

Work and Pensions Committee and Education Committee

Oral evidence: School holiday poverty, HC 2459

Wednesday 4 September 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 September 2019.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Frank Field (Chair); Rosie Duffield; Ruth George; Emma Hardy; Steve McCabe; Ian Mearns; Nigel Mills; Chris Stephens.

Questions 118 - 203

Witnesses

I: Stephanie Ellis, Manager, Welcome Network, Jan Lefley, Community Manager, Romsey Community School, Dr Caroline Wolhuter, Head of Innovation and Impact, Accord Group, and Ian Stevenson, Service Manager, Neighbourhood Management, Gateshead Council.

II: Lord Agnew, Minister for the School System, Department for Education, Sarah Lewis, Director, System Leadership and Strategy (Early Years and Schools), Department for Education, Will Quince MP, Minister for Welfare Delivery, Department for Work and Pensions, and Donna Ward, Policy Director, Department for Work and Pensions.

Note: There was a short informal discussion before the formal evidence session started. You can see a record of the informal discussion [[here – link](#)].

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stephanie Ellis, Jan Lefley, Dr Caroline Wolhuter, and Ian Stevenson.

Q118 **Emma Hardy:** To follow up, were there any restrictions on how you could spend the money that the DfE provided and how much money did the DfE provide you with?

Jan Lefley: £765,000, and, no, there were no restrictions.

Ian Stevenson: £204,000. There was not a restriction but obviously the programme was focused on children on free school meals. That was something that we were very focused on in terms of targeting, but our programmes were open to all. We were very clear that what we did not want to do was to stigmatise those children and families. That was the only stipulation, shall we say, rather than restriction.

Q119 **Emma Hardy:** How did that work in terms of ensuring you were meeting the requirements for children on free school meals?

Ian Stevenson: All of the sessions were open but what we did behind the scenes was we worked very closely with the delivery partners, but also schools before they broke up for the summer, to engage and encourage those children and families to book on to the programmes that we were offering. Some of the paid sessions that we did at things like the leisure centres as well, if we had 20 spaces, say, we kept 10 for those families that we were trying hardest to get into the programme.

Dr Wolhuter: Time was a restriction, having to focus on the summer holidays and not carrying over to other holidays. We were required to meet quality standards. They were around four days a week, four hours a day, delivering a minimum of an hour of physical activity, food to school food standards, enrichment activity, and then the requirements around safeguarding, insurance, and so on.

We also had to ensure that the provision was free at the point of access. That was positive in some ways but very restrictive and it meant that a lot of providers would not work with us because they either through experience have said they want to charge nominal amounts of money or they cannot financially viably do free provision, and the divisions that creates. We have tried to look at some of the bursary-type schemes. It was not fantastically easy to do that. That was a big challenge when trying to scale up to provide in-reach services to 50,000 children. Birmingham has just under 50,000 children on free school meals and the requirement to make sure that there was an in-reach service to all those children, with those restrictions, it sometimes did pose a challenge around being able to make that reach.



Q120 **Emma Hardy:** What would have made it easier in terms of restrictions or changing things?

Dr Wolhuter: Time, and in some cases being able to provide more money. We initially had £5.85 per day that we could provide providers. We then did an uplift to £7.50 a day but that was not enough. If you are looking at people who have a lot of experience in childcare provision and youth provision, that is a very weakened sector. We have organisations closing every week in Birmingham because of the difficulties financially to get that to stack up. I think that there is a piece of work around that relationship and trying to get maybe more resource into those types of organisation for it to be not just one summer.

Q121 **Chair:** I am going to ask you at the end what you would recommend we ask Ministers for, so can we keep those thoughts to the end? There is notice; that is a different question to what you might have been told about. Is that all right? Very good.

Stephanie Ellis: Yes, echoing people's comments about time and also particularly the time needed and possibly the funding needed to cater for children with additional needs. We had one school particularly interested in getting involved but it did not have the time to line up the specialist support needed to cater for those children. I think that it is also realising that if children are needing additional support in school, they probably need additional support in the holiday clubs as well. I do not know that that necessarily was taken into account. That was maybe learning as we go and is something that is very much needed for those children and, of course, will holistically be supporting them as they go back into school as well if they have had those enrichment activities throughout the summer. It can be a particular strain on families as well during that time.

That would be something that would be welcome going forward, very much specifically looking at some of the additional needs that cannot be catered for in other settings, recognising that families need a break and potentially looking at how that could be joined up with some of those services that are already provided for those children through other funding pots. How could we maybe link some of that together to get better value for money of those resources?

Q122 **Ian Mearns:** I am really struck by a lot of the answers you have already given, given the numbers of children, but the school holidays in the summer are six weeks, 30 school days, yet the programmes that you have talked about are eight, 10, 12 days or so. You are dealing with hundreds of children per day, but how much more would need to be done if we were going to get everybody involved that needs to be involved?

One of the statistics that I saw over the summer in my own locality—and I am from Gateshead where Ian is from—was that the Gateshead foodbank, which I support on a regular basis, was suggesting that it had taken in 4,500 tonnes of donations in the August month but given out 7,500 tonnes, which was much more than it would regularly give out,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because of that very thing, the extra demand, particularly from families, during the long summer break. How much more needs to be done from that perspective?

Jan Lefley: From our point of view, we work quite closely with the foodbanks and Foodshare and offered our families extra support. If we had had the time we could have got more families in for longer, but the first week was very quiet. We struggled with schools. One head teacher said to me, "No, this isn't for my families". I was absolutely furious. I did not have time to speak individually to every head teacher. There are 700 head teachers in my area. I wanted more time to sit down and explain to head teachers, to stand in playgrounds and talk to families and see what they wanted.

What we did do, and I will leave for evidence for you, is we asked families to fill out postcards and say what a difference this made and what they thought of it. We photographed 600 of the 1,600 postcards we had back with families' comments so you can see what the families have said. It is on this roll of wallpaper.

Q123 **Steve McCabe:** I was thinking about the comments you were making about time in various ways. How much notice do you get that you have secured the funding? It strikes me that must have an impact on how much time you have to plan and speak to all these people, organise it, and cater for the kids with extra needs. How much notice do you get that you have this funding and the project you have in mind is secure for the summer?

Jan Lefley: We had three months.

Stephanie Ellis: Similar.

Ian Stevenson: Yes, but a bit less because there was a purdah so we were not able to publicise some of the programme of activities as well. We were notified in March from colleagues in the DfE that we were successful. Then there was a period where we could not start to publicise what we were doing and that limited some of the planning time. It was a bit of a challenge.

Dr Wolhuter: Yes, I think Theresa May tweeted on 8 May and at that point we could go public that we had the funding and could then start engagement work with a broad range of stakeholders.

Q124 **Steve McCabe:** Presumably, ideally, you could do with knowing the minute summer ends so that you are planning for the subsequent year and building on what you have learned?

Stephanie Ellis: Yes, ideally, and multiple years of funding if at all possible.

Steve McCabe: We used to be in favour of three-year funding cycles.

Q125 **Ian Mearns:** The Government say they need to do more evaluation to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

find out what works in terms of support for children over the holidays. You have already mentioned a number of things that have been done and you will have a good idea of what works. What would you say that you have been able to do that really did work?

Stephanie Ellis: For us I think there is not one set model that works. I would say that. We very much learn at a local level so any research that was to be commissioned going forward needs to be done locally with local people and that local infrastructure and listening to local families as to what they would want and what they would access. Not just local at a borough level, but local absolutely in the heart of the communities. I think that is where it has worked very well where there has been some existing local community infrastructure that we could tap into, there are existing people there, and with some support and some bringing together of resources they have been able to fly at that short notice and work with local people.

Q126 **Ian Mearns:** In securing the funding, did the DfE ask you to do an evaluation process so that you would feed back to it what works?

Stephanie Ellis: Absolutely, yes. There were some processes that have come directly from the Department for Education, but we were able to partner with our local university, the University of Chester, because we felt we wanted to do something that was in depth and was taking into account some of the other things that were going on apart from just this funding.

That is something that needs to be taken into consideration moving forward, that this is not the only initiative that could be helping people who are struggling in the holidays. That is a point about saying what is really needed going forward is this joining up of other initiatives as well, and particularly investment in local communities and infrastructure and investment in mental health service support for families as well. That is a huge issue that we are seeing and often affects some of the barriers for people moving forward in their lives.

Jan Lefley: We found that a lot of the families we were working with could not read or had limited literacy skills, so the paperwork that was associated with the evaluation from the evaluation partner was difficult for most of them. The children's one was amazing and had to have an adult sit down with the children to do it.

We commissioned our own in that we had young people involved in going around and taking photographs and taking films. We have a montage of photographs that families put together. We had clouds in classrooms and halls and sticky notes so that people would write what they wanted. We gave everybody a postcard and there was a competition at the end of the postcard when you fill your postcard in. They wrote exactly what they thought and what they felt on those postcards. We have excluded all their names and addresses.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We used lots of ways of evaluating and we spoke to people. The best days that we had were when the DfE came down and spoke to people and when Ecorys came down and were mobbed by the parents who wanted to tell them what it meant to them. They cannot always put that down in a tick-box or on a piece of paper.

Ian Stevenson: Very similar. We have partnered with Northumbria University to do some local evaluation to complement the stuff that Ecorys is doing. There is loads of research out there that has proved the concept, in my view. The four/four/four works I think in Gateshead. While we said we wanted groups to work towards that, we knew that some of our community groups did not have the capacity to deliver four hours a day for four days per week for four weeks of a summer. What we said is let's make it work across the borough, so it complemented. We had some sessions starting at 9.00 am, some sessions starting at 10.00 am, some sessions starting at 11.00 am and almost going straight into a lunch and then an activity after lunch. That helps mums and dads as well because mums and dads have different work patterns, so it fitted the family need.

I think that some of our important anecdotal evidence will start to come out this week from schools, with teachers coming back to us that children go back to school happier, healthier, where they are more prepared to learn than perhaps they were previously. We are planning a big session with all of our delivery partners as well where we are going to get everybody together and work out what did work in Gateshead and what did not. We have done this for about four or five years on a far smaller scale and we know that we need to continue it wherever this conversation or Government policy gets to. We know that there is a need to continue this, that the need is very much there within the borough.

Dr Wolhuter: The quality standards, the four by four by four model, is difficult but the other requirements we know happened were the nutrition education, the physical activity, the enrichment, those standards that the DfE has put out as part of the tender. Where that has been delivered that works well. Children engage well, they get a lot of benefit and a lot of positive outcomes, multiple outcomes, around that.

We know that the application of that in somewhere like Birmingham, age-specific provision, especially for young people in high school, is important. Looking at last year's management data as well as, I am suspecting, a lot of the management data that will come through from this year, primary school children, whether with their families or not, are engaging well and provision is best geared towards that. Older kids are needing to access services but are not accessing as effectively. There is a piece of work around youth provision. Where the youth services did provide, it worked amazingly.

Under-fives need support. We have Early Years Pupil Premium. Holidays are a big issue for those children and families and linking in with that area. Specialist SEN provision works well where it is available. It is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

difficult. We have already covered that. Safety: we know that this is creating a safe space for children and young people. We had a range of complex safety issues in a city that has soaring knife crime. We had feedback that this has saved lives.

Q127 Ian Mearns: Does enough evidence exist to convince policymakers that this works and is needed?

Ian Stevenson: Yes.

Stephanie Ellis: Yes, I think so.

Q128 Nigel Mills: I think that it was Feeding Britain's report that said that while holiday clubs had, "achieved a huge amount on limited budgets and resources", it was now time, "for robust national structures which would ensure consistent co-ordination". You appear to be stating the opposite of that, that you do not want robust national structures where the same provision happens everywhere. Is that what you would all think, that we should leave it to every locality to do what works for them?

Dr Wolhuter: I think that there is a piece of work around cross-sector working that needs to happen at a central level, that guidance and understanding of how this kind of work impacts and benefits health, community safety, education, families, drugs, employability, all of that. There needs to be some guidance. There needs to be some national pressure put on to schools to be engaged in promoting opportunities around this, looking at revising their insurance policies, opening up and hosting and supporting in a better way. These are things that are quite difficult to do at a local level, so there is a role, I believe, at that higher-tier co-ordination, but locally people need the flexibility to respond to their community and for communities to respond to their own needs in ways that are best suited and locally grounded.

Q129 Nigel Mills: Stephanie, you were the one who was desperate for it to be a local provision.

Stephanie Ellis: Yes, absolutely, but at the same time I do completely agree it needs that co-ordination. We had a community safety programme as well. There are so many issues that are intrinsically linked to each other and I think it does need that co-ordination at a national level.

The other thing that needs to be considered in all of this is we are talking about food and looking at some of the food production and availability of healthy and affordable food on housing estates. So many housing estates have just one very expensive, small convenience store. Often the cheapest food is not the healthiest. Some of that needs to be considered as part of this as well. That is what I think the national focus on this can bring.

Q130 Nigel Mills: There is a real danger, isn't there, that the more that Government get involved and the more funding there is, the more



HOUSE OF COMMONS

requirements get added? They will say they want certain topics covered for so many hours and they want certain people to be targeted. Is that something you would welcome, where you can say, "No, don't do that, that will make this so hard it will start to get less successful"?

Jan Lefley: I think that the targeting makes it difficult. We had head teachers who will not target, so it went out blanket or not at all. We tried to put our venues in places where we knew those families were so that it was near and safe. Talking to schools, schools could not do this. I am from a school and Sue is from a school, but we have been working in community development for years. Schools do not have the infrastructure to do it. Councils nowadays do not always have the infrastructure to do it, so it does need to be a partnership approach and that means you have to have that local knowledge at local level.

Q131 **Nigel Mills:** Your programme was very different to what I would have seen as a school holiday club, where you have kids in so the parents can go to work if they are working and not have to pay expensive childcare. You were doing something much different to that, weren't you?

Jan Lefley: We wanted to support parents to make choices.

Nigel Mills: You wanted parents to come along.

Jan Lefley: Yes, they had no choice.

Nigel Mills: This was not free childcare, was it?

Jan Lefley: No, it was not free childcare. What we have done with those parents is we have not now just dropped those parents. People have moved on to community education, they have signed up for other programmes, they are being supported. People who have come in with issues are being supported by outside organisations. We tried to work to support them to make life different the next time. Teaching people to cook and to shop cheaply and to use that cheap food to produce good meals has made a real difference to some of these people. A head teacher yesterday said to me, "I have parents saying they are cooking for their children, they are not just buying stuff from the supermarket".

Q132 **Chair:** Is it right to say that if there were poor, hungry children whose parents were at work, they were excluded from your programme?

Jan Lefley: No, they were not. We had walk-ins. We called them walk-ins. They were kids who just turned up. They were not turned away.

Q133 **Chair:** So it was not exclusively for parents?

Jan Lefley: It was not, but as part of the advertising they were told they needed to come with them. We did have walk-ins who came into the project and the staff within the project supported those young people.

Q134 **Chair:** We found in Birkenhead—I think I am right in saying, because the data is being written up—that there were certain days of the week where, because of this provision, parents could start work for the first time, not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for the whole week. Those were the days when their children would be alone. They would not want them to be alone, but because they could go to the projects they could start an activity called work.

Jan Lefley: We had a two-pronged approach. We also ran some free childcare. People who wanted to work could put their children into free childcare but people who were not working would come to the family fun days.

Ian Stevenson: I think it needs to complement the free childcare that is available. In answer to the question, local does work best. We know our community organisations, we know the local structures, we know the networks that are available. Those networks know the families that we need to help. What we need to do is to give them the capacity to be able to do that. It is a big, big ask for a community organisation to run a programme such as this, especially one that perhaps does not have very many, if any, paid members of staff. What a number of our volunteers are reporting back now is that while they have had a great summer and they are really proud of what they have done, they have struggled to maintain the momentum where they are volunteering. Somehow what we need to do is to build that capacity and that sustainability not just for the summer but across the whole year. Then you can start to link in some of the other programmes and things like that.

Where for Gateshead the policy side needs to link up perhaps is the other things that are available through DfE now. Where do free school breakfast clubs fit and can we extend them to link into these sorts of programmes and things like that? For me, keeping it local would work best. There is no doubt in my mind.

Dr Wolhuter: I think that there is a piece of work around how this type of work relates to the wider childcare sector, because there is not enough affordable childcare. Children are staying at home on their own, whether their parents are in work or not in some cases. People working on shifts need to sleep during the day. We had a lot of single parents saying, "This was a godsend because I could go home and sleep instead of trying to look after my children at the same time and struggle into work or miss work". A lot of people give up work to support their children in school holidays as well.

Local is important. We had programmes that started at 6.00 pm, programmes that started at 9.00 am. Some had parents come along, some did not, some took siblings, some did not. Those programmes worked best but there is not enough community infrastructure in the city that I live in to be able to reach out. There are not enough activists and volunteers who are willing to give up their summer and struggle with sometimes very difficult circumstances to make it not just a postcode lottery. If you are in an area with lots of community activists, you have a good chance of being not just fed but having somewhere to go, seeing your friends, being active, being able to leave the house. A lot of children



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are under curfew. Local is vital but if we are relying on local we need to support local in a much bigger way.

Q135 **Nigel Mills:** This is city based?

Stephanie Ellis: Chester but also the surrounding area of Chester.

Nigel Mills: I am wondering how easy this is for more rural-based families who obviously rely on school transport to get their kids to school. How do they get their kids to access these services in the summer without that bus?

Stephanie Ellis: We had a mix of a couple of larger cities and towns and some rural as well. The communities that were able to put on the provision at short notice were communities with existing community infrastructure. That was the case in some of our rural areas so that the children did not have to travel because they did still have a leisure centre, they did still have a youth provision.

Q136 **Nigel Mills:** If I am five miles away from the school or the leisure centre, there is no easy solution.

Stephanie Ellis: No, there is not, and I think that is something that does need to be addressed, because the rural nature of poverty means that you are doubly isolated. Often you do not have those resources available to you. I think that should be considered, going forward, if this is to be rolled out.

Ian Stevenson: We mapped our free school meals data by postcode and when we originally applied for the funding from DfE we said that we would have 19 delivery partners. We ended up with 39. The reason for that was when we mapped the data by postcode it told us that some of the locations and some of the delivery partners were not in the right part of Gateshead. In particular, we have quite a rural part of the borough, so some of our rural villages are 10 or 15 miles away from the town centre and travel is difficult and expensive. We made sure we went back and put provision into those locations where it was needed. Nobody in Gateshead had to travel more than two miles to their nearest programme of activity. That was where we got to in the end.

Jan Lefley: We were across the whole of Hampshire and we included Southampton and Portsmouth after we put the bid in because they had not received funding. We included them within our bid and we had lots of rural areas. If I was visiting projects I could only do three projects in a day because you could not get around to all of them. It was a massive exercise.

Q137 **Nigel Mills:** How were you getting children from the most deprived areas?

Jan Lefley: We offered transport. Where there was a scheme where there was space and rural areas around it, we offered community



HOUSE OF COMMONS

transport and people could pick up a bus and be transported in and transported out again.

- Q138 **Nigel Mills:** Are there any particular groups of children who you struggled to get to engage or get their parents to engage in these programmes? Some people have said disabled children or those with learning difficulties are particularly hard to get involved. Is that what you have all found?

Stephanie Ellis: I think that it was that timing was needed to be able to put on that provision. We found as well that for older young people, the over-12s, because we had seen such a reduction in youth service provision across the boroughs and youth centres closing down, there was not enough time to speak with the young people—to say, “What would be the types of activities you would like to come to?” Where there were existing youth centres, it was wonderful, really lovely to see, and they doubled or trebled the amount of children they thought they would see.

There is a need for it, but again it is what lots of people have said, it is the commitment to long-term infrastructure and it is about trusted relationships. You cannot just flop into a community for six weeks and leave again. People have had those things removed from them and I think that you need to build up trust. It needs to be somebody or something that they know is going to be there for a period of time and they can build relationships with those people running the clubs.

- Q139 **Nigel Mills:** As a final question—I am not sure I dare raise this—do any of you ever think, “God, I wish the summer holiday was only four weeks rather than six weeks and the holidays were more spread out”?

Jan Lefley: Yes.

Ian Stevenson: When we sat outside before we talked about how the summer has gone and everyone went, “Phew”. It has been 100 miles an hour. We have talked about the lead-in times and things like that, but I do not think any of us would regret being part of this programme.

- Q140 **Nigel Mills:** Would it help if the holidays were spread out a bit more through the year? Would that make the problem easier or would it just spread the problem around and not make it easier?

Jan Lefley: I think it just spreads the problem.

Stephanie Ellis: It spreads the problem.

Jan Lefley: Currently, at Park during the holidays they feed 100 people a day every holiday and they are open on Christmas Day. That happens all year round, so it is just going to mean they are busier for the rest of the time.

- Q141 **Chair:** Would it be better if we were not based as though we are an agricultural community where we need to get the harvest in?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jan Lefley: It might work better, yes, but schools have tried it and it has just not come about. I think that schools do need to be used more and schools do need to be the base of this. I have survived community schools, extended services, children's centres and now supported families. I am still in there and still trying to make sure that my school and Sue's school is relevant, but whereas there used to be 35 of us in Hampshire, there are two of us. We are having to spread ourselves thinner and thinner to make sure that the families are still being picked up and looked after.

Q142 **Chair:** Can I ask you a final question? I had a little to do with the Feeding Britain report and I thought two of the main things were money—you have been very British and not mentioned that we need a lot more money in this area—and, secondly, the danger of money that we need accidentally or deliberately crushing local initiatives. Initially, we thought—Feeding Britain still does, doesn't it?—that moneys must be there to support local communities and add where there are not activities, rather than money going where there are not local activities. In a number of Feeding Britain—I think you were the exception, Stephanie, weren't you, in getting money?

Stephanie Ellis: Yes.

Chair: They had to raise their own money to continue or they would have gone under. Therefore, would it be right that the questions we ought to put to the Ministers when they come, one is about what conversations you had with Sajid about an adequate budget to make this much more universal in an acceptable way, and the role of schools, that even if they are not going to open themselves as schools, they should be open and the insurance side should be covered. There is the whole business as well of it being wonderful teaching people about the use of good food, but if they go home and there is no shop selling good food, it is a cruelty, isn't it, beyond belief that people should be enthusiastic about cooking and find they cannot get the materials? Is there anything else we should add when we meet the Ministers in a moment?

Ian Stevenson: I think that you have covered it. Funding is important, the timing of that funding is really, really important as well, and allowing local areas to use that money how they see best is really important.

Chair: Sorry, I missed that, Ian. What was the third part?

Ian Stevenson: Allowing local areas to use that money in the way that they know best in Gateshead's view is really important.

Q143 **Chair:** Do you think, Ian, that one of the great things from these two years of experiments, building up larger money, is that we can show the Government how good local authorities have been, or other big organisations, in using this money in a terrific manner?

Ian Stevenson: Absolutely.



Chair: They should just trust people.

Ian Stevenson: Jan has hundreds and hundreds of comments; I have some comments that have come from some of the families that we have spoken to. I think that every single one of us would say we have really positive feedback from the families that engaged in the programmes. We know what works; we need to tailor that accordingly in the local area.

Q144 **Ian Mearns:** There is a final question that I have as well, and that is: is there some significant capacity building that needs to be done out there? One of the things that I am concerned about is that I have had this thought in my head for quite some time that the capacity of communities to come to the table on this is quite often in inverse proportions to the level of needs in that same community. I live in the middle of Gateshead and Gateshead is very diverse. The community that I live in the midst of is relatively poor, but where all the resources are and where people have more capacity, more time, more wherewithal, is not in that same community necessarily. How are we going to match that? The big society idea is great, but what you are not going to get is the Harrogate Townswomen's Guild going into the centre of Bradford on a daily basis to deliver this stuff. That is the point I am getting at.

Chair: Or who else do you think could do that, that would be a good question.

Jan Lefley: What we did with working with the long-term unemployed is we gave those people a chance to be part of this as well. They had four weeks' employment over the summer and that has motivated people to want to carry on and do something. It was not being done unto people, we were all working together to try to deliver the project. Local people were applying for the work academies and were then working within their local area.

I believe in volunteering and I think that is great, but I also think that people should be paid for a job if they are doing a job. You should not be trying to replace paid work with volunteers because that is not fair.

Ian Mearns: It is not sustainable either.

Jan Lefley: It is not sustainable. That is where the funding supported us to be able to do that. Therefore, not only are we hoping to change the families' lives but those people who came and worked with us, they have gone on to get jobs, so we have started to change their lives as well. That must make a difference.

Stephanie Ellis: Something I would like to add is—and I champion all the great community work that has gone on in our local area—something that niggles away is that while this is absolutely great, we should not be in a situation where people are having to come to a club to be fed. We cannot ignore that. While it is wonderful for people to come together and community is marvellous and it is much needed because you cannot always eat on your own and you need friends and you need to feel a part



of a community, we should not be in a situation where people have to come to a club to rely on that meal. We cannot ignore that and we cannot try to fix that by having these clubs.

We all know, and you will be familiar, that people are dealing with debt, they have had Universal Credit delays and a lot of some of the issues that people are dealing with are long term, they are deep and they need an holistic approach. While this scheme is wonderful and I absolutely want it to continue and to be part of a deeper addressing of community need, there has to be that other side of the coin as well that those deeper issues are not going to be met long term.

People need to have their own choices of the food that they cook and the activities that their children are involved with and that they would have enough money in their pockets to take their children on a day out.

Q145 **Ian Mearns:** In a nutshell, these schemes are very important, they are needed, but what we should be doing is working to alleviate the whole situation that needs them to happen in the first place?

Stephanie Ellis: 100%.

Chair: The benefit in reverse, in other words, for a start. Huge thanks for coming. I am sorry it was a unique beginning to our inquiry with you. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Agnew, Sarah Lewis, Will Quince MP and Donna Ward.

Q146 **Chair:** Theodore and Will, and Sarah, it is your first appearance before a Joint Committee, isn't it?

Lord Agnew: I am sorry, you will have to talk up a bit.

Chair: For some of you it is your first appearance.

Lord Agnew: In your Committee, yes.

Chair: Yes, but not in the other Committee, so welcome. Sarah, might you begin by identifying yourself for the sake of the record and then we will begin?

Sarah Lewis: Absolutely. It is actually my first appearance at any Committee.

Chair: A particular welcome, then.

Sarah Lewis: I am Sarah Lewis and I am a Director at the Department for Education. Among other things, I am responsible for our holiday activities and food programmes that you have just been hearing about, and our early years and childcare entitlements.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Agnew: I am the Lords Minister for the education system and I have recently been asked to take over for school food.

Will Quince: Minister for Welfare Delivery at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Donna Ward: I am Donna Ward. I am Policy Director in DWP, responsible for child poverty and related issues.

Q147 **Rosie Duffield:** During the recess I got involved in quite a few campaigns about holiday hunger, and it is something that we are talking about an awful lot. Sharon Hodgson in the Labour Party has been leading lots of schemes in this, so it is on our mind quite a lot at the moment.

The first question I want to ask is what you think the role of the Government is in supporting children and families during the school holidays. I also want to highlight the article in *The Mirror* and *The Express* that appeared on 18 August, which was entitled, "British children so hungry they eat loo paper and scavenge in bins". That was an article written mostly by the Chief Executive of the Childhood Trust, Laurence Guinness, who has talked about children literally consuming loo paper to stave off hunger pains. With that in the background, can you tell me what you think the role of Government is in stopping that, please?

Chair: Will, would you like to begin, and then Theodore?

Will Quince: Certainly. In terms of the Department for Work and Pensions, we spend around £95 billion a year on in-work benefits, as you know. We aim to have a welfare system that works for those who need the help and support, that is sustainable for the future but also is fair to the taxpayers that pay for it.

The key to this in terms of the school holiday period is around childcare, and our particular interest will be around childcare and how that interacts with Universal Credit. I suspect you will ask lots of questions about that a little bit later on. We are certainly aware that parents do come under particular pressure in the school holiday periods and we are looking at ways, via the Department but also working alongside the Department for Education, that we can improve the offer that we have.

In terms of what we do, we work very closely with the Department for Education in its universal offer and we have worked very carefully and closely with work coaches in all of our jobcentres to ensure that they are aware of the overall package and what we offer in terms of the UC entitlements to childcare. It very much works hand in hand with what is available in terms of the broader universal offer from the Department for Education.

Q148 **Rosie Duffield:** How do you think we have reached the stage where children are eating loo paper? Is that an embarrassment to the Government?



Will Quince: I have not seen the particular article that you refer to, so I will have to go away and have a look at that. I find it difficult to believe, if I am being honest. I have spent the past four days, including a visit up to Birkenhead, to the Chairman's constituency, getting a better understanding of some of the issues. I regularly meet with all sorts of organisations and stakeholders from across the country that do feed in to areas like childcare but also broader poverty. We do listen to those concerns. I have not had concerns of that nature raised. That does sound like a really extreme example. I struggle to believe it is indeed true, but I will go away and have a look at that article and read it for myself.

Q149 **Rosie Duffield:** Emma and I have worked in schools so we have direct experience of children doing things like scavenging from bins and stealing each other's lunch in the last few years. It is definitely something that teacher friends of mine have said has grown, so perhaps speak to more staff in schools and people running these charities. Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Chair: Theodore, might you tell us what the thinking is now? You have had two years of pilot projects on ensuring there is more money in the community. We have had wonderful feedback this morning from groups who have benefited from that. What are your long-term views?

Lord Agnew: The whole point of the pilots was to try to determine what the long-term solution might be. Nobody supports holiday hunger for children and I am appalled to hear of those reports that Rosie has referred to. My caution is that are the pilots, operated in the way they are at the moment, the best solution? In other words, if we scaled it nationally from the 10 or 11 local authorities that it is in at the moment and multiplied it by the number of children who are eligible for free school meals, you end up with a colossal sum of money. I do not know if that is the best way to do it. I want to throw out some ideas today where we might be able to scale up the programme but doing it in a rather different way. At the appropriate moment I will give you my thoughts on that.

Chair: Chris, it is clearly your area as well, isn't it?

Q150 **Chris Stephens:** Thank you, Chair. Going on to that, Lord Agnew, what we are looking for as a Committee today is what the long-term aspirations are of the Department for Education in funding a programme for meals and activities during school holidays. I would say it is not just summer holidays, although summer holidays are the longest period. There are periods in other school holidays in the evidence that we are getting where there is an issue. What is the long-term aspiration of the Department to deal with funding meals and other activities?

Chair: Theodore, you might use this opportunity to give us some of those ideas about scaling up that you have.

Lord Agnew: Yes. These are only my thoughts so I do not want you to take these as Government policy, because the thinking is very much



HOUSE OF COMMONS

emerging. My concern is that we need to get to the cause of the poverty of these families. Why are they in the straits that Rosie is suggesting, that their children are having to eat lavatory paper? That is an appalling situation. I would want to understand more about that. How did those families get to the point that things were so desperate? I want to go to the root causes of the problem.

The second thing I would want to do is I do not believe in creating a long-term dependency on the state by families. We need to try to create an environment where families are able to function on their own steam and on their own merits. That might include parenting classes, it might include teaching parents how to get the best value from cooking and shopping, using seasonal food. These might all sound small and trivial things but my starting point would be to get those families to stand on their own feet.

Going beyond that, I am very interested in a programme that has been rolling out over the last few years called OnSide Youth Zones. I do not know if any of you have heard of these places but they have about 13 sites across the UK—or England, I think—at the moment. These tend to be mostly in areas of deprivation. They are open in the holidays all day and in the term time from 4.00 pm to 9.00 pm and they provide intensive activities for children for a very wide age range. They also include a meal. I believe that this programme could be expanded. If you are going to have more hearings, Frank, I would encourage you to invite the philanthropist who set this up. Basically, it operates on a three-legged basis. The philanthropist put up some capital for the buildings, the local authorities put up some money for the running costs, and local schools will also contribute as well. That is one side of the infrastructure.

Then we have the food itself. One of the things that concerns me is the enormous amount of food waste that is being generated by supermarkets. They are very alert to the problems and are doing things about it. There is a very good charity called the FareShare FoodCloud. I don't know if any of you have heard of this, but again I would encourage you to perhaps invite members of that charity to a future hearing.

This is not a small organisation. It is supporting over 10,000 charities. It has set up a tremendous logistics operation, which is drawing the food from 3,000 supermarket stores and distributing it to 10,000 charities, feeding 900,000 people a week—46 million meals last year—with 77% of the surveyed charities saying that they were improving the nutrition of their clients. These are not just children, it can be asylum seekers, all of those who are struggling in our society. I have an idea, and it is only an idea, that we could bring these two forces together. We could expand the OnSide Youth Zones and we can harness the distribution power of the FareShare FoodCloud.



Q151 Chris Stephens: Is the Department for Education funding the programmes that you have just mentioned or providing finance for these organisations?

Lord Agnew: I think that I have read this year the OnSide Youth Zone has had a little bit of money for one of these pilots. I think I am right. You are nodding your head. Am I wrong on that?

Sarah Lewis: It is mostly DCMS with youth policy.

Lord Agnew: Okay, sorry.

Q152 Chris Stephens: Because we can all mention some of the fantastic work that is being done in our local areas, but some of it has been done by the third sector, the charity sector—but it is not being done by Government, Lord Agnew. In everything you have said so far, what I have not heard from you is how the long-term aspirations of the Department will benefit disadvantaged children as a result of how you see things going forward. Could you maybe just explain the long-term aspirations of the Department in dealing with this issue and how that will help disadvantaged children as a result?

Lord Agnew: The long-term direction of travel has been to substantially increase the provision of childcare for parents. If we start in 2010, there were entitlements for 15 hours a week; in 2013 it was extended to the 20% least advantaged two-year-olds; in 2014 to the 40% least advantaged; in 2015 the Early Years Pupil Premium for three and four-year-olds. In 2017 we extended an additional 15 hours for eligible working families and 94% of those families say they are very happy with the service and are saving up to £5,000 a year in childcare costs. That has been the direction, but I am mindful of particularly the comments that Rosie made and the clear evidence that there are children who are falling through the system.

The ideas that I am suggesting to you are not small, these are big endeavours. Building these OnSide Youth Zones requires several million pounds and they are all the way from Carlisle certainly to London. As I have just shown you on the FareShare FoodCloud, they operate across the country. Our job, if this idea was able to be brought together, would be to co-ordinate these activities and provide some money, but what I am trying to avoid—and this is where maybe politically you and I would never agree—is that I do not want to create huge amounts of ongoing dependency.

Q153 Chris Stephens: Where I may not agree is that I want to make sure that in school holidays schoolchildren get a meal. At the moment there are far too many schoolchildren who are not getting a meal during school holidays and are not able to participate in activities because their parents can't afford to pay out the money for those activities. What is the long-term aspiration in dealing with that, Lord Agnew?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Agnew: I have just set out what my aspiration would be. It is now for us to start working up a package that would deal with it and you go to the areas of greatest need first. This is not going to be endemic across the whole country. There will be pockets of deprivation, particularly in Frank's constituency, I suspect, and several others. Already in the last five years we have provided the universal infant preschool meal, which is costing £600 million a year. A great deal has been done. We will look to how we can expand the current programme, but I don't want to just commit to saying, "We will turn the 10 local authority pilots into 150 local authorities".

Q154 **Chris Stephens:** My last question then, Lord Agnew, is whether this programme of work that the Department is looking at would cover all school holiday periods, not just the summer holidays.

Lord Agnew: I think that we have to go to where the need is greatest first. As you quite rightly said, the summer holidays are the period of greatest pressure and I think that should be our first priority.

Q155 **Steve McCabe:** I am just interested, in particular, to ask about some groups that have greater difficulty. I wondered, if you are trying to develop whatever kind of scheme, what attention you are going to pay to children with disabilities. There has been some evidence—I think it was from Child Poverty Action—about some of the difficulties there. Again, there are some particular issues for children who live in rural areas, not least because of the transport costs. But if there is going to be any kind of attempt at a national programme or a national guided programme, I wondered what you were going to do, what the thinking was for those particular groups.

Sarah Lewis: I will pick up on this. I sat in and listened to the evidence from the previous witnesses. I thought it was quite inspirational. My teams have been out and about; I have been out and about visiting. I visited a project in Croydon. Our Secretary of State has been to visit one of the projects in Leeds. One of the key things that is coming out is the learning that we are getting from those projects, and we learnt quite a lot in 2018. We are learning an awful lot more with the formal evaluation in place for 2019 and indeed the stories that we are hearing in 2019, but one of the key things that I am hearing is this point about particularly children with disabilities, where we know that those are challenges that they don't just face around accessing holiday activities; there are also challenges around accessing childcare for children with disabilities. It is something that in any next stage for this programme we would definitely want to do more on that than we do currently.

On rural areas, I know that you heard from people earlier today who are running projects in rural areas and are doing some quite creative things to try to reach out into those areas. It is inevitably much harder, it is more expensive because you are travelling further, but again we have heard that message loud and clear.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I want to pick up quickly on the funding for the future. Clearly, the Chancellor is standing up to talk about the spending round for the next financial year later today. Once we have that in place, we will be setting down programme and project budgets within that. We will have our overall departmental envelope this afternoon. We will then be looking at programmes and projects such as this one, so within the next few weeks we will be able to say what the position is in relation to future funding around holiday activities and food for next year. Clearly, matters after that are a matter for the multi-year spending review next year. I recognise that causes some frustrations, but that is the position that we have in relation to funding at the moment.

Q156 Steve McCabe: The Chancellor is going to announce funding for one year. Assuming that plan comes to fruition, does that mean you are saying that by October it will be possible to notify people of what their funding will be for 2020?

Sarah Lewis: I am not going to commit to October. As you will have heard in the previous two rounds, what we did was we did bidding rounds and we need to allow people enough time to bid into this. I think there is something about bidding rounds that enables people to sort of create that bid, to work with partners, to think about what they think needs to happen in their area, which I think is quite powerful. We need to allow time to do that, so once I have my budget, and Lord Agnew has his budgets, we will be able to then go out and organise a bidding round.

The feedback that we heard this morning about timings is something that myself and my team have been hearing on all our visits, that inevitably the earlier that people hear, the better the activities will be. We have definitely heard that as well. That will come through from the evaluation. I am not going to commit to definitely saying in October what is going to happen, but we will work as quickly as we possibly can.

Q157 Steve McCabe: The criticism you heard was that people did not hear until three months or even a shorter period; I think May was the time most people heard. How much earlier than “earlier than May” are you going to notify them?

Sarah Lewis: What we heard—what I heard—from people this morning was that they were told by us, by my team, in March, but because of purdah, people were not able to communicate more widely.

Q158 Steve McCabe: Yes, so it was May that they found out, so how much earlier are they going to find out this year?

Sarah Lewis: It was in May that the areas found out, yes. I would want to do earlier than last year is what I would say.

Q159 Steve McCabe: Yes, but how much earlier? A week earlier, three weeks earlier, two months earlier? I think that they said it would be better to hear at least six months earlier and ideally 12 months before.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Lewis: We are not going to make 12 months.

Q160 **Steve McCabe:** We are not going to make that deadline, but I am wondering what promise you are making here to the Committee.

Lord Agnew: I do not think we can make a promise, but I can assure you that it will be sooner than it was last year. This will be on my watch.

Q161 **Steve McCabe:** That is a wonderful promise, but that could mean the day before. I am trying to understand how much you have taken it on board. That is the purpose of the question. If it is going to be significantly earlier, then that is important. If it is going to be a token earlier period, it does not sound as if you have heard it that much. That would be the conclusion most people would draw.

Lord Agnew: I think we should aim to get it a month earlier.

Steve McCabe: A month earlier?

Lord Agnew: That would be my aspiration. I cannot make a promise because you will hang me if it is 23 days.

Q162 **Steve McCabe:** No. You say a month earlier and you cannot promise; I heard that.

The position about rural children and disabled children, is there going to be some kind of consultation paper or something so that we will know how your thinking is shaping on that?

Sarah Lewis: My team has talked to the providers this year and the providers that took part last year, so we have ongoing engagement and clearly the evaluation should also help us with this. We will see it early stages before its publication next year, so we do not need to wait until next year to know the emerging findings. Clearly, you were hearing things today as well. What we will be doing, assuming there is another bidding round, is we would then build things like that far more clearly into the spec for future bidding rounds than we did this year.

Q163 **Chair:** Theodore, could we make a plea? If local authorities feel that they must keep to the purdah rules for this rather good news, the Department is not bound by local authority purdah rules.

Lord Agnew: We are in some respects. I hate purdah, it stops—

Q164 **Chair:** You could make the announcement, couldn't you?

Lord Agnew: I would love to. I think these are rules above my pay grade. I get terribly frustrated in purdahs because I can't get on and do things. Maybe you need to call someone from the Cabinet Office or from the Ethics Department or somebody, but these are all people who always block us from doing things.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q165 **Chair:** Knowing how Government works—they have just published the data in Ian's area and so on—I do not think anybody would worry, they just get on and act on it. But, Ian, you want to ask a supplementary.

Lord Agnew: But maybe you might write to our Permanent Secretary.

Chair: I will. We will write and suggest it.

Lord Agnew: Because I 100% agree with you. It is so frustrating, it is so pointless when we have good things happening.

Chair: And money to pay for them and you cannot announce them, yes.

Lord Agnew: It is ludicrous.

Q166 **Ian Mearns:** To a large extent, Sarah has already covered the question I want to ask, because I was very interested in the evidence that we heard just previously there and about how much time was a real major factor in the capacity building that was required in order to deliver effectively what was needed in particular localities. Therefore, Lord Agnew, a month would be nice, but an announcement immediately after the turn of the year would be extremely useful, I think, to most of the providers who are hoping to co-ordinate activity in their own localities.

Lord Agnew: I completely accept that. My own track record in Parliament is that in every programme that I have managed I have closed the timelines in successive years. I assure you I will do everything possible, but I just cannot make a blanket promise or I will be dragged in here and beaten up by you in six or 12 months' time.

Q167 **Ian Mearns:** Having spent 27 years, by the way, as a local authority councillor in Gateshead, the purdah rules seem to be adhered to much more stringently than they ever did before. That seems to me very frustrating.

Chair: Particularly when it is such good news, isn't it?

Ian Mearns: It is, absolutely.

Lord Agnew: I genuinely encourage you to write to our Permanent Secretary.

Chair: We will follow it up, Theodore.

Q168 **Nigel Mills:** Just two quick things. I am always a little nervous about bidding programmes, because you don't always get bids from the areas where you think that will be most needed. What are you doing to try to close any gaps on the map where there were not bids this year and that you think ought to have been accessing this fund?

Sarah Lewis: If we had enough money for a national programme, then clearly we might be able to try to find a way around the bidding process, because then all areas in the country could benefit. Until or unless we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have that position, we need some sort of process for enabling that public money to go out to the very strongest areas that are best placed to deliver this and the strongest partners in the best place to deliver this.

The point about parts of the country that may not bid, which of course is always on our minds, is those are the parts of the country that, as you say, may be the ones that would most benefit, they are the parts of the country with the lowest capacity and so on. That is on our minds. What we can do there is if we run another bidding process we can do more to promote in those parts of the country. We can work through local authorities; we can work through the voluntary sector to promote that opportunity.

I would also mention that this year we quite deliberately did not do only the most disadvantaged parts of the country. You will have heard from quite a wide variety of parts of the country earlier today. That is because we recognise that poverty is everywhere and disadvantage is everywhere and disadvantaged children live in what can otherwise be wealthy areas. We wanted to have a programme that recognised that and see what we can learn from that.

Q169 Nigel Mills: There is no way of allocating part of any funding to new schemes or to support the start of schemes where there are not any, so people can see, "If I do bid for this for the first time, I am not going to get blown out of the water by a successful huge scheme somewhere else that is bound to tick all the boxes and fill the form in better" or something?

Sarah Lewis: What I have seen this year is a real mix of some quite established local partnerships that have been doing these sort of things for a while and are going even bigger and even better with our funding and then some things that were quite new and quite embryonic. I have seen a mix this year.

Q170 Nigel Mills: For my final question, schools do not know exactly how much money they will get for the next three years, but they know they will get something. Are you—

Sarah Lewis: They will know soon, very soon.

Q171 Nigel Mills: How high up the Department's priorities is this kind of scheme funding over the summer? Is it something that you do want to have as a priority to do every year or is it something that if you have a few quid behind the sofa when you get to the end of the year you might use it for this, but there are no guarantees? Whereabouts is it?

Lord Agnew: We start from the point of view that food poverty for children is an appalling problem and it is a high priority. That is where we start. As I said in my opening comments, where I am cautious is that I do not want us to blindly walk into a situation where we multiply the current programme by 15 times to deal with the whole country in this way,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because I am very sceptical that that is the way of getting the best result for the children, for those families.

I agree with your last comment about getting different types of bids in so that we can experiment with different ways of doing it. The ideas that I put forward at the beginning of the session would be things that I would be very keen to include in the next rollout.

In terms of school funding, they will know very soon, just to reassure you. The per school figures will be available within, I don't know, six weeks or so.

Sarah Lewis: A few weeks, yes.

Lord Agnew: It is a very substantial increase, as you will be aware, we think the largest single increase in school funding since 2004. I am asking you to thank me for that.

Q172 **Nigel Mills:** But the point I was trying to make is are you saying to the providers of these services, "This is a priority for the Government. In all normal circumstances there will be funding every year for this and we will be trying to sustain it. That is what we are trying to achieve" or are you saying, "If we have a few quid, we might chuck some out at the last minute, but we cannot guarantee anything"?

Lord Agnew: No, it is the former, but it is not a blank cheque to existing providers. We are not here to entrench oligopolistic suppliers. We want to genuinely seek out innovative ways of dealing with what is a terrible problem, absolutely. The opening comments of the session were about children eating lavatory paper in this country in the 21st century, and that is grotesque. That is the priority. It is not to encourage a current bunch of suppliers just to be told, "Yes, you can go on doing this ad infinitum". That is not what I would accept at all.

Q173 **Chair:** Will, your Department has been successful in lobbying the Chancellor to reverse the cuts in benefits. That would be beginning to go some way to meeting Theodore's worry about having to create programmes, which could create dependency, because people do not have enough money in the first place to feed their children. Would that be a fair summary?

Will Quince: Not entirely. I suppose our priority is twofold. I do agree with Lord Agnew wholeheartedly when he says that the comments that Rosie made are awful. That is why I am going to go away and have a look at that article and try to get to the bottom of that particular case. We take food insecurity incredibly seriously, as you know, Mr Field. We don't want to see any child going hungry, whether it is in term time or in school time, and not even children, any family going hungry, for that matter. That is why we do put robust plans in place and have a welfare safety net that does support people.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The key initial point is about understanding and it is about understanding what the drivers are because, yes, we can do work via our Department or the Department for Education around tackling food insecurity and hunger—whether it is in the holidays or not—at the moment. But as Lord Agnew rightly points out, we need to get to the root causes of those issues so we are not just addressing it via a metaphorical sticking plaster, but we are addressing those core root issues.

As I said earlier, we do listen very carefully to organisations, to claimants and to Members of this House from all sides for their lived experience and the experience of their constituents. You are right, over the past few years we have made considerable changes and have been successful at attracting additional funding for the Department from the Treasury. That has enabled us to make significant changes to programmes like, for example, Universal Credit.

But we do come at this from the fundamental point that to better understand it, we want to support more people into work because we know work is the best route out of poverty, and we want to address any of those barriers that exist to helping people get into work. We know childcare is one of those.

Q174 **Ruth George:** I find all that quite concerning, particularly the comments from Lord Agnew about not thinking that there are lots of people in destitution out there, because there is lots of evidence out there. There are 1.5 million people in destitution, including 350,000 children—not just in poverty, in absolute destitution. If you are looking for reasons, then you have the two-child limit, you have the benefit cap, you have the Local Housing Allowance being held down, people having to make up rents, and you have the punitive charges that are being made on people for advances under Universal Credit and for debt. We know that there are millions of people who are in destitution and that is affecting families with children, so that is why it is so important to look again at those policies. I hope, Minister, that you will be making sure, and your Department will be making sure, that that will be addressed in today's spending review.

Lord Agnew: Sorry, is that a question or—

Donna Ward: Just to be clear on today's spending round, that will not be addressing AME. We would be waiting for an autumn Budget for AME bids. Please do rest assured that we have state of the art poverty modelling, we have every option that we could think of ready to go and persuade Treasury, but we do need an autumn Budget or forthcoming fiscal event that addresses the AME question, not just the DEL question. But we are ready to go on that and we have invested a lot in understanding poverty data and modelling poverty and getting Treasury on board with how we do that. It is just that today's statement is not about AME.

Will Quince: If I can support what Donna has just said, yes, any changes of the nature that you suggest would need to be made at a fiscal



HOUSE OF COMMONS

event and that would be done in something like a Budget, for example. As you will know, we are now approaching a spending review and bids will be being made as part of that.

I would not agree with all of the assessments you have made in relation to all of those policies or some of those policies, but what I would say—and as Mr Field knows—I keep all policies within my brief under very close review. I work with officials to look at it and we take very much an evidential-based approach to them. If you have more information to feed in to us, as I know you and other members of the Committee do, then of course I will look at them.

Donna Ward: Just to say we are writing back to the Committee on your recommendations following the inquiry on destitution to explain more about how we are measuring poverty, our new work with the Social Metrics Commission, how we use things like the JRF data that you have quoted and so on. We are aware of all of that information.

Will Quince: That is an important element. In terms of food insecurity, we have added to the Family Resources Survey questions around food insecurity. That started as of April. That will give us some very good data. As you will know from the announcement earlier this year, we are now commissioning a piece of work from the Social Metrics Commission, so we are looking at a new measure of poverty. That will give us even more information.

We are working very closely with organisations like the Trussell Trust and other foodbank providers to better understand things like food insecurity and understand the root causes and the drivers of it, which will give us that evidence base in which to look at our overall policy base and what other levers we can pull, not just within the Department for Work and Pensions, but across Government to make the changes that are necessary.

Q175 **Ruth George:** Part of that and the driver of food insecurity is poverty during the school holidays, as we have heard and been discussing on this Committee. Childcare, as you said, is a key issue in that. The Secretary of State came to speak to us before the recess and said that families will be able to receive budget advances to help with the upfront costs of childcare. Are all parents eligible for that now?

Will Quince: No, they won't all be.

Q176 **Ruth George:** Which groups are excluded?

Will Quince: Donna, do you want to go into the detail?

Donna Ward: Budgeting advances are generally offered to people in receipt of Universal Credit for six-plus months. Work coaches can make an exception if you have been on UC for less than six months, but if you ask for a budgeting loan, then you are allowed it if it is to allow you to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

stay in work, so childcare would come under that remit. It ought to cover most people, but then there are some limits on how much can be loaned, so it will not be a perfect solution for everyone. But we have made sure that that six-month limit is not going to be affecting families that need childcare in order to stay in work.

Q177 Ruth George: Does it also exclude people who have accessed the advance at the start of their claim, as 58% of people do?

Donna Ward: Yes.

Q178 Ruth George: So it excludes 58% of people who have had an advance at the start of their claim in the first year and anyone who has made any other—

Donna Ward: That is right. As you are still paying back a budgeting advance, you cannot get another one. It is not a perfect solution. We have two solutions in place, as you know, to try to help smooth the childcare offer. One is using the Flexible Support Fund at the very start of a claim, but that is in the first month before a parent gets paid. You do not have to pay that back. That goes direct to the provider. It can pay for your deposit, your first month of childcare and it is very helpful, but is only available in that limited window. Then after that, it is budgeting advances, but with the restrictions that you have mentioned. It will not be available to absolutely everyone because if they already have a budgeting advance to pay back we do not want people to be even more indebted. As I say, we got rid of the six-month limit.

Looking at the UC offer relative to tax credits, having looked at the evidence that parents gave before, it is important to say although tax credits certainly seemed much easier to navigate for parents at the time because it is based on an estimate of the childcare that you would need going forward and therefore you just say, "I think I need £50 a month" and that goes into your claim, the problem with tax credits is that a lot of people then built up a lot of debt. These debts are now coming on to Universal Credit. If you have estimated you need £50 a month, but at the end of the year when you show the evidence of what childcare you have paid that was a significant overestimate, that has to go from your tax credit entitlement the year after.

Although the Universal Credit childcare offer is not absolutely perfect, it is more generous than what tax credits offer. It does try to keep up with what you are paying so you do not build up arrears. We have tried to use the Flexible Support Fund and budgeting advances to the best of their effect, without being able to solve all the problems in that space.

Q179 Chair: Donna, wouldn't the system be more perfect if you put into the Universal Credit system that which operated under tax credits, which was that the providers picked up the money separately from the mothers who need the service?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Donna Ward: Direct to provider?

Will Quince: Do you mean direct to provider payments?

Chair: Yes.

Will Quince: There are issues with that. Donna, do you want to—

Donna Ward: That sounds a good idea, but it is worth thinking of any kind of in-work benefit, whether that is Universal Credit or tax credits, as a top-up to people's wages. Although we say the childcare offer is 85% of your childcare costs up to a certain cap, that is a sort of notional entitlement. Your maximum entitlement is the most that you can get, but obviously that is tapered away if you work more. Once people work more than the work allowance, their notional entitlement reduces.

Say, for example, you have two parents both working fulltime and they are just at the margins of being entitled to Universal Credit, as they would for tax credits, and only take out £100 a month. Who are we to say what portion of that £100 a month ought to go to the childcare provider versus their landlord versus anything else? That is just a top-up to their wages to be used in whichever way they see fit, although I do not think that was in fact explained very well in the response to your inquiry on childcare, which I think is the fundamental problem.

Chair: That is very politely put.

Donna Ward: Because we are not paying everyone a fixed amount, so if you take, for example, the Flexible Support Fund, the reason that can be paid direct to the childcare provider is because you are paying for a specific thing, you are paying the deposit or you are paying the first month and that is a fixed thing and you can pay straight to the provider. With an in-work benefit system that is topping up people's wages, if you work less you get more Universal Credit, if you work more you get less Universal Credit. It was the same in tax credits, it just took a lot longer to adjust. It is hard to apportion that money to different places.

Q180 **Chair:** Could I summarise what you are saying there, Donna?

Donna Ward: Yes, please do.

Chair: The answer is no, is that right, you are not considering that scheme?

Donna Ward: But for a good reason, that there is not a fixed amount going to providers every month.

Q181 **Ruth George:** But people are giving receipts for the amount that they have paid to childcare providers, so they are having to make that payment. You say you do not want people to get into any more debt if they have already had a budgeting advance, but if they are faced with sort of £600, £800, £1,000 extra cost for childcare in the school holidays



HOUSE OF COMMONS

or they will have to give up their job, then they are going to have to get into debt and they are ending up taking out payday loans because they cannot access that from anywhere else. Providers cannot let them pay in arrears. Childcare providers are absolutely stretched to the limit.

You say that the Flexible Support Fund will support people in the first month. The logic of that is that you then start a job at the beginning of the school holidays, so your Flexible Support Fund covers you for a month of very high childcare costs, but that is bad for a lot of parents; it is bad for children. They do not want to have to do very long hours the first day when the parent starts work. It is a disruptive time. It is a system that is not working for families and it is a system that is not helping them to stay in work. What are you going to do about it?

Will Quince: There are two points you raise. The first one is in relation to getting into debt. Donna was absolutely right when she said under the old tax credit system, because in effect you are making a calculation for the year—as a guesstimate, if you like—about what you are likely to need, we know that people did get into considerable debt at the end of the year and that could be into many thousands of pounds. We know people that—

Q182 **Ruth George:** That was largely because the amount that you could earn over and above was reduced from £5,000 down to £1,000. It was not due to childcare costs. Childcare costs tended to be underestimated by parents rather than overestimated, so I am afraid that is a false argument.

Will Quince: In relation to the broader points around Universal Credit, Donna is absolutely right, which is that it is a far more generous system than the previous system, so it is up to 85% of your childcare costs versus 70% under the legacy benefits or tax credit system.

Q183 **Ruth George:** After they had been cut.

Will Quince: It is important to also stress that under the tax credit system or legacy benefit system you had to work a minimum of 16 hours, and that is each person in a couple, so it is 32 hours across a couple before you were—

Q184 **Ruth George:** No, it was 24 hours.

Will Quince: No, it was not.

Donna Ward: No, there were two separate rules. I was quite surprised to find that out, yes.

Will Quince: That was for tax credits, but childcare was separate. But under Universal Credit it is simply being in work, so there is no minimum requirement. But what I would stress is we do listen.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q185 Chair: I have never met anybody who says they would not prefer the 70% with the old arrangements about paying than the 85% that you offer under tax credits. Have you met anybody who has said, "Will, I am pleased about the 85%, even with all the difficulties that I get with the payments in arrears, compared with the older less generous system"?

Will Quince: Yes, I do. People do not necessarily talk about the figures of 70% versus 85%, but some like the way the system operates. Most of the issues that have been raised with me—and I do meet with a lot of people in terms of childcare—what they have tended to say to me is it was that initial period of finding that deposit or that first month that was the most difficult. That is why we listened to the Committee, we listened to those parents and we listened to some of the charities that were feeding that in to us, and the Secretary of State took very fast action to use that Flexible Support Fund as a grant, non-repayable, to be able to support that initial deposit or first month's payment.

I should stress that we also hear the issues that are being raised around the second month and also around the point at which people enter holiday periods and in particular the summer holiday. We are looking at what we can do in relation to our childcare offer. We could not do that, as Donna has rightly said, outside any kind of fiscal event, but I am constantly looking at ways in which we can improve all of the areas within my portfolio. Childcare is, of course, one of them because it is one that a number of stakeholders and charities and organisations and colleagues do feed in to me. But we are listening and that is why we put in the Flexible Support Fund. That has made a difference. It was the biggest complaint that I was getting from people about that initial upfront cost they were having to either borrow or get a budgeting advance for.

Q186 Ruth George: How many people have accessed the Flexible Support Fund for childcare?

Will Quince: We do not hold figures specifically in relation to the Flexible Support Fund in terms of a breakdown of that nature. The Flexible Support Fund is the—

Q187 Ruth George: How do you know that there are lots of people who have accessed it?

Will Quince: Because, as I said, I speak to colleagues and stakeholders and organisations and jobcentres. But I think what is important to note about the Flexible Support Fund is it is exactly what it says on the tin. It is localised support at the discretion of jobcentres and they use it for many things. For example, if you were attending an interview and you needed a suit or you needed accommodation, or I recently heard of one where they needed some equipment to start a new business, we give that discretion to local jobcentres to take the appropriate action that is in the best interests of the individual in front of them. We do not hold that data in terms of the breakdown of specifics of how it is spent.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Donna Ward: Although we have started. We have put an additional code on the Flexible Support Fund so that if a work coach uses it for childcare purposes it is now flagged up differently, so we will know what proportion of the Flexible Support Fund has been used on childcare from next year's data. That was in response to the Committee asking about that.

Will Quince: Yes, it was.

Donna Ward: You have also made a recommendation about using the invoices as opposed to the receipts and then that would obviously help with the timing issues, because I think we have all recognised that is the issue parents are struggling with. That is something that the Department is examining as well.

Chair: That is good news. You are on the move.

Q188 **Ruth George:** Did the Secretary of State write to all jobcentres regarding the Flexible Support Fund and budgeting advances in the summer?

Will Quince: My understanding is yes, but I will seek that confirmation.

Q189 **Ruth George:** Could we have a copy of that letter? I do not think the Committee have had it and we were told that we would be sent a copy of that letter.

Will Quince: I will go back to the Department and ask. What I would say is that having spent the four days pre returning to Parliament up and down the country at jobcentres, I did ask that question in all. Yes, it was being used. It is important to say we are listening.

The other thing we are doing as well is around looking at the flexibility around the reporting, which is also another issue that is often raised by stakeholders.

Chair: Great, thank you very much. Please, Emma. It may be the last question of our Committee in this Parliament.

Emma Hardy: Well, I had better make it a good one.

Chair: I am sure you will.

Q190 **Emma Hardy:** Morning, everybody. Following on a little bit from what my colleague, Ruth, was saying, some of the evidence we had from parents was about the cost of school uniforms coming at the end of an already expensive time for parents. I know that in 2015 the Government promised to update the statutory guidance particularly around the use of sole suppliers and the excessive use of branded items. I have been running a campaign locally around this issue and I would like to know your thoughts on what more the Government could do to encourage schools not to use sole suppliers and not to insist on excessive numbers of branded items, because this pushes up the cost of uniform.



Chair: Theodore, might you come in on this, please?

Lord Agnew: Yes, indeed, because it is an important issue. It is very important to stress that there is a specific problem of a relatively small number of schools who use this requirement of monopoly suppliers for uniforms. I do not like it, because it is a pernicious way of excluding children from less well-off backgrounds. If you have any evidence of specific schools that are doing that, then please send me a list of them. I genuinely mean that, because I do go after these sort of people.

I had a similar question in the Lords a few months ago, schools allegedly charging children for water, which is a statutory requirement, to provide drinking water, but allegedly there were some who were not. I said, "Please send me the names of these schools and I will go after them". I never heard another word. I absolutely mean it, if there are examples that you are aware of, then please do tell me because I will not have it.

But going beyond that, we now have the CMA, the Competition and Markets Authority, involved in launching a more formal inquiry and that is just unrolling at the moment. I have a draft letter that has not been sent yet by my Secretary of State to Lord Tyrie to set some of the wheels in motion on that. That is very much happening.

More broadly, though, it is important just to record that there is quite a good news story out there on the cost of uniforms overall. In preparation for coming here today, I went and found a site called MadeForMums, which lists all of the suppliers of uniforms in the country. Top of the league this year—or the most cost effective—is ALDI, who are offering a package of £4.50 for two sweatshirts, a shirt and a pair of trousers or a skirt. That is 10% less than they were charging for the same package last year.

Q191 **Emma Hardy:** With respect, though, that is because they are non-branded items.

Lord Agnew: Yes.

Q192 **Emma Hardy:** This is the point, if you allow parents to shop around and buy non-branded items, then they can get them for reasonable prices. That is what my campaign has been about. What I would like the Government to do is to encourage schools to stop using branding on all of their items or at least make branding optional. I have seen examples in my constituency of schools insisting on a tiny logo that is about this big on the sides of trousers or the sides of skirts, which then makes that pair of trousers three times the cost of a plain pair of black trousers from the local supermarket. The same with blazers: instead of asking schools to give a badge out that parents could sew on, they have to buy the embroidered blazer. Some schools—not in my constituency—even insist on socks that have the embroidered logo of the school on them.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

This is where I think the Government could update their guidance and say, "There should be a limit on the cost of a school uniform for going to this school, there should be a cap" and the school should be encouraged to look at the cost of their branded items to see whether or not what they are asking parents to buy is an excessive price. That is what I am asking for your support with.

Lord Agnew: You are very sound on everything you say. I am just interested to know when you challenge the schools who are insisting on these logos, what is their defence? I am just curious to know.

Q193 **Emma Hardy:** The good news is some schools said it was a fair point. It is something that I think has evolved without thought, that schools have just thought, "This is a good way to make children look smart" and they have not stopped and thought about the cost of it, so some schools are reviewing it, which is good news. Other schools insisted that it was part of making the children look smart and that is why they insisted on the branded items, which is where I think the guidance from Government saying, "Children can look just as smart in an outfit from ALDI as they can with something that has the school logo all over it" would make the real difference.

Lord Agnew: Yes, I agree with you. As you say, you can get these badges that you just iron on to a blazer or on to a sweatshirt. I am a practical sort of person and we need to just tell these schools to not be so ridiculous, frankly. I am happy to amend the guidance. I have less flexibility on making things into a statutory requirement because of the legislative timetable and so on, but let's not use that as the reason to stop this. It is just mindless bureaucracy on the part of these schools.

Q194 **Chair:** Following what Emma said, you have said, haven't you, that you will issue guidance to say that all this stuff of extra emblems and all the rest of it should go? It is proper for schools to say, "We want grey trousers of a certain colour and grey skirts" or whatever it is. Most schools do want to have a school badge, but as you just said, you can buy them and iron them on. It would be terrific if you could write to Emma and set a—

Lord Agnew: I will get told off afterwards.

Sarah Lewis: Absolutely.

Lord Agnew: But I am up for it.

Q195 **Chair:** It is one of the great things of being a Minister, isn't it, getting told off?

Lord Agnew: Yes, I 100% support you. Everything you say makes absolute sense.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

On the separate issue of these monopoly type deals, I want to go after them. I hate monopolists in every form that they come and this is particularly pernicious.

Q196 **Ian Mearns:** I am not renowned, Lord Agnew, for being a cynic, but the situation, as it seems to me, is that some of the schools involved use the expensive school uniform as a method of social selection in terms of their pupil intake. Other schools will also be involved with single retailers who are providing the branded items and getting a financial incentive for doing so. That is a supposition on my behalf. I have no evidence for that, but I am convinced it is probably the case.

Lord Agnew: I am sure you are right in some cases. I think also, as Emma has said, they do it just unthinkingly. They do not realise that this is an additional burden for a family that is not well off, but I accept the cynical view that there will be people like that. I am very happy, though, if you ever have evidence of individual schools that are doing this, then do let me know.

Q197 **Chair:** That will help us locally, that you want to know the names.

Lord Agnew: Yes, but we will do something on the guidance as well.

Chair: Having Theodore send out Emma's guidance for comprehensive school uniforms, that would be good, wouldn't it?

Emma Hardy: That would be really good.

Lord Agnew: Yes.

Q198 **Chair:** All right. On that happy note, I think we should end. I cannot tell you what a difference just that one thing would make to save many families who find school uniforms a terror to provide. Emma, thank you very much.

Lord Agnew: We will work out a timetable for that and we will report back to you so you know something has happened.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming in.