OFFICIAL REPORT
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Monday 27 March 2017

Session 5

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE
7th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)
*Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)
Naomi Eisenstadt
Jackie Erdman (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)
Eddie Follan (Barnardo's Scotland)
Andrew Hood (Institute for Fiscal Studies)
Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
Sandra McDermott (Glasgow City Council)
Fiona Moss (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership)
Sonya Scott (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

Glasgow City Chambers

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Monday 27 March 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 13:59]

Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener (Sandra White): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2017 of the Social Security Committee. I remind everyone to turn off their mobile phones, as they interfere with the recording.

It is a beautiful day in Glasgow, and I thank you all for travelling through. We decided to come to Glasgow because we agreed that we have to go out as a parliamentary committee and, as we know, Glasgow has, unfortunately, the highest levels of child poverty in Scotland. We wanted to hear from expert witnesses and to have a round-table discussion tonight with people who work with families and children on the ground. We must remember that it is not just children in out-of-work families who are in poverty; 75 per cent of the children who are in poverty in Glasgow live in families who are in work.

We have received apologies from Mark Griffin. Everyone else is here, except for George Adam, who is running late; I think that he is looking for a parking space. I am sure that we will welcome him in a couple of minutes.

I thank all the witnesses very much for turning up and for their submissions, which make very interesting reading. I welcome Naomi Eisenstadt, who is the Scottish Government's independent adviser on poverty and inequality; Andrew Hood, senior research economist, the Institute for Fiscal Studies; and Dr Jim McCormick, associate director Scotland, Joseph Rowntree Scotland.

I will start with a wide-ranging question; other committee members will come in later. I referred to the poverty levels in Glasgow and Scotland. Obviously, Glasgow has the highest number of children who live in poverty. Why do the panellists think that we need the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill?

Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation): In the recent past in Scotland, the United Kingdom and other countries, we have seen progress towards reducing poverty generally and child poverty specifically. Our progress ebbs and flows over time, but we can say that having a vision, a goal and ambition and a timescale for them is very helpful in focusing Governments—national and at all levels—and others, such as housing providers and market providers, on what they can contribute specifically to that very complex and ambitious task. If we are to have that commitment as a society, having good, clear measurements and targets is important for scrutiny and ensuring that we are on track and that we can change course if we are not progressing at the rate at which we would like to progress.

We welcome the bill's provisions in order to sustain progress, widen accountability and locate responsibility. We have views on specific points, but broadly we warmly welcome what the bill is trying to achieve.

Naomi Eisenstadt: The points that I would make are very similar to the points that Jim McCormick has made. I remind the committee that I was the civil servant in the Government who drafted the initial UK bill, so I was really heartbroken about the dismantling of that bill. In particular, I was very pleased about and warmly welcomed the Scottish Government's resistance to dismantling the bill and putting back together some of the key components that I consider most important. Like Jim McCormick, I agree with most of what is in the bill, which can take us really far, although I would make a few very minor comments about things that I am worried about.

Andrew Hood (Institute for Fiscal Studies): As usual with the IFS, we do not endorse or not endorse particular political decisions.

To follow on from what Jim McCormick said, if we look at child poverty rates across the United Kingdom between, for example, 1997 and the mid-2000s at least, we see that there were very large falls. It would be stretching the bounds of credibility to argue that those falls were not directly linked to the Labour Government's target. There were the interim targets for 2010, and then the targets to 2020. In the recent past, we have seen a very clear link between a set of social policies that reduced income poverty among children in the UK and targets of that nature.

The Convener: Gordon Lindhurst has a question on targets.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): Dr McCormick talked about timescales. What do panel members think about the targets that are set in the bill, particularly with regard to timescales? Would interim targets be appropriate in a bill of this nature?

Dr McCormick: Given that the timescale is 13 years, a child starting school this year will, on average, be 18 by the time that we get to the deadline, so understanding what the pathway through a typical childhood looks like, with its various twists and turns, transition points and so on, is quite important. Having interim targets is a

good idea. Around 2023—my goodness, that sounds like a long way away, but is not—there is a strong case to have a thorough root-and-branch look at whether we are making substantial progress at pace towards achieving the targets by 2030. My guess is that more progress will have been made on some targets than on others. We need to be able to understand why that is the case, change course if necessary, as I said, and respond to external shocks, of which there will be lots over the period and which will take Governments by surprise. Being able to recalibrate targets and have interim targets in addition to the proposed delivery plans and annual reports is just good governance.

Naomi Eisenstadt: I agree. We need interim targets and halfway through is an important stage. Part of the difficulty—MSPs should welcome this comment—is that we need a culture change about progress. I was a civil servant when Labour failed to meet its targets. Somebody I knew—Mark Greenberg—wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* that said if only the United States had failed in the way that the British Government had failed on child poverty. We had made massive progress; we just had not met the target.

That culture change is important, because if politicians are afraid of being castigated for failure, they will not be bold enough in their aims. We need to get better, particularly at local level, at saying what did not work, as well as saying what did. That is why Jim McCormick's point about the need to have a thorough look is important. It should be not about blame but about saying, "We tried this and it didn't work, but somewhere else they tried something else that seemed to work." That is very important in terms of interim targets. We need to share what does not work as well as what works, and politicians need to not be afraid that they will be castigated for all time for failure when in fact there may have been real progress.

Andrew Hood: There is a slightly broader issue. The purpose of interim targets would be to try to ensure accountability and the ability to see whether the Government is on track to meet its targets. Speaking from my experience, I can say that interim targets might be useful, but they will be only part of a successful strategy.

I began working for the IFS in 2012. At that time, we were producing independent forecasts of child poverty and it was clear from them that the Government was not on target. However, there was no mechanism to make the Government say how it would get to the targets, and that was after the date for the interim targets had passed. We said that if the Government wanted to hit the targets, it was important that it started describing a strategy that it would use to meet them.

Where I am heading with that is that where we have targets in other spheres of economic policy, such as fiscal rules, Governments do not just say what the deficit is and that the target is that it will be eliminated by a certain date. They have a projection. The Office for Budget Responsibility says, given the Government's current plans, what it expects to be the case in the year when the target binds.

That does not mean that the Government cannot wriggle out of the target by using accounting tricks or doing whatever else it wants to do. Nevertheless, it is a particular way of ensuring that, rather than simply having an interim target, the Scottish Government will be faced every year with a projection, based on current economic forecasts, for poverty levels in 2030, or in year X.

The Convener: Issues come up during the year—just now, for instance, there is Brexit, the roll-out of universal credit and the removal of housing benefit for those aged 18 to 21. Surely looking at a target purely as a number will not work, as the target must be viewed in conjunction with the changes that happen throughout the year.

Andrew Hood: I am saying that, if the bill's intent is that child poverty should be at a certain level by 2030, the Scottish Government should take whatever action it can to ensure that that happens, regardless of what occurs in the wider economy. If the Government is recording progress only against a set of interim targets, it will be very hard, once the timescale for the interim targets has been reached—or even a long way before then—to hold the relevant people to account unless the Government says, "This is what we expect the number to be." There will be a lot of uncertainty around the number, as is the case with all OBR forecasts, but nevertheless it is fair to say that, to some extent, those forecasts have helped to hold the Government to account on its own rules in that context.

Naomi Eisenstadt: There is a real difficulty in striking a balance between holding Government to account, given the wider circumstances, and ensuring that we have the data to ensure that we are on track.

Dr McCormick: It is important that we capture what is within the powers and budgets of local and national Government in Scotland in order to understand the contribution that Scotland can make. That has to be set against wider trends, UK reserved powers, the macroeconomic outlook and so on, but it enables us as far as possible to identify the contribution from different levels of policy making and, where we have the powers, how to maximise the impact of what we can do.

Gordon Lindhurst: As I understand it, you all generally agree that it is good to have interim targets, not just—or even most importantly—for accountability, but to allow for the possibility of review. That means not treating the interim target as the end goal, but rather, at certain stages in the process, reviewing one's assumptions, looking at how things are working and how they are not and adjusting the approach to fit the current circumstances. Is that what you are saying?

Naomi Eisenstadt: A specific and easy example is the one that the convener started with. When I was a civil servant, we thought that employment was the answer, and a huge amount of work went into making sure that lone parents in particular got into work. We were very successful—we continue to be successful—on the employment side, and yet levels of poverty among children have gone up. That is an example of a strategy that was not enough on its own because of other factors such as flat wages and people not getting enough hours. The Government needs interim targets to enable it to say, "We made an assumption—is that assumption borne out?" It does not want to wait until 2030 to find that the assumption is not borne out.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): We have touched on issues around accountability, interim targets and annual reporting. One interesting point that stood out in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's submission was point 18 on delivery plans. Perhaps Dr McCormick would like to comment further on his recommendation that

"a new delivery plan is published early in the next and subsequent parliamentary term rather than at the end of it."

What is the thinking and direction behind that?

14:15

Dr McCormick: That is partly about the status of the delivery plan and where it fits in the parliamentary cycle. If we have annual reporting—a duty that should apply jointly to the Scottish Government and local community planning partners—that is not just retrospective but forward looking, the purpose of the delivery plan is a bit different and it becomes a strategic look at the next four or five years. In accountability terms, it makes more sense to have that as an early act post election so that newly elected MSPs and a newly formed Administration can decide what the best priorities are for the five years of that parliamentary session. In part, that would be about manifesto commitments, but it would also be about the thorough learning that has gone on in the previous session. The timing is a non-trivial point, but the really important thing is that we maximise our ability to learn from national and local contributions to solving child poverty.

The other key point to make—I wholly omitted it from our written submission, for which I apologise—is the link between the plan and the forward budget process. The more that we can drive resource allocation decisions that are based on evidence from what has and has not worked, the more it becomes a living, breathing, practical and useful plan, rather than something that sits to the side of what Government is doing.

Naomi Eisenstadt: I agree with Jim McCormick on the Scottish Government delivery planning process and the timetable that was suggested. However, I would be wary of planning requirements at local authority level, because they become tick-box exercises. You need local authorities to report on whether they have made progress, but how they decide to do that is up to them. If you make each local authority submit a plan, you need a couple of civil servants to read those plans and to go back to the local authority to say that the plan was not good enough, and so on. I get very nervous about requiring too much specification and not enough outcomes framework.

Ben Macpherson: That is useful.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Should there be additional targets, either subsidiary in nature or not? In paragraph 11 of Jim McCormick's submission, he points out that there are several factors that

"are not taken into account in measuring poverty."

They include access to cheaper energy and affordable credit and not having to pay through the nose for household goods or insurance. Should we be looking at recurrent poverty and those who fall in and out of poverty? Are the four measurements sufficient?

Dr McCormick: It is important that we have a small core set of the right targets that are informed by a richer measurement or monitoring framework that gets more into the detail of the connections that drive the outcomes around those targets. The broad measures that are being proposed are very good, but a target that better captures the depth or severity of poverty is missing. Destitution is one concerning aspect of poverty that is not typically experienced, but which a growing number of people are experiencing. Glasgow has the fourth highest estimated rate of destitution in the UK. It is a really important aspect of living way below the thresholds that are set in the bill and there are measures that can be used to get a better grasp of the severity of low income.

It is great that the after housing costs measure is the preferred measure. It is the basis for a more challenging target for the Scottish Government, but it is right that we effectively measure the money that is left over after someone has paid for

their housing, which almost all of us have to do most of our lives.

The supplementary point is that there are other essential costs that reflect a mix of market drivers, regulations and public policy, which cover, as you say, energy, childcare and other costs. In time, we think that it would make sense to move towards more of a composite measure of essential costs—housing plus.

Without overcomplicating it, the use of methodologies such as the minimum income standard captures what is needed to have a modest but adequate standard of living in the UK. Such methodologies allow us to cost some of those essentials more consistently. As well as understanding what is happening around boosting incomes, it is about making sure that we attend to the cost drivers that families face.

Naomi Eisenstadt: As regards the minimum income standard, there are huge differences in the cost of living in Shetland versus Glasgow, so looking at income on its own does not work. Certainly, Scotland and Wales both have much more rural poverty than England has, so, for Scotland, looking at the minimum income standard in rural areas is very important.

Andrew Hood: I have three separate things to say. One is that when we think about measures, the limitations of measurement unfortunately become relevant. For example, there is an argument that, just as the persistent poverty measure exploits the fact that we have data on the same households over multiple years and might be interested in patterns of poverty over that longer timeframe, there might be a good case for being interested in patterns of poverty over a shorter timeframe. Rather than just having that annual capture, you might want to see whether people are moving in and out of poverty. The challenge there is that I do not know of any good source of data that would allow you to do that in a reliable way.

There is a challenge for Scotland in particular. The UK Government was armed with a UK-wide survey, and although the levels of precision in that survey are not great, they give a reasonable guide to what is actually going on. I assume that the plan is that, like the whole-UK targets were, the targets will be based on family resources survey measurements. That will be a challenge in itself.

That takes us to Jim McCormick's point about severity of poverty. Intellectually or conceptually, we absolutely want to measure how deep in poverty someone is. The challenge is measurement. Colleagues at the IFS have shown that, for the vast majority of the people who record their income as zero in the family resources survey, their consumption and living standards are higher than those of the people who report weekly incomes of between £1 and £300. They have been mismeasured—they are people who have just not bothered to fill in that bit of the survey, so we cannot say that that is the group that we really need to worry about. When we think about destitution, there is an argument that at least some of those people are exactly the kind of people who will not answer the door when the survey man knocks. There are therefore difficult issues around measurement.

On housing plus, when you think about what costs you deduct from income before doing a comparison with a poverty line, the tricky element is that there is a trade-off between trying to capture some sense of disposable income—the income that people have to live on—and not wanting people's genuine choices to determine whether they are or are not in poverty.

Let me explain what that means. To measure income after housing costs, for example, has a lot of benefits. However, there is also a disadvantage. Imagine two households with exactly the same income: family 1 values the quality of the house that they live in more than the quality of the food that they eat, and family 2 values the opposite. Therefore, family 1 spends more on rent and less on food, and family 2—because it values those two things differently—chooses to spend less on rent and more on food.

On the AHC measure, one of those households will be measured as being in poverty and the other will not. You might not want that to be the case, because the only difference is that they prefer one thing over another—it is nothing to do with essentials. That is the challenge when you start trying to widen the definition. You might want to capture energy costs but people will make different choices about how much they want to spend, and you might not want that to be reflected in the measure.

The third and final thing is, as Jim McCormick was hinting at, the importance of separating targets from the other things that you want to measure. You can say, "These are the targets and this is what we want to achieve". To do that well, you are going to have to measure a ton of things that are not the targets. You would really want to know about the wage rates of lone parents, the employment rate of parents, childcare provision, benefit take-up rates and so on. There is a huge number of variables and, if you are serious about hitting a set of targets such as these ones, you need to know what the answers are. However, they are not the targets; they are just measures to help you think about what the targets are. That is an important conceptual distinction that, as we have said before, the UK Government has lost hold of to an extent. The consultation document

that it issued in 2013 made no clear distinction between measuring poverty and measuring a cause or a consequence of poverty. The challenge that you face when you are thinking about including more measures is to ensure that, in doing so, you do not start to muddy the waters.

The Convener: Thank you for that explanation. If we were confused about data and various other things, we will be even more confused now. We need to look at the data that we get with clear eyes, because there is truth in the old adage about statistics.

Adam Tomkins will ask the next question.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): Welcome to Glasgow, everyone.

I want to ask whether the bill goes far enough and, if not, how we might encourage our colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to allow it to go a little bit further. I was struck by the written evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which says that poverty has multiple drivers and that setting targets—by which I think it means income targets—is

"a necessary but partial route to reducing poverty in the population as a whole."

I would be inclined to agree that it is both necessary and partial. What do the witnesses think would be necessary to do in addition to setting income targets if we were really serious about reducing child poverty?

Dr McCormick: Thank you for that difficult question.

On whether the bill goes far enough, we must examine its purpose. If the purpose is to set out an ambition and make a commitment and then to have some anchor points by which we decide whether we are on course, it does that narrow job adequately well, although there are some improvements that could be made to it.

However, I think that you are inviting us to talk about what else it takes to arrive at that destination. It takes a lot of things. For example, does the combination of the fairer Scotland action plan that we saw last year, the delivery plan in the bill and the objectives around inclusive growth add up to the comprehensive all-age long-term strategy that we have called for? That strategy is not just a matter for Government; it also involves businesses, housing providers and so on. We are quite a long way from that in Scotland and the UK as a whole. The bill helps us to get closer to it, but a lot of policy and practice activity is needed, and a lot of commitments must be made.

We talk about five major drivers of child poverty, one of which is an ineffective benefits system, which means that there must be improvements in social security. There are lots of things that we can do to make life better and more financially secure for families with children, but it is important that we do not try and put all the strain on the limited powers that Scotland is about to take on. It is also important that the labour market contribution is maximised and that we reduce the attainment gap and the cost of the school day.

We are trying to take action across multiple drivers, and the bill is about keeping track of the income measures of progress and outcomes.

Naomi Eisenstadt: I do not disagree with anything that Jim McCormick has said; I strongly agree with most of it, particularly the points about the links in the bill between the fairer Scotland action plan and inclusive growth.

However, I add a note of caution about what legislation can do and how much you need to work on the cultural issues around employment, regeneration and all the other issues that contribute to or increase poverty.

No matter where you sit in the picture, you think that your bit is the most important. Certainly, legislation is the most important bit, but if you load too much into the legislation, you do not get the cultural change. It is very difficult. There are some short-term things that you need to do, there is the legislation itself and then there is the issue of how you get the wider community—for example, public sector employers—to play ball on the issue of income when funding for the public sector is being squeezed.

14:30

Some of these things are to do with intention. The intention that I always talk about is that of reducing the cost of childcare. Reducing the cost of childcare often helps to make work pay, but the cost of reducing quality is that it will not contribute to reducing the attainment gap; in fact it will increase the attainment gap. In addition, it is women who are employed in childcare, which is the lowest-paid industry, and the group of employers that was most upset about the minimum wage was the childcare sector. There is a problem with the tension between the costs of what you are trying to do: is it for child development gains or employability for parents now, or are you trying to ensure that it is fair work?

The Convener: Does Andrew Hood want to come in on that?

Andrew Hood: I want to briefly build on what Naomi Eisenstadt said. The answer to the question partly depends on why you want to reduce child poverty in the first place. If the focus is on the material living standards of children, given the current measurement framework,

increasing their household incomes is about as direct a policy as it is possible to have. How do you raise those incomes? That is a huge set of issues: you want to measure a whole set of indicators and drivers that will matter there.

As Naomi Eisenstadt was starting to hint at, maybe part of the reason why you care about child poverty is to do with not the material living standards of children when they are children but the long-run effects of growing up in poverty on their later life chances. You might manage to raise the material living standards of children from low-income households in Scotland but have no knock-on effect on a set of objectives related to their schooling, attainment or choices. You would have ended up not hitting the end that you really wanted, although you might have had some good effects along the way. In one sense, that is one of the strongest arguments for income being a partial measure. You might really care about the life chances of the child, but the Scottish Government is not doing anything about measuring the quality of the education that those children get, which, for their lifetime income, is the most important thing.

Adam Tomkins: Thank you all for your really interesting answers. I want to try to drill down a little bit deeper into one element of what has been said. At least two of you—perhaps all of you—have talked about education, and specifically the attainment gap. We all know that the First Minister has said that she wants closing the attainment gap to be her number 1 mission in this session of Parliament. Should the bill include a legal duty on ministers to take steps to close the attainment gap, given what we know about the close link between educational underperformance and child poverty? If not, why not?

Naomi Eisenstadt: I would say no, because I think that if you wrap too much in the bill, you will not get the impact. Income is enormously important and the bill is about income. The Scottish Government has said that income matters. Income matters to everyone in this room and it gives us choices. It is something that Government can do more about.

No country in the world has closed the attainment gap. Not a single country has no social class gradient. What we want to do is to make the gradient a little flatter than it is. The relationship between inequality and the social class gradient on educational outcome is demonstrated everywhere in the world. The assumption is that if we reduce inequality and poverty somewhat, we will begin to narrow the gap. It does not mean that we do not have to make massive efforts on education and the quality of childcare—we do—but I do not think that it belongs in this bill.

I have one more point to make. When we talk about children, it is important that we look at the position of people in their late teens, and that will be addressed in the next report that I am doing for the Scottish Government. I think that one of the perverse impacts of the push on university attainment is that we have failed a significant number of our young people in their late teens, particularly the 14 to 19-year-olds who do not go on to university but who can nevertheless make a significant contribution to the Scottish economy. I would like much more emphasis to be put on that group of young people, and my next report will do that.

Dr McCormick: I agree with that. The place to make the link is in the delivery plan, where Government has to give an account of which powers and budgets it will use to contribute to achieving the targets, but what is really helpful is to have a richer framework around the bill.

I will give an example from the current measurement framework. The indicators are mainly amber, a few are green and two are red. One that is red is extremely important in this context—numeracy rates for children living in the most disadvantaged communities. If we have the right kind of measurement framework, we can see whether the focus is on pockets, prospects or places. We need to know what a balanced approach looks like. As Andrew Hood said, we need to be able to identify the long-term consequences of not getting numeracy capability right at various points in a child's life. Equally, if there are areas in which we are doing well, we need to be able to work out how we maintain and build on that progress.

It is absolutely right to draw out the connection that you are making. I think that the delivery plan is the place where all of us—Parliament included—should be scrutinising how good the Government's theory of change is in achieving the targets.

Andrew Hood: Your question touches on an important issue, which is the potential that a bill such as the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill has to distort incentives. We want to create incentives. In legislating, the intention is to create incentives whereby politicians have a stronger reason than they would otherwise have to go after the targets. That might be of benefit, but it might be of cost if the bill has a distorting effect and moves the focus away from other action that would not deliver on the income-based targets or might not yield fruit within the six-year horizon or even the 12-year horizon that the targets lay out. I am not saying that it is inevitable that such an approach will distort incentives, but if the ultimate objective is multifaceted—if it is to improve the material living standards of children in Scotland over the next five to 10 years and to improve their prospects for the rest of their lives over the next 50 or 60 years—it

is important to bear that issue in mind when we think about what it is that we are doing by legislating for income-based targets.

Adam Tomkins: I have a final, short supplementary. The child poverty measurement framework is a very rich composite set of measurements that does not look only at income—it does not look only at pockets; it also looks at prospects and places. I am not sure that I understand the rationale for having a comprehensive framework but putting only one aspect of that—pockets rather than prospects or places—in the bill and leaving the rest to a very loose and informal extra-statutory, or non-statutory, non-enforcement regime. I do not understand the logic of that.

The Convener: Would anyone like to respond to that, or was Mr Tomkins just making a comment?

Dr McCormick: I understand the premise of the question. What I am saying is that I think that the delivery plan should be quite a big deal from the point of view of parliamentary scrutiny; it should be the place where ministers make the necessary connections. When it comes to portfolio commitments, we should be asking how strong the commitments are on reducing the attainment gap, improving affordable housing and tackling the other contributory factors.

There is a risk that, if we put too much weight on the bill, it will not end up doing what is intended. This is the missing bit of the picture in Scotland. As Naomi Eisenstadt said, the UK Government could change tack and get rid of the previous targets and then Scotland would have a case to answer. The bill does it to some degree, but it is by no means adequate on its own. The Government also has to make sure that the commitments that it has made in other areas are robust and delivered.

The Convener: Does anyone on the panel want to reply to that point before I bring in the next question?

Andrew Hood: I reiterate the importance of clarifying what is child poverty and what are its drivers and consequences. We talk about a child poverty measurement framework, but the attainment gap is not, in most people's understanding, the same thing as material living standards, although they are both important. We can say that we are defining poverty as income poverty, in which case the bill has the right focus, but we can also say that we care about educational attainment and we also care about X and we also care about Y. Alternatively, we can take a broader view but, once we do that, we start to conflate causes and consequences and poverty itself. That is the benefit of having a focus.

The Convener: Naomi, do you want to come in on that point?

Naomi Eisenstadt: My view is similar to what Andrew Hood just said, so I would rather give someone else a chance.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): First, I thank the panel. The committee particularly wanted to hear from you at the beginning because what you have to say is important.

I want to continue on the same theme as Adam Tomkins, because I was surprised at the answers. Andrew Hood said that we have to measure child poverty, and I agree with all that. I am not an academic and all this is quite new to me, but I understand why we need to measure things. However, what is the point of a focus on a bill if we are not going to use the bill to get the Government to specify how it will make a difference? I am struggling with that.

We may or may not agree about the measures that could be taken. However, one of the reasons why the Labour Government made some progress on child poverty was child tax credits, and it did the same for pensioners. During those years, people who were among the poorest pensioners came to me to say that they had never had so much money in their lives.

If the bill is going to make a difference, the Government has to make some big-bang commitments to something. I totally agree with Naomi Eisenstadt that the late-teen age group has been absent from the Scottish Government's programme—not just that of the current Government but those of successive Governments—

Naomi Eisenstadt: That is my fault, as I was talking about the under-fives. [*Laughter*.]

Pauline McNeill: I am not saying that there should not be a focus on the under-fives; I think that you are right that successive Governments have done so much for so many age groups, but there seems to be a direct correlation between living in poverty and not aspiring to go to university. I do not see how people cannot make that link. If we believe that there is such a link, surely there should be something in the bill that drives the Government to at least say what are the three top legislative things it will do until we get to 2030 that will allow us to see whether we have taken the right measures. I am struggling to see why we would not put something in the bill that would force the Government to commit to that. All we will be doing is measuring child poverty for the next 20 years.

The Convener: I will open the discussion up to the panel and a couple of members who have supplementary questions.

Naomi Eisenstadt: The difficulty is with the balance between focus and breadth. Andrew Hood made an interesting point about the purpose of ending child poverty.

14:45

Part of the purpose is to have a productive, wealthy Scotland that is less unequal; and part of it is the social justice argument that asks, "Why does my child have opportunities that somebody else's child doesn't have?" In my view, that is just about social justice and it does not have to link to economic aims: it has to link to fairness. That is why I thought that the process of the fairness work was so good.

On Pauline McNeill's point about having a commitment for the Government in the bill, my view is that, if the bill is strong enough, all the other components will be part of the framework through which we think about how we do our planning. That is why I agree with Jim McCormick about the delivery plan. The difficulty is that it is about both the short term and the long term. Of course, for young people, it is not so long term, because in five or six years the poorest 16-year-olds today will be parents.

Where I am trying to move to is to say that we need an economy with enough well-paying jobs so that the 50 or 60 per cent of young people for whom university is not appropriate still have a chance at a decent life. We have very low apprenticeship pay, the living wage does not kick in until people are 25 and the largest proportion of people on zero-hours contracts are those under 25. There is therefore a real problem in terms of income for those young people who are not, for whatever reason, destined for university. However, I do not think that cramming more and more into the bill will fix that.

Dr McCormick: We could probably pick 25 or 30 policy areas where we have evidence that making the right moves over the next generation will have a small, medium or large impact. My comment is less about a particular group of the population or a particular policy area and more about a kind of procedural test. I would support the bill being tougher on the Scottish Government by giving it a duty, alongside local partners, to report annually and, as part of that, to give us an account of the evidence on which the Government has based its budget decisions that contribute or not—to be discussed—towards the targets. We need in Scotland to invest in better data and better modelling and projections so that we know what would happen if we did not take certain measures.

Pauline McNeill: I wonder whether the panel would consider going a step further than that. I hear what was said about cramming everything into the bill, but I am not suggesting that that should be done. It seems to me that there is a case for saying in the bill that, as well as having an annual report and a delivery plan, the Scottish Government should be required to set out either budgetary commitments or legislative commitments—it could be as vague as that—that would contribute towards the long-term reduction of child poverty. Would that not link everything together better?

Dr McCormick: I would support that. I would support being explicit about the Government having to make the link with its annual budget process in particular. In addition, we need to ensure as far as possible—this is a big stretch over the 15 to 20-year period—that we are investing in those areas that will give us the biggest impact for most children. Lots of little inputs that benefit small groups of people are fine, but there is a big opportunity cost from not investing in better interventions with better value for money and better longer-term returns. I am not the economist or the fiscal expert on the panel, but I think that it is important that we beef up our capacity to convince ourselves that we are making the best moves possible over the period.

Andrew Hood: I am not a legislative expert and I do not know about the theory of change to which Dr McCormick referred, which is to do with how laws will change policy. However, I have a cautionary tale, which is that the UK Government had an obligation to publish a child poverty strategy under the Child Poverty Act 2010 and I think that it published the last one of those in 2013, but it had no obligation to hit the target in that strategy. The UK Government could therefore say, "Here's our child poverty strategy. We're going to do this. This will help reduce child poverty." If we asked by how much, there was no legislative requirement for the Government to tell us that. If we asked whether that would reduce poverty to the target levels, the Government could just say, "This is our child poverty strategy." That was the situation that the Government had got itself into. I guess that that brings me back to my earlier answer about the value of some form of projection that says, "Show us the modelling that says, if you do this, this and this, you will achieve this target."

The Convener: Did you want to come back in, Pauline?

Pauline McNeill: Yes, I have a final question on this issue. We could discuss, say, 25 or 30 policy measures that could make the difference, but I note—and I want to get this on the record—that paragraph 17 of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation submission says:

"Among the current 17 measures for 'prospects', we note that 9 refer to 'poorest households' ... However, in most

cases even in the 20 per cent of places faring worst, a majority of residents are not income-deprived or employment-deprived."

That paragraph seems to be making the point that we need to be careful here, because it is very often the case that, in areas that we describe as deprived, the majority of people will actually be wealthier than that. No matter what policy measures we think will make a difference, we need to remember that it is individual families and people who matter, not just the areas themselves.

Andrew Hood: Again, that is a data challenge. Our data is not at the level of every single household in the country, which is what you would need to be able to look at the issues on a household-by-household basis. We go about this work in two ways: first, we take survey data from a representative sample of households; and, secondly, we look at area-level measures. Those are the two ways in which we solve the data gap. The fact is that once you start to focus on Scotland, both limitations become more important. The job done by the survey data is less good than having data on 25,000 households across the whole of the UK.

Naomi Eisenstadt: It is not only a data problem but a service delivery problem. It is easier to deliver your anti-poverty strategies on an area basis, because you have a concentration of enough of the population. It is more difficult in rural areas and even in medium-sized towns, where poverty is more dispersed.

The whole targeted-versus-universal argument lies at the heart of that problem. You can afford to take a universal approach where there are concentrations of poverty, but when you take a universal approach to everything, you wind up with a lot of deadweight costs. It is a perpetual problem, and it is about service delivery being sensitive to individual as well as area differences.

However, it can be done and it should be done. Race, gender and all the equalities issues have the same problem and we are worried about race equality not just in Glasgow but in, say, the Shetland Islands.

Dr McCormick: It is a really good challenge and makes us think about what is in effect the geography of poverty. Across the whole of Scotland, about one in three children living in poverty will be found in the most deprived 20 per cent of places, which means that if all you did was target those places, you would access only about one third of the population currently living in poverty. The figure is higher in urban areas and lower in rural areas, but, broadly speaking, those are some figures to consider.

Area-based approaches are an important but partial and, in some ways, increasingly blunt way of targeting resources. There are a number of reasons for that. First, the housing market has changed; for example, we do not have vast council estates full of unemployed people. The picture of poverty has changed dramatically from what it was 30 or 40 years ago. The labour market has also changed, and a lot of poverty is now hidden and disguised as seasonal employment, low pay, inadequate hours and so on.

In some ways, the pupil equity fund, which gives virtually every school some resourcing because virtually every school has an attainment gap, is one way of going about things. The measure of free meal entitlement that it uses might be imperfect, but at least it does not make the mistake of targeting only certain authorities or schools. The geography of this problem has changed a lot over the last generation, and it is important that, as well as targeting measures, we have broad safety nets to try to pick up people who are either in hidden poverty or on the margins and very much at risk of dropping in if those broader frameworks are not in place.

The Convener: Three members want to come in with a supplementary. Ben Macpherson will be first.

Ben Macpherson: Do you want me to comment on the themes that we have discussed in the past few minutes?

The Convener: Yes—and please note that the time that we have left with this panel is running out.

Ben Macpherson: I want to return to the points about wider economic change. Paragraph 16 of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's submission refers to its strategy covering "five major drivers", with a suggestion that four extra indicators be developed. I was particularly interested in the inclusion of an indicator on

"wider GB factors (e.g. Universal Credit uptake and work allowances, benefit sanction rates)".

Will you comment further on that, Dr McCormick?

In addition, I was struck by Ms Eisenstadt's comment that work alone does not work. You have touched on in-work poverty and the fact that two thirds of children in poverty in Scotland are from families that are in work. Will you elaborate further on the critical importance of considering that point and how the inclusive growth agenda is key to the issue?

Dr McCormick: You raised a point about what we might include as indicators and about making sure that those are covered in delivery plans. We want the Scottish Government and its partners to be held to account for what is within their substantial remits, powers and budgets, otherwise there is a measurement framework over which

they have limited control. Fundamentally, this is about devolved and local policies, but it would be a mistake to ignore UK or GB-wide drivers. Andrew Hood's work at the IFS will bear out the importance of the tax and the social security changes that will remain at the UK level and how those could have a substantial bearing on Scotland's progress on the targets over the next five years, at a minimum.

It is important that we have the best grasp that we can of the different contributions, so that we are able to keep track of what is happening with the drivers, able to weigh up the scale of the effect of GB-wide influences and to compare those with Scotland-led influences.

The bill will put local authorities and national health service boards in the spotlight. We have to get that local reporting right and to avoid the bureaucratic, box-ticking or retrofitting risks. It is also important that we have the UK Government in the spotlight for those areas where its choices could have a substantial bearing on performance in Scotland.

Naomi Eisenstadt: In-work poverty is basically about low wages, not enough work hours, the quality of the job and the lack of progression. I particularly dislike the expression "positive destinations", because it makes everyone feel great that we have done hugely well on positive destinations as young people leave school, but it does not distinguish between flipping burgers at McDonald's or going to the University of St Andrews; there will be a social class gradient, too. It is the nature of the work that is important.

The NHS and local authorities have a major role, because they are massive employers. Scotland is one of the countries in Europe with the best qualified people. We do not have an undereducated population; rather, we have people taking jobs for which they are overqualified and other people who would happily do those jobs are excluded from them because the application process is more difficult than the job.

A whole range of steps could be taken on the employment side. Those would be through custom and practice, not legislation. The issue is about how we get together private and public sector employers to think through the employment picture in in-work poverty terms.

Work is important—it is good for mental health and attachment to the community, and those in work act as role models for children. I wanted to believe that work would solve the problem—and I feel bad that it has not. The next stage in the work story involves looking at how we improve the quality of work and ensure that people who have PhDs do not wind up driving taxis.

15:00

The Convener: Alison Johnstone has a supplementary.

Alison Johnstone: The panel has spoken about the need for the bill to have a focus, without which it will not be able to deliver on its objectives. Dr McCormick spoke about the link with the annual budget process and Naomi Eisenstadt pointed out that, unfortunately, work does not always pay, so some people will be reliant on additional income.

As you will no doubt be aware, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the projected increase in absolute child poverty is explained entirely by the tax and benefit changes. Do you have a view on that? It suggests that we have to ensure that we make optimum use of the powers that the Scottish Parliament now has to raise tax and so on. Should the bill make any provisions that are linked to the social security powers that are coming to the Parliament?

Andrew Hood: On the high-level point, and to follow on from Ben Macpherson's question, it seems that one way in which the bill could fail to achieve its aims would be if Scottish politicians, quite reasonably, were to say, "What were we supposed to do? The UK Government made all these changes, and those powers are reserved." That is a real challenge.

Even at UK level, there are clearly factors beyond the Government's control that really affect child poverty rates. In one sense, what happened with the coalition Government was that it said, "Well, we have the biggest recession and global economic downturn since the great depression—that is why we are not going to hit the targets." That was the bottom line.

There are always factors that are outside the control of organisations or of the level of Government that they are trying to affect, and it is important that we think through what that means for the bill's effectiveness. I do not know enough about the technicalities of the legislative structures to be able to say how that should play out.

The Convener: Does Naomi Eisenstadt want to come in on that?

Naomi Eisenstadt: With regard to the part of the previous question that I failed to answer, there is no simple answer to any of this—it is all very tough. From my whole career, I know that, no matter where people are, they always blame the next people up. When I took part in the fairness commission on Shetland, the people from Unst were blaming Lerwick. That is life—people will always do that.

Whatever level someone is at in Government or in civil society, they can contribute something in

this area. One of the lessons in relation to inclusive growth is that we need to ask how we use regeneration and capital investment in job creation and in training and development. It is about not only the budgetary response, but getting double payback for every pound that the Government spends. There are things that the Scottish Government can do with its powers, otherwise I would never have taken on the job of adviser.

Dr McCormick: With regard to social security powers, the important links to make in the bill include what Governments—plural—over this period propose as the basis for driving take-up in the right direction and for annual uprating of the payments for which we will be responsible, and how they will ensure that people have genuine access to information, advice and guidance on the new system. Those are important, tangible links. They will not sit in detail in the bill, but they will sit with this committee when it comes to consider the next bill. That is a very good litmus test for whether the social security and related tax powers are doing their job to contribute alongside the other drivers that we have spoken about.

The Convener: Ruth Maguire has a last supplementary.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I am not sure whether you will allow this as a supplementary, convener, but I will chance my hand. I thank you all for your contributions—they are very interesting, and we have covered a wide range of topics.

I have a specific question about targeting versus universalism. I would like to hear the panel's views on topping up child benefit. Instinctively, I would tend to go for a universal approach to things, but I am acutely aware that a lot of the money would be invested in people who are not in poverty. What are the panel's reflections on that?

The Convener: I will let you chance your arm. Who wants to answer that question?

Andrew Hood: There is simply no way out of the fundamental trade-off between universality and targeting. Basically, we tend to think that there is always a trade-off between the generosity of the system towards the poorest, the cost of the system to the Government and, in particular, the work incentives that that creates. There is no easy way out of that.

Despite all of universal credit's operational challenges and some emerging flaws—it is fair to say that there are some emerging flaws—it does a relatively good job of optimising the trade-offs in the structure, as it gets rid of some of the idiosyncrasies of the old system. Structurally, it basically does what can be done, which is to say, "You get this much when you have no private income. We'll then withdraw that at a rate that we're going to choose." If you tried to make that universal, that would be prohibitively expensive, unless you reduced the generosity to those on the lowest incomes. Unfortunately, that is just the maths, and it is very hard to get round that.

The Convener: Does Naomi Eisenstadt want to come in on that?

Naomi Eisenstadt: Yes. I was afraid of that question, because I am not with my colleagues on the issue. I am not in favour of the £5 extra child benefit. I simply do not think that that is the best way to spend the limited money that we have. If we give everyone a spoonful of rice, the people who are most in need will not get any fatter, but the fattest will get fatter. Therefore, I am not in favour of that approach.

There is a fundamental issue about the delivery of benefits and the benefits system, and that is to do with dignity and respect. We should stop using stigma as an excuse for universalism and start to treat people as decent human beings; we would then not have that problem. That goes back to Jim McCormick's point about take-up.

Dr McCormick: It is the classic dilemma. Universalism has every advantage over targeting, except cost. Over this period, there is a choice for Governments on what is affordable and what is effective. One thing that could be done to retain universalism and have an element of targeting without stigma and without take-up falling is to explore the interaction with the tax system.

Naomi Eisenstadt: Yes. That is another way to do it.

Dr McCormick: Other countries have progressive taxation of some universal payments. That keeps everyone in the system, but ensures that there are different levels of payment in the system. We have tried to do that in a very clunky way with child benefit for top-rate taxpayers. I am not proposing that, but we could take the small example of winter fuel payments and explore how they can be taxed.

If we were to raise child benefit in Scotland, we could explore taxation. There are other things that we could do in the meantime. For example, we could choose to top up child tax credits as a more targeted and affordable way of getting to the same place.

There are no easy answers; there are only difficult choices. We should welcome CPAG and colleagues having at least put that issue on the table and come forward with figures. Costed propositions are really important. Whether that is the best priority in the next five years is for Governments and Parliaments to decide, but that should stimulate a debate in which we can look at

the issue alongside other examples of using the topping-up power and come to a conclusion on the most effective approach.

Ruth Maguire: Dr McCormick, you said that the winter fuel payment is an example of a benefit that you might tax. Have you thought of any others?

Dr McCormick: At JRF we support the principle of not looking at social security in isolation but exploring the interaction with tax. We have said that we think, partly because poverty rates have been reduced so substantially for older people, that that is the place to start. We have not costed other examples, but we should have the courage in Scotland to explore the interactions with our broad new powers, although we do not have easy answers at this stage.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That was very diplomatically put. We have run over time, so I thank the witnesses for their contributions. We have learned a lot.

15:10

Meeting suspended.

15:16

On resuming—

The Convener: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for your patience. I thank the witnesses on the second panel for their patience, because the first panel session ran over slightly. If you wish, we can do the same for you.

I welcome John Dickie, director of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, and Eddie Follan, policy and public affairs officer at Barnardo's Scotland. As with the previous panel, I want the discussion to be quite open and for either of you to answer the questions. I will start with the same question as before. Why do we need the bill?

Eddie Follan (Barnardo's Scotland): Thank you, convener, for the invitation to take part today, which is appreciated. I am here to represent a coalition of organisations that are part of the end child poverty coalition, which has campaigned for quite a long time on—obviously—ending child poverty and on income measures. The coalition includes the Poverty Alliance, the Child Poverty Action Group, Children in Scotland, Children 1st and One Parent Families Scotland.

All members of the coalition warmly welcome the bill. I was listening to Naomi Eisenstadt and we are relieved that the bill has been introduced. We work every day with the consequences of poverty. We work with families, the majority of whom have one thing in common, which is that they are on a low income. That has an impact on organisations such as Barnardo's Scotland, which, rather than getting in early and working with those families to help them to improve their lives progressively, has ended up having to deal with crises that usually arise because such families have no money.

As I said, we welcome the bill, and the committee has our submission. We think that the bill could be improved in some areas and I have no doubt that we will answer questions about that.

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): The short answer to the question is that we face a scandalous situation in which more than one in four of Scotland's children are officially recognised as living in poverty. Those figures are starting to increase, and projections suggest that up to 100,000 more children will be pushed into poverty by the end of the decade. We face an existing and increasing child poverty crisis in Scotland.

It is important to have targets and measures, but it is also important to remember that behind the statistics and the measures are tens of thousands of children in Scotland whose families do not have the resources to give them a decent start in life. Those families do not have the resources to support their children to participate in the day-to-day after-school activities that their peers are participating in. They do not have the resources to ensure that children have the same diet or the same healthy food as their peers. Those families do not have the resources to make sure that their children can enjoy the school holidays. Too many are left with no income at all, and some find themselves and their children at food banks. It is clear that we face a desperate situation that requires government at every level to look at how it can use all its powers to tackle the problem.

As a campaigning organisation and a charity that is working for an end to child poverty, our experience is that having in place clear targets and a legislative framework can be really helpful in keeping the child poverty crisis at the forefront and in holding the Government to account on the progress that it makes. We are delighted that the bill is before the Scottish Parliament. We are keen to support the committee and Parliament to strengthen it and to ensure that it passes successfully through the Parliament.

Gordon Lindhurst: I think that you were both in the room when the earlier panel gave evidence, so I do not want to repeat too much of what was said then. The bill places no legally enforceable obligations on ministers, so it is not a bill under which anyone could go to a court of law to ensure that any rights were enforced. As I read it, there are also no interim targets to hold the Government to account on or to allow for review and adjustment of assumptions or the approach that is being taken. Of the previous witnesses, Dr

McCormick talked about the risk of not attaining the bill's objectives if certain things were added to it and Naomi Eisenstadt talked about whether the bill is strong enough. From your points of view, are interim targets a good thing?

Eddie Follan: It is worth looking at the lessons that we have had before from targets that have been set out in legislation. One lesson is from the fuel poverty target that was set in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. The target was to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016 but, for a series of reasons—the main one was the price of energy—we never eradicated it. We had no interim target, so we went for 15 years without getting to the stage of saying, "How are we getting on?" To be fair, there was a lot of investment in energy efficiency measures, but there could have been more, and at no point did we sit down and say, "Where are we now?", which is really important. It is important that we do that with the bill.

A better example of such a precedent is the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009—you might be able to tell that I used to work in the field of energy policy—in which there is an interim target for reducing emissions by a certain amount by 2020 and a final target for 2050, but also annual targets along the way. The independent Committee on Climate Change advises the Government on how to set those annual targets. Targets need to be achievable—you do not want to set yourself up to fail—and that has been the ethos for the climate change targets. There is the imperative of doing it, but they also need to be achievable.

The same point applies to the bill—the targets have to be achievable. If we decide to put in interim targets, we have to make sure that we do not fail to meet them. At the same time, we should not go from end to end with no targets.

John Dickie: I agree. There would be value in adding interim targets to the bill. Along with others, we have suggested a halfway target for halfway through the period that we are looking at, which would provide an opportunity to take stock, to reflect and to review whether we are fundamentally off the trajectory for achieving the targets. Interim targets would be welcome.

There is something to be said about the different ways in which progress can be measured between now and 2030, which is when the ambition is to achieve the targets, and about the role of the delivery plans and the annual laying of the delivery plans before Parliament. The role of the Scottish Government's commitment to refreshing the measurement framework that will sit alongside the delivery plans is also important.

Having interim targets as well as the main poverty targets will allow us to review progress and to have a clear sense of where we want to be year by year in relation to the delivery plan and the measurement framework. Perhaps we need to explicitly refer to the measurement framework in the legislation, given that it is clearly being seen as an important part of the overall picture for understanding what needs to be in place to make progress and how we measure whether progress has been made beneath the headline targets.

The Convener: I have a small supplementary. All the organisations that Eddie Follan represents work on the ground with people we might call users, and John Dickie also represents a number of such groups. I note that the submissions suggest that not just organisations but users—those who are directly affected—should have some way of feeding into the targets. Is that what you suggest?

Eddie Follan: Absolutely. Users' lived experience is crucial to and essential in informing Government policy on targets or whatever else. I know that the Government carried out a fairly wide-ranging consultation on the fairer Scotland action plan, but I think that, if we are going to take such an approach—we know that it has benefits—we need to think about what the outcomes will be. Too often, we ask people for their experiences and then just wander off; things might get done, but either nothing changes or we cannot tell people what changed as a result of their involvement. I absolutely agree that people should be able to give input but, if we are going to do that, we have to ensure that we do it meaningfully.

John Dickie: In developing the national delivery plans, we need to engage with and involve families with lived experience of poverty, listen to what they say and understand what works or does not work in supporting them to increase their incomes and find routes out of poverty. That is crucial, and perhaps we can get into the question of what needs to be put in place and how to ensure that, with regard to process and content, the delivery plans clearly set out what is expected in each year of the five-year period.

The Convener: I might explore that issue with the next panel, if not with you.

Adam Tomkins: A few minutes ago, John Dickie said that he would like the bill to be not only passed but strengthened. We have talked a bit about interim targets, and delivery plans were just mentioned, but what else do you want to be included in the bill? Is there anything that should be taken out of the bill to strengthen it?

John Dickie: I do not think that anything should be taken out of the bill; what is in there is good. However, as I said, the addition of interim targets would be helpful, and the welcome addition of a duty on local authorities and health boards to

report on progress and on what they are doing to tackle child poverty could be strengthened by ensuring not only that a retrospective report on what has been done to tackle poverty is produced but that local authorities and their partners take a strategic, forward-looking approach at a local level and mainstream the issue of child poverty in all their relevant planning processes.

We have been looking at local outcome improvement plans, community planning partnerships and children's services plans. We are not necessarily suggesting that a new duty to produce a child poverty strategy should be imposed, but we must ensure that local authorities and their partners put child poverty front and centre in existing strategic processes, in addition to looking retrospectively at what they have done that might have contributed to tackling child poverty. We get that there is a balance to be struck between being prescriptive and ensuring that there is progress on making child poverty an outcome that is at the forefront of every local authority's decisions on policy and spending priorities, but we think that that is a key area for development.

I mentioned the need for the measurement framework and the important role that it plays to be explicitly referred to and recognised in the bill. We also suggest that the bill could be strengthened through the potential for independent scrutiny and the Scottish Government's commitment to setting up a poverty and inequality commission. If that is to exist, it makes sense to give it a concrete role of providing independent scrutiny of and advice on the progress that is being made against the child poverty targets, and it is important for that function to be established in statute and for the commission to have the resources and expertise to do that work properly.

15:30

There is a range of mechanisms for ensuring that the legislative framework is correct, that we can drive progress and that opportunities to scrutinise and hold the Government to account are built into the framework. To pick up on the previous panel's discussion, we have said that there is also an opportunity to include substantive measures to back up the legislative framework that underpins the targets and the approach that needs to be taken—the mechanisms—with policy proposals. We have specifically modelled the impact that topping up child benefit would have, given the tie-in between the bill and the Scottish Parliament's new social security powers and given everything that we know about what worked when progress was made on reducing child poverty, which we heard about in the earlier evidence session.

I am probably moving on to other questions but, on what we know works, to go back to John Major's Government in the mid-1990s, there was recognition of the pressure that low-income families were under and child benefit was invested in. That was followed through by the new Labour Government with investment in child benefit and tax credits. We know that boosting incomes by using social security powers works to reduce child poverty and improve wider wellbeing. We also know that the freeze on child benefit and family benefits and the cuts to the value of social security for families are the key drivers behind the increasing levels of child poverty and the forecast explosion in child poverty that the modelling suggests will happen soon.

There is evidence that such policies work at having a big impact on child poverty. That is why we think that we can use the legislative framework for the strategic approach and the targets for ending child poverty as an opportunity to introduce policies that will make a substantive impact on levels of child poverty and set us on the ambitious trajectory towards eradicating child poverty by 2030.

The Convener: Does Eddie Follan want to come back in?

Eddie Follan: I think that John Dickie has stolen my lines, but that is the danger of working in coalition—that is nothing to do with the Government, obviously.

It is important to recognise the work that goes on in local authorities. Barnardo's works closely with local authorities, many of which are taking a strategic approach to tackling child poverty. I will mention two—that is not to exclude others—that I know from experience are doing a lot of work on child poverty: they are Renfrewshire Council and Inverclyde Council. However, one issue for us is the inconsistency of such work across Scotland. We hear that said a lot about the implementation of policy, but policy on child poverty is applied inconsistently. That is not to say that child poverty is not a priority for local authorities, because I am sure that it is, but it depends on what resource they can put into tackling it. We would support additional resource for local authorities to ensure that they can take forward some of the work that the bill proposes and be much more consistent in their approach.

John Dickie touched on a lot of things that we said in our submission, so I will not labour those points.

Adam Tomkins: I take the points that both witnesses have made about additional resource, but I am conscious that Opposition MSPs have limited powers in terms of the amendments that they can lodge to strengthen the bill, particularly

where such amendments would require additional revenue spend. I will therefore focus on where we can seek to improve the bill on the non-revenue side.

I was struck in particular by something that John Dickie said that goes against the caution that we heard about from our session with the earlier panel, which you were both here for. Naomi Eisenstadt in particular was quite strong in her steer that the committee should not seek to overload the bill because that might do more harm than good, although I am probably putting words into her mouth. How do you react to the suggestion that one of the virtues of the bill is how slim it is? Do you agree?

John Dickie: It is important that the bill remains focused on what it is meant to achieve, which is to set targets and to create a framework and mechanism by which plans to reach those targets can be developed and reported on, and by which people can be held to account on the targets.

How much ends up on the face of the bill and how much ends up in regulations or guidance is a matter for discussion in committees and the Parliament. We need to ensure that there is consistency and that we all have a shared understanding of what child poverty is and what is needed in order to end it. There is scope for setting out in more detail what should be included in the delivery plan in terms of process, because we need to be clear about exactly what will be done in that five-year period, what impact it is expected to have in terms of progress to reach the targets, who will be responsible for delivering on that and what the implications of that will be for the Scottish budget.

It is important that we get some of those issues set out—in the bill, or in regulations or guidance—so that they do not drift in a way that means that the targets become about something else. In the earlier discussion, you heard how, when we talk about poverty, we can start to talk about a lot of other things that are important regarding children's wellbeing. The bill is about tackling the underlying poverty that undermines the ambitions that we have for our children—all the problems and issues that low-income families and other families face. Taking away the poverty barrier is central to the bill.

A balance needs to be struck, but I think that there are ways in which we can strengthen the bill without overloading it or undermining its primary purpose.

Adam Tomkins: That is helpful. Do you think that there is room to include in the legislation a requirement for the delivery plans to address the attainment gap?

The Convener: I will let Eddie Follan answer first, because he did not have a chance to reply to the first question.

Eddie Follan: I agreed with a lot of what the previous panel said. We are good at measuring numeracy and literacy, which are two of the pillars of the curriculum, but we are less good at measuring the third pillar, which is the health and wellbeing side of things. We have had discussions with Scottish Government officials about how best we can do that through the national improvement framework. That work is on-going. We work closely with schools and local authorities on closing the attainment gap, and action goes on locally to do that.

On the first question, there is a big issue about process. We are talking about income and poverty today, but it is important to join up the work that we already do. Part 3 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 contains a requirement for local authorities and health boards to report on progress on poverty against the national and local outcomes. However, that reporting is patchy and inconsistent. In relation to the bill that we are discussing today, we could consider including a duty on local authorities to plan, but we could also, in the fullness of time, consider guidance on joining up the actions that are already being taken. Under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, local communities set their outcomes locally. We would argue that we should consider the links between the legislation that we are discussing today and that process, with the aim of ensuring that local people are involved as well.

John Dickie: I agree about the importance of tackling the educational attainment gap. Last year, during the passage of the Education (Scotland) Bill, we argued that that aspect should be beefed up, with a clear duty on Government to reduce the attainment gap as part of the legislation. That is where I see that aspect more comfortably fitting. The measure is one of attainment and the attainment gap; it is not, in itself, a measure of poverty or child poverty.

Clearly, child poverty—the fact that families do not have enough money for their children to be able to participate fully and comfortably at school, or to get the most out of the school day—is the key driver of the attainment gap. If we are serious about closing the attainment gap, it is key that we tackle poverty and make progress on the poverty targets. The two aspects relate to each other.

As I said, we pushed hard for there to be statutory targets and a statutory duty to close the attainment gap in the Education (Scotland) Act 2016. Perhaps there could be scope for an amendment to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

that would amend the 2016 act in order to achieve that; I am not sure.

Adam Tomkins: Would you support that?

John Dickie: Yes.

Alison Johnstone: The Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill in many ways replicates the UK Child Poverty Act 2010. I noticed that the end child poverty coalition's submission calls for independent scrutiny. John Dickie has discussed that issue with us today. Is the panel surprised that there is no suggestion that an independent body should provide scrutiny?

Eddie Follan: First, I should mention that we are members of the ministerial advisory group on child poverty and discussions take place in that forum. We are encouraged that the Government is proposing a poverty and inequality commission. I think that that was a manifesto commitment. We would want to see the details, but having an independent scrutiny role is crucial, particularly when it comes to targets.

Our submission mentions the independent panel on climate change. There could be a role for such a committee to advise the Government on the targets that it should set and why, if that were the case, they have not been met. There should be independent scrutiny; let us see how that progresses.

John Dickie: There was recognition that there was a landscape there, if you like, with a ministerial advisory group, an independent adviser to the First Minister on poverty and a manifesto commitment to establish a poverty and inequality commission. The legislation provides an opportunity to think through in a bit more depth how best to make that work in scrutiny terms and how to add a level of accountability to the child poverty legislation. Given that there is a commitment to have a poverty and inequality commission, it would make sense for that to have a statutory function to scrutinise and to advise on progress towards meeting child poverty targets.

Alison Johnstone: You have spoken about boosting incomes using social security powers. The Greens have been urging the Government to roll out the healthier, wealthier children initiative, which has proven positive impacts in Glasgow. I think that the Government is receptive to that. Does income maximisation have a role to play?

John Dickie: That project is a good example of how boosting income could work. Having the right referral networks among the mainstream statutory services—in that project, midwives and health visitors refer expectant and new parents to income maximisation services—has worked to boost incomes.

The project was independently evaluated over two years and, I think, the financial gain was more than £3 million to households across greater Glasgow, which is an average gain of more than £3,000 per household. Money is available that people are entitled to, whether they are in or out of work, but some families are missing out on it.

We could build in referrals to income maximisation and provide the income maximisation benefits advice service to families at key transition points. The birth of a child, the time when a child becomes entitled to free early years provision, the start of primary school and the start of secondary school are points at which things change for families and additional costs start to be incurred, so ensuring that all families get access to a high-quality income maximisation check would be a useful contribution to boosting family incomes and achieving the targets that are laid out in the bill.

15:45

Alison Johnstone: I will put the same question to Eddie Follan. Should there be a provision in the bill to offer all parents or guardians access to income maximisation advice?

Eddie Follan: I agree with what John Dickie said.

We are talking about delivery plans and we are saying that when ministers report they should report on what they are doing on income maximisation and provision of advice. We want the bill to include a number of things that the Government must report on, and income maximisation should be one of those things, because its role is crucial. As we said earlier, we must take every opportunity to increase people's incomes. We have only a certain range of options, so that is what we want to see in the bill.

Pauline McNeill: I want to ask the panel the question that I asked the previous panel. There is a great deal of support in the committee and the Parliament for the Scottish Government having targets, which we hope that it will assess as we go along to 2030. Should the bill require the Government to set out, either in the budget or in the delivery plan, how it hopes to achieve the targets to reduce child poverty by 2030?

Eddie Follan: I echo what the previous panel said. The delivery plan will be crucial. The Government will have to come back to Parliament every year and it will have to report on what it does. The delivery plan should have to include particular aspects, such as the full use of Scottish social security powers, the provision of information and advice on income maximisation, the provision of suitable and affordable housing, the availability of childcare and the facilitation of employment for

parents and carers. We want to see all those things in the delivery plan.

I can understand why the bill might not contain a commitment to spending. John Dickie will have something to say on that. I cannot speak for the coalition on that.

It is crucial that we ensure that there will be accountability, and that is where targets have a role. We on the outside of Parliament will be able to scrutinise whether the Government is reaching those targets, and you, as politicians, can do the same thing. Annual reports will be crucial and will allow us to hold the Government to account on the progress that it is making.

On poverty causes, we need to look at increasing the incomes of those in this country who are on the lowest incomes. As I said, we need to take every opportunity to do that. I know that John Dickie will want to talk about one aspect of that.

John Dickie: There is a range of policy levers. It is important that the bill sets out the legislative framework that will ensure that the Scottish Government, local government, health boards and their partners use the whole range of policy levers that will be needed to achieve the ambition of eradicating child poverty. As Eddie Follan and others have said, that is about employment—improving parents' access to the labour market and the rewards for parents in the labour market. It is also about using social security powers, particularly the new powers that are coming to the Scottish Parliament, and it is about housing and not being complacent about housing costs.

A major reason for our seeing faster progress in Scotland and having lower levels of child poverty after housing costs is that housing costs have been kept lower. However, we should not be complacent about that, because they are increasing. More and more low-income families are ending up in the private rented sector, so keeping housing costs low and affordable needs to be a key part of the delivery plans, along with access to advice and information, as we have already discussed. All those policy levers will need to be used to the maximum in order to achieve the targets, which are ambitious. There is no single one of those levers that is the only one that needs to be used.

Having said all that, there is real potential to use this bill—this expression of the commitment of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to ending child poverty—to show how those policy levers will be used in a substantive way and to ensure that resources are allocated to make progress in tackling child poverty.

The new social security powers allow us to top up reserved benefits, including child benefit. That is one area in which there is evidence of what works in tackling child poverty; there is evidence of its impact in terms of numbers. We are talking about a £5 top-up reducing child poverty by lifting 30,000 children out of poverty—that is a 14 per cent reduction in child poverty.

The Convener: Can I ask a wee supplementary? I am conscious of what the previous panel of witnesses mentioned about child poverty in particular. Would you be looking to means test for the top-up?

John Dickie: No. To follow on from the earlier discussion, there is a real issue that we have to think about. There is a difficult balance to strike between universal approaches and means-tested approaches. We have thought about this very carefully within CPAG and, with stakeholders, we have modelled the impact of topping up child benefit and the impact of topping up the child tax credit. There are strong arguments on each side of that judgment call. We reached our conclusion given the administrative ease and efficiency of child benefit, with its near 100 per cent take-up. There is also the fact that families are very often living on child benefit, even when they are struggling with means-tested benefits and are not getting the tax credits that they are entitled to. There was evidence from food banks that the only income that families still had was their child benefit because of the problems with the means-tested system.

There is also the scale of the cuts to the value of universal credit and the fact that it will be limited to the first two children alone—there are a lot of reasons that make it quite complicated and difficult to work out exactly how a Scottish Government that is topping up a UK benefit would get round those hurdles and make it an effective and efficient way of ensuring that that money reached all the low-income families that we want to reach. There are also the arguments about not wanting to create any issues as parents move into work or increase their earnings. Those issues are avoided if child benefit is paid to families both in and out of work. There is a whole bundle of reasons why a non-means-tested approach makes sense in terms of being the most straightforward, efficient, effective way of investing in low-income families.

Pauline McNeill: I want to make a comment to both of you about what I am struggling with in the evidence that I heard from the first panel and a bit of what I am hearing now, notwithstanding the policy on topping up child benefit, which I have no difficulty in supporting. I am concerned about getting bogged down in targets and reports when we scrutinise the bill at stage 2. I know that those things are important, but it seems to me that, as advisers to the Government, you have to get across that, if we are trying to achieve

generational change, that has to be the purpose of the bill. I cannot support the bill in any other terms.

I am not certain how we would achieve that generational change, but I am looking for more from all the organisations that we are getting evidence from. I will be honest—I am looking for more. I am relying on organisations such as yours to guide the committee and to give us ideas about what can bring about generational change, because I do not believe that just setting targets will achieve that. That is why I support the policy of the Child Poverty Action Group, but that will not be the only one.

The line that Adam Tomkins is pursuing about the link between educational attainment and child poverty seems to me to be quite an important one. Surely if we do not have something that links the targets to Government action, we will fail in 2030.

The Convener: Does anyone want to address that?

Eddie Follan: It is absolutely the case that we need more investment, and we would completely support that, but I cannot tell you today, "This needs to happen." However, the targets are important. The bottom line is that we need to have ambitious targets in place and we need to hold the Government to account on them. In the interim, the Government must come back to Parliament every year and we must hold it to account.

Pauline McNeill: I presume, therefore, that you support interim targets, because we cannot just wait until 2030.

Eddie Follan: We absolutely support interim targets. Earlier, I said that there were two models that we could look at: the fuel poverty legislation, which did not provide for targets, and the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, which provided for annual reporting and annual targets. There is merit in looking at both models.

The Convener: I want to follow up on the issue of targets. You mentioned working locally and the need for a joined-up approach. If there were a joined-up approach—I assume that this would be looked at as part of the consideration of the social security bill—that would give us evidence for the targets. I am just surmising. I will follow up on that with the next panel.

Eddie Follan: One of the issues for the end child poverty coalition is the lack of a link between the local and the national. It is very important that we get that right.

To be fair, we have a very complex planning landscape in Scotland when it comes to things such as children's service planning and setting local outcome improvement plans through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. The committee will have to consider whether there ought to be a duty on local authorities to plan ahead. Potentially, that could be done within the bill as it sits. When the local authorities report annually, they could give an indication of what they were going to do over the next year. That would not necessarily need to be scrutinised, but we need to link up the different planning systems and make sure that they link to the national targets. That is a challenge, and the guidance will help with that.

John Dickie: We support the bill, because it is not just about setting targets for 2030 and then forgetting about them. The targets do not sit in isolation. There will be a duty on the Government to produce delivery plans and to lay annual reports before Parliament. I would be interested in exploring what commitments we can get, either in the legislation or from the committee and from the Government, that there will be annual scrutiny of those reports. This committee would probably be the most relevant one to scrutinise the reports and to hold ministers, local authorities and health boards to account on the progress that was being made and the action that was being taken to move towards the targets.

There is a link between the 2030 targets—hopefully, there will be an interim, halfway target in the bill—and the five-year delivery plans and the annual reporting. All that needs to come together so that the Government is held to account. In the delivery plans, there must be clarity on the expectations, which must include the use of all the key policy levers, whether on employability, social security, childcare or housing. There ought to be concrete, practical policies in the delivery plans. If there are not, the Government must be held to account on why those are missing from the delivery plans.

Ben Macpherson: It could be suggested that the question that I am about to ask is on a nebulous point, but I think that it is an important one, so I ask the witnesses to bear with me.

Your organisations work on the ground with children and families who are affected by poverty every day of the year. We have focused a lot on the practical issue of the bill's capacity to have an effect through budgets, through targeting and through holding the Government to account, but I want to ask about the capacity of legislation to bring about social change and to shift social consciousness in such a way that we make sure that we keep a focus on child poverty.

In reading "Child Poverty Measurement Framework—Performance at a Glance 2016", I was struck by the fact that 40 per cent of the poorest children do not feel accepted at school by those around them. In general or specific terms, how do you see the bill's importance to the overall journey that we in Scotland are taking to build a

social security system that is based on dignity and respect? How do you see its interaction with the social security bill and the overall programme of change?

16:00

Eddie Follan: Naomi Eisenstadt touched on that earlier when she talked about the cultural change that is needed to tackle a lot of these issues. The important point is that there is no one single aspect that we can change that will get us to the 2030 targets, but cultural change is one of the aspects that will. As I said earlier, we were genuinely relieved that the income measures that had been taken away were going to be put back into the bill. We know the impact that having no money has on the people we work with.

I am not sure that that answers your question. We can look back to additional support for learning; there are arguments around that at the moment. It used to be called "special needs", but the legislation changed that and it became much less about people having special issues; now we think of it as being about people who need additional support. Therefore, I think that legislation has a role to play in driving cultural change and how we think about poverty in this country.

For clarification, our submission seems to suggest that there is no measurement framework. I know that the Government is reviewing it, but we would like to see particular aspects included in the measurement framework that would improve it.

John Dickie: Legislation in itself will not create the change that is needed to end child poverty. That will require a wider culture change so that there is public support for the necessary measures and pressure on the Government and Parliament to take the necessary action to end child poverty. Children are living in poverty because work is not paying their parents enough; because there are too many barriers to childcare so parents cannot increase their hours of work or get into work in the first place; because the social security system fails to provide parents with adequate financial support whether they are in or out of work; and because housing costs are leaving people without enough money to meet the other costs of bringing up a family.

We need significant policy changes in all those areas to achieve what the bill seeks to achieve. The bill is part of the process for building support within and outwith Parliament for that culture change that will create the kind of environment in which the politicians can make some of the policy and budget decisions that are necessary if we are going to have a Scotland that is free of child poverty.

Eddie Follan: I am sure that my colleagues in health who are sitting in the gallery behind me will agree that there is a growing recognition of the impact of adverse childhood experiences. A lot of work has been done in Wales, England and Scotland that shows that the life chances of someone who has four or more adverse childhood experiences will be severely affected in later life. For the children and young people we work with, those experiences could include domestic abuse, alcohol abuse and violence. Poverty is one aspect of those adverse childhood experiences and, for too many children, it is their reality. Unfortunately, with poverty comes a lot of the other things that we work with every day, such as domestic abuse, alcohol abuse and substance misuse, and we need to remember that when we are here talking about targets, legislation, interim targets and so on. The question is spot on about that.

Poverty is essentially about trauma. People are traumatised by poverty, as we recognise through our work on adverse childhood experiences. If we can build that aspect into the way we talk about poverty, and if we change the culture and public opinion in that regard, we will be doing a good job.

Ben Macpherson: I agree that no piece of legislation is a panacea, but it is widely acknowledged that the bill is an important step.

Ruth Maguire: Alison Johnstone mentioned income maximisation, and I would like to talk about that in relation to the benefits system. We are well versed on the current impact of welfare cuts. I would like to hear your reflections on the difference that it would make to poverty levels if everyone claimed everything to which they were entitled. What are the reasons behind people not claiming those benefits?

John Dickie: That is an interesting question. I have not seen any modelling that shows what the impact on poverty levels would be if everybody got every benefit to which they were entitled. The figures that we have seen from successful income maximisation initiatives such as the healthier, wealthier children project suggest that significant amounts of additional income would go into household pockets.

As the social security and income maximisation policies in Scotland and in the rest of the UK diverge, it will be important for us to be able to capture the impact as shown in the data. That brings us back to some of the challenges that Andrew Hood spoke about earlier. Will we be able to capture data on whether maximising household and family incomes from the benefits system is successful? How best can we capture that data, and how can we know whether income maximisation is contributing to progress towards meeting the overall poverty targets as well as to

improving the individual lives of those children whose families now have £3,500 more each year?

What was the second part of your question?

Ruth Maguire: What are the reasons behind people not claiming benefits to which they are entitled?

John Dickie: It is complicated—there is a range of reasons. It is partly because the system gets very complicated. For example, we very much supported tax credits, which have played a huge role in improving the incomes of low-income families. However, there were complexities and problems with the administration of the system, which meant that some people gave up as they heard from their friends and neighbours about problems with overpayments and having to pay money back.

There are issues around how we can simplify access to financial support for families. That is another big argument for the value of child benefit as a key part of the overall package of financial support for families, as it has a take-up rate of 95-plus per cent, and it does not give rise to the same issues that inevitably come with means testing. I take Naomi Eisenstadt's point that, if we try to strip away all the associated stigma, there is potential for making progress on means testing. However, the reality is that any kind of means testing—with all the form filling and complicated administration—will create issues in ensuring that money gets to all the families who need it the most.

There is an opportunity with the new social security powers and the development of the new Scottish social security agency to ensure that the agency has a function in ensuring that people are able to access devolved sources of financial support and that, when people present for a devolved benefit, they are given full information about the wider package of benefits, whether those are UK Government, Scottish Government or local authority benefits.

The Convener: Does Eddie Follan want to come in on that? We are running over time, but I said that I would give you extra time. The witnesses from the next panel are being very patient.

Eddie Follan: In response to Ruth Maguire's second question, it is clear from our perspective that people are in crisis, and having to deal with the benefits system is an added complication that they do not need. We have worked to support families who are not getting the benefits to which they are entitled. Investment in an income maximisation service will be crucial, not least, as John Dickie said, because of the new powers. The difficulty in accessing benefits puts more pressure on families.

The same applies to the wider social security system. I am thinking, for example, of conditionality with regard to return to work and the pressure being put on parents with two-year-old children to get ready to go back to work when those children turn three. Not only does that cause a lot of distress, it leads to a fair mistrust of the benefits system, and I think that we need to follow through on the dignity and respect agenda that we have been talking about.

The Convener: I see that Ruth Maguire has another question. Is it a very small one, Ruth?

Ruth Maguire: Tiny.

The Convener: I hope so, because we are running over and people are being very patient.

Ruth Maguire: The funds for the benefits that are being devolved will be transferred at current take-up levels. Is that right, or should they be transferred according to the number of people who are eligible for them, so that the Scottish Government can work to ensure that everyone gets what they are entitled to?

Eddie Follan: I think that that is a question for John Dickie.

John Dickie: The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a benefit take-up campaign, and we must do everything possible to maximise take-up to ensure that, at the point of transfer, those budgets, too, are maximised. As the transfer of resources is likely to reflect actual spend at the point of transfer, the key thing is to ensure—and with urgency—that people take up the benefits that they are entitled to.

The Convener: Thank you very much for what, once again, has been very interesting evidence.

I suspend the meeting for five or six minutes before we move to the final panel.

16:11

Meeting suspended.

16:17

On resuming—

The Convener: Good afternoon. I thank everyone for their patience—everything has run on. It is such an interesting subject, and the questions and answers have been so interesting, too. If those on the third panel need any extra time, I will be happy to give it to them.

I welcome to the meeting Fiona Moss, head of health improvement and inequality, Glasgow City health and social care partnership; Sandra McDermott, head of financial inclusion and improving the cancer journey, Glasgow City

Council; and Jackie Erdman, head of equalities and human rights, and Sonya Scott, consultant in public health medicine, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I will ask the first question and then bring in other members. The panellists have sat through the whole session, so my question will be familiar to them. Why do we need this legislation? Do you want to start, Sonya?

Sonya Scott (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde): I am happy to start. There is a growing body of evidence that socioeconomic inequalities are important determinants of a range of social outcomes, with child poverty being the sharp end for a particularly vulnerable group. It is important to set out an ambition—or aspiration—to tackle that in legislation to give the issue visibility and priority, not only among the general public but, as previous contributors have said, in allocating resources to tackle it.

Jackie Erdman (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde): There is a clear social justice argument for reducing child poverty—it is an issue of fairness—so I welcome the bill.

The problem is both complex and simple. It is complex in that it covers a wide range of policy areas. The bill, I hope, presents a chance to tackle that, as the fact that so many areas are involved has been a big frustration of mine in the years in which I have worked on this agenda. Co-ordinating everyone and getting them all to work together is challenging.

As Sonya Scott said, it is also a simple issue, in that it is about access to money, resources and power, which we know underpin health inequality. On that basis, again, I welcome the bill.

Although I would also welcome efforts to tackle poverty across the whole life course, for children the issue is about having the best start in life. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has shown that the health service can have a direct impact on child poverty, and we are proud of that.

There is a clear link to our children and families work. We can give advice, and you have already heard about the healthier, wealthier children initiative—I would just say in that regard that we have raised £13 million over the past seven years. We can also give practical help, and we have a universal approach, which means that we speak to more or less all parents at some time in their children's lives. Further, we can be advocates in relation to child poverty. Again, that comes back to the social justice dimension.

Sandra McDermott (Glasgow City Council): I welcome the bill. I have been responsible for tackling poverty in Glasgow for the past year, which has been a real challenge. The bill fits in well with the work that we are doing in the poverty leadership panel, which involves our partners in health and others right across the board. Our vision is that Glasgow should be a world-class city in respect of both economic growth and how it tackles poverty and inequality.

When I first started in my role, one of the most shocking statistics was that 36,000 children in Glasgow were living in poverty, and your briefing probably alludes to the fact that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that it expects the figure to rise by 50 per cent by 2020. I know that you are looking at the whole of Scotland but, in Glasgow, that would mean that 54,000 children were living in poverty in the city.

If we want to make a real difference to child poverty, reach our ambitious 2030 target and reintroduce what was in the UK child poverty legislation up to 2010, I welcome the bill, because it will bring about a cohesive effort by national Government, local government, the community planning partners, the third sector, the charitable sector and, more important, people with direct experience of poverty. One of the most powerful aspects of the poverty leadership panel has been our community activist panel, which is made up of people with lived experience of poverty, who can bring to us their voice, their experience and their views about what matters and is important to them and what we need to change. Because of all of that, I welcome the bill.

Fiona Moss (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership): You have quite a row of us here this afternoon. I am the stream lead for child poverty for the poverty leadership panel in Glasgow city. I have been working on this agenda for a few years now, and I have found it to be an agenda that you do not have to convince people to engage with. You will not have heard from anyone this afternoon who thinks that it is a bad thing to do. Any society that accepts child poverty is a poor society. Certainly, we cannot achieve what we want to achieve in Glasgow if we do not give due attention to child poverty.

I want to touch on one area that has not been mentioned so far. Child poverty is a focus for us in Glasgow, but it plays out in different ways in the city. We have some neighbourhoods where the rate of child poverty is as low as 5 per cent and we have one neighbourhood where 48 per cent of children live in poverty—there are a number of neighbourhoods where getting close to half the children live in poverty, which is unacceptable to me, working in the public service, and to everyone on the poverty leadership panel. Therefore, we welcome the bill.

The Convener: The point about ensuring that the voice of local communities is heard is

important. I note the point about various areas suffering from child poverty more than others.

It is important that health boards and social work departments work together. Do you support having very localised neighbourhood data to use in relation to the social security bill and the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill? I know that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities very much supports that, but do you? We would have not data in the round but data from neighbourhoods, which would mean that everyone would need to work together.

Sandra McDermott: Fiona Moss alluded to the fact that we cannot have a successful child poverty strategy—or antipoverty strategy for children—in the city without it being both area based and people based. As she said, there are areas of the city where almost half the children live in poverty. We have a thriving places project in Glasgow that deals with areas with high levels of multiple deprivation, according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Given that we already have the SIMD, it would seem sensible to go down the path of targeting area-based poverty as well as people-based poverty for specific groups of families and children, whether they be lone parents, families with disabilities or addiction issues, or kinship carers. There is room for both a place-based approach and a people-based approach for specific families that are experiencing poverty because of their circumstances.

Jackie Erdman: If I understand the convener's question correctly, I think that it is important for local areas to know about their own progress. One of the things that springs to mind is the inverse care law, which states that people get care in inverse proportion to their need. Given the inequality that we have in Glasgow, it is important to show that we can use our resources in different ways to target different areas.

Fiona Moss: Place means different things in different parts of Scotland, but it is fundamental to how Glasgow operates. Because of our scale, we cannot do business if we just consider ourselves as a whole city. In that sense, place is very important to us. If I was sitting here representing Shetland, with its levels of child poverty, I am not sure that the issue of place would have quite the same resonance. I guess that the question is how the place issue is worked through in legislative terms. Therefore, place is important to us, but there are groups of children that we should be concerned about as well. In our written submission, we referred explicitly to children with a disability, because we know that they have a much higher risk of being in poverty throughout their lives, with all the implications that that has. So, there are maybe areas in which it is not just about place but about groups.

Sonya Scott: I agree with everything that the others have said, but I would add a wee note of caution about the limits of data. At the very small geographical levels, we will be able to use only area-based data; we will not get survey-level data, which, as has been said, is where we get that individual perspective that is really important, as quite a significant proportion of our families living in poverty are not necessarily in our most deprived areas.

The other thing to think about is spheres of influence. Jackie Erdman made a good point about the mitigation of child poverty through a service response and ensuring that services are delivered in proportion to need. We would want to get a reasonable disaggregation of data and geographical levels for that. However, the action that we would need to take to stop poverty in the first place would be at a higher level, so the data might be sufficient to monitor those actions.

Gordon Lindhurst: Possibly all of you were present for at least part of the previous evidence sessions and have heard my question already. Could interim targets be useful as a means of checking how far we have got, part of the way through the process, and of seeing how best assumptions or approaches might be adjusted?

The Convener: Who wants to go first?

Fiona Moss: Obviously we planned that it should be me. Certainly in public services, targets influence behaviour and activity. When I have a target, I tend to be able to work on it and make change—if targets are in place, they influence what we do. In that sense, I would certainly recommend that there are interim targets. The challenge is that, with everything that is going on, we are imagining that child poverty will go up in Scotland, so ensuring that we bring the level of child poverty down at the pace that we are aiming for will be challenging. However, without targets, how will we know?

16:30

Sandra McDermott: As part of the work of the poverty leadership panel, we are developing an action plan just now, and Fiona Moss is leading on the theme of child poverty. It is very important that we set targets that highlight what we hope not just the poverty leadership panel but a city-wide approach will achieve. We need to ask what all partners across the city can do to tackle and reduce child poverty.

There are a couple of important reasons for having targets. One is the need for a clear, agreed baseline across Scotland against which we can

measure progress on what we are working towards. We need to have not only interim reports but an action plan and to demonstrate clearly how the actions that we are taking deliver against our targets and the wider aspiration of reducing poverty. Targets enable us to see whether our work is on track, year to year, so that we can modify our interventions in the action plan and are not just constantly thinking that we are never going to achieve them.

There needs to be publicity or some way of reporting on things that a local authority, national health service board or community planning partnership has done that really work and have a fantastic impact, so that we are not all chasing around, trying to reinvent the wheel, but learn from each other about what works and what has a good impact. We should all be cohesive and do what works, taking account of the different approaches for cities and for rural areas.

It would be good to have a community of practice, so that we could all work together to share good practice and share experience of initiatives that we have tried but which did not work. That would enable us to direct our scarce but valuable assets and resources to what really makes the biggest difference. Interim reporting, along with the other things that I have mentioned, is key to that.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to comment?

Sonya Scott: I have a couple of points. Interim targets are important and I endorse their use. I agree with Andrew Hood that forecasting, and looking at trajectories and whether we are on course to meet an interim target, will be important. Interim targets would give us a sense of urgency, as 2030 is still relatively far away—although, as others have said, it will come round soon enough—and having a halfway mark might mean that people put their foot to the pedal a wee bit more. All in all, such targets are definitely worth having, and I would also introduce the forecasting element.

Adam Tomkins: We have heard a lot of evidence this afternoon from people who have welcomed the bill—in fact, we have not heard from anybody, be they a member of the committee or a witness, who has criticised the bill. We have heard about a number of ways in which the bill could be strengthened or improved, so that it becomes even more effective in not merely measuring but tackling child poverty.

I have two questions. First, given that you all work on the front line in helping to address these problems, how will the bill help you, practically, to do your job better? Secondly, what would you like to see added to the bill that would help you to do your job even better than that and help your effectiveness in tackling and reducing child poverty?

Jackie Erdman: I really believe that the bill will support our work. As other colleagues have said, targets can be very motivational. If we have interim progress and local reporting, that will focus minds on tackling child poverty, and I welcome that.

The bill could take a strategic approach to meeting targets. There has been a lot of discussion about that, and other colleagues have talked about the delivery plan and the measurement framework. I welcome the approach that the bill takes in providing for discussion with local areas about how the delivery plan is formulated. We need to be clear about the areas that we should be looking at, such as education, employment, childcare, the labour market, and other aspects beyond that such as gender and ethnicity, and we need to have a dialogue about how we meet the targets.

I will not go into whether that should be handled through legislation or should be done at the next level down, but I think that we need to have that discussion. That will help things locally. Particularly in health, there are some initiatives that it would be good to link the bill to directly, such as children's services plans, the link workers programme, the new health visitors and the getting it right for every child initiative. There is a layer of such work going on in health and it is important that we hold those approaches to account on how they are tackling child poverty.

Sandra McDermott: I agree that the bill helps us in our work. Because it is a Scottish Government bill, it gives us authority, from the highest level, which can galvanise what we are doing in our community planning partnerships, local outcome improvement planning, health and social care partnerships and the poverty leadership panel. It is helpful to be able to say that we are working towards a target to reduce poverty levels that is in legislation. The target in the bill of reducing poverty levels to 5 per cent, or 10 per cent in some areas of Glasgow, is really aspirational and gives us a galvanising impetus to corral the city's efforts to make it happen, although the work is not without its challenges.

One thing that would enhance what is in the bill is something on the use and sharing of data. We all use data on a daily basis and, as you probably know, the data protection legislation is being enhanced so that the rules around sharing data will be even stricter. However, in Glasgow, we have seen the power of data in reducing poverty.

I will give a brief example. By comparing the data that the council held on the uptake of housing

benefit and the uptake of free school uniforms, we recognised that more than 5,500 children were not taking up their entitlement to free school uniforms. We researched why that was and uncovered some of the barriers that John Dickie talked about earlier, such as the forms being too complex, concern that the offer might impact on other benefits and, for some of the people, having to fill in another form when they were already dealing with quite a number of crises in their lives. We conducted a data-match between the school roll and the housing benefit records and sent out the payment to eligible people automatically, which increased uptake by more than 90 per cent. We were able to do that because the data was all held by the council, so it did not have to be shared with anyone.

It would be useful if the bill contained a provision that—for the benefit of reducing child poverty and within the limits of the Data Protection Act 1998—encouraged health and social care partners and housing providers to share data for the power of good and to use the data sets that are available in the country and the city to improve the lives and outcomes of children.

Sonya Scott: On the first question about how the bill will help me to do my job more effectively, as a jobbing public health consultant, I see my responsibility as being to reduce premature mortality, increase healthy life expectancy, increase wellbeing and the quality of life and reduce inequalities. We can think about what we are doing to deal with the fundamental causes of reduced life expectancy and reduced healthy life expectancy in the intermediate and the immediate.

Being a broad specialty in the NHS means that you are quite often pulled downstream to focus on issues around delayed discharge and avoidable admissions. That is understandable, because that is what the chief executive is held accountable for in the annual review. Having the reduction of child poverty as a statutory responsibility would give me a lever; I could say that the law requires us to focus on the fundamental causes of ill health and health inequalities, which would help me to rebalance my care efforts.

A few things could be added to the bill to strengthen it. I was struck by a comment from either Naomi Eisenstadt or Jim McCormick about the Government having to set out the budgetary response in relation to the bill. That would be really useful because, at the end of the day, this is about putting your money where your mouth is and allocating resource.

It would also be useful to have some guidance around the other areas of legislation that relate to the fundamental causes of poverty: employment; education, particularly non-academic skills routes; childcare; affordable housing; and so on. It would be useful if we were able to link those policy elements to the bill.

Finally, on local accountability, I think community planning partnerships are not mentioned with regard to local responsibility. Our community planning partners are really aware of the broader set of actions that could reduce child poverty, so it would be useful to draw them into that reporting responsibility.

Fiona Moss: I will pick up on a couple of points that have not been brought out so far. There is a cross-policy aspect to the measures that will impact on child poverty, which needs to come through in all legislation rather than just this bill.

On community planning, all community planning partnerships have their local outcome improvement plans in place for 1 October. In Glasgow, we are active within the child poverty arena and discuss how our LOIP can impact on child poverty. Where a local area has not engaged in the child poverty agenda, I wonder whether that will come through naturally in plans.

The difference that the bill will make for me in Glasgow is probably not much, because we are already very active and engaged on this, but it might make a bigger difference in other areas that have not taken on board some of the child poverty components. When I first began to look at the child poverty agenda, I was overwhelmed by what to do, because it is quite a challenging area to impact on. However, in the past three years in Glasgow we have managed to achieve a great deal—amazing things—from a zero start. Examples include work on the cost of the school holidays, on the cost of the school day, on healthier, wealthier children, and on lone parents. Where people focus on child poverty, it makes a difference, and that is how I hope the bill will have an impact across the rest of the Scotland.

One thing that would help me would be to have a greater influence on the Department for Work and Pensions. I have requested information on how many families—not single-parent families—have been sanctioned in Glasgow, and I have not been able to get the data. At accident and emergency departments, people have arrived with what I think is a child protection issue because of DWP policy, but the DWP is not required to comply with child protection legislation here in Scotland. There is a stack of things about being able to have influence in other spheres that would really help me.

The Convener: Thank you. We might be able to help with that point about data—we will check.

Adam Tomkins: That set of answers was incredibly helpful. I do not want to push you on anything that you would feel uncomfortable with, but as legislators, we need to understand your

expert professional judgment on what should be in the legislation, the guidance and the regulations. If you have views on those, please share them with us, either now or later in writing. That is precisely the contribution that we as lawmakers can make to that field. Again, thank you very much for those answers.

Pauline McNeill: I was struck by what Sandra McDermott said about the power of data with regard to entitlement to free school uniforms and the point that many people do not apply for additional support simply because, if your life is in crisis, all you are doing is coping with things. We have to find those people.

I have two questions. I am interested in the practicalities on the ground, but I need to get some flesh on the bones. In that respect, I thought that Fiona Moss's example involving the DWP was stunning. If you could have only one measure in the delivery plan, what would it be? Many years ago, the children's commissioner talked about every child in every family having access to, say, a health visitor or someone who would be a support for that family. For example, in many families, children do not get the grades because their parents cannot provide the assistance with their homework that they require. It could be anything like that, but that struck me as a very practical measure that could help families and children.

My second question relates to the previous—and important—point about not just categorising areas as areas of deprivation, but trying to reach individuals who are also in poverty but who do not live in deprived areas.

16:45

Sandra McDermott: There are a couple of issues, the first of which is the use of the Scottish Government's devolved welfare reform powers, as has been mentioned. The recent benefit cap change throughout Scotland was implemented from 23 January, with some results in Glasgow. The change reduces the amount of benefit for families, lone parents or couples with or without children to £13,400 for single people or £20,000 for a family. Some 730 families in Glasgow have been affected, and 90 per cent of those families have children, which equates to just over 2,173 children. Therefore, children are obviously affected disproportionately by the cap.

We can look at that from Jackie Erdman's point of view and consider the human rights aspects. The UK Supreme Court, for example, has said that the benefit cap denies children the protection defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the fact is that such sweeping policies have fundamentally and completely changed families' income levels by up to around £400 a month.

Obviously, we have tried to take a co-ordinated approach in order to support those 730 families. For instance, our health and social care partnership has visited every single one affected to see what else we can do for them. Using our discretionary housing payment budget to mitigate the impacts would cost £2 million in Glasgow, which we obviously do not have. The impacts of the benefit cap throughout Scotland are huge and should be looked at urgently to find out how they can be mitigated, especially where children and families are involved, and how the situation might be changed.

The other issue is the erosion of working tax credits, child tax credits and child benefit—as John Dickie has already explained that issue articulately, I will not cover it again—and whether there is any provision at all in the bill to allow us to increase child benefit and stop the erosion of working tax credits and child tax credits if we really believe that families, including working families, are affected by poverty. In Glasgow, more than 61 per cent of the affected families that have children in poverty are in work. How do we address that? We can do so through addressing the uptake of welfare benefits, and national and local government can make a really concerted effort to ensure that everybody gets what they are entitled to, whether that is healthy start vouchers, welfare benefits, working tax credits, child tax credits or the sort of access that I have already mentioned. We need to share the data exercise that we carried out to ensure that everybody gets their free school uniform, their free school meals, access to leisure activities and all the free things that other local authorities and board areas can provide. Targeting holistic support at families in the first year would be a huge step forward.

Jackie Erdman: The bit in the bill that I would like to strengthen is, as we mentioned in our original submission, the gender dimension of child poverty. We have looked at that issue for years in the context of tackling child poverty locally, particularly the situation of lone parents. As Fiona Moss has said, we have recently done a lot of research on the impact of welfare reform on lone parents and what we can do practically in local areas to meet their needs.

The group most affected by welfare reform are working-age lone parents, who are losing about £2,500 a year. However, that is the result of a perfect storm of inequality in the labour market, the childcare difficulties that lone parents face and the fact that jobs are not flexible. I would therefore like the bill to have an impact on that area and address it in a focused way. We have done a lot of

research on this, and we can share some practical approaches with the committee.

The Convener: It would be wonderful if you could send us your research. I look forward to seeing it.

Fiona Moss: To be honest, we could throw issues at you all afternoon, but I would focus on disability living allowance for children. Through the healthier, wealthier children service, we have come across a number of families who have not been claiming DLA for their children even though they are entitled to it. We as a health service know when children have a disability and we work with them, but there must be an easier way for families to get DLA than the current system.

Sonya Scott: I would love to see a basic income guarantee, although I am not sure whether that is possible under the devolved powers—that is probably more the committee's area of expertise than mine. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that a basic income guarantee, which I am a big enthusiast for, would provide redress in a raft of problems, including both absolute and relative poverty as well as underemployment. Another aspect that would undoubtedly have a big impact on child poverty is affordable, flexible childcare.

I endorse the points that my colleagues have made, particularly Sandra McDermott's comment about automating benefits, where that is possible. A general practitioner colleague of mine in Drumchapel talks about the collusion of exclusion; by that, I mean that we are quite happy to tolerate levels of non-access, which is where people who are eligible for benefits do not claim them. We need to go the extra mile to provide a link between eligibility and access, where we can.

The Convener: Thank you. Do any members want to come back in?

Pauline McNeill: I just want to thank the witnesses for their wonderful evidence. However, you talk about areas of deprivation, but we know from the data that there are minority groups of deprived people in areas that are not deprived. How do we tackle the issue of individuals who live in poverty in areas that are not being targeted?

Jackie Erdman: The healthier, wealthier children service shows the benefit of tackling child poverty through mainstream health services, because people are in contact with their midwives and their health visitors. We call it inequality-sensitive practice, because it is about looking at the social circumstances of the person who comes to a health professional for whatever kind of health appointment. That is where we have been able to develop pathways into mainstream financial inclusion support. We therefore have a lot of approaches on the ground; the committee has heard some good examples, which, if rolled out nationally, would allow us to start to tackle child poverty in an incremental way.

Sonya Scott: I wonder whether I can tack on to my previous response the issue of income maximisation. The committee has asked about the healthier, wealthier children service; I should point out that the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow, too, has a financial improvement programme, but it is currently under threat because it is partly funded by the third sector and one of the funding partners is no longer able to commit to it. The programme has, on average, raised £4,000 per year for each family who has come into contact with it. Some of my senior management colleagues in the health service would say that that is a DWP responsibility, but it would be good if whoever was responsible for income maximisation could link it in some way with our universal services, as it would have a big impact.

On Pauline McNeill's question about how we reach deprived individuals who do not necessarily live in deprived areas, proportionate universalism might be the solution, and it would also be an answer to the dichotomy between targeting and universalism. For me, proportionate universalism would overcome that dichotomy, if we could get it right. In the old system of health visiting, we had core, additional and intensive approaches, which was a good example of a proportionate universal service.

Fiona Moss: One of the unique things about the healthier, wealthier children service is that we sell it to parents by saying that having a child affects your pocket. In other words, we do not sell it on the basis that people who are in poverty might value the service. However, over 70 per cent of the families who have used the service are actually in extreme poverty. Therefore, having a more universal service does not necessarily mean that we cannot reach the people whom we need to reach. We are conscious that people often make personal decisions to exclude themselves from services if they give them a label that does not actually help them or make them feel any better about their circumstances. The ability to support people without making them feel any worse is fundamental to our approach.

The Convener: Ben Macpherson has a supplementary question, and then Alison Johnstone wants to come in.

Ben Macpherson: I actually have a couple of supplementaries, convener. First, I wonder whether Sonya Scott can elaborate on the difference she thinks that free childcare makes to addressing child poverty.

Sonya Scott: As we know, childcare is one of the biggest costs facing families and lone parents in particular. I am not sure about the affordability of free childcare, but it seems from face validity that affordable and flexible childcare would have a significant impact. Perhaps others have statistics to hand that they could quote, but I think that that would have an immediate impact on child poverty.

Fiona Moss: In our work with families in the north of Glasgow on the cost of the school holidays, we found that childcare provision was a major issue, and cost was fundamental. More childcare was available than was being used, but people could not afford to use it. However, the issue is about not just cost but flexibility and timings. Another issue that came through very strongly was that the childcare options for children with additional needs are extremely limited.

Sonya Scott: There is a link with people in insecure employment and on zero-hours contracts, and something that came out strongly in the work on the cost of the school holidays was that flexible and free childcare would overcome issues for such people. We hear stories about people losing employment, because the insecurity and unpredictability of their work patterns mean that they cannot access childcare easily.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you both for that.

Sandra McDermott brought up the issue of the benefits cap. In your experience over recent years, have any other elements of UK Government welfare reform had a detrimental impact on efforts to tackle child poverty?

Sandra McDermott: That would apply to most of the welfare reform changes that have been made, whether it is the freeze on benefits up to 2020, the changes to the tax credits system, the current benefit cap, the previous benefit caps or the bedroom tax. Clearly, no welfare reform changes have benefited people in poverty; indeed, in Glasgow alone, the impacts of welfare reform have resulted in £348 million a year being taken out of the Glasgow economy. Really, that has been taken out of the pockets of our most vulnerable people in the city, including families with children in poverty, lone parents and people who are striving to get back into the workplace. They are completely affected by those changes. I could go through most of the welfare reform changes and show that there is a complete impact and a cause and effect. In 2012, there was one food bank in Glasgow; as a result of welfare reform and potentially other things that have happened in Glasgow, we now have more than 70. There is to my mind an absolutely unquestionable cause and effect relating to the UK Government's welfare reform changes and their impact on levels of poverty in the city.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Fiona Moss: We have some evidence of that. Every three years, we carry out an adult health and wellbeing survey in Glasgow city. The last time we did it, we asked people whether they had been affected by or had benefited from welfare reform, and in some neighbourhoods, not one single person indicated that they had benefited. Overall, I think that about 90 per cent said that their income had reduced as a consequence—I can check the figure for you if you are interested.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you.

17:00

Alison Johnstone: I thank the witnesses for their compelling and helpful evidence. My understanding of the impacts of the reforms is that they are quite gendered and, in particular, have had a dreadful impact on women and children.

Sonya Scott spoke about the gap between eligibility and access, and we have taken evidence from welfare rights organisations who have spoken about some people's difficulties in that regard. With universal credit, the digital by default assumption makes the process impossible for some people. We have heard of Citizens Advice Scotland advisers spending their time setting up email accounts for people and teaching them how to use IT. What scope is there in the bill to ensure that people have the right to access?

Those involved in the healthier, wealthier children work are trusted by most people; you would let them in your front door and trust them to help you. Are there any innovative solutions to the access issue? Are we using schools as widely as we might? I know that stigma, too, is an issue. Indeed, I remember how, when I was at school, some people who were entitled to free school meals would not take them up because they had to stand in a separate queue. We are more empathetic and sensible now, and we have taken steps in the right direction in that respect, but do you have any solutions to how we make access something that people can obtain without feeling stigmatised?

Sandra McDermott: One approach that we have developed in Glasgow involves our library service, because libraries are seen as safe and trusted environments. With Scottish Government support, we have set up a digital inclusion service in Glasgow's 33 community libraries, and the library staff have been trained to support people in that respect. We have also recruited volunteers called digital buddies who go into that safe environment and, in a completely non-judgmental way, help people fill in forms, set up email accounts, help people apply for houses and jobs

online and help them through their claimant commitment to ensure that they are not sanctioned. Moreover, through our financial inclusion work, people have direct access to wider financial inclusion support such as debt and money advice, where that is required, and financial capability.

Libraries are unique and trusted resources in most communities in most towns and cities, and people feel safe there. Most if not all have digital access through the Openreach programme, and the fact that it is available in that safe environment has made a huge difference. In fact, we have built on that premise by putting our housing benefit and council tax benefit practitioners into local libraries, and we have also included our citizens advice bureaux partners to ensure that, within the library setting, people are able to receive immediate debt and money advice, help to prevent homelessness and access to wider benefits. Allowing libraries to explore their role as community anchors and to provide that wider support is an approach that has really been welcomed, and the use of volunteers has added a really interesting dimension, too.

Jackie Erdman: I have not yet mentioned the work of GPs at the deep end in Glasgow, which is all about providing advice where people actually are and making access easy. There are not only people based in GP surgeries who can give welfare rights advice, but people who are able to access records in order to help with writing appeals letters and so on. That approach, which has been very successful, leaves the GPs to do their primary job of caring for people's health. I think that a very good example in Possilpark has been written up, and it might be of interest to the committee.

Sonya Scott: I just want to fly the flag for automation again. Sandra McDermott highlighted the very good example of using existing data sets to check eligibility and put the money straight into credit union accounts or whatever, so that people did not have to feel stigmatised or face literacy difficulties in filling out forms. We are all quite well educated people, but when I recently looked at a healthy start form, I lost the will to live just pulling it up. I found it difficult to find and click on the link, and the form itself was quite big and complex. Where we can automate things—and I think that we can do so with a lot of existing data sets—we should do so and give the money directly to people.

From a child poverty perspective, schools are particularly good as community anchors. In Govan, Hill's Trust primary school, which, I am sad to say, no longer exists, was quite innovative in, for example, having a full-time community development worker. My understanding is that she did a lot of work helping people complete benefits applications and helping with the IT side of things. You need human resource as well as the facilities, but automation seems to obviate the need for any of that.

The Convener: Unfortunately, at this point, I must close the meeting. I thank the witnesses for their evidence and answering our questions. We are now moving into private session, but I should remind people of our public round-table discussion at half past 5. The committee might well want a wee cup of coffee before we get on with that.

17:05

Meeting continued in private until 17:15.

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