



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Child well-being in England](#), HC 1034

Wednesday 12 March 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- [The Children's Society \(CWB0018\)](#)
- [ASCL \(CWB0014\)](#)

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Members present: Mr Graham Stuart (Chair); Neil Carmichael; Alex Cunningham; Bill Esterton; Pat Glass; Siobhain McDonagh; Mr Dominic Raab; Mr David Ward; Craig Whittaker

Questions 1-130

Witnesses: **Dragan Nastic**, Domestic Policy and Research Officer, UNICEF UK, **Peter Grigg**, Director of Campaigns, Policy and Research, The Children's Society, and **Ian Bauckham**, President, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome to the Education Committee. Today we look into the issue of child well-being in England. We are grateful that you could take the time to be with us today. We tend to be quite informal here, and use first names; I hope that is acceptable to you. Perhaps I could begin by asking how important it is that we have an understanding, and measures and metrics, that reflect overall child well-being in a country such as England. Dragan?

Dragan Nastic: Good morning. I am Dragan Nastic from UNICEF UK. UNICEF argues that it is vitally important that there is accurate and fast data collection and measures, to measure progress in improving child well-being. Without data, policy is blind. Only data allows us to shape our policy. One purpose and reason behind the report and the international comparisons of child well-being is to show that much of child well-being is policy-shaped. One of our main conclusions in the recommendations, including in Report Card 11, is to give more emphasis and resources into data collection and data analysis. There is quite a lag at the moment, especially when it comes to international comparisons. It takes at least two years to produce these reports. They do not really show up-to-date information.

Q2 Chair: We will come to the issues around education and the merits and demerits of OECD PISA tables later. You do not seem to have had quite the same impact yet that PISA panic brings about in countries—countries suddenly focusing much more closely on

their educational policies as a result of their position. Would you like your work to lead to greater public engagement and policy response?

Dragan Nastic: When it comes to education and well-being, PISA results are just one of the elements. Even they are limited just to the areas of science and maths.

Chair: We will come to that. Sorry, I probably did not make my question clear. It was more that the PISA tables, whatever their strengths or weaknesses, seem to have a great deal of impact on nations in terms of the way they view their policies. When we were in Finland, we were told that they were losing confidence in their system until they came top of the PISA tables; it gave them a bit of a fillip, whereas others countries, who were perhaps complacent, were dragged out of that and took an entirely more revolutionary approach to improvement as a result. Do you think your reports have that level of impact and, if not, would you like them to?

Dragan Nastic: The main purpose of our report is to start debates in countries on the issue of well-being, and to stimulate the discussion. We are very glad that the report is the topic of your inquiry.

Ian Bauckham: That is a really important question. One of the difficulties of this UNICEF report is that it covers a very wide range of areas, from housing, to health, to education, to safety, to child mortality and so on. It is quite difficult to give it the same degree of sharpness and focus that the PISA tables have, because they are focused very directly on educational outcomes, where interventions can be put in place in a very specific area to address shortcomings identified. That might be part of the reason why they do not appear to have the same level of impact that the PISA tables do.

Q3 Chair: How useful is the focus? As you say, it is so cross-cutting. Is it capturing something that is worthwhile and needs to be taken seriously by policy-makers?

Ian Bauckham: It probably is, yes. It needs to be disaggregated to a significant extent. Each area needs to be looked at individually, because these are very different policy areas.

Peter Grigg: The Children's Society has been working in and around well-being for some time. It is obvious that we would say that we think it is important that a report like this comes out. The report in 2007 did promote a degree of shock when it showed that the UK was at the bottom of the league table. Those sorts of things are helpful to prompt debate.

There is a breadth of issues contained within the UNICEF work. It is perhaps no surprise in a country like ours that has difficulties in talking about feelings and emotions, and wants to maintain a stiff upper lip. We have always historically placed children in a place where they are seen and not heard. It is perhaps of no surprise that children's subjective well-being does not feature very highly in the policy debate. For us, reports like this help to build a platform on which we can do more work in looking at subjective well-being in detail. We can then provide some picture for the UK, to help understand exactly what is going on with children and well-being in this country.

Q4 Chair: As you say, the UK came bottom in 2007. It had a bit of a shock impact, because of the starkness of that. What difference did it make?

Peter Grigg: What difference did the report make?

Chair: How did that impact? The shock was felt. When the Children's Society looked at this issue, how did the then-administration reorient their policies in order to tackle it?

Peter Grigg: It prompted a national debate about the importance of well-being. We can see a marked increase in policy debate around well-being from that moment. That coincided with a deeper commitment from the ONS to measure national well-being. You are even finding economists recognising a link between well-being and economic productivity. When we are talking about well-being, there is a danger that we put it in a box marked, "The soft stuff". Actually, the more we understand about it, the more we intrinsically understand the links between this and the performance of our country and of children.

Q5 Chair: We talk about the "soft side", but I was just trying to tease out what changed, other than greater recognition of the importance of well-being and more debate. How did it impact on policy, so as to make an improvement in the lives of children?

Peter Grigg: From a measurement point of view, more investment has gone in to trying to understand national well-being. That is a technical point, which is important. From a policy perspective, it is difficult to understand exactly what has changed since that period. The UNICEF work does show that there has been a marked increase in children's well-being, from about 2000 onwards. It is steadily rising and it is getting better. As Dragan has pointed out, the data does suffer from a bit of a lag. Their data is from 2009-10.

We repeat surveys more often and more regularly. We focus more on children's feelings and subjective responses to well-being, not just the objective measures. In a way, they are more responsive to the economic situation. We are finding that there has been a peak and, indeed, the beginnings of a decline in children's well-being from about 2009. We will be reporting on that further, later this year. We are very worried about that because there are a range of policies that do not sufficiently take into account children's well-being, in an assessment of what they are going to do for children.

Chair: Like what?

Peter Grigg: There are some recent examples that we are concerned about, which we raised in our written evidence. Some of the impacts on children's well-being are things like the Immigration Bill, and restricting access to health services for refugee and migrant children, for example. We are glad that the recent Child Poverty Strategy has many measures that will help children's well-being, like the announcement around free school meals.

Q6 Chair: Has child poverty not dropped by 300,000?

Peter Grigg: Indications are that child poverty will be rising by 2020, by about 800,000.

Q7 Chair: Has it not dropped in the last few years?

Peter Grigg: I certainly do not think child poverty has gone away as an issue that we need to tackle.

Q8 Chair: That was not my suggestion. I was asking if child poverty had dropped or not.

Peter Grigg: Child poverty has been dropping, but there are—

Q9 Chair: Is that worthy of note or not?

Peter Grigg: The indications are that child poverty is rising. That is what we are concerned about. There will be 800,000 more children in poverty in 2020 than there are now, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Q10 Craig Whittaker: That is surely a projection. The question was has child poverty dropped, with a forecast to rise, or has it not dropped?

Peter Grigg: Historically, child poverty had begun to decline. There are fewer children in child poverty, but there are still one in four children in child poverty.

Q11 Craig Whittaker: I understand that. That was not the question. The question is whether child poverty has dropped by 300,000 now. I understand what you say about projections, but has child poverty physically dropped by 300,000?

Peter Grigg: It depends which measures you are using. There are some signs that show that there are fewer people in absolute poverty. Relative poverty is on the increase.

Q12 Craig Whittaker: From actual poverty, child poverty has dropped. Is that what you are saying?

Peter Grigg: Sorry; repeat the question.

Craig Whittaker: You mentioned actual and relative poverty. Have the figures in actual poverty dropped: yes or no?

Peter Grigg: The number of children in poverty are rising in actual terms, yes.

Craig Whittaker: In actual terms.

Q13 Mr Ward: Is this not all about falling and rising average incomes, and the 60% figure?

Peter Grigg: To relate it back to well-being, the topic of inquiry, we find in our research that money and possessions do matter. We try to talk to children about how they feel about poverty. What we find is that it is one of the major associations with how they are feeling about their lives. Money and possessions matter.

We created an index that tries to work out exactly how children define their own poverty. We asked them about things that they are missing out on in life, and we created an index around that. Those children that have more than five of those things missing in their lives do have lower well-being. As we are here to talk about, the problem is that those children who do suffer from low well-being are more likely to suffer adverse consequences as a result. They are more likely to suffer from bullying, achievement in life and educational attainment, which I am sure you see in schools.

Q14 Mr Ward: You are talking about well-being. We are going into well-being and now it is well-being into child poverty and definitions. Is it not really to do with the measurement of the definition of child poverty? As incomes fall, you will then have fewer in poverty simply because of the 60% definition of child poverty.

Peter Grigg: The point I am trying to make—apologies if I am not being clear—is that the way we see how poverty affects well-being is important. What we are trying to understand—

Q15 Chair: Peter, you were frustrating me because there is a Government definition of child poverty, which has not changed under this Government or the last Government. It has dropped by 300,000, yet you seemed incapable of saying that. I do not know what the problem was. Emphasising that in the context that you are expecting it to rise seems fair, but my understanding is that there has been a drop in both relative and absolute terms.

Peter Grigg: Historically, there are some improvements in child poverty. What we are concerned about is that there are still far too many children in poverty in this country. There are one in four in children in poverty in this country, so the problem does not go away.

Q16 Chair: Of course; as long as there is a single child in poverty, there will be too many, Peter. Nobody is going to be putting their hands up saying, “That is a delight”.

Peter Grigg: Those numbers are rising. There are 800,000 more children who will be in poverty by the end of 2020. Yes, it is a forecast.

Q17 Chair: Do you think this whole debate about well-being has been dominated by people of the left? Is child well-being important enough that everybody should be involved in it? Reading some of the narrative of the report, it seems like the answer is always “greater public spending” and “greater state involvement”. Is there a danger that this becomes some silo of the left? Your answer, Peter, smacks to me of that. The Children’s Society cannot say anything positive about what is going on because it has to emphasise every negative. Your answers have shown a determined effort to do exactly that.

Peter Grigg: I started the statement by saying that the Child Poverty Strategy contains many good measures, such as free school meals. I think it is really unfair to mark the issues of subjective well-being and the issues of child well-being as a political issue of the left. That is not fair.

Q18 Chair: I was asking whether it was dominated, in terms of staff and viewpoints.

Peter Grigg: I do not think it is. It is dominated by people who are concerned about children’s well-being. We have a legal duty to look after and understand children’s well-being. There is an economic duty; if you want to talk about economics, there is a reason why child well-being matters. It matters for outcomes; it matters for the economy; it matters for our society. I think that is a really unfair—

Q19 Chair: It matters too much to be dominated entirely by one narrative view of the approach to Government. That would be my point.

Peter Grigg: This current Government is concerned about well-being. Well-being is a big issue for David Cameron. He makes a big deal of trying to understand it. I think that is an unfair categorisation of the debate.

Q20 Craig Whittaker: I have one further question on the subject before we move on. You mentioned relative poverty, and young people and children feeling that there were five things that they were missing out on. Could you give us a list of those five things?

Peter Grigg: It is important to understand our methodology. We first of all try to understand subjective well-being and how children are feeling and what they feel about their lives. Then we try to break that down into different domains of life, including relationships, family, friendships and how they feel about their local area. In terms of material deprivation, money and possessions came through as one of the three key drivers that seem to influence well-being. Relationships are the second driver. The third is the child's ability to feel choice and autonomy in their lives. They are things that do correlate very strongly with low and high well-being.

Within that, you can see that we have tried to understand exactly how children themselves define money and possessions. We have created an index that is about what they think they have in their lives. It asks: "Do you think you have the clothes or the trainers that you think you should have compared to your peers?"; "Are you happy with your house?" and "Are you happy with your environment?" We try to break those down to understand children's perceptions.

The link between actual income and poverty is a small one. One of the reasons I was trying to move off talking about traditional definitions of child poverty is that it is not the most significant factor that defines well-being, in our work. Those three things that I have identified are more significant. When you break that down and have that conversation with children about their own situations, you understand that the material deprivation is having an impact on the satisfaction they feel with their lives.

Q21 Craig Whittaker: I fully understand that. I would love to have a 40-foot yacht in the south of France, but the reality is that my salary does not enable me to do that. Does that mean that I am in poverty relative to people who are in that situation?

Peter Grigg: I do not think you are in relative poverty, Craig; I would not worry about that. You do not need me to tell you that. The point I am trying to make is that children do adjust their expectations according to their peers. It is not the simple point of income. Where they feel they are missing out does have an impact on their well-being. Another point is around choice, autonomy and their ability to feel like their future is going to improve or not.

Q22 Mr Raab: I want to pick up on that, because of the distinction between objective and relative poverty. I represent one of the most affluent constituencies in the country, but we have pockets of deprivation. We have got levels of child poverty and elderly poverty that are very high, but are not picked up by the funding formula criteria that central Government use. There is an argument about whether that is deliberate or not. I do not know whether you have come across this, but that is something where I would like to see some

reform to make sure that at what is called super output level, pockets of acute and relative deprivation are picked up on. It is particularly tough to be poor in a very rich area.

Peter Grigg: I think that is a very, very strong point, Dominic. From UNICEF's point of view, we are talking about big, national indicators that are quite difficult to drill down into any detail. We have tried to understand national indicators about well-being so that at least we can have more detail in the UK. Where we have seen real, interesting application of our work is where we have gone to a local area and we have done more work on children's well-being in that area. For example, we surveyed all the children in all the schools in the Isle of Wight. We talked to them about their well-being. Then you are able to make some actual applications for what is different.

What we saw in the Isle of Wight was that whilst some of the issues around relationships were very stable and were indeed better than the national average, there were real worrying things going on about girls' appearance at the age of 14, about the safety and security that people felt in their immediate area and the relationships with their teachers. It is very important to have a localised view of what well-being means. It is important to have a localised view of the children who are missing out in terms of the three key drivers that we have seen—relationships, money and possessions, and choice and autonomy. You will get a more nuanced picture if you do go down to super output areas, even with a more affluent area such as you described, Dominic.

Q23 Alex Cunningham: Other witnesses will get a chance to comment along the way, when we get to the first question on the papers. Going back to the child poverty issue, it was a fact that child poverty fell under the last Government, but was starting to rise again towards the end of their time. It had fallen considerably, as we have seen the increase in energy bills, cost of living and everything else associated with it. Surely, all those things are leading us to the point where there are bound to be more families and children falling into poverty as the cost of living rises and the incomes do not go with them.

Peter Grigg: I think that is the case. I was reluctant to get into a political debate around poverty.

Alex Cunningham: Sadly we did get into a political debate.

Peter Grigg: The point I was trying to make to Craig is that children's well-being is at the heart of that. We really need to understand what we can do to support well-being. In our minds, those three drivers—relationships, understanding money and possessions, and choice and autonomy—are a key part of that. The ability to listen to children and to actually understand them is important.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner did a really interesting exercise on the Budget. They did a children's impact assessment of the Budget. They saw that some of the measures contained were not going to be productive or be the best for children's well-being. Those things are important. To have an analysis of what policy change is doing for children is so critical.

Q24 Alex Cunningham: Maybe we can move a bit wider, now. We seem to measure everything these days. I wonder whether we can really have a robust measure for

well-being, given different ages, genders, structures, incomes and a host of other variables. Is it not all a bit vague? Ian?

Ian Bauckham: I would say that it is very difficult to do. Looking specifically at the education section of the report, as soon as you start digging down into it, you uncover all sorts of difficulties with what the measurements actually mean in comparative terms, from country to country. The early childhood participation indicators, for example, are ranked according to the proportion in education, between the age of four and the statutory school starting age in each country. Because that school starting age varies from country to country, you have varying periods of time between the age of four and that starting point, and so you have figures that are skewed all over the place.

Q25 Alex Cunningham: So it is a lot of nonsense, and we should not take that much notice of it.

Ian Bauckham: You have to look at it with great caution. I am not sure that the rankings simply tell you everything that you need to know. We are very fond of looking at tables and trying to see where we are in the league table. In a lot of this data, we have to look considerably beyond that and dig down and look at what the figures actually mean. Particularly, we have to compare the same figures with the last point of measurement, so that we can see progress over time rather than just looking at our rank order compared with other countries, when actually the metrics are different from country to country.

Dragan Nastic: If I could start by getting back to your observation, I would hope that there is no ideology in this area. Our approach is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and thereafter the rights including the standard of living there. What we see in our dialogue with the countries all over the world is that child well-being is a priority for every one of them. After all, it was the Conservative Government here that ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our approach is that child well-being is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is multi-faceted and it cannot be measured just with one indicator or dimension. It must be measured using a group of them. We would dearly love to have even more indicators. There are some big things missing from international comparisons that are crucial for the well-being of children—for instance mental health, violence and abuse. Also, as Dominic mentioned, there is the question of the most vulnerable and deprived children. We would like to be able to probe more there, but for that we need internationally comparable data.

A good example of what Dominic said is Denmark. In one of our previous reports, we mentioned the fact that Denmark is the country with one of the lowest rates of child poverty. However, in Denmark there is a small group of children who are in poverty. They have fallen far, far below. The gap between these two groups is much bigger than in many other countries where child poverty is a serious problem, looking just at the numbers. There are different things we would like to analyse. I would say that our work on international comparisons is very much a work in progress.

If you look at Report Card 7 and Report Card 11, the methodology has changed. I can inform you now that UNICEF is working on Report Card 12 as we speak. It will be published in October this year. There will be another comparative international overview of child well-being. Specifically, we will be looking at the impact of economic austerity in OECD countries. Report Card 11 gives just a picture of the beginning. It shows what

happened in 2009 and 2010 after the great recession and crash of 2008. We would like to see what has happened after that. We will be looking at the period between 2008 and 2012. There will also be a lot of indicators showing what has happened here in the UK—not just in the area of child poverty and its various measures, but in other domains and dimensions.

Q26 Alex Cunningham: We have all this data coming in and that exists. It is variable and it is all over the place. It is different in different countries. There is no real, firm way of actually measuring one country against another. What can we do with it all? What decisions can we make based on this evidence that will actually make a difference?

Dragan Nastic: We think that it is useful to have international comparisons, despite the fact that they have a lot of weaknesses and that monitoring on the national level is much more significant. Still, international comparisons help. First of all, they show that a lot of things are policy shaped. If there are significant differences between countries which are on the same level of development, that means there is something about the policy that is the cause of that.

Peter was talking about the material deprivation index. In one of our previous reports, for instance, you can see that on one side are Belgium and Germany; on another are the Netherlands and Denmark. These countries are on the same level of economic development and have the same GDP per person. However, material deprivation rates in Belgium Germany are three and seven times higher than in Denmark and the Netherlands. This shows that child well-being is very much policy-susceptible. As I said, the comparisons help to provoke national debate and to refocus Governments into taking measures for improvement.

Q27 Chair: Your focus through the measures is skewed towards the poor and disadvantaged, anyway. Rather than promising an overview of child well-being as a whole, would it not be better to acknowledge and focus on the poor and disadvantaged and their experiences in different countries? That would both be methodologically easier to put together and a fairer representation of what you were trying to do. It would still be very useful to say to countries that how you treat the children at the bottom of your society, the poorer and disadvantaged children, is in fact a very important indicator of how civilised and successful a society you are.

Dragan Nastic: We do this because of our global mandate, which is to support the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to that Convention, all children have access to all the rights in the Convention. So, if we want to follow a human-rights-based approach, we have to then take into account the well-being of all children.

Q28 Alex Cunningham: To go back to the question, what can actually be changed as a result of all this variable data out there?

Ian Bauckham: As I said earlier, looking simply at league table rankings is not a particularly helpful way to look at the data, but it can trigger some important questions. Going to the education one specifically, again, look at the participation in further education, where the United Kingdom stunningly comes at the very bottom of that

particular table. There is a note there in the report that says that this may be because we have a particular focus on academic education and we do not have particularly well-developed vocational and technical pathways beyond the age of 15.

I am not suggesting that we chase a higher league table position, but that does trigger an important question about the kind of education provision that we are putting in place for technical and vocational pathways for ages 15 to 19. A discussion around that, as well as an analysis of the quality of what we are doing and the levels of participation in that kind of education, would be a good outcome of that.

Peter Grigg: First of all, it would be a limited application of well-being just to look at the most poor in poverty, because we do see examples of where well-being is affected in other groups. There is the point about relationships and the time that young people have. Until recent amendments, there were not sufficient observations of young carers' needs and time, and the extra pressure that they are facing in their lives. That is the sort of group that would not necessarily always feature if we just took that narrow poverty view of what well-being is about. Relationships matter for other groups.

In terms of whether this is all “nonsense”, to paraphrase what you said, Alex, the ONS would certainly disagree. It is very important to measure national well-being. We have worked with the University of York, Jonathan Bradshaw and Gwyther Rees, who are international experts. We have proved that there are robust and validated measures. In terms of what we actually do with it, I was trying to explain with the Isle of Wight example that schools and local authorities can take that and work on the specific issues in their area. It can be appearance issues, bullying or the local environment. It can be all sorts of things, but to have the data behind you gives you a decent opportunity to do something about it.

Chair: Thank you, Peter. We have a lot more to cover in a limited time.

Q29 Craig Whittaker: Most of my questions have been covered. Dragan, I know you said that this was a work in progress. You also said that data collection and analysis is vital to shaping policy going forward. Yet countries like Japan, Australia and New Zealand are missed out of the report because you say the data is just not there. Are you valuing what you measured rather than measuring what is valued?

Dragan Nastic: As I said before, we would like to measure all that is available, but we are limited. The problem with international comparisons is that you need to have not just data but internationally comparable data. As you said, for Report Card 11, it was unfortunately not possible to list countries like Australia. I can tell you that Australia will feature in Report Card 12. There will be a separate, special background paper on Australia itself because the Australian Government have adopted some exciting policies on how to support families and families with children and to deal with the impact of austerity. It is a work in progress. As I said, not everything that is valued can be measured, and it certainly cannot be internationally compared yet.

Q30 Craig Whittaker: You have mentioned economic austerity as being one of the measures that you would like to include in the evolution of the report. What other measures do you think would give an accurate picture of accurate comparisons across countries?

Dragan Nastic: We are trying to go beyond just comparisons and league tables. As Ian mentioned, league tables do not show you the whole picture. Although I would say that there are more than just rankings in our league tables. We also scale results; you can see for every country where they are in relation to the average in their group. We are trying to provide much more information than just a simple league table.

What we are also going to do in Report Card 12, for the first time, is assess policies. There will be a special chapter to see what policies developed countries have adopted to try to implement austerity packages but not at the expense of child well-being. We will also try in that report to assess the success and impact of these various policies.

Q31 Mr Raab: Your Report Card 7, in 2007, placed Britain at the bottom of the 21 developed countries for overall well-being. Then, Report Card 11 in 2013 put us in 16th place. Why were we rock bottom in 2007? Why have we risen to the mid-ranking area now? Are there any specific causes, when you drill down?

Dragan Nastic: Although Report Card 7 was published in 2007, it looked at data from the beginning of the decade, in 2000 and 2001. In Report Card 11, we were then able to look at the whole decade and see that the UK has made quite significant progress. Actually, the UK and Portugal are the two countries that have made the most significant progress in the whole decade. That is the result of investment and conscience.

Q32 Mr Raab: I want to try to be as forensic as I can, because I know there is a lot here. Why were we at the bottom to begin with and why have we risen? I think I understand that you are saying more public investment, but perhaps you could be a bit more specific about what areas made the difference. Why were we at the bottom to begin with?

Dragan Nastic: People in our research team with whom I spoke tell me that the cause of the problem was that in the 1980s and early 1990s there was neglect. A more specific policy effort came afterwards and was intensified through a period of time.

Q33 Mr Raab: That is very general. Are you talking about money going into schools? Are you talking about other areas of public services? What are you talking about specifically? I am trying to work out what we can glean from this.

Dragan Nastic: I am talking about it all, actually. We are not only looking at material well-being but also at services. There are a number of indicators and domains. What was interesting about Report Card 7 was that the UK came at the bottom of the league table in almost every domain.

Q34 Mr Raab: This Committee is conducting an inquiry into white working-class underachievement. Based on your experience of the UK, I wonder what we can glean from these well-being surveys and rankings, for that particular group of our society. Others feel free to chip in. Dragan?

Dragan Nastic: To use a one-liner: policy works. For instance, if you look at Report Card 11, there has been a huge improvement in the housing area. The UK is doing very well. That is because throughout the whole decade, there has been a lot of investment here in social and private housing. That has then reflected in the scores and the position of the UK.

Q35 Chair: I do not understand that. There has been a much bigger increase in the number of households than there has been in the number of houses built, and we fell to the lowest level of house building since the 1920s. Notwithstanding investment in some quality, the housing stock fundamentally did not keep pace relative to the need.

Mr Raab: Particularly at the affordable end.

Chair: Yes, especially at the affordable end. There are more people in overcrowded housing, etc.

Dragan Nastic: The UK also did very well in that particular area as well: the quality of housing and the number of rooms per family. When you look at the league tables, the UK has done quite well.

Chair: That is surprising.

Q36 Mr Raab: That conflicts with our own ONS data. Do either of the other two want to comment?

Ian Bauckham: The more I listen to the discussion, the more I think that the measures are simply too composite and too broad to be able to draw simple conclusions. Putting all those together and doing a simple rank ordering is utterly misleading, to be honest. The only way to get any sense out of this is to look at each area individually, benchmark it back against our performance last time and ask some questions about the way in which we have moved. As I said earlier, I do not see that putting all those very different measures together and trying to draw a single conclusion from it can tell us very much.

Q37 Mr Raab: It does not have to be a single conclusion. It can be a Gatling gun list. I just wondered what would top of your Gatling gun list.

Ian Bauckham: My particular interest is, obviously, education. I would want to ask questions about education. To be honest, the data is not all that helpful. The one on NEETs—participation in education, employment or training—has data back from 2009-10. I do not know what that can tell me about what has happened in the last five years. The education experience that those people will have had will have been of the 10 years prior to that. It does not give me a sense of what is happening to young people in schools now.

Dragan Nastic: If I can reply to this, and pardon me for being pro domo sua, we are aware of all the failings and weaknesses of international comparison. Report Card 9 was all about that. In Report Card 11, we are very honest. We say that the data should be interpreted with care. We still feel that it is very useful—even to know, for instance, what the situation was in 2009, because these are things that show trends. In a lot of these areas, things do not change overnight. They change over a period of years. It is useful to know.

Q38 Mr Raab: There is always a time lag for comprehensive research, particularly international. Peter?

Peter Grigg: If you are looking at white working-class underachievement, I think there are some things you can glean when you draw down into the well-being work in this country. The index that we break down gives us some examples around family, the importance of stable relationships around the children, health, home and school. All of these are a part of our index. More specifically, you can draw down by age. We look at how well-being fares over different age groups, starting at the age of eight. There seems to be particular issues around ages 13 and 14 that really need attention.

Q39 Mr Raab: Is that issue in schools or in families?

Peter Grigg: Across all the indicators in our index, low well-being rises at the age of 13 and 14. It relates to parents, how young people feel about themselves, the way they see and how they feel about school. We have all been to school; we know that it gets a bit trickier at 13 or 14.

Q40 Chair: Is that different here, compared to other places?

Peter Grigg: I am talking about our work, which is only done here. I could not answer that.

Q41 Mr Raab: Do you think that people feel better about themselves at 13 to 14?

Peter Grigg: I am saying they feel worse. If you are looking at areas of intervention, that is one area that you could look at.

Q42 Mr Raab: How much of that is just adolescence?

Peter Grigg: Some of it will be adolescence, of course. That is what I am saying. We have all been there.

Q43 Mr Raab: How meaningful is that?

Peter Grigg: If you are looking for examples of where low well-being is particularly problematic and can lead to other, more problematic issues like running away or getting into risky behaviours, then I am suggesting that there are some intervention points. The second thing is the relationships, parenting and parenting support and what you can do to build social and emotional well-being at the earlier stages of a child's life. This could also be relevant to your inquiry into white working-class underachievement.

Mr Raab: Very good. Ian, I do not know whether you want to start on this. I am curious to know why you think the UK has done so badly on education, particularly post-16 education?

Ian Bauckham: On the post-16 education and participation post 16, we do appear to be very weak. There is a note in the report that attempts to explain that. It does say that it is possibly because the vocational and technical pathways are not available here, or do not have parity of esteem. When I looked at the research, I was not quite clear whether that meant that they are therefore not included as valid education, or whether it meant people are not taking them up. I do not know. I do not think the information told me that.

Dragan Nastic: These are two very important areas. We were also puzzled by the fact that there was such a huge gap between the UK and other developed countries, when it comes to the indicator of participation in further education. In every other developed country, the rate of participation is above 80%. In the UK, it is 75%. We did not have an explanation for that. When we presented this report to the Minister David Laws, before its publication, it immediately attracted his attention and the attention of the civil servants. We could not offer an explanation and they did not have an explanation for this particular result.

What I can tell you—and since Ian is also asking for more up-to-date data—is that the trend continues to be negative. I can tell you that in advance. In Report Card 12, the rate of children and young people not in education, employment or training has deteriorated further. Perversely, this will not be reflected in the ranking, because in other countries it has deteriorated even more, for example in Spain, Greece and Croatia. The austerity there has been much more—

Q44 Mr Raab: From what you are saying, you are not clear why. Can I ask others whether this is partly to do with vocational qualifications? Will the recent emphasis on investment in vocational qualifications therefore help in this area?

Ian Bauckham: I think that is very welcome and I think that will help. It is partly to do with that. It is a bit puzzling, because very soon everybody up to the age of 18 will theoretically have to be participating in education or training of some sort. It is a little bit puzzling that figures are as low as they appear to be, here, of 75% or 80%. One of the difficulties that we face in the education sector is tracking those young people from the age of 16 to 18, and ensuring that they are participating as they are required to do so.

Chair: Thank you very much, Ian. We have very little time.

Q45 Bill Esterson: Ian, in your written evidence, you made the point that the report said we should be studying what goes on in the Netherlands and in the Nordic countries, rather than in the other English-speaking countries. Does the ASCL agree with that, and, if so, why?

Ian Bauckham: Yes. The Netherlands in particular are a very interesting case, because in many ways they are very close to us in the way that their school system is organised, the high levels of autonomy that they have and so on. I think it would be very good to look carefully at what is happening in the Netherlands and see what lessons we can learn from them. They come out very strongly in a number of indicators.

Q46 Bill Esterson: Dragan, it was your report that made this point. What is the evidence to support the assertion that we should be looking at what goes on in certain countries?

Dragan Nastic: Sorry, I missed your question.

Bill Esterson: Why should be following what goes in the Netherlands and in the Nordic countries, rather than other English-speaking countries?

Dragan Nastic: I do not think we said that. We do not say that. UNICEF is an inter-governmental organisation. We would not say that. We present the results to nations

or Governments, and we hope that they take them into consideration and that they will provoke their interest. We do not say one should look at this country or the other country.

The results themselves stimulate a little bit of curiosity—for example as to why one country is doing better in one particular area even though the rate of development is more or less the same. The Netherlands have come at the top of the league in both Report Cards and throughout the decade. They are even also on top of the subjective well-being. It is an interesting country, but we would not go so far as to tell your Government or any Government that they should follow their suit.

Q47 Bill Esterson: Can you tell us what the policies were that led to the improvement between Report Card 7 and 11?

Dragan Nastic: As I said, in current Report Cards we do not go into trying to unpack which specific policies have led to certain results. We remain at a level of comparison. We will try to go further in-depth. Here and there, there are some bits of information, for example when it comes to education. There is a lot of information here on Finland, such as why it is doing so well or why the gap between Finland and other countries in educational achievement is so huge. There is information there on the specific policies that enabled Finland to be a champion in that area. By and large, we do not go that far beyond this report.

Q48 Bill Esterson: Peter, when you were not being accused of being a left-wing ideologue earlier, you made the comment that you expect there to be a worryingly dramatic increase in the level of child poverty. What evidence do you have for this?

Peter Grigg: I was making a few points. The subjective well-being point is that we see that there is already a decline that we have marked, which UNICEF's data has not yet picked up but we fear it will do. It will show a decline in children's well-being and subjective well-being. We saw that last year, from 2009. We will report again on it this year. It is concerning.

Just to make it clear: this is not a few children sitting around feeling a bit grumpy. It is not about general, teenage behaviour where you would expect people to get into different moods at different times. This is persistent, stubborn, low well-being, with people who feel that their life is worthless and who feel that they have no satisfaction in their life. That is worrying and troubling. It is expensive to deal with for a state, as it transpires into other issues, such as risky behaviour, poor health outcomes and poor education outcomes. I did want to make that point, because well-being can be put into a box as a nice-to-have discussion, but it is a critical part of children's lives that we should all be concerned about.

Q49 Bill Esterson: Can you tell us about the time lag between policy and changes in well-being? Specifically, tell us about what has happened historically, the evidence we are looking at from Report Card 11 and the more recent changes, such as the improvement in teenage pregnancy figures.

Peter Grigg: It is such a complicated issue to unpick; saying when a policy has an effect on children is difficult. Certainly, there is a point to make about the difference between objective measures of well-being and subjective measures. Objective measures will tell you when the indicators come out about what actually happened as a result, so the health

problem or the education problem. That is what UNICEF are predominantly picking up on. At least the subjective measures get a little bit earlier on in the process. You are asking people how they are feeling about things, which probably will be a bit more policy-responsive. I could not possibly claim that there is a formula about how long a policy takes to make someone feel better. I presume that more good policies would make more people feel better.

Q50 Bill Esterson: So, you have no evidence about how long it takes?

Peter Grigg: For any specific policy? It would be difficult to understand.

Q51 Bill Esterson: Anything in your report, Dragan?

Dragan Nastic: It will vary from one area to another. When it comes to immunisation, for instance, you can see very quickly results of your investment. But dealing with obesity or child poverty, for instance, is something that would take at least several years.

Q52 Mr Ward: If it is difficult to compare objective measures, it must be even more difficult to compare subjective measures. I was quite interested reading about the possible cultural differences that may then result in different responses on measurements, looking at the subjective measures. I think there are a few comments in the UNICEF report, which talk about culturally conditioned responses depending upon different countries. Can you tell us a little bit about that, Dragan?

Dragan Nastic: Unlike Report Card 7, in Report Card 11 subjective well-being and its results were represented as a separate chapter. It is not one of the dimensions of the child well-being. The reason is precisely as you said: that there is still academic and theoretical debate about how to objectively measure subjective well-being and how you can interpret it in a more scientific way. On the other hand, we of course firmly believe that it is absolutely necessary to see what children say, think and feel about their well-being. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child compels us to take children's views into consideration. It is important to know what they think and feel about this. That is why it is an indispensable and crucial dimension of child well-being, because on the methodological ground it is not—

Q53 Mr Ward: You are UK-based, but could there be a different issue, whether it is stoicism or what is culturally acceptable in terms of complaining?

Peter Grigg: There is certainly an aspect. When you are talking about how people feel and how people answer questions about how they feel, of course there will be all these dimensions. The approach we take has shown fairly consistent rates in terms of well-being. To give a happy note, four-fifths of children in this country are flourishing and are doing well in terms of well-being. It is not all doom and gloom, just to make that point. The 10% who do suffer from low well-being is fairly stubborn. It cuts across cultures. We even do things like ask people on different days of the week and see if that makes a difference.

Q54 Chair: Does it?

Peter Grigg: It is fairly stable. There is a tiny spike on Saturdays, so maybe we can meet on Saturday next time.

Q55 Craig Whittaker: Is that a good spike or a bad spike?

Peter Grigg: It is a good spike.

Q56 Mr Ward: You have touched on this, so I do not need very much. We talked about whether in fact it is policy-amenable, because it is so difficult to grasp. You could put something together for the identification of increasing rates of obesity. Are subjective measures something that can lead to policy formation?

Peter Grigg: I believe it can. When you break down the issues within it, around family relationships, time use and the quality of the environment, you can begin to understand what you can do about it. You could approach it within the school if you had a better understanding of the particular issues that children were facing.

One of the points to make for the Committee is that we perhaps have not gone far enough to investigate how things like pupil premium could be used to try to enhance children's well-being. Issues such as trying to help people understand their social and emotional issues, and the news today about psychological well-being and mental health in teenagers, are critical factors that policy and this Committee can do something about and should do something about, to support children's well-being.

Q57 Mr Ward: Moving on to the issue of the different age ranges, for example the eight-to-16 range. Do we know enough about how young people at earlier ages form judgments? Are the subjective measures something we can rely on? Do we know enough about them?

Peter Grigg: We know quite a lot. There is plenty more we need to know. We start the survey at about the age of eight. We think there is robust evidence from the age of eight. There is some evidence before that, but not quite as robust. There is a lot we know about the earliest ages of children. The point I would make is that there are some categories of children we certainly do not know enough about. We do see, where we have been able to speak to looked-after children or children in foster care, that 50% of those children do suffer from low well-being. We need more research into those areas.

Q58 Siobhain McDonagh: The UNICEF UK quality study on well-being, materialism and inequality concluded that parents in the UK felt under pressure to provide their children with unwanted consumer goods, and were also struggling to find some time to be with their children. Why is this a particular problem in the UK, but is much less so for Spain and Sweden? What can the Government do about what appears to be a problem with parenting in society?

Dragan Nastic: That was UNICEF UK research, not a UNICEF report, and it was qualitative research, so one needs to be a little careful about the findings. That report showed that family relationships are the most important thing in children's lives. That is also something that the Children's Society surveys have shown. The families in the UK are under more pressure when it comes to parenting and giving quality time to children than Sweden or Spain.

The explanation that report reached was that in Sweden, there was better organised and more generous support from society, the state and from the Government, in terms of policy, to families. In Spain, the situation is better not because of that; Spain is actually doing worse. The situation is better because of the role of the extended family. In Spain, families tend to live together. Even if they do not live together, wide families stick together very much, and support and help each other. Their relationships with grandparents and aunts, etc, seemed to be very important in children's lives.

Q59 Siobhain McDonagh: What can families or children do to promote child well-being? How should the question of the impact of poor parenting on children be tackled?

Chair: There is little in your report about parenting.

Dragan Nastic: There is a little, but not much.

Q60 Chair: Is that not odd? You are doing a report on child well-being and the most important thing for child well-being is a relationship with parents. You have got very little on parents.

Dragan Nastic: It is dealt with mostly under the subjective well-being. In other parts of the report, it does not feature so much. We would love to be able to know more about that, because parenting is obviously crucial.

Peter Grigg: Parents matter; of course they do. We find that children who say their families do not get along together are eight times more likely to suffer from low well-being. It is really important. Good quality relationships within a family are so critical. Family harmony is absolutely essential. Where we find low conflict and high levels of support from parents, life satisfaction is much higher. The converse is true: where there is high conflict and low levels of support from parents, there is much lower satisfaction. Parenting is critical.

Q61 Chair: Siobhan's question was whether there are any lessons. If parents were watching now, are there any lessons from all this that a parent could hear, take on board and use to change their behaviour accordingly?

Peter Grigg: Our research would suggest that talking to children would be a start. Talking to them about their emotions and feelings is a critical aspect. Any good parent would know that, right? I am sure there is always more we could do. Quality time spent with children is another critical factor. Another is the choice and autonomy. It is important that they feel that they can self-determine, to some extent, what they can do in their lives. I am not suggesting that parents should let them run free and do everything they want, because that in itself would not be great parenting. However, it is important that children feel that they do have some involvement in decision-making, do understand the things around them and do have hopes and aspirations for the future. All those things are important.

Ian Bauckham: It is odd that we were talking earlier about the importance of material possessions for children's sense of well-being, but actually it is the relationship with parents. I think that is absolutely right. In policy terms, find ways of making it possible

for parents to spend more time with their children, particularly in the early years, to form good bonds.

Q62 Chair: More time; fewer gifts: is that the message?

Ian Bauckham: I think so.

Dragan Nastic: UNICEF is conducting separate research into support for parents and doing international comparisons on policies in various countries. I will share the results of that research with you as soon as it is produced.

Q63 Alex Cunningham: You have already covered much of the stuff in my group of questions. I just have one, to Ian. How are schools using the Good Childhood Index to inform their own policies and practices?

Ian Bauckham: They are focusing on child welfare much more than they used to. For example, there are many examples of the pupil premium being used creatively to support parenting and to support counselling for young people to help them understand their situation and move forward. They are a couple of examples of things that schools are doing.

Q64 Alex Cunningham: What more needs to be done? That is possibly patchy across the country.

Ian Bauckham: It is very patchy across the country. It is very variable, and it is quite difficult to get qualitative information about it, because you have to drill down into each school to get an overview.

Q65 Chair: Is there anything we need to change in accountability? Some people say it is so focused on exams. You have got Ofsted as well, but people say it is so much focused on exams that schools are not sufficiently incentivised to look at the whole child rather than just a narrow aspect of the child.

Ian Bauckham: I think you have just made the argument. Absolutely; if all the focus is on examination outcomes then you do exactly produce behaviours in school that focus entirely on exams.

Q66 Chair: The Minister is sitting right behind you. He is about to come to the front. What message would you give to him about how that accountability could be changed so as to better get schools to look at the whole child and not just narrow exam results?

Ian Bauckham: Re-balance the accountability in schools; shift the way that Ofsted inspection operates in schools, so that you are imposing less of a burden on schools in terms of accountability for individual exam results; and encourage schools to develop ways of giving children character, resilience, values and focus on well-being as well.

Q67 Mr Ward: Coming bottom of the league table in 2007 was described as being a shock—I do remember it at the time—and a wake-up call for the Government. Did it wake up?

Peter Grigg: We pay some more attention to well-being, but not enough to children's well-being and not enough to children's subjective well-being. The recent ONS indicators are a shift in the right direction, but there is a lot more that can be done. There is not really any obvious Government responsibility in any particular place for children's well-being across the board. That means that it is possible for different pockets of policy to go without due attention to children's well-being. It would be helpful if there was a greater focus. From our perspective, it was a bit of a shock but more of a prod in the side than any big slap round the face.

Q68 Mr Ward: Dragan, you came up with some recommendations as a result of that. What is the assessment?

Dragan Nastic: I will also reply to the question that Graham asked at the beginning. Looking back at Report Card 7, I think the main change that happened there was that about a year after the launch of the debt report, the Department for Children, Schools and Families was created. It was the first time that there had ever been a department with such a wide remit. It also incorporated as a priority the question of overall well-being and the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is an area where we would like to see further progress and for impact assessments to be used.

Q69 Chair: Is there evidence that those countries with better outcomes—the Nordic countries and the Netherlands—have a more joined-up Government approach? Do they have clearer responsibility for the well-being of a child across Government Departments?

Dragan Nastic: I think it is crucial that there is a Department that looks holistically at the overall well-being.

Q70 Chair: Is the evidence that those countries do have that? If I went to Holland, would I find it easier to find a Minister of Child Well-Being than I would in this country?

Dragan Nastic: I do not think that you could find direct evidence that you would be able to attribute the results to that specific cause. I do not think that things in life are that straightforward or simple, but it would certainly help. Under international law, it is an obligation that there is a Department that leads on the overall co-ordination and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much for giving evidence this morning. If we can switch as quickly as possible to the Minister, who I see is ready is ready and waiting, sitting behind.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon David Laws MP, Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education, gave evidence.

Q71 Chair: Good morning and welcome, Minister. It is a pleasure to have you before the Committee again. When it came to deciding who would come today to talk about child well-being, did you toss a coin? If you did, did you win or did you lose?

Mr Laws: We tried to anticipate what you were most likely to be interested in, so we could be as helpful as possible. There is a good reason for my being here: I am the lead DfE child poverty Minister. Also, issues such as attainment are very much in my area. Obviously, other Ministers cover other aspects—Edward Timpson covers a lot of the well-being issues and Matt Hancock does a lot of the 16-to-19 participation. It seemed like the areas that you were interested were more likely to impact on me, so I managed to secure the slot.

Q72 Chair: So you won?

Mr Laws: I won.

Bill Esterson: We believe you.

Q73 Chair: Since the demise of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, has the desire to create a more joined-up approach to the interests of children across Government gone backwards?

Mr Laws: No, I do not think it has at all. I am rather sceptical of structural, departmental solutions being the answer to all of these things. We are still quite capable of working across Departments. Later on today, I am going to be going to the Social Justice Committee, which is chaired by Iain Duncan Smith. It brings together Ministers from all Departments—Health, DWP and so forth—to join up our policies in these areas. I do not think that there has been any set back from not having a Department like that.

Q74 Chair: Do you recognise that a lot of others would disagree with you?

Mr Laws: You can do things differently in different countries. What really matters is the quality of the policy solutions and the ability to join things up, either within Departments or between them. Sometimes, you can have un-joined-up things even within single Departments—not in the DfE, of course.

Q75 Chair: Of course, Minister. Given the importance attached by the Prime Minister to well-being, why is there no clarity over a Minister who is responsible for child well-being and would have that specific role? I know that it goes on in different policy areas. Rather than taking the ad hoc approach of saying, “Right, you had better sit on the child poverty committee and you had better sit on the education and health join-up committee”, would it be better to have someone whose whole role is to look at pulling these things together and ensuring that the Government, in all its decisions, thinks of the impact on the child?

Mr Laws: I would guess that the problem in doing that is that there is a risk that you have got somebody who is in charge of all these things in theory, but in reality a lot of the policy levers are outside their hands. Sometimes it is much easier to get things done as the departmental Minister, who is in the lead of things, rather than having a Minister who has a lot of responsibility but not much direct power.

Q76 Neil Carmichael: Good morning. What is the Government's view about why well-being is important?

Mr Laws: I think it is very important because it is one of the many factors that impacts on not just the happiness of young people but their likelihood of succeeding in the future. As has already been said to the Committee, we know that young people who are properly supported in the school and home environment are more likely to do well. They are more likely to have a positive attitude, be aspirational and acquire skills. They are more likely, therefore, to get into a virtuous circle.

Q77 Neil Carmichael: Thank you. Did the findings in the UNICEF Report Card 11 come as a shock and a wake-up call to the coalition Government? What aspects of that report surprised you most?

Mr Laws: I do not think they were a big shock. They look very much in the rear-view mirror, in that all we are looking at is the result of changes over the period of time under the last Government, because the data we are looking at is from 2009-10. I was a bit surprised, initially, to see that we had risen from bottom of the table to mid-table. The two tables are not comparable at all, in terms of the issues that are being looked at.

In addition, as you will know, quite a few countries have been added to this league table compared with the last one. If you look at the countries that have been added, they are largely lower-income countries that have come out below us. A lot of the countries below us in this league table are countries that we would frankly expect to be below us, because they are generally poorer countries.

We were disappointed to see the ranking in the education area; I am obviously particularly concerned about that, as a DfE Minister. A lot of it relates to the measures that have been chosen, which may or may not be the right ones. There is a lot of focus on participation rather than on the end outcomes. You could argue that you could have different participation figures and you could have very different end results. I think there is a question mark in our mind about whether or not such a heavy focus on participation is right.

Undoubtedly, there is also the fact that in 2009-10, in spite of the work that the last Government was trying to do, we had an unimpressive performance as a country in the 16-to-19 cohort. There is no getting away from that. It is not just participation that is low. It is also the NEET figures, which I do not think there is any way around. Those are not very good figures. I was surprised that performance under the last Government in this area had been so disappointing, comparatively. The good thing is there has been some good progress in those areas since the coalition Government took over.

Q78 Neil Carmichael: We heard a lot about the post-16 issue in the last session. Concern was obviously expressed about participation. Yesterday, the CBI commented that we do not have enough engineers, for example, which made me think about the question of rebalancing the economy. I was wondering if there was a link between the kind of economy that we had before, the direction of travel in terms of rebalancing and the whole question of post-16 vocational training and the direction of travel that young people might need to go in to fulfil that aspiration of providing more engineers. I wonder what your thoughts are on that.

Mr Laws: I suspect that our problems with the 16-to-19 age group are focused on three particular things. As a country, we still have a lot of low-attaining students at aged 16 who have not done well in education up to that age group and who leave school with very low qualifications or no qualifications. They are not well-prepared to go on either to academic routes or, frankly, vocational routes. One of our big challenges in order to improve 16-to-19 performance is to improve pre-16 performance. All the indications are that at 16 and 18 you tend to go on and do good things successfully if you have mastered the subjects at 16. A lot of the focus here ought to be on that.

Secondly, compared with other countries we have much more of a serious examination check at age 16. Some countries have already moved to a system that focuses more on 18. That may have been an issue here in the past—that people have not felt that they ought to be continuing to 18, which is one of the reasons why the participation age has gone up, and which will make an impact.

As you touched on, the other thing is the quality of vocational education. We know that some businesses, even in these difficult economic times, have found it difficult to recruit people into high-skill areas. We have had to draw in people from abroad. We need to make sure that we have those skills in the future. We need to make sure that vocational education offers high quality routes into well paid jobs and is not just an opt-out from academic education for people who do not do well in it.

Q79 Neil Carmichael: In that specific area of post 16, regarding the last point you made about the interface between business, the real economy and the sector itself, the conclusion I would draw is that we need to see more relationships between those sides. Do you tend to agree? How would that be brought about?

Mr Laws: Yes, I think we do. We first need to make sure that the vocational qualifications that are being developed and that people are encouraged to do are useful things that are going to have value in the labour market. We need to make sure that young people are not encouraged to do qualifications because of league table performance rather than the qualification leading on to progression; I fear that, at one stage in the last Parliament, they were.

As we develop the careers advice and guidance that we give to young people, we also need to make sure that business is very much engaged in that and that we are giving people an insight into the careers of tomorrow that they could be involved in, and that we make sure that those careers are as opened up as possible to people across the entire country and not just where they happen to have those particular sectors.

Q80 Chair: Having mentioned employers, I thought you were going to use three other words: professional careers advisers. Are those words banned? Are they verboten for any Minister ever to utter?

Mr Laws: No, I do not think they are banned. This is work in progress, as you know.

Chair: It certainly is.

Mr Laws: I do not think there has ever been a golden age of this, in the UK.

Q81 Neil Carmichael: It follows on from the exchanges that we have just had that measurements of destination would help, certainly in the post-16 sector, not just because we have identified shortfalls in supplies of engineering and so on but also as a better measure of the performance of the sector itself. Do you think that that is something we can see more of in the future?

Mr Laws: In the conclusions of our work on accountability, including 16-to-19 accountability, we are certainly going to be doing a lot more to hold institutions to account for destinations. At the moment, we are trying to make sure we have got the quality of data for that. We need to make sure that we know that, if we are going to use it for accountability purposes, the data is of high quality.

It is worth mentioning, by the way, some of the progress in this area since the last general election. The participation in educational training figures in England, for 16 to 18 year olds, were 79.5% in the last quarter of 2008. They are now up to 86%. The NEET percentage in England has come down from 10.3% in 2008, to 7.6%, which is the lowest figure that we have got for a quarter four measurement since we had this consistent series. We still have a long way to go to get to the types of levels the Government would like to see, but it is encouraging that there has been this progress over the period, since this UNICEF report was compiled.

Q82 Neil Carmichael: Are there any lessons we can learn from countries like the Netherlands, which clearly seem to be beacons of success in this area?

Mr Laws: One of the things that the Netherlands have had for many, many years is the pupil premium that we introduced in 2010. That has been helpful in bringing young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds up to high levels of attainment. The truth is that as soon as you start giving people a good quality education early on, and decent qualifications and hope, that begins to impact on all the other variables that we see here. One of the reasons why we have got such bad pregnancy figures for young people is that we appear to have lots of young people who leave school with very poor qualifications and without prospect of work. Those are the people who tend to have children at a very early age.

Q83 Chair: Do you have any data on that?

Mr Laws: Yes. Obviously we have the data that we have in Government, in terms of the levels of teenage pregnancy.

Chair: Could you write to us with that? I have not personally seen it for a while. I saw the data on girls who left school with no qualifications. The percentage of them who had had a child while teenagers was massively high.

Mr Laws: It is incredibly high. We have seen this two-tier system, whereby people who get good qualifications are tending to get married and have children or partner up much later in life, at the same time as the cohort of girls who are coming out with low qualifications are still having their children very, very early. One of the best things we can do to avoid teenage pregnancy in the numbers we have had in the UK is to make sure that girls have got a good quality of education, see a future for themselves and do not just leave school and think that the only future for them is as a parent.

Q84 Bill Esterson: The other advantage of the Netherlands is that they have very good sex education in schools.

Mr Laws: You obviously know more about the Netherlands' system of sex education than I do.

Bill Esterson: Perhaps that is something you could look into.

Mr Laws: That is absolutely something I could look into in more detail.

Q85 Mr Ward: The OECD has called for targets to be set for this area of child well-being. Is that something that would be of value, do you believe, to keep the focus on the important issue?

Mr Laws: There are certainly some parts of all of this that are amenable to having targets. We already have, obviously, the targets under the Child Poverty Act. We obviously have the accountability measures in education that are designed to drive improvements in some of those areas. We have particular strategies in areas such as teenage fertility, and there have been very big amounts of progress to report in there, recently—between 2008 and 2012, the under-18 conception rate in England has fallen by 40%, which is quite a staggering improvement in a short period of time.

Q86 Chair: Do you have any idea why?

Mr Laws: In part, there has been more of a focus on this in schools. There has been more work done, under the last Government and this Government, to highlight the risk of this to young people and give better education about sex and relationship matters. We know also that we have got young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have tended to do better over the last few years in terms of educational performance. To some extent, this does reflect the success of Government health strategies. It is one of the areas of notable success. There are other areas, such as the use of alcohol, where we have been less successful.

Some of the 26 areas in the UN report are amenable to targeting and so forth. Some of them, where they are less consistent over time, are less so; I am nervous about things like bullying, because I think the consistency of reporting over time could be an issue. You do not want to distort reporting behaviour by having some of those things in an accountability framework, so that people start to suddenly change their reporting behaviour.

Q87 Mr Ward: What about at school level? Do you believe that there could be room there for inclusion of well-being in school assessment?

Mr Laws: I am very reticent about going down that route. I think you can go down two routes in terms of school accountability. You can either say that lots and lots of things are important, and therefore you are going to have a myriad of accountability measures and you are going to endlessly add things to the Ofsted framework, or you can focus on the end outcomes that you really want and hold schools to account for those. I went to a school last week in Sutton that has been using some of its pupil premium money for emotional and social support. It had got specific staff members in to do that. I will be

very interested to see whether those things have a strong evidence base that shows that they work.

Intuitively, it sounds to me like a very sensible thing for schools to do, to make sure young people are ready to learn; it is very difficult for them to be ready to learn if they have got all sorts of emotional problems and problems in the home environment. If you can clear those away, they can go on to learn. The outcome of that that I want to see is higher levels of attainment, and a narrower gap between advantaged and disadvantaged. I am really worried about measuring too much. It will drive schools mad, and end up with the risk of a tick-box culture.

Q88 Chair: Do you have any reflections on Ian Bauckham's thoughts, nonetheless looking at the accountability measures—

Mr Laws: I am reticent to go down that route. Barely a day passes in the DfE where some organisation does not approach the Secretary of State or me or Ofsted directly, to ask, "Why do you not prompt Ofsted to report on this particular measure or that particular measure?" Eventually, the whole thing could be completely over-burdened. We should have a narrower measure of carefully selected accountability tools. Then, we should make sure that Ofsted's report can look at the whole gamut of things that matter in schools, but in a way that is not tick-box and in a way that gives weight to these areas but without ending up with an excessive number of targets that have to be measured, which I think would distort behaviour.

Q89 Chair: Destinations data is coming up. You have touched on it already. Can you give us a bit of an update on how that data is shaping up? Is it realistic in a free society, where you cannot tag everyone, to be able to get enough information to hold schools to account? Does it look like the data will be usable within a sufficiently short timeframe that, again, it can be useful for accountability of the school rather than just in a historic insight?

Mr Laws: It does look as if we are going to eventually be able to report destinations data. Firstly, it is a matter of making sure it properly quality-assured. As soon as you have things that are accountability measures for institutions, they are entitled to expect that they will be correct and accurate. In some areas, there could be data-sharing issues that come up between different educational institutions or different parts of Government. Data collection is a sensitive thing. This is one of the areas where it is arguably less sensitive, because people can see the clear policy rationale, but it still could require legislation in some areas. We need to look at that carefully.

Q90 Alex Cunningham: I have a question around ministerial responsibility. The media is today suggesting that the Secretary of State is bored of education and may move. Do you think a change of leadership would see a welcome refocus on children's issues such as health and well-being, and get them back up the agenda?

Mr Laws: I think you have been reading *The Daily Telegraph* too much. That is the only place I have seen any reference to speculation of that type. I do not see a Secretary of State who is at all bored with his portfolio. He is incredibly active. He has new ideas every single day. He is very passionate about the subject. I should think he will be around in the Department for quite a long time to come.

Q91 Alex Cunningham: That is a sterling defence of the Secretary of State. Maybe he could concentrate a little bit more on child well-being, care and things of that nature.

Mr Laws: I think that he does. One of his strengths, as a politician and a Minister, is that he is a very focused individual, who does recognise that to make progress in an area you have to have a clear sense of priorities. If your priorities are 184 things, then you are perhaps not going to deliver them all. If you look at the work that he has done, not only in the area of education, but if you look at the leadership that he has given over the last few years over issues of children in care and trying to improve the fostering system, he is doing a lot in that particular area and not just in schools. Of course, he leads a Department that is doing a lot in early-years education to raise quality and to extend the two-year-old offer. It is a bit of a caricature that he is only focused on the schools area; he is actually focused right across the range of his responsibilities.

Q92 Alex Cunningham: If he is listening in, Minister, I think he will be blushing quite deeply. I was interested that you were more or less implying, at the very start of your evidence today, that you are all Ministers for children and children's well-being and everything else, but you are just dealing with this particular facet. How many times do Ministers in the Department actually meet together to talk about wider issues of social care, children's well-being and how policy can change, to improve our position in some of these league tables?

Mr Laws: We have regular departmental meetings led by the Secretary of State to discuss all issues. Where there are specific issues that come up where Ministers want to make progress and there are issues that cut across a number of different portfolios, we will meet together in ad hoc groups to deal with those things. We do that quite frequently.

Q93 Alex Cunningham: Are you doing that to deal with the well-being issue?

Mr Laws: Not on well-being, because a lot of the issues in well-being tend to be focused around individual Ministers. But a good example of an area where we would be cooperating very closely would be the 16-to-19 area. There will be issues of funding, there will be issues of careers advice and guidance, and there will be qualification issues that will bring in Liz Truss and Matt Hancock's lead. Those are areas where there is a lot of overlap and where we will definitely be working closely together.

Q94 Alex Cunningham: And the loss of funding for some 18-year-olds in college.

Mr Laws: We have had to make some quite difficult decisions, because not all our budget is protected; as you know, the schools budget is, but the other areas are not all protected. We are lucky, compared with most Departments, that we have had a very good budget settlement during this time of austerity. We have had to make some painful decisions. That particular one has been a painful decision. We are still looking very closely at it, as I think the Secretary of State said to this Committee.

Q95 Chair: Can you give us an update on that? In particular, I thought colleges who had taken on students this year, on the basis of the previous funding arrangement, and are

paid in arrears—for them to lose that money, let alone the future money, was adding insult to injury. He did say he would look at it again.

Mr Laws: I cannot give you the outcome of that. I can tell you that some very serious work has been going on, to analyse the impact on individual institutions. The Secretary of State and Matt Hancock have been very closely involved. I have obviously been keeping in touch with it as well. I hope we will be able to report the outcome of that shortly, but I cannot pre-empt what that might be.

Q96 Alex Cunningham: You painted a glowing picture of Ministers within the Department working together. You also mentioned earlier in your evidence about cross-Government working. How is it working, across Government? Are people really engaged in the issues associated with children and young people?

Mr Laws: Yes, Ministers are. Ministers meet across Departments when there are issues that require co-operation. For example, I have met the Health Minister previously to talk about issues of vaccination and how schools can cooperate with that. We also have the Social Justice Committee, which Iain Duncan Smith chairs and which meets very frequently. A lot of the issues that that Committee discusses relate to this policy area. We are going to be meeting later on today and discussing issues to do with parenting and family support for children. A lot of that is directly relevant to this debate and the work of the DfE.

Q97 Alex Cunningham: Are other Ministers in other Departments as agitated as you and I are over our positioning in this UNICEF table?

Mr Laws: I cannot speak for other Ministers' views about this specific issue. I would imagine that Ministers and the Government would want to see us do a lot better than average, in this area. We are not right down at the bottom of the league table, but a lot of the countries that we are above are countries I would expect us to be above. I would not expect us to be below Italy, Greece, Hungary, Romania and countries like these. We are an advanced, serious, developed, liberal country. We ought to be challenging in the top part of these tables.

Chair: This may be an Italian diplomatic incident.

Mr Laws: It is an excellent country, but we as a Government have high aspirations.

Bill Esterson: You will not be going there soon.

Mr Laws: We want to be performing at the top end of things. I do not think that any of us in this room would be happy to just be bumbling along in the middle. We ought to be doing better in those areas.

Q98 Bill Esterson: Do you think it would be a good idea if we had Ministers from across the Department, and maybe from across a number of Departments, giving evidence on something as important as this, as you are not in a position to answer for them?

Mr Laws: I cannot answer for other Ministers. Obviously, you yourselves will know that Select Committees guard jealously, sometimes, their access to their Ministers.

Chair: Do they? That is not my experience.

Alex Cunningham: I have never felt particularly possessive.

Mr Laws: The Select Committees I was on always did, but maybe that was just the people on them. I cannot speak for other Ministers.

Q99 Chair: Bill's question is: would it have been better? It was our failure, not yours—we did not ask. Should we have had a Health Minister there, a Housing Minister there and a DWP Minister there?

Mr Laws: I think that is a matter for you. It is my job, coming to be held to account by you, to make sure that I am briefed on all of the areas that you are going to be interested in.

Q100 Bill Esterson: Looking at what Peter Grigg was saying, he was predicting a dramatic rise in the level of child poverty by 2020. He and others talked about the link between well-being and economic prosperity. Do you accept that link?

Mr Laws: Yes. Crudely speaking, there is likely to be a link in countries between good economic circumstances and well-being. It is not a one-to-one link, by any means. You can often find societies that are poorer, in absolute terms, that have better well-being indicators, and vice versa. Sometimes, children's happiness and contentment is not simply related to the position of their country in league tables. I would like to see child well-being improve. I would also like to see child poverty, measured in all the ways that it is measured, reduced at the same time.

Q101 Bill Esterson: In your earlier answer, you mentioned that the report we are looking at measured the last Government's performance. Do you think things will have improved or not?

Mr Laws: On child poverty?

Bill Esterson: Yes. The next time UNICEF produces a report, will it show an improvement in our position in the league tables or not?

Mr Laws: I am not sure. It depends not only on our assessment of what is happening in our country, which we have a reasonably good idea of—although obviously the data is always a year or two out of date—but it also depends a lot on what is happening in the other countries, because it is a relative thing.

All countries that we are comparing ourselves with have been very challenged over the last few years by the global recession. They will have had different policy responses. My guess is that in some areas, they will have taken even more draconian action than we have to deal with our public finances. In some of those countries, you will see child poverty go up quite a lot. As you know, relative poverty has actually come down in this country, so far, since 2009-10, although that is using the 2011-12 data. That is because median incomes have fallen over the period of the recession, since about 2008. But that has moved people over the poverty line, because some of the poor people have not got poorer at the same speed as other income groups.

Q102 Bill Esterson: UNICEF describes the profound negative effects of the cuts in spending in local government and in welfare. Given the long-term effects on children's well-being, do you think it was a mistake to cut as far as the Government did?

Mr Laws: We have tried to protect a lot of the education and children's areas. We certainly have in terms of the school budget. We have also at times taken difficult decisions designed to help some of the poorest children. At times in this Parliament, we have over-indexed child tax credit. When inflation rose to its absolute peak a couple of years ago and was putting a huge squeeze on household budgets, we took the deliberate decision as a Government to index benefits at 5.2%, which was the rate of inflation in that year. There was a much bigger increase for some people on benefits than there was for people in employment, because of the very high level of inflation.

We have taken a number of quite tough decisions. For the very upper-income groups, we have also made a disproportionate cut in their incomes due to policy interventions. We have sought to protect some of these lower-income groups and that is why, so far, the more pessimistic predictions that have been made for the child poverty figures have not actually been borne out.

Q103 Bill Esterson: Children's services have taken a much bigger cut than schools. Looking at the findings from the report, it suggests that only in one country is the lowest third, in terms of age group, getting a higher share of spending. That is Hungary.

Mr Laws: Which report are you looking at?

Q104 Bill Esterson: The OECD report. I am just checking the data. Hungary is the only country to spend the highest share in early childhood. Five countries in the OECD spent most in middle childhood and 22 spent most in late childhood. That is despite evidence that money is best invested in early years. Yet your Government's cuts did hit children's services, although as you say, you protected education. Should that be a big concern for us?

Mr Laws: It is certainly something that we need to keep very closely under review, to make sure that it is not doing damage. We believe that in all areas of public services it is possible to make some efficiency savings without impacting outcomes in a damaging way, particularly given the fact that there was a very, very big increase in public expenditure between 2001 and 2009-10. There are a lot of areas where we have been able to drive efficiencies out of the system without damaging frontline services.

Q105 Chair: Sorry, Minister, the question was about—whatever the budget is, in a way—where you spend it. Do you spend it in the early years? We would like to hear from you where you are spending it. My impression was that this Government had moved investment earlier and, if anything, reduced it later, as we have seen with the 16-to-19 in various ways. Actually, the two-year-old offer and early years spending, I would have thought, was higher.

Mr Laws: We have certainly done very well in early-years spending. As you know, the participation rates for three and four-year-olds are now 96%, which is incredibly high internationally. As you said, Chairman, we have got the two-year offer for the most disadvantaged 40% coming in.

Our two, three and four-year-old funding combined will go up from about £2.1 billion in 2011-12 to £2.855 billion in 2013-14. We have tried to give a lot of priority to this area. We take very seriously the case that early intervention is important. That is why in the pupil premium in the coming year, we have also decided to put all of the increase into primary education, rather than secondary. We are trying to shift resources into the early years to improve life chances.

Chair: Could you write to us, further to Bill's question, letting us know what you have done about this proportion issue? Also, if you have got intent for the future, could you let us know, to find out whether it fits with this?

Mr Laws: Yes.

Bill Esterson: The Chairman has looked after you very well there, Minister, I think.

Chair: You can ask further questions, Bill.

Q106 Bill Esterson: He is right. The point is: is Government policy going to continue to shift towards more investment in early years? Do you think the evidence suggests that that is what you should be doing?

Mr Laws: I think it will do. We also need to continue to develop the evidence base about what works in the early years, which I think is weaker in some respects than in schools. We need to make sure that we are not just putting money into the early years, but improving quality. We know that our early-years workforce, in terms of qualifications and pay, is at a much lower level than many of our competitor countries. We need to make sure that our two, three and four-year-old investment is not just investment in childcare, but is an investment in high quality education that is really going to make a difference.

Q107 Bill Esterson: As you know, we are coming to the end of our inquiry into underachievement among white working-class children. Do you think that there is a need for investment beyond the areas we have just been talking about, if we are to fundamentally shift the gap that we have seen in evidence—no doubt you will have looked at it as well—in that particular group?

Mr Laws: Do you mean just in the early-years group, or for the white working-class?

Bill Esterson: Yes, for the white working-class.

Mr Laws: My view is that we need to do an awful lot more to intervene early, to raise the quality of education and the focus on disadvantaged youngsters. As your report indicates, there is also a big issue about aspirations amongst white working-class groups. Raising those, making sure that there is the support and the parental environment and that there is high aspiration amongst schools and young people themselves is extremely important.

Q108 Craig Whittaker: Can I ask you about your plans for monitoring for data collection, specifically for early years? I wondered whether you had had a look at the models used in Australia or Canada, to see whether they can be implemented in England to make things better.

Mr Laws: I must confess that I have not looked at those myself. It may well be that my colleague Liz Truss has, and I know that you are planning to see her again at some stage. I

am happy either to write to you in more detail about that, or for you to pick it up with Liz, as you like.

Q109 Craig Whittaker: Super. Can I ask you then about the UNCRC? Why has the Government so far not followed Scotland and Wales and the recommendation of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children in introducing a legal duty on public authorities to have regard to the UNCRC when making policy decisions?

Mr Laws: We think there is a lot of good stuff in the UNCRC.

Chair: Shall we spell it out, as we are broadcasting? The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is worth saying, I think.

Mr Laws: We just do not think it is necessary as a Government to shift all of these things into the legal duties. We think that we can achieve the outcomes without decanting, essentially, a lot of international guidelines and best practice into UK law.

Q110 Mr Ward: Someone once said that if you treat people who are unequal equally, then you reinforce inequality. I have a couple of questions on closing the gap, first of all in terms of well-being and then in terms of child poverty. We have the pupil premium as an example, but are there other examples where we could target resources more effectively to enable us to close the gap in terms of child well-being, possibly at the expense of universal provision of other services?

Mr Laws: We could certainly look at whether or not we target more in the early years. We could look at whether or not we should be targeting towards deprivation. We have obviously done that in the two-year offer, because we have only rolled it out to the most disadvantaged 40%. We could look at whether we target disadvantaged funding more towards the three and four-year-old group, as well. We could also target more on an age basis, as we are in the pupil premium, shunting it towards young people in primary schools rather than in secondary schools.

Q111 Mr Ward: When times are very, very difficult and resources are limited, are there any universally provided services that could form the basis of a source of reallocation?

Mr Laws: Are you thinking particularly in relation to education services?

Mr Ward: I am thinking of things like pre-natal services and universal provision.

Mr Laws: From a DfE perspective, my view would tend to be that we have looked at a lot of those decisions in our budget judgments every single year. We still have to make savings across the Department for the non-protected areas. A lot of the savings that we see in those areas we have probably already made. None immediately spring to mind.

By targeting the pupil premium as we have, and laying it on top of existing deprivation funding, we have made sure that many areas that were already well-provided with deprivation funding are now extremely well-provided. That means that there are schools that do not have a lot of children on the existing deprivation measures which also feel that they need a basic, core budget to do their job of educating young people well. It is not

easy to educate young people, even if they are not in the disadvantaged categories, and that is why we have this whole debate over a fairer funding system for our schools.

Q112 Chair: Where is it? It was imminent before Christmas. The last time I checked, it is nearly the middle of March.

Mr Laws: It is very imminent.

Chair: We need to extend our vocabulary.

Alex Cunningham: It is imminently imminent.

Mr Laws: I hope that we will be able to report on it to you soon, Chair. As soon as I have a date for it, I will let you know.

Chair: Can you give us any guide?

Mr Laws: I cannot.

Chair: Can you tell us when it will definitely be out by?

Mr Laws: I certainly hope that it will be out this month, Chairman. These things depend on people higher up the pecking order than me. I will let you know, as Chairman of the Committee.

Chair: That does not always end well, no matter how much is being spent.

Q113 Mr Ward: On the question of child poverty and the elimination thereof, are you in favour of setting a target for the elimination of child poverty?

Mr Laws: Yes, I am. Targets have to be sensible and credible. The existing targets for 2020 do not target, as you know, zero for child poverty, which no country has achieved. They target around 10% on some of the key measures. We have had, in the past couple of decades, unacceptably high levels of child poverty in this country. We should still be aiming to do a lot better and the Government remains committed to the measures in the Child Poverty Act 2010.

Q114 Mr Ward: Of course, one way of increasing or decreasing child poverty is by changing the definition. The BBC said, “David Laws accused the Conservatives of ‘vetoing’ improvements” in the definition of child poverty. Were you correctly quoted?

Mr Laws: I was very disappointed that we did not reach a cross-Government agreement on this, since you mention it. We worked as child poverty Ministers very hard, for a long period. We did a lot of work looking at existing measures of child poverty, about new measures that would focus particularly on tackling the root causes of it. It would have been very positive if we could have come, as a coalition, to an agreement that both parties could have bought into. That was not possible, as has been announced recently. The different parties will now have to take forward this agenda in their election manifestos and make decisions in the next Parliament.

Q115 Siobhain McDonagh: Do you agree that there is a need to increase the quality of school-based personal, sexual and health education, and sex and relationship education to address health issues? Will the effectiveness of the new sex and relationship education guidance be measured by its impact on teenage pregnancy rates and other well-being indicators?

Mr Laws: Yes, I think we do need to improve the quality of both. It is reassuring to be able to record, as I did earlier, that the teenage pregnancy rates have come down quite significantly over the last few years. One of the useful things about the UNICEF report is that although some of these international comparisons have to be approached with care, they do enable us to look at ourselves in relation to other countries to understand whether our performance looks good or bad internationally. When we look at the international performance in relation to teenage pregnancy, it is still pretty rotten, in spite of the performance improvements that we have seen in recent years. It is rotten because we started off at such poor levels 10 or 20 years ago. There is still a long way to go in this area.

Q116 Siobhain McDonagh: What steps are you taking to improve parenting skills among young people, perhaps through schools?

Mr Laws: We have got a Government pilot in this area to look at parenting initiatives and how we can encourage good parenting. We also put money into the Education Endowment Foundation, to research what works in terms of effective educational interventions and to make sure that they are based on proper evidence and comparisons rather than just on political views or impressions. The EEF is very keen to look at this area of parental interventions and what works. It is commissioning a number of reports in this area and I hope that that will be able to help inform us about how important good parenting is and also the interventions that might be effective in making a difference.

Q117 Siobhain McDonagh: Have you evaluated proposals for the introduction of a national programme of school-based counselling for all secondary schools?

Mr Laws: I would have to refer back to my colleague Ed Timpson on that, if you will excuse me for doing so. I will perhaps write to the Committee.

Q118 Siobhain McDonagh: This next question might also be the same. What part do courses in mindfulness play in raising child well-being? Does the DfE plan to promote such courses?

Mr Laws: We are very interested in promoting this. We certainly think that it is an area that merits consideration, based on the evidence we have seen to date. My colleague Liz Truss has been looking at this recently.

Chair: For the purposes of broadcast, can you tell us what mindfulness is, as far as the Government is concerned?

Siobhain McDonagh: I have just finished the parliamentary course in mindfulness.

Mr Laws: Oh, good. You can probably tell us even better than me.

Chair: I do not encourage members of my Committee to give evidence to the Committee. It is tempting, though. So, Minister, my colleague will pick you up if you get it wrong.

Siobhain McDonagh: That would not be mindful or done with kindness, so I will not be picking you up. It is perfectly okay.

Chair: You can tell I have not been on the course.

Mr Laws: It is about trying to impact on people's motivations, their attitudes to life and trying to get at some of the things that we do not always get at through our crude technical interventions. It is an area we should take seriously, while making sure that there is proper evidence-based scrutiny of it.

Q119 Chair: Mindful of yesterday's news, could you tell—

Siobhain McDonagh: With mindfulness, you have to live in the present.

Chair: I have so much to learn. Mindful as I am of the plan for free school meals and the way that was brought in, could you say something about how universal free school meals was a good way of spending £1 billion when we have such a stubborn gap between outcomes of the poorest children and those better off?

Mr Laws: I am really passionate about this policy. I think it does a lot of incredibly good things. It was seen in the pilots to improve attainment, but interestingly only to improve attainment where it was a universal offer, not just when it was targeted at a wider cohort than are presently targeted by free school meals. There are many schools themselves who report that when you give young people decent food, not only at lunchtime but at breakfast, it helps improve their concentration. Sadly, it is the case that we live in a society where a lot of young people do not get the food that they need before they come to school.

Q120 Chair: Minister, that is exactly the point. If you have £1 billion to spend, and you have so many children who we hear cannot concentrate in school because they have not had breakfast in the morning, surely what we should have done was make sure we rolled out more breakfast clubs and better reach-out to those most in need, rather than giving—it is a cliché and I apologise for using it—free lunches to the children of millionaires.

Mr Laws: We give free education to the children of millionaires, and we are not giving free meals to millionaires who send their children to private school, so there is an element of targeting for that already. We have seen better attainment. We have seen children more ready to learn in schools. We have seen healthier eating outcomes, with more children eating vegetables. We have seen better socialisation outcomes. It is incredible that so many young people do not sit down properly to eat meals in a disciplined way. It has improved the culture in schools. It is going to help parents at a time when household budgets are squeezed.

I am very, very positive about this. I think it is something that is welcomed by the vast majority of schools and parents. We have had strong backing in the Government for it, including from the Secretary of State and from the Treasury. I think it is going to be a success. Of course, when you try to deliver big things, there are going to be

implementation issues and there are going to be people who see the challenges. Once this is actually delivered, as it will be in September, I think it will be a success.

Q121 Chair: There are worse things you can do than give free school meals to children for the first three years of primary school. It is not a negative policy, per se. My question was specifically about the use of £1 billion at this time, given the challenges we face and the fact that we have two main aims of Government policy: raise standards for all, and close the gap and create fair outcomes.

My question specifically was: did you evaluate? Certainly from the way it has been reported, it looked like there was an announcement for a party conference as part of a high-level political trade, far away from the granular detail of education policy, and the money was spent in that area because, as you say, it will be popular and it has some positive stuff. Was it the best way of using £1 billion? Would you have chosen to do that ahead of making sure that every poor child gets a meal in the morning?

Mr Laws: Yes, I believe it is a good way of using that money. Let me make two points very briefly. First, this was not something that we dreamed up overnight. This was something that came out of the pilots that were begun in 2009. It came out of the School Food Plan, which was a serious process that took a long period of time to put together.

Q122 Chair: It did not recommend this particular solution, did it?

Mr Laws: Yes, it did.

Chair: It said it should be phased. If you look at the plan, it says it should be phased in its introduction, with the flexibility that is missing from this plan.

Mr Laws: It said that it should be rolled out to all primary school pupils.

Q123 Chair: “Rolled out” being the operative words. It does not say it should be introduced in September.

Mr Laws: That was because the School Food Plan authors—who are incredibly supportive of this policy that we are delivering, believe it is the right thing to do and believe that it is deliverable—did not necessarily think that they would be able to secure all of this money. We have secured it. I do not want to open up any coalition tensions.

Chair: God forbid!

Mr Laws: Let us look at the other thing that was championed by our coalition partners, your party, as part of the same Autumn Statement in which this was announced. It was the married couple’s allowance. Again, I do not want to raise prickly issues, but I am not aware of the cost-benefit analysis on that that has been done that ranks it higher than the free school meals policy. I would put our free school meals policy, and the benefits that that is going to have, against the benefits of the married couple’s allowance any day. If we are going to apply evidence-based policy-making, that is fine, but we should apply it to everything that the Government does.

Q124 Chair: I hope that whoever is responsible for the Committee for that would analyse that on its merits, and ask exactly the same questions with exactly the same force of Ministers in front of them. I still have not had an answer to my question. Was there any assessment made as to whether this was the best use of the money, to fulfil the goals that Government rightly has set for education?

Mr Laws: Yes, because we do lots of good and brilliant things in the Department for Education, such as the pupil premium and the two-year-old offer. It is not as if we are ignoring attainment.

Q125 Chair: I am not saying you are ignoring it; I am asking whether this specific intervention did in fact come out comparatively at the top of any kind of objective assessment, and whether any such assessment was made.

Mr Laws: Yes, Ministers are assessing all the time what their priorities should be, and how they can deliver them across a broad range of areas. We assessed this very carefully. I was very supportive of it, as well as the Deputy Prime Minister, and so was the Secretary of State, who is very passionate about this. Recently, we have both written a joint letter to every school in the country that will be affected, promoting the policy and making clear that both coalition parties are committed to it.

Q126 Craig Whittaker: I want to push this a little bit further. You have £1 billion to spend on one thing that is going to increase and give best value for that £1 billion. Is this policy the right policy to make?

Mr Laws: It is, because we are doing the other things that are really important, too. If you asked me at the beginning of the Parliament whether I would rather have £1 billion for this or whether I would first rather deliver the pupil premium, I would put the pupil premium first. But, we have now delivered the full £2.5 billion for the pupil premium, so we can do other, very positive things. This is another very positive thing.

Q127 Chair: We have dealt with the high politics. I have one thing on the practicalities, about schools that are struggling and have already got 11.30 phased lunch sittings. Are you able to give some flexibility? It is not going to do any harm, although we can argue about whether it is the best use of £1 billion. Making sure the money is used in the most sensible way in this context is something that we are very concerned about as a Committee.

Mr Laws: The authors of the School Food Plan and the other advisers who we have are convinced that this can be delivered by September 2014. We have set up, and we announced last week, not only some additional funding for smaller schools with their initial cost, but also a high quality advisory service, which will not only be able to give schools practical advice over the telephone, but which also has the capability of going out to literally thousands of schools across the country over the months ahead to give them practical advice and to explain how other schools in the same circumstances have been able to address this issue and deliver it.

We know from the pilots that schools are very effective in delivering solutions in an imaginative way. Some of the pilot areas, such as Durham, had an even shorter period of time than the one that we have got. We have got one year—Durham had about 12 weeks

to do this. They still did it successfully. If colleagues, MPs or schools have questions about this, they should know that this advisory service is up and running. This is not just about something they can read on a website. This is real, practical advice for all the schools that need it.

Q128 Chair: I have a question about phasing of payment. I heard from some schools that they were making savings because they were worried about when the funding was going to come to meet the costs of this. Could you say something about that?

Mr Laws: The capital funding has already been rolled out. The revenue funding will be made available to schools before they have to incur this cost. I can send you a final note on the mechanics of doing that.

Q129 Chair: So no school needs to be making any savings in anticipation of additional costs. They are going to be fully funded in time, guaranteed.

Mr Laws: No. We are going to pay them money with a very high assumed rate of uptake across the whole system. If schools have additional uptake beyond the assumption, we will also make sure that we fund them for that. They will get a very large amount of upfront funding on the basis of an ambitious estimate of what the take-up is likely to be, looking at the areas of the country where there are already universal, free school meals and where the take-up is high.

Q130 Chair: Shall we draw it to a close there? Thank you, Minister.

Mr Laws: Thank you.