addressed as they have been taken, but also action has been quite sporadic.

Government, of course, want to do good things and have good intent when they see problems, but this must go beyond that. This has to go beyond it to strategic proactive action to bring down poverty over years. That is what ultimately is missing.

Q145 **Debbie Abrahams:** This follows on from my questions to the previous panel. How do we make sure that as evidence emerges it is reflected in the indicator steps around poverty and subsequently in the policy action? As a caveat to that, do you think poverty is inevitable?

**Anne Longfield:** I do not think poverty is inevitable. I think that not only can you do something about it but you have a moral and economic responsibility to do something about it.

We just heard Philippa talk about 20 years of this issue being an issue of discussion and debate and some action. Those children who were five 20 years ago are now having their own children and will have poorer life chances and poorer economic situations as a result. If we want any confirmation that poverty exists, we should go and visit those places where people are living this day in, day out.

We see the consequence of poverty and have that measurement before our eyes. Over the last year with the pandemic more and more people have been able to see what that means, a very different level of assets to draw on during an emergency.

There is the impact of poor housing, the impact on education. The education evidence is very clear that those who are living in poverty and disadvantage are much less likely to achieve academically at various points we measure. As they go into school, 45% of children on free





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school meals will not be reaching all the development goals we would expect. At 16, we have heard from the Education Policy Institute that children are 18 months behind in disadvantage. If you look at persistent poverty, they are 22 months behind.

The clues are all here for us to see but it requires that proactive will to take action. Some of the building blocks are already in place. People should not see that this is an insurmountable mountain that has to be started at the bottom. There are very much foundations there to build upon, but the will and determination to make this a top priority publicly and politically is the thing that we need to see.

**Bruce Adamson:** I strongly agree with what Anne said. It is important that we see poverty as a human rights issue first and foremost. Children have the right to an adequate standard of living, a safe, warm place to live, good, nutritious food. They have the right to benefit from social security and have their family supported.

We know that these are all things that are needed for children and the state has agreed to do these things. The profound impact on children in education, health and mental health has been made a lot worse by Covid. It is absolutely important that this is the top priority. Poverty is avoidable because poverty is exacerbated and often caused by political decisions and this has been the strong condemnation from the international community as well. Inadequate social security is central to an increase in child poverty.

Children's commissioners across the UK have consistently identified that changes to the welfare and tax systems have detrimentally affected children and their families, including things like the benefit cap and the two-child limit. The Child Poverty Action Group, looking at child benefit, said that it has lost 23% of its real value over the last decade.

This is why I think the international community has been so clear. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights have both raised serious concerns about this in their reports and highlighted the disproportionate impact on children with disabilities, children living in families or households where a parent is disabled, households with more than one child, ethnic minority groups, care-experienced young people, young carers. We know the groups that are most affected. What is important is recognising the multiple factors that cause child poverty and a lot of that I think has been covered in the previous sessions and has been made a lot worse by Covid.

In Scotland there is quite a lot of geographical variation in levels of poverty but this is not just an urban issue. In rural areas and our island communities the increased food costs and lack of affordable housing creates significant issues and, importantly, the voice of children and young people is missing around this debate. It is important that we get all the metrics in place, but we need the lived experience to come



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through strongly and it is essential that children's voices are heard. They have a right to participate in decision-making and they are experts on their own experience. Even before Covid, this was one of the main issues that children raised with me alongside mental health.

Their evidence needs to be part of this discussion and also they have some great solutions. They want to be a part of that. Alongside some of the metrics and the measurements that we have talked about, which are absolutely important, that lived experience particularly of children, young people and their families has to be central to decision-making.

**Q146 Siobhan Baillie:** A question specifically for Bruce, and I want to say welcome back to Anne as well. I hope you had at least some time off before having to come before us again. Specifically on the Social Metrics Commission's proposal for a new measure of poverty, what is the Scottish Government's response to this and what is your personal view on the proposal?

**Bruce Adamson:** Thank you, and it was very interesting to hear the panel before. Obviously I cannot speak for the Scottish Government but the Social Metrics Commission's proposed new approach to measuring poverty came after the legislation that was passed in Scotland. I understand from the Scottish Government that they warmly welcome the work of the Social Metrics Commission.

Our Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets in statute four target measures that are reported on annually and these are all set after housing costs, which is one of the main findings from the Social Metrics Commission. The Scottish Government's statutory targets are also underpinned by a non-statutory child poverty measurement that looks at trends and drivers of poverty over time, including things like average rates of pay, availability of childcare and debt, and takes into account many of the measures that the Social Metrics Commission has proposed.

Together in Scotland we have a basket of measures that look at all the different aspects of poverty and try to give a clear picture of what is happening over time and it strongly associates with the work of the commission.

The Scottish Government have also indicated they will retain the current income measures that are based on the Child Poverty Act and these measures are widely supported by stakeholders. There was a lot of discussion in the Scottish Parliament during the passage of the Child Poverty Bill and it was supported unanimously by Parliament. A very important thing that is happening in Scotland at the moment is that we have strong cross-party support for this approach and so a deep understanding of the factors that affect the experience of poverty right at the heart of that.

One of the other elements is the work that we have been doing in Scotland on impact assessments and last year the European Network of



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Ombudspersons for Children developed a common framework of reference for children's rights impact assessments and a key aspect of that was around clear data and measurement.

We strongly support what has been happening with the Social Metrics Commission. Scotland has already pretty much adopted that approach and it is being supported on a cross-party basis and strongly by civil society, but it is still reasonably early days.

**Q147 Chris Stephens:** My first question is to Anne. I think you were asked this in a roundabout way earlier from the Chair. You spoke to the Committee last year. You said that children in poverty had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and I think since you appeared in front of us there has been a further lockdown. What is the latest evidence showing which children have been worst affected? I think I saw both you and Bruce nodding at the question around the no recourse to public funds. Is that an issue and are there other children who are affected?

**Anne Longfield:** Certainly throughout the pandemic I was at great pains to report as soon as possible on some of the areas where children were being deeply impacted. The whole issue of mental health is an enormous problem, which is very linked to their parents' situation and their parents' financial situation.

The reality of what is reported from families and parents themselves is that levels of stress and anxiety are high. Very often that is reflecting parents' own levels of anxiety and stress and as children come back into school sometimes that can be played out. Even though we are moving to a new phase of the pandemic, the reports of high levels of need remain very high.

I asked one multi-academy trust to give me some indication of the level of need that they were seeing. This one trust alone said that in one week 369 new children had been identified with high levels of vulnerability and half of those were domestic violence.

I think it is important that we understand that there is a cumulative effect of poverty and financial insecurity and of a high level of need and vulnerability with families and with children. What we found during that time is that those children who were living in families with the highest level of fragility, which is parents with domestic violence but with high levels of mental health and addictions themselves, were least likely to cope in that environment.

Housing remains a huge issue. I heard of one family with a one-bedroom flat with four children, who had survived the last year with four children sharing a bed. Both parents were working, sharing a living room and sleeping and working in the same room, but attempting to let the others sleep at the same time. Those levels of anxiety and stress are part and parcel of having huge financial insecurity and very low levels of assets to



draw on. That has been the reality for a large segment of children and families living in poverty.

Q148 **Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Anne. I think that brings me quite nicely to asking you both some questions around Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which you will both know but for the benefits of others says that every child has the right to a standard of living that allows them to develop physically, mentally, spiritually and socially and that poverty can mean children have a standard of living that falls below this threshold. Bruce, first to you, can you explain why it is deemed to be important that the Scottish Parliament has decided to incorporate Article 27 into Scottish law?

**Bruce Adamson:** The incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law is the most important legislative thing that Parliament could have done, and I am delighted that Parliament unanimously passed that legislation earlier this year. We look forward to its commencement in due course.

What it does particularly on economic, social and cultural rights is to bring them into domestic enforceability in a way that does not exist at the moment particularly well. The experience that we have seen from other countries who have already incorporated rights frameworks into their law in a stronger way is that this leads to a change in culture. It focuses attention on the things that we need to do to ensure better outcomes for children and young people, particularly when we look at things like Article 27 and the adequate standard of living but also in education that is designed to develop children to their fullest potential, the right to social security, all of the things that come together to ensure that families are supported to ensure that children can thrive.

What has been really clear, as Anne was saying, since the pandemic is that the human rights issues for children that existed before the pandemic have been exacerbated. In April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called on states to take a rights-based approach to the response to the pandemic. It noted with concern the risk to children's rights and the mental, physical, psychological impact on children and young people and called on that rights-based approach—because it is not just a public health crisis; it is a human rights crisis as well.

What is important is that we lock in place a legal framework that gives us the tools to address the issues that we already know existed. Building on what Anne was saying, the impact on children and young people has been severe and particularly the situation for children living in one-parent households, refugee children and that point on no recourse to public funds we are really concerned about. Not enough is being done to make sure that we are identifying the families and the children and making sure that they are getting support.



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Gypsy Traveller children, disabled children, young carers, care-experienced children, all the children whose rights we knew were most at risk before the pandemic have been disproportionately impacted, along with the growth of mental health support needs and bereavement as well. The impact of bereavement from changes to family and also the mental health impact is really important.

Children and young people have been telling us throughout the pandemic about the concerns they have. Food insecurity has increased, so again a central part of Article 27 and the right to an adequate standard of living. This is not asking for the earth; this is the basic requirement to make a society function. Food insecurity has increased and I know that you have been debating that in the UK Parliament. This was a problem before the pandemic but we were really concerned about access to food with school meal replacements, breakfast and dinner clubs. It was a bit slow getting direct cash payments to families, which was what was needed.

Anne has mentioned substandard housing—again, a really important part of Article 27 and the adequate standard of living. Housing has to be safe, warm and I think the lack of private space for study and recreation has been a big issue that children have raised with us. The lack of outdoor private space has meant that the restrictions have disproportionately impacted families and even things as simple as heating.

The access to education, the digital divide and lack of digital access has really come to the fore. We are online now but for the last 15 months children have been living much of their lives online for education and socialisation, and the poverty impact on that has been profound. Again, that is linked not just to the right to education but also adequate standard of living.

What is important is that we take a rights-based approach. I commend the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament for progressing the legislation to incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child during the pandemic. I was very concerned that it might be used perhaps as an excuse to delay it but I am pleased that we have this in place. I hope that it will be commenced later this year, pending the outcome of the Supreme Court and Royal Assent.

**Q149 Chris Stephens:** Thanks very much, Bruce, for a very comprehensive answer. Anne, a simple question to you: do you think that the convention should be incorporated into legislation in other parts of the United Kingdom and what are the benefits of doing so? I am sure Bruce has probably outlined them to you.

**Anne Longfield:** Yes, Bruce has done a sterling job there. Of course I do, because it is a framework and a framework that puts the needs of children at its heart. It is a framework to work within that strategy that can be built upon and also that progress can be measured against.



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I would be concerned about the issue of delay. I do not want to delay on this. I am concerned that we have had a decade of talking about and refining measurements. Measurements are absolutely important; I would say measurements beyond the facts that we know. I think we know enough to know that this is a priority and measurements need to become a second order to the strategy.

To be able to have that would make it very clear that this was a priority. We know that there are other priorities here that are central to this agenda, levelling up being the issue that I am talking about. I do not believe you can level up without addressing child poverty. It absolutely has to go to the heart of it. I also think that at every level Government but also in the locality everyone needs to be able to understand what action they can take to address that.

We have seen that in other countries, yes, in Scotland but also in New Zealand. That is the level of determination that we should have. Ultimately, it comes down to what we want as a society. I believe that most people want a society where as many people as possible can thrive. At the moment we have one-third of children who are held back through no fault of their own. That is something that we have the tools and the knowledge to be able to change, but it needs to follow through that we want it to enough to make it a priority.

On no recourse to public funds I should have said there, yes, of course, there is a data issue, there is also a response issue and the impact of that is chilling for anyone in that situation. I am pleased that there has been help with free school meals but that needs to continue.

**Q150 Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Anne. The no recourse to public funds issue is something this Committee has been chasing for some time. If I can now ask both of you, the DWP and the Scottish Government have instigated winter payments, the Winter Grant Scheme and the Winter Support Fund, to provide extra support to vulnerable families. What difference has that made? Maybe we will start with you, Bruce. Are there lessons there for DWP for future local welfare support?

**Bruce Adamson:** That support was absolutely vital. This really is a matter of life and death. The amounts may seem small on the face of it but made a huge difference, and what we were hearing from children and families and the amazing civil societies in Scotland that work closely to support them was that this was absolutely pivotal. What I think it has shown is that it is possible to use public funds to alleviate poverty quickly and efficiently and we saw that through a number of issues, at both the Scottish level and the UK level.

The Scottish Government approach particularly in providing support, many millions of pounds through third sector partners such as through the Aberlour Urgent Assistance Fund, were really important, but even so nearly two-thirds of families on Universal Credit in Scotland had to



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borrow money to survive and half are behind on rent and other essential bills.

The Scottish Government Winter Support Fund, which included £100 per family for low income families to make up for the unfortunate delay in the start of the Scottish Child Payment, was absolutely vital. It was described as a lifeline. The Scottish Child Payment is currently at £10 per week for children under the age of six but is going to be extended to all children under 16 on a phased basis by 2022. There is no cap on the number of children per family, which is why we are so concerned about the two-child limit at the UK level.

It is important that we get the money to families and so the £100 one-off payment was welcome, but we are concerned that some might miss out on that. It is linked to free school meals and the eligibility criteria for that in Scotland needs to be looked at and particularly including those below school age.

The other additional funding directly to third sector organisations is important to note as well in that the relationships are important. What is important is that children and their families have people who can support them to navigate what is often a quite complex social security system.

Relying on the support of third sector organisations is absolutely essential but the key lesson is that social security needs to be able to provide some financial resilience and ensure a standard of living. That is important because when so many families have been subject to so much change over the last 15 months, the stress and worry has a profound effect. Making sure that these supports are well known, well supported and put in place at the earliest possible time is essential.

**Anne Longfield:** It is very welcome, and the help for local authorities over the Covid Winter Grant has been well used and also the introduction of holiday and activity programmes—again, something I have campaigned about for some decades. There has been some help for charities as well, which has obviously been useful. All those are good, and they have shown that things can happen quickly. It has been useful to be able to engage local authorities and to provide the resources that local authorities can bring into this. Also we know that during the pandemic schools were going above and beyond in their support for vulnerable families.

All of those are good; they are emergency responses and they give us some indicators about what is needed in the long term. Schools have done so much to reach out to families, some especially so over this last year, but they must get on with teaching now that children are back in school.

It is very clear that there is an immense amount of unmet need that is now being offered some support during the last year but is not of the level of need that is going to be able to get help from children's services.



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Someone described it to me as a Coke bottle and that is the level of need, but the response from children's services, because levels of thresholds are so high, is the bottle top. It is the red top and there are schools that have talked to me about having 250 children in need out of 400 on their roll, in their view, but only eight having social workers. It is that level of gap that I think we should now absolutely take note of.

The other part is the way that we reduce poverty, the way that we help these families get to a much more sustainable place and their children is for the long term. It is not going to happen over three or six months. It is going to be about helping those children from the first days of their life as they grow up and sticking with those families, what I would call scaffolding. The schools that are seeking to do that with the help of charities around them.

The support costs for a school or the support numbers for a school might be for every school almost one-third of the staff are around family support, community support. That is the scale of change that we need to see. In my view that will bring dividends not only in social benefits but also in economic benefits for all of those children who go on to have much greater life chances but also financial security in the long term.

**Q151 Chris Stephens:** Thanks, Anne. You have both indicated the really important point of a rights-based response. I have one very quick question for Bruce. What was the trajectory of child poverty levels in Scotland before the pandemic and what is your assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children in poverty in Scotland since then?

**Bruce Adamson:** That is a huge question and partly suffers from the data lag that we were discussing in the first session. The impact has been profound in human rights and children's rights terms. The Poverty and Inequality Commission is set to publish its child poverty scrutiny reports next month, on the same day the Scottish Government publish their annual progress report, so we will know a bit more then.

We are hearing at the moment from third sector organisations about the major concern, despite the significant investment, with the number of increases in applicants. The number of families who have not previously required support now needing support has increased significantly and that is coming through. Aberlour, which works extensively in Scotland on poverty, has picked this up in some of their reports with the families they are working with. Some of this is linked to things like furlough but the loss of income has been really significant.

It is hard to tell. We were making progress against the targets set but the progress was slower than hoped. My real concern is that we are not doing enough and have not done enough over the last 15 months and we are looking at significant increases in child poverty. We will know more as the more recent data comes in.





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Save the Children published an excellent report yesterday describing the impact of the pandemic on families with children with low income and described it as a tipping point for many that were in precarious financial circumstances. The pandemic and all the stresses and anxieties of it have created real problems. The level of concern is really high at the moment from children and young people and their families and it is important that we get the data and metrics in to allow us to make the rights-based decisions we need to.

**Chris Stephens:** Thanks for mentioning Aberlour. They do fantastic work in Glasgow South West.

Q152 **Selaine Saxby:** The Government announced in March that the £20 uplift in Universal Credit would be maintained for a further six months. Recognising there is a data lag issue, what does your evidence show will be the impact of the extension on child poverty?

**Anne Longfield:** I was very concerned that the uplift would be removed and I am very pleased that it has remained for the time. We know it has been supporting 1.3 million single parents, 600,000 couple parents, and 1.3 million single parents would lose £80 a week or the equivalent if it was not there.

I think it is an important support for this period. We are not out of the pandemic yet and parents are not even starting to be able to build back their financial base. A lot of families on zero-hours contracts in some parts of the country and some of the poorest areas as their main form of employment lost their jobs overnight and will probably be the last ones to come back on. They are in the position where they do not have that security to build back from over the coming months.

I want to see as much financial security as possible to help families plan, but also that understanding coupled with issues around potential eviction coming back after the ban has been lifted. Are families being put in positions of emergency and poverty again because of no fault of their own? They need security about their accommodation and about their work.

There is an issue about those who have been in longer-term, persistent poverty and their access into work that I wanted to raise, here again being able to see these things coming down the track and to understand what it will take. For those families who have not had the security of employment and have been in persistent poverty for some time the route back into work is not one they can just slot back into, so normal access to employment schemes that might come on will not have the impact they could for these families. They need to get the support to build their confidence, get them work-ready and then help them into work.

I put a plea in for anyone looking at the Access to Work potential schemes to look at this group of parents and what it will take. We know from past experience that community-based provision with people who



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can provide support and trust alongside them to help them get there will be most beneficial.

**Bruce Adamson:** I strongly agree. The key question is what the Government's evidence is to show what the impact will be of the removal of the uplift and making sure that before anything is taken away we understand clearly what the impact on child poverty will be. Our significant concern about the removal of the £20 uplift is that it will feed into all the biggest concerns we have talked about. The commissioners from the devolved jurisdictions in Wales and Northern Ireland and I have written about this as well and raised serious concerns.

In Scotland it will mean that effectively it will knock out the benefits that the Scottish Child Payment brings into families. They will be taken away by the drop in the uplift. The Poverty Alliance in Scotland has said it thinks it will have a seismic impact on child poverty, particularly, as Anne pointed out, how it links in with the end of furlough and employment support.

There are real unknowns about what family income will look like and there are too many unanswered questions for us to remove supports from families and be confident we have taken a rights-based assessment that children will have an adequate standard of living and have the benefit of social security, and we are still able to meet those obligations if we remove this support that has been hugely beneficial.

Another important point is the Child Poverty Action Group has highlighted that the £20 uplift has made a huge difference to the families that receive it but it does nothing to lift families out of poverty because of the level of Universal Credit and the impact of things like the two-child limit or legacy benefits, not being able to get the benefit of the £20 uplift.

I am really concerned around what will happen and all the links between this and the other supports available as well. It is important that, as Government take decisions to remove support, they need to be confident they have done a rights-based impact assessment to see what the impact of that decision will be and it still meets the obligation to children and young people. All the evidence shows this uplift is absolutely essential to families and removing it will be catastrophic for many families unless other supports are in place.

Q153 **Selaine Saxby:** To clarify further, what in your assessment does the impact of the £20 uplift in Universal Credit tell us about the relationship between income and levels of child poverty?

**Anne Longfield:** What has been discussed throughout this session that is really important we hold on to is worklessness. There is a huge increase in risk in poverty and that goes without saying, but the majority of families now who have children in poverty and who are working and rely on support through the welfare system to top up their wages for their income.



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We need to look at understanding how we can help those families to increase their level of employment and that needs to have live information on the scale of their hours worked, but also the measures can ensure that no one drops off a cliff at this point.

For a lone parent in this situation, it is vital that this amount of money stays. I do not think this is the time to take chances. The amount may seem relatively small but for those families this is essential funding. Parents have talked about having the ability to plan, to be able to buy decent food, to not always be on the cliff edge. These things sink families into a new stage.

**Bruce Adamson:** I agree. There has been some strong evidence and discussion around worklessness and we know it is an important measurement, but the evidence from DWP shows that for three-quarters of children in relative poverty there is at least one person in paid work.

We have seen the significant rise over recent years of child poverty in families where there is work, but with the proliferation of low-paid jobs, stagnant wages and zero-hours contracts the effect on children and young people has been profound there.

Even when employment can be secured and post-Covid that employment is still available, we are still well short of what we need to ensure an adequate standard of living. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty in his pre-Covid 2018 report was concerned about the direction of travel in the erosion of the social contract and fulfilment of human rights. The link here is really important and we need to make sure post-Covid that all the supports are in place before we remove any other supports.

**Anne Longfield:** I will add that when you have a strategy that is scrutinising every element of support and how that impacts, there are many ways of helping to financially support families with children and child benefit is obviously one of those. I have called in the past for an uplift of that, which I continue to support.

Within Universal Credit itself there is the ability to strengthen the child element of that, which is clearly an option within it. Given that we have introduced the uplift to Universal Credit, I think we should keep it but there are elements around it that gives someone who is determined to deliver this outcome an ability to look at ways we can help families with children.

Q154 **Nigel Mills:** May I go back to a topic we discussed earlier in the first panel about whether the Government should set a target for child poverty? In Scotland that has been set from about four or five years ago. Has having that target made a real difference to performance in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK or has it not made a huge change?



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**Bruce Adamson:** It has made a significant change in the approach to poverty. The outcomes may take a bit longer to track but what is important about the Scottish targets in the legislation is that they are all passed by the Scottish Parliament unanimously with support from all parties, so there is a real consensus in Scotland around the need for this framework. That is an important starting point. They are very useful tools for benchmarking progress and those working directly with children and young people and families experiencing poverty have consistently cited them as useful for benchmarking progress and allowing them to focus the attention of decision-makers.

Having that framework is really useful. You will be familiar with the Scottish framework and its four income-based targets to reduce poverty by 2030. The decision was made clearly in Scotland to stick with measurements that were already in place because they were robust and well known and widely understood, and allow comparisons with the past as well as international comparisons. Using the framework that has been set out has been important.

Monitoring of progress by the statutory Poverty and Inequality Commission, independent of Government, is important. Its analysis and evaluation has been really useful and the next report is due next month.

Something the Poverty and Inequality Commission picked up on in its scrutiny last year was that there was not enough evidence on how actions in the delivery plan were expected to impact on targets, playing that important critical role in supporting improvements in the planning. It recognised some of the improvements but wanted greater understanding of the likelihood of impacts of actions on targets.

I think it is an important role of having targets and then having a plan and scrutiny of the plan to allow us to see where we are going. I am looking forward to seeing the outcomes for this year.

The Fraser of Allander Institute noted last year that there are some challenges in measuring the impact of some of the policies and cited that lack of evidence. It is positive that we have those targets and the measurement framework in place because they help us track poverty over time, but there is still a lot more to be done. The interim targets set for 2023 now look very unlikely to be met, given in particular the challenges of Covid-19.

It is also important to note the Scottish Parliament has significant powers to address social security powers but some are reserved to Westminster. It is important to recognise the need for a complementary approach to make sure everything is in place. It is positive we have that in place but there is still a very long way to go.

**Anne Longfield:** I agree that there needs to be a national strategy with targets. This is very doable but it needs that determination and political will to make it happen. We have seen a policy void, despite the good



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work that may be going on in pockets, that looks at a strategy around poverty.

There is no clarity around departmental lead. In the past there was a joint unit before the DfE and the DWP and I would like to see that re-examined and clarity of where poverty is owned by Government. I also want to see this as a priority that all Departments understand it is if not their responsibility to deliver their responsibility to contribute towards.

I have seen time and time again, working near to Government over the last six or seven years, that there are well-intentioned pieces of work going on that fail to reach their impact because they are not delivered with any semblance of joint mission or joint impact.

We are talking about a time with heightened need but also lessened resources, and I think it is absolutely essential that we work collaboratively across Government but also locally to ensure everyone understands that this is a priority. Levelling up is clearly much discussed, but a child poverty strategy has to be at the heart of it if it is to succeed.

The reality of children living in poverty is that they do not have time for anyone to get to the point where they are totally happy with a measurement. It is a reality today. A chilling figure I have from the academy trust I mentioned earlier, that I did not mention before, is that 45 of their parents and 28 children have tried to take their own lives over the last year; seven parents and two children have succeeded. They operate in levels of greatest disadvantage. Summer there is with half the numbers on free school meals. I cannot say that is all due to poverty but knowing those numbers gives you an understanding of the scale of concern here. I think after the pandemic is an opportunity for a reset moment and this needs to be at the forefront of priority.

**Bruce Adamson:** An element in Scotland is the incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which contains within it an obligation for the state to use all available resources to the maximum extent possible and to be able to demonstrate that. Things like child rights impact assessments and child rights budgeting will become more prominent in decision-making at all levels in Scotland as decision-makers are required to more properly evidence what they are doing and using available resources to the maximum extent possible to ensure that children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

That is an important thing that will cut through every aspect of decision-making and policy at all levels and links closely to what we are discussing here for adequate standards of living and the right to benefit from social security. I would expect to see in the coming months and years in Scotland much more development of the decision-making framework across the piece and that gives huge strength to the cross-departmental, cross-ministerial work we need to see to tackle poverty.

Q155 **Nigel Mills:** Can I check with Anne what she thinks will work best after a



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departmental Minister that has the clear lead responsibility for this? Are we after a joint unit between DWP and the Department for Education that has the responsibility for this or is it a bit of both of those? Are you after an institution to own this or a clearer owner within the existing ministerial structure?

**Anne Longfield:** I would probably take all those but also add that it has to live at the centre. I hear reports of people being drafted in to work on levelling up in significant numbers at the moment and it is that level of determination and person power we are putting on to this, so I think it has to live at the centre. It is a defining feature what a legacy it could be to do this, but we allow a third of our society to live lives that are below their potential and that on any level just is not right.

Q156 **Nigel Mills:** We should recommend that the centre takes responsibility and sucks it in and we see what comes out at the other end in a few years.

**Anne Longfield:** Bruce has also given us a warning about how there can be a lag in delivering on targets and we know that from the past, a concern about whether essentially you have to revert to financial transfer just to get there. We should not underestimate the scale of change, not only of the cultural priorities but also of delivering. I do not mean just financial delivery. I am talking about the kind of help that families need to be able to get on and flourish.

The Secretary of State for Education talked about family hubs last week and how he wants those to expand. We can call them Sure Start if we wish, but that kind of support that sits alongside families' lives to help them and their children is the kind of infrastructure that I would like to see as part of a plan to reduce poverty.

**Chair:** Thank you both very much indeed for joining us for a very interesting session; it was particularly interesting to hear about the contrasting approaches in Scotland and England. We are very grateful to you both. That concludes our meeting.