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Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee

Comataidh a’ Cheartais Shòisealta, Taigheadas agus Riaghaltas Ionadail

Wednesday 28 October 2026

Session 7

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SOCIAL JUSTICE, HOUSING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP)
*Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
*Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Chris Birt (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick (Poverty and Inequality Commission)
Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance)
Fiona King (Save the Children)
Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform) (Committee Substitute)
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Justina Murray (Aberlour Children's Charity)
Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland)

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee

Wednesday 28 October 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:33]

Interests

The Convener (Craig Hoy): Good morning, and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2026 of the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee.

We have received apologies from Thomas Kerr and Steven Bonnar. I welcome Julie MacDougall, who is attending as Thomas's substitute, and Fulton MacGregor, who is attending remotely as Steven's substitute.

Because we have, in effect, two new members joining us today, agenda item 1 is their declarations of interests, in accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct. I invite Julie to declare any relevant interests.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I am currently a sitting councillor on Fife Council.

The Convener: I invite Fulton MacGregor to declare any relevant interests.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I declare an interest: I am registered with the Scottish Social Services Council.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:34

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a decision on taking business in private. We have determined that we will take in private agenda item 6, as well as all future consideration of draft reports and correspondence to the Scottish Government. Do we all agree on that?

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): No.

The Convener: Kate Campbell does not agree.

Kate Campbell: I would like to say a couple of words, convener.

We had a discussion before the meeting began, and I understand that other members are minded to take item 6 in private, so I will not push it to a vote; I think that I would be defeated if I were to try that. However, it is important to put on record that there are many different views about pre-budget scrutiny. Your views and mine are very different, convener, particularly regarding adult disability payment and mental health, and I think that that is not being properly reflected.

I will not go into the details of the letter. I know that we will have a discussion in private afterwards. I also understand that this is unusual, and that you would normally have discussions on such letters in private. However, we are a new Parliament, and, if it is not against the rules, perhaps we could consider changing the rules or doing things differently. I hope that, in future, if suggestions are made as to how we do things, they might be considered more openly.

I feel that the public should be able to see our discussions in relation to what we put forward and what comes out of this committee, having taken evidence. Putting on the record and sharing in public our views and our debate about how we arrive at a position is important for transparency. However, I am happy to recognise that we will have that discussion in private today.

The Convener: Thank you. That is on the record.

Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP): I agree with Kate Campbell. Can I also double-check the wording of what you said, convener—was it to take this item and all future items in private? I do not know whether that was a misspeak, or if that is us deciding to take all future ones in private.

The Convener: That is the standard wording and procedure, Mr Bouse. However, if we wanted to delete that and simply take this item in private, I

would have no issue with that, if the committee is in broad agreement.

Gary Bouse: I would otherwise be really uncomfortable with agreeing to it.

The Convener: In that case, I do not think that we are breaching any protocols if we agree simply to take this individual item in private. Kate Campbell's comments are obviously on the record. I will be guided by the committee on whether I am perhaps required to go to the Conveners Group for further discussion on the general approach taken by the committee.

Do we agree to take item 6 in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Child Poverty

09:37

The Convener: I turn to agenda item 3. I welcome our guests around the table with whom we will consider child poverty as part of a series of stakeholder round-table evidence sessions covering the five parts of our remit. As has been stressed to the witnesses who are before us, this is not our usual format; it is very much a round-table session. As a new committee, we hope to learn as much as possible from you as we set out on our journey for the next five years.

I welcome to the committee Chris Birt, associate director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Satwat Rehman, the chief executive officer of One Parent Families Scotland; Fiona King, head of policy, research and influencing at Save the Children; Justina Murray, chief executive of Aberlour Children's Charity; and Peter Kelly, chief executive officer of the Poverty Alliance. We are also joined remotely by Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, commissioner at the Poverty and Inequality Commission. You are all very welcome. If there is a point that you want to come in on, make sure that you signal to me, and we will try to make the process as interactive as possible.

I will ask a scene-setting question. I am not sure who will want to take this question; perhaps Professor Fitzpatrick might wish to do so. There is a live discussion in the Government and beyond at the moment about the level of the Scottish child payment. However, if you were to look back at the child payment since its introduction, how would you characterise the impact that it has had in combating child poverty?

Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick (Poverty and Inequality Commission): My apologies, convener. Can you hear me?

The Convener: Yes, I can hear you.

Professor Fitzpatrick: I am sorry. I cannot see the committee, and I lost the sound for most of that question. I think that you were asking me about the commission's view on the level of the Scottish child payment. Is that correct?

The Convener: I was saying that that is very much a live discussion. There is almost an inflection point as to whether to continue to increase the payment. However, before we get into that discussion, will you reflect on the commission's view on the development of the child payment to date and the impact that it has had on reducing and, potentially, in time, eradicating child poverty in Scotland?

Professor Fitzpatrick: There is no doubt that the Scottish child payment has been an incredibly powerful tool in reducing levels of child poverty in Scotland. There is a clear consensus that it has made a major contribution to the fact that child poverty is lower in Scotland than it is elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Not only is the commission a great supporter of the role that the Scottish child payment has played to date but it supports increasing it as we move towards the final targets on child poverty. The payment is the most powerful tool that we have in the box at the moment for the bold and transformational action that we must take to get anywhere near those targets. We are great supporters of the Scottish child payment—indeed, I think that it is a source of envy for those people who work in child poverty elsewhere in the UK, because it has clearly made a massive impact.

The Convener: I think that Fiona King wants to come in on that point.

Fiona King (Save the Children): Thanks for inviting Save the Children to be part of the discussion. I will build on what Suzanne has just said. The evidence abounds that the Scottish child payment is making a difference and that it is why the trajectory of child poverty is different to that in other parts of the UK. The evidence shows that the child payment makes a difference as a key part of a package of supports. Other witnesses can speak better to the quantitative evidence that supports that aspect, but we know from parents, families and everyone whom we work with and for that it is absolutely crucial.

It is interesting that we have gone straight in on the Scottish child payment. In a way, the conversation about whether it is working, its levels and its value has become a bit unhelpful, because it is part of a wider suite of things that are making a difference and helping child poverty to go down—albeit a bit slower than we would like—which is not the case in other parts of the UK. For the families for whom we are working, it is critical, not only to buy essentials to help children in the here and now, but for the stability, choice and

agency that it gives families. It comes out so clearly from the people with whom we speak that, if the payment is available, they can make choices for their families that are about stability and moving away from poverty. That is why we need to see the Scottish child payment as so much more than a benefit that is here today and gone tomorrow, because it is not—it is about prevention, investment in children and their childhoods right now, and choices around buying in bulk, buying season tickets, doing a course or moving into employment to pay for your extra hours of childcare.

We spoke to some parents ahead of the evidence session and asked specifically about the Scottish child payment. One of our parent campaigners from Glasgow said:

> "Scottish child payment makes a real difference to our family. It helps me cover everyday essentials and also gives me the ability to buy good-quality clothes for my children and take them to activities like soft play, where they can play, learn and enjoy being children. These things might seem small, but they matter for their happiness, development and wellbeing."

Instead of only getting into the levels and numbers, we need a more rounded conversation about what the Scottish child payment is, because it is not only preventing people from falling into further poverty in future but helping with the stepping stones that lead away from poverty. It is about doing more than considering only the immediate impact of buying essentials.

Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland): I want to reinforce that point. One of the things that we hear time and again from the single parents whom we work with is the difference that it makes for them to know that regular, predictable and stable payments will come into the household. We found that the number of calls from people in crisis have gone down at times of the year when our advice line might have had a spike in those calls—post-Christmas or early in the new year, for example. The Scottish child payment is making a difference. Exactly as Fiona King has said, it helps people to plan, stops them being stressed and worried about how they will manage and, therefore, allows them to think about their future.

We would say that the Scottish child payment is foundational. We absolutely agree with what we have heard from Professor Fitzpatrick: it needs to be increased and seen as a key plank for not only tackling and reducing child poverty but maintaining low levels of it.

Peter Kelly (The Poverty Alliance): At this stage, I will just repeat Satwat's and Fiona's comments. In the work that we have done with our members in engaging with people with direct experience of poverty, the story is the same: the Scottish child payment makes a real and meaningful difference.

09:45

That is an important message for the committee to hear at a time when some of the debate on social security seems to suggest that the impact of payments such as the Scottish child payment are not meaningful, whereas we hear time and again that the Scottish child payment is meaningful and that it can be transformative. There is an idea that we are simply moving people slightly above a poverty line, but it would be a mistake to consider the impact of the Scottish child payment in that way. When we consider the lives of the 40,000 children who have so far been impacted by the payment and the hundreds of thousands of families who are benefiting from it, we see that it has had a significant and lasting impact.

My key message for this part of the discussion on child poverty is that money makes a difference. There is good, strong evidence—not just the evidence that we will give you today, but good, strong academic evidence—that backs up that message.

Justina Murray (Aberlour Children's Charity): The take-up of the payment was mentioned in the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing. It is a benefit that is envied by other parts of the UK. The take-up figure of 94 per cent is unusual for a means-tested benefit; we can see that the stigma and difficulties in accessing benefits that come with other forms of social security do not affect the Scottish child payment.

The term "cash first" has gone out of common parlance, although it refers to a point that was mentioned earlier. Every pound that is given to families is a pound that circulates around the local community. This is not a question of tackling child poverty versus supporting businesses; it is all for the same end.

I am never a fan of the metric that suggests that, in Scotland, we just want to be less rubbish than in England. There is a less polite way of saying that, but I will be polite for the committee. However, we can see from the statistics that that is the story of child poverty in Scotland versus child poverty in England. That is to do with the Scottish child payment, which is easy to administer and has a high take-up—it is a bit of a no-brainer.

We have already, quite early in this parliamentary session, heard a clear view from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing that there will not be the increase that the whole sector and families are asking for. We have not really seen the evidence for that view, and we would like the Parliament to say, "Hang on a minute, it is not up to one person to decide that

there's not going to be an increase." It would be fantastic if the Parliament would support the call to increase the payment.

The Convener: Chris Birt wants to speak next. We are truly a round table—we have gone right round the table since the beginning of the meeting, so we are true to our word.

Chris Birt (Joseph Rowntree Foundation): I will be quick, because I will not repeat what anybody else has said. It is worth reflecting that the Scottish child payment is a well-designed policy, and the way in which it was set up is why take-up has been so high. There were trade-offs involved in tagging it to universal credit, but that has meant that it is relatively straightforward for people to get, which we cannot ignore.

To come back to one of Fiona King's points, the Scottish child payment is a massive use of devolved powers. It involves almost £500 million of additional investment beyond the Barnett formula, which is money that the Scottish Government has chosen to invest in a powerful way to reduce child poverty. Frankly, that can sometimes be the source of the frustration that we and others around this table voice, because we can see the ambition and the boldness of the policy. The cabinet secretary and other ministers need to defend the spend in the Parliament, as they should—they are rightly held to account on that—but we want that ambition to be reflected in other parts of the Government's programme, too.

The Convener: The Government has signalled that it does not intend to continue increasing the Scottish child payment. That partly relates to the trade-off, which is that a pound that is spent on the child payment is a pound that is not available elsewhere in what is a fixed budget. To set aside the discussion on the child payment for a moment, which other actions that have been taken by the Scottish Government since 2017 have proved effective in marshalling the fight against child poverty?

Justina Murray: I will not quite answer that question, which might be frustrating, but I will say that there has been a lot of activity. There was a report that stated that something like 100 actions have been implemented or delivered at scale. However, families are still living in poverty, and we have not solved child poverty—I will talk later about our urgent assistance fund. There is a lot of busyness.

In 2025-26, 25 milestones were reported on. As has been said in the SPICe briefing and by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, although a lot of good things are happening, it is very difficult to see the impact on child poverty. Some of the milestones were things such as, "We issued a statement", "We published a plan", "We published a strategy" or, "We announced something." There are lots of Government announcements about spending money that are not following through to outcomes for families. Rather than answering your question directly, I am saying that we have seen a lot of busyness, rather than that there are things that we can say are actually helping to eradicate child poverty. The Scottish child payment is an example of something that we can say is helping to eradicate child poverty.

The Convener: The Government seems to have drawn a distinction between reducing and eradicating child poverty and then ending intergenerational child poverty. The minister has said on the record quite clearly that cash payments are not the solution to tackling intergenerational child poverty. Do you agree?

Justina Murray: The language has flipped backwards and forwards. We had "tackling" child poverty and then "eradicating" it, but the plan is still about tackling child poverty. We all support the eradication of child poverty. In the first speech that he gave in Parliament in the new parliamentary term, the First Minister was clear that eradicating child poverty was the defining and number 1 priority of the Government but, in a 2,500-word speech, he did not mention it until he was 1,000 words in, and it got four mentions. To go back to what Chris Birt said, we have to look at what is being said versus what is being done. Of course we want to end intergenerational poverty—who does not want that?

Chris Birt: I will answer your initial question, too, convener, but, on your second question, I do not agree with those terms and I do not think that it is helpful to describe poverty in lots of different ways, because that blurs and confuses the debate that we need to be having. Social security is preventative policy. For families that have been in deep struggles for a long time, things such as social security can be the foundation for building things, and that is absolutely crucial.

The child payment is not the only thing that the Scottish Government has done to maintain lower levels of child poverty in Scotland compared to those elsewhere in the UK. There is also investment in social housing. Let me be clear about that point, because I am sure that nobody in this room thinks that the housing market is extremely healthy while there are 10,000 children in temporary accommodation and so on. However, there has been significantly higher investment in social housing in Scotland, compared to elsewhere in the UK, which is why there is a lower level of child poverty. It makes up a lot of the difference with regard to the lower child poverty levels in Scotland.

On Justina Murray's point, the forewords to a lot of the Scottish Government's delivery plans could have been written by the organisations round this table, because we are quite happy that the Government's analysis is strong and that it identifies the correct issues. However, the blunderbuss then comes out and we have all these different pilots and pathfinder programmes that represent a sprinkling of the right things but which are never at the scale needed, and the Government does not stick with them. For example, the SPICe briefing covers employability measures, on which a target came in, then a budget was cut, then it came back in, and then it was about the parents and then it was not, so local authorities' heads are spinning as to what the priorities are. Focusing and prioritising are crucial.

Fiona King: To build on that, lots of things in the successive delivery plans on tackling child poverty have been helpful: we have the childcare offer, breakfast clubs and free school meals—there are lots of bits and pieces. As is right in this forum, we are discussing numbers, detail and policy, but this is about better outcomes for children, and we cannot lose sight of that. The targets, which are legally binding for all politicians and parties in the Parliament—they are the Parliament's targets—are not wrong, and they relate to the right ambitions for children across Scotland and for the Scotland that we want to see, which is a Scotland that does not have high levels of child poverty, because that thwarts a lot of the things that we all want Scotland to do.

However, it is unhelpful to look at all the policies in isolation because, as I often say, when we think about the families and children who we are talking about, their lives are a bit like a Rubik's cube. They are juggling money, childcare, shifts at work, transport and fuel costs, getting cheap food and all the different parts of their lives. They are trying to slot things together, and they face many barriers in addition to those that all families face, because they are living on a low income.

For that reason, the Scottish child payment cannot be divorced from whole family support, breakfast clubs and the childcare offer. The reason why we are seeing traction at a national level on reducing child poverty is because we provide a patchwork of support. If you take away one piece, we will stop progress. It is unhelpful to pick out one policy or another, because they work together as a fabric to improve lives, provide stability and increase incomes, and to give people choice and agency to move away from poverty, which is what we want to see.

However, I agree that we have too many confetti policies. Poverty is about insufficient income, and we separate it out—pet poverty, older poverty, child poverty, period poverty and what have you—but the issue is that too many families in Scotland do not have enough money. We need the big policy calls and the big actions that will change that. The bits and pieces that are announced probably do not add up to reducing child poverty. They might help qualitatively, but it is things such as the Scottish child payment that will change the situation. I know that we do not want to keep coming back to that point and we have had that discussion but, if it is a jigsaw, social security is one of the largest pieces.

The Convener: However, the Government is saying that that piece is now as large as it can be, because it has to make difficult decisions elsewhere. Are you sympathetic to that point, or, with a fixed budget, would you be content if the Government said that it could not do something any more because it needed to grow that part of the jigsaw?

Fiona King: I am sympathetic about the fiscal constraints. All of us campaigners live in the real world, but our job is to ensure that children are at the heart of the debate. If it is the Government's defining mission, it should be the top agenda item in all discussions, including those about the economy, education and everything else, because those matters are not separate. It has been made clear that the Scottish child payment is not going up, but my challenge would then be: "In that case, how are you going to meet the targets?", because they are legally binding and the evidence is clear that the credible path to meeting the targets includes social security increases.

We are in a bit of a gridlock on that. Whole family support, which I am sure we will get into, and some of these other things are enormously important, but they cannot do it on their own. The evidence abounds that you need support and services as well as social security. I am sympathetic on the fiscal constraints, but reducing child poverty is better for the country, the economy, educational outcomes, NHS outcomes and public service outcomes, so it is not an either/or situation. We need to reduce child poverty to do all the other things that we want to do, and to divorce those aspects is incorrect. The evidence is that we spend an awful lot of money in Scotland responding to poverty, when it is cheaper if we can prevent it in the first place.

Satwat Rehman: I want to say exactly that—it is not an either/or situation. We are not talking about having social security or other services. Those must be integrated for the family, and income must be foundational to that. The fact that, after a fantastic piece of work by Save the Children and others, the Scottish child payment will be going up for families with children under one shows that the Government knows that it is a mechanism that works. Therefore, if reducing child

poverty is the Government's number 1 priority, as we hear time and again, and it is serious about doing that, that is where it should invest.

Other measures will take longer to have the impact that we want. The childcare expansion is not going to happen overnight. Already, we are hearing from families that access to childcare is patchy, so we still do not have the availability that families need, and there is not the flexibility needed to meet people's working patterns. There is a journey to go on before childcare can become more of an enabler in the way that we want it to be for the families who need it.

Employment is not a route out of poverty. I am thinking about the families and parents who we work with, because 62 per cent of single parents work, and yet a third of all single parents are in poverty. Those are structural issues that will take longer to address, because it is not just about individualising a service and making a person job ready. We have many parents who are job ready, but we do not have a labour market that is ready for them. That is why it is absolutely critical to look at these things sequentially, with income as the foundation, knowing that, if work is to be the route out of poverty, we need to improve the nature of work, the income from work and the opportunities for progression into work. We have to look at sequencing and things happening in parallel—it is not an either/or situation. However, we know that social security is what will get us from where we are now to meeting the targets by the deadline.

10:00

The Convener: Before I bring in Julie MacDougall, I have a question on that point. The Government has said that it does not like cliff edges in any policy. However, the link to universal credit potentially means that a more significant payment, such as the child payment, could be lost if somebody, for example, loses their qualification for universal credit by working more hours or taking on additional work. Bearing in mind what you said, Ms Rehman, about employment not being the route out of poverty, would it not be better if we removed those cliff edges so that there is a more phased approach as people go into the world of work or take on more hours? That way, they would not run the risk of losing what I think is by common consent round the table an impactful payment. Would you like that aspect to be revisited?

Satwat Rehman: Yes, we would like that to be smoothed out and for someone's progression to be part of what can be supported, so that they do not have to worry month to month about the difference that bringing in more income would make. Research by, I think, Professor Kitty Stewart and others at the London School of Economics and Political Science has shown that the Scottish child payment is not a disincentive to families wanting to work.

Julie MacDougall: I agree with absolutely everything that I have heard. What I understand is that, although it is of course really important to have the payment, it is about a holistic approach, as Fiona King has said.

We have what I would class as welfare system failure. We see that all the time, every day, in our communities: we have something on which we say that there has been a hundred actions, but we should measure our outcomes because, clearly, they are not working, despite the apparent slight reduction in the figures. We apparently still have one in 10 people in deep poverty and we have food banks in our communities. Although work is a way out, it must be good and well-paid work, with a system that works with that and does not penalise people for having a job. We need to look at the fact that we give, I think, £7 billion to social security, which is 14 per cent of the Scottish budget. That money is there, but it is about what we do with it, and the outcomes clearly show that we are not doing the right things.

I agree with everything that has been said. On what the solution is, I am obviously keen to have further discussion on the matter and hear more from the witnesses to understand more. As a local councillor, I am aware of what is happening in our communities at the grass roots and I cannot disagree with anything that I have heard so far, so I look forward to the rest of the discussion.

The Convener: I will bring in Gary Bouse briefly before I bring in Chris Birt.

Gary Bouse: It is a short comment. Justina Murray talked about language. One of my big takeaways from the ADP round-table discussion that we had was that language is very important. That is what the carers and people who work in ADP told us. How everybody, especially us as MSPs—and we could reflect that to MPs and councillors, too—deals with language is important. Do you agree? That was a big takeaway. Every group that was involved spoke about that; they were really concerned. It really should not be happening that people use terms such as "cheaters", as that does not help at all. Do you agree?

The Convener: Justina is nodding. Do you want to come in on that?

Justina Murray: No.

The Convener: Fine. Did you want to agree with Mr Bouse, Ms Campbell?

Kate Campbell: No, I want to come in on ADP.

The Convener: Okay. I will bring in Chris Birt and then bring you in after that.

Chris Birt: Most years, I go to Glasgow Disability Alliance's challenge poverty week events, which are sobering. One thing that you will constantly hear from disabled people in Scotland and across the UK is just how untrusting they are of public services, because of how they have felt in the crosshairs for years. A large proportion of the increase in deep poverty, which Julie MacDougall mentioned, is among disabled people, and that has been happening since the turn of the millennium. So this is a long-term process, and the social security system is obviously vital in it.

I come back to something that the convener talked about earlier. If the Scottish Government were to say, "Look, our social security spending is done for now," we would obviously all challenge that. There are things that it could do in the meantime to smooth some of the cliff edges in the Scottish child payment et cetera. However, we have also talked about the hard choices that need to be made in the budget, and spending on the SCP means that the Government must find that money from elsewhere.

We are also making a choice at the moment. If we do not change how we spend our money, we are choosing to maintain poverty at its current level. The struggles that families face, which everyone round this table could describe in glorious technicolour, are persistent. Poverty is, fundamentally, a lack of income. We must change how income flows through our society. That will not happen by osmosis. It will not happen because of the weather. We must make changes.

Childcare is a really good example. No one here would say that we should not expand childcare provision for low-income families to help to reduce child poverty. That is linked to work incentives and all those kind of things. However, we are not doing that at the moment, because it costs money. We therefore need to have discussions about how we roll that out and how we prioritise low-income households. We may also need to look at schemes under which people contribute more towards the cost. The Scottish Government is already spending lots of money on childcare. We must have those discussions. If we do not, we will remain where we are now. Even the Scottish Government's projections for child poverty are flat, and that cannot be an outcome that we accept.

The Convener: On that point, I am not attributing this view to the Government, but perhaps the rationale for arguing that cash payments have reached their peak is that greater investment might lead to diminishing returns. Say that the Scottish child payment was to be increased to £55 a week. There might be an argument that those additional pounds would yield a better outcome if they were spent elsewhere. Is there any research to support that view, or any sympathy for the argument that the cash payment has a ceiling because additional pounds would be better spent in another sphere?

Chris Birt: This is a wee bit of a glib answer, but go outside and visit the queues at food banks in communities across Scotland. Frankly, anyone who argues that the current social security system is adequate is not credible.

Take, for example, the depth of poverty. We can, and probably should, have a discussion about how Scotland's social security system could better target those in deepest poverty. One example is the baby payment. I do not think that anyone would argue that mothers and fathers with very young children should be working. They should be there to support their family, and all should have a decent income. We need to have a discussion about targeting. However, there is no simple trade-off. You cannot just say that we can get better bang for the buck in one area than in another. Political judgments come into it, too. Sometimes, we simply need to be honest about that.

The Convener: I think that Justina Murray wants to come in on an earlier point.

Justina Murray: Yes. It is on a theme that threads through some of the conversation about political choices and language. We have not really talked about children's rights yet. The Parliament has incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law. Those rights should not fall within the realms of the nice to have; they should not be regarded as a bit of a luxury or an optional extra. Children up to the age of 18 have the right to live free from poverty.

The same applies even with some of the more targeted approaches. We will obviously not say that families with babies under one should not receive an additional payment—of course they should. However, a family with an 11-month-old and a family with a 13-month-old will largely face the same costs. The Parliament has a duty to uphold the UNCRC, as do governments at all levels, so why would we say that an 11-month-old is entitled to more support than a 13-month-old? On breakfast clubs, why would we say, "We'll do that for primary 1 to 5, then we will do P6 and P7, but we will not really look at secondary schools, because, let's be honest, teenagers are not hungry in the morning." That is madness.

If we start from a rights-based approach, the political choices and the language become different. To return to the point about cliff edges, our system is creating age-related cliff edges that do not reflect the UNCRC, which is now part of the law.

The Convener: Peter Kelly wants to come in. I will then come to Professor Fitzpatrick for her thoughts or observations on what we have heard.

Peter Kelly: It is clear from what the witnesses have said so far that social security is one of the key levers that we have to drive down child poverty. For the purposes of this committee, as you consider what business to focus on, the question that you need to ask is: how do we build on the progress that has been made with social security? You need to consider the gamut of social security powers that are available to the Scottish Government. We rightly tend to focus on the Scottish child payment, but we need to remember that the Scottish Government has made commitments to mitigate the bedroom tax and the benefits cap, and it is paying to do that. We need to think about the Government's wider role.

The question of language is important. A few questions ago, the convener asked about the things that the Scottish Government has done differently that have made an impact. The change in benefit uptake has not happened by accident. Chris Birt has talked forcefully about the choices that we can make. Since the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 came into force, the Scottish Government has consistently had a benefit uptake strategy, which has undoubtedly had an impact, so we should welcome that. The new uptake strategy that has just been published is very welcome and will, I hope, strengthen the impact.

As others have said, we are talking about stuff that has an impact on people in the real world. The language that is used in the Parliament and in the media when talking about people who are experiencing poverty is extremely important. We need to be conscious of that, and we should recognise the work that the Scottish Government has done in that regard.

We have touched on issues relating to the labour market and jobs. We are looking for things that we have done in Scotland to try to drive things forward. For example, the support that the Scottish Government has provided for payment of the real living wage has been quite consequential. Proportionately, there is a higher rate of accredited living wage employers in Scotland than there is in other parts of the UK, so that has had a real impact. About 75,000 workers in Scotland have received a pay increase as a result of their employer being an accredited living wage employer.

As Fiona King said, we must consider a whole tapestry of actions. There is a lot going on, so the challenge for the committee over the coming period is to think about the things that will make the most difference. The clear message from us is that social security remains a key lever that we need to pull.

Kate Campbell: It is quite helpful that I am coming in after that answer. The convener keeps asking about what we should take away if we were to provide more funding for the child payment. In our discussions in the committee, some voices have said that there should be a reduction in ADP, but I do not agree. My understanding is that many of the families and children who are living in poverty are in that position because either an adult or a child in the family has a disability. I am interested in the witnesses' views on how important ADP is in tackling child poverty, particularly when there is someone with a disability in the family. Reducing ADP in order to increase the child payment should not be the trade-off.

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

Satwat Rehman: It is funny when everybody looks at you, because you think, "Okay—crikey."

I would give an emphatic no—we should not have a trade-off with different policies. Almost 50 per cent of single-parent families include someone who is disabled. The purpose of the adult disability payment is to help with the additional costs as a result of limitations and problems—for example, someone cannot be mobile in an arrangement that is not designed for them. We should not take away support for one of the groups that is most at risk of poverty in order to give it to another group. That should not be on the table.

We have an advice and information service and we do a lot of work on maximising families' income—that is the first thing that we do when they come to us. The difference that something such as adult disability payment makes to a family—as well as the additional help with costs that they get once they receive it—is remarkable. Therefore, there is absolutely no way that we would say that you should cut one benefit in order to provide another.

10:15

The Convener: Professor Fitzpatrick, do you have any thoughts or observations? You are participating remotely, so I want to make sure that you have the opportunity to come in.

Professor Fitzpatrick: I agree with what has been said by my colleagues on the panel today. The overriding message has to be one of concern that there is dissonance between what the cabinet secretary and the First Minister are saying about the eradication of child poverty being a number 1 priority, and what is in the delivery plan. No credible path forward is set out in the delivery plan to actually achieve the 2030 targets. As colleagues have said in their submissions, the problem is not

the targets; it is the relative lack of action to meet them. There is no credible path forward without investment through social security, and the Scottish child payment is the most successful vehicle that we have had for that.

I will comment on a couple of other issues that have come up. One is about what else the Scottish Government has done since 2017 that has contributed to our relatively better performance on child poverty. Much as there are no grounds for complacency, we are doing better than the rest of the UK. That is because of the Scottish child payment, but it is also about other things. Chris Birt mentioned the investment in social housing, which has happened not only since 2017 but on a long-term basis. Because Scotland has a bigger social housing sector, it makes a major contribution to our lower rates of child poverty and poverty in general than is the case elsewhere. Peter Kelly mentioned other things that have made a major contribution, such as the other welfare mitigations that the Government has put in place.

Another key message is that policy and decisions really do matter: we can make a difference in child poverty, and the Government has done so, but, if we are to reach the targets, we cannot just continue to do what we are already doing; we must accelerate progress towards them. There is no credible path without the Scottish child payment and other investments in social security.

What really concerns me is what Fiona King called the confetti of policies or statements of action. For a lot of these things, we are told, "We published a report", "We held an event", or "We issued a statement", but we now need to focus on hard outcomes. We do not have a lot of time between now and when we need to reach the targets, so we need that bold, transformational action, but the Poverty and Inequality Commission does not see that in the delivery plan.

One specific point on which the commission maybe strikes a slightly more sceptical tone than some of our colleagues concerns the whole-family support model, and the increasing emphasis that Government seems to be placing on that as the route to meeting Scottish child poverty targets. Of course, the commission is very mindful of the importance of person-centred, holistic approaches, but we have not as yet seen evidence that draws a clear line between whole-family support and meeting child poverty targets. We are very concerned that the Government is shifting away from a cash-first approach towards this public service reform approach, despite the fact that we have not seen evidence of causal pathways between the whole-family model and meeting the targets on child poverty.

The commission would want to strike a balance between the two aspects: policy is important, and the Scottish Government has implemented important policies that have driven down child poverty from where it otherwise would have been, but we have not done anywhere near enough to meet the targets, so it is important that we do not move away from a cash-first, social security-orientated model.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Mark Griffin, who wants to return in detail to the issue of the targets.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): The Scottish Government has announced a review of the targets in the 2017 act, and the cabinet secretary has said that she expects to have a meaningful consultation on that review. Given the Government's intention to have a meaningful consultation, I would expect everyone in this room to be involved in that. What has your level of involvement been in any review so far? What is your broad view on the purpose of the review of the targets? I will go round the table, starting with Peter Kelly.

Peter Kelly: We have been well involved in the review so far. At the moment, we are in a phase where it is not a formal consultation, but we have been brought in to have discussions. Just last month, we held an event with Poverty Alliance members, at which we discussed in detail with Scottish Government representatives the process and purpose of the review of the targets. Poverty Alliance is a network of more than 450 organisations, and around 30 or 40 members turned up for that event, including people with lived experience. It is important to have that kind of discussion, and we found that to be a helpful session. One of the messages that came out clearly was that the income-based targets are fundamental. In the discussion in the room that day, we were quite clear that the existence of the targets has helped to drive action and focus attention on making a difference in child poverty, and that is why there are 40,000 fewer children in poverty than there would have been.

Chris Birt: The Government appears to be being reasonably transparent in the technical process that it is going through just now. My colleague, Peter Matejic, who is our chief poverty stats geek, is involved in that, along with lots of other people. As far as I understand it, that will bring out a shortlist of possible measures, and that will be the point at which a more formal consultation kicks in. Like the committee, we expect to see that in due course, and there is no reason to suspect that it will not happen.

To come back to Peter Kelly's point, income is fundamental to poverty. When the statement came

out, I came up with a fairly cheesy line: if we try to measure poverty without measuring income, it is like having a speedometer in your car that only tells you the temperature. We must have credible timelines, and they must be ambitious. With regard to the role of the committee, it is also important to note that your predecessors were very powerful in amending the 2017 act as it went through, and bringing in important provisions, such as the interim targets.

In my view, the Scottish Government has to review those targets, because it is almost impossible to meet the current ones. If you have targets but no drive to get there, those changes that Peter Kelly talked about—which the targets have forced—fly away. When Shirley-Anne Somerville has her discussions with Jenny Gilruth about the budget, those discussions will have less teeth, because the targets are not there. Therefore, it is really important that those targets—and teeth—come back. It is also important for the Parliament to seize a collective responsibility for meeting them, because, fundamentally, the 2030-31 targets suggest a much better Scotland than the one that we have today.

Satwat Rehman: Like others around the table, we have been involved in the work that the Poverty Alliance has been doing around this issue. We have also been kept informed while we await what comes out of the technical group that is looking at what types of targets could be in place. As groups, we have met the cabinet secretary and civil servants, but that has really been to provide challenge and urge them not to shift the goalposts, for some of the reasons that you have heard from Chris Birt today.

There is nothing wrong with the targets—we have the right targets. A lot of work was done in developing those targets for the 2017 act. The work that is being reviewed or gone through again was the work to look at the most effective way to tackle—or show that we are reducing—child poverty.

As we have spoken about before, the lack of scale of action, which needs to take place to meet the targets, has resulted in our being in this position now. Taking the lead from the families that we work with, and knowing how important reducing child poverty is for them, our main message would be that there should not be a retreat from the targets, but you may want to review the actions that you need to take.

We are giving examples of what we know will work best to get us to those targets. You might want to look at timeframes. However, it is not about finding something different to measure. We are going to be measuring the right things and we are looking forward to further engagement with the Government as it produces possible options for the targets. We would always argue that, fundamentally, if you are talking about reducing poverty, you are talking about income. That needs to be made central.

Justina Murray: When we first heard about the review of the targets, it looked a bit slippery. A narrative has been presented about the reasons for that. I am not sure that the Scottish Government was expecting the sector to say, "Aye, that's absolutely fine," but we definitely did not say that. We pushed back really hard. However, we did not just harrumph about it and complain; we offered support and expertise, which have been accepted. I agree with others that the process is very participative and well-informed because there is also sector expertise around the table. It feels as though that is the right process.

Going back to Fiona King's "confetti" term—which we have all decided is excellent—I am slightly anxious that we do not end up with a confetti of targets. There is a great deal of clarity in the income-based targets: they are easy to measure and to judge against. That would be my anxiety about the outcome; about the process, I have no complaints just now.

Fiona King: Similar to others, we have been kept abreast and are feeding in at the right points. We will feed in when there are official consultations and what have you.

Building on what others have said, we are clear that income must stay at the heart of those measures. There is an academic exercise going on about what is the most cutting-edge way to measure that, what else we could do and what it could show—that is fine; we will be keeping a close eye on the process and, to a certain extent, it could be useful. For me, the acid test will be whether, if the outcome is that in a year or 18 months we have a new set of targets, that will result in better outcomes for children. That is the only thing that matters. We do not want to win the battle but lose the war—to have a beautiful new set of targets that measures whole-family support, childcare and a whole bunch of other really good things, but which, in the end, is not as robust and does not have the ambition of the current targets.

The guiding star for any resulting new set of targets—whether that is an augmented or changed set—has to be that income is at the heart of it; it must result in better outcomes for children and families; and it must continue to have the ambition that the current set has. The previous iteration of this committee in the previous parliamentary session undertook an inquiry and some post-legislative scrutiny of the 2017 act, and concluded that, although the targets are imperfect, they drive progress. To Chris Birt's point, the

targets keep an eye on the clock and make sure that the issue is current and is at the Cabinet table.

Looking at other parts of the UK, there is a randomised control trial going on between places that have targets and places that do not. In Scotland, we do, and we are seeing child poverty levels go down. We could debate the metrics in perpetuity, but targets help to keep everyone's eye on the ball and it is critically important that we do that.

Mark Griffin: I will follow up on some of those answers. In the initial rhetoric from the Government, when the cabinet secretary introduced the review in her ministerial statement, she contended that actions were being taken by the Government that, perhaps, were not being counted as efforts towards reducing child poverty. However, if we count those actions that were not previously being counted, it does not change the situation for any family. Is it a credible way to assess child poverty to add in something else that we were already doing? Would that almost be massaging the figures to make Scotland look slightly better by counting something that we were already doing?

Chris Birt: I do not think that anybody is massaging anything, but no, it is not credible. Again, the test is to look out of the window.

The point relates to scale and the "confetti" term that Fiona King coined—that is her fault now. Progress towards the targets is measured through national surveys, so there is no way that actions that take place at a relatively small scale will show up in them. Things such as childcare can have an impact on families' incomes but, at the moment, we have universal provision and it is less likely that those things will show up in the targets. I cannot remember who said this, but it is right: we do not have the wrong targets; we simply do not have enough action towards them.

10:30

Earlier this year, we put out a bit of work, which others around the table supported, that said that we think that the previous delivery plan did not, in fact, meet the legal requirements of the 2017 act—a King's counsel told us that. That is a crucial issue that the Parliament also needs to consider in relation to the next iteration of the targets. Those teeth need to be a bit spikier, and they need to bite a bit more often.

We have got to a situation where we can have a pretty beige delivery plan and then say, "Oh, if we measured this a bit better, we might see that we are doing more to address child poverty." That is not a credible position.

Peter Kelly: Following up on what others have said, the problem with our approach to addressing child poverty is not the way that we measure it.

There is no doubt that we could invest an awful lot more to improve our data. For example, having disaggregated data on poverty would be extremely helpful as it would enable us to better understand how poverty impacts on different groups in different ways, as would data that allowed us a better understanding of what was happening in local areas. The story that we tell about child poverty coming down does not feel real to a lot of people in a lot of communities, because they do not see it. The levels of child poverty in some communities in Scotland are well above the figures that we have been talking about today.

However, improvements in data, or changes to the way that we measure our targets, or to what we include in our targets, do not materially improve people's lives. Again, the committee will have a role in looking at any review of the targets, changes in timescales and so on, and that is quite right.

We have targets for 2030-31, and we need to remain laser-focused on the actions that require to be taken, in addition to those that are already being taken, to get towards those targets. It is not a question of the targets being wrong; it is about how we get there.

The Convener: To perhaps inject a dose of political cynicism into the discussion, 2030-31 is a pre-election period, and Governments do not like missing targets. Is there a potential risk that the targets are changed or the goalposts moved? As Chris said, the Government is probably aware that nobody around this table thinks that the targets will be hit.

Peter Kelly: There is a need for the targets to be reviewed. We know that. There are data questions that mean that the targets need to be reviewed.

Far be it from me to comment on political matters, but there is always a danger when any Government looks at its targets and says, "Well, these aren't quite measuring the right thing." We need to be conscious of the robust nature of these targets and stick with them. If, as many people around the table have said, it becomes clear that it is very difficult to see how we reach those targets, then they need to be addressed. We need to say, "Right, what next? What comes next?" We do not want to see a situation such as where we had statutory targets at the UK level that were undermined and then scrapped for no good reason at all. We saw the consequences of that in the actions that were taken to address child poverty at the UK level.

Chris Birt: The politics are obviously not for us. However, we are kind of already there, in terms of our not being able to meet the targets.

For me, it is really important to bring those teeth back and for politicians to feel that pressure. As the convener said, elections can make them feel that pressure, because they want to do what they said they were going to do. However, even that is five years away, which is why I think that the targets need to be reviewed. We cannot wait five years, miss them, and then say, "Oh well, that's rubbish". Yes, it would be a difficult election campaign, but that would be five years of children's lives cast away.

We should bring the targets forward and strengthen them.

The Convener: That question has clearly lit the touchpaper.

Satwat Rehman: Absolutely. The committee has heard from every witness at the round table so far that we back income-based targets very strongly. We see them as being central to our being able to show that we are reducing child poverty.

If we look at this in the context of pre-budget scrutiny, and the fact that the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 will need to be reviewed because the reporting date will need to change, we see that there are some opportunities. The data for 2030-31 will not be available until March 2032, but that provides an opportunity to consider how to strengthen accountability in the 2017 act, and, instead of proposing a new set of targets, be satisfied that we will meet the existing ones. We want to maintain the targets, but, as Chris Birt and Peter Kelly said, we are not on a trajectory to meet them in 2030-31. That does not mean that we do away with them; rather, we look at whether we need to shift a timeframe or whether there needs to be more concerted action. On the 2027-28 budget, we would like to see scale, not activity, similar to what we have been hearing. No confetti, please, basically.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission says:

"There is no route to the targets that does not require significant additional investment over the next five years."

Most of the 25 milestones for the 2025-26 plan are not child poverty measures, and the Government's own assessment calls most of the actions relatively small scale. Again, we are talking about having to increase the scale of what we know is working. Post election, we would like to see a child poverty delivery plan with measures, and modelling of how far the plan is going to move each target. We need to be satisfied that the plan will meet the targets.

As we have said before, we must rule out any retreat. Any new timeframe must come with new interim targets and stronger accountability. It does not mean that, while that is happening, we do not do anything. We still need to keep acting on child poverty and not waiting until after the review. Nothing in the review should stop the Government investing in what we already know works.

Kate Campbell: I am worried that I might end up going back round everyone, so do not feel that you have to answer.

We are hearing very clearly about income-based targets, which makes sense, because poverty is not having enough money, and measuring how much money people have seems like a reasonable way to measure the targets. However, we have also heard about the patchwork of other things that are important. Social housing, childcare and free school meals have a big impact. Do panel members feel that there is a place for some of those things in addition to—not instead of—income-based targets? Is there a way to measure social housing and childcare, for example?

Fiona King: I agree with everything that everyone said about the importance of income-based targets, and with Satwat Rehman's point that we cannot pause action to undertake a review. Children have not got the luxury of being able to wait for us to pontificate on the best measure, while they do not have enough to buy toothpaste. We must not pause action. We are all saying we should be putting the foot down, and it feels a bit like we are pausing and doing a review. We all agree that there is legitimacy in doing a review, but that has to come alongside accelerating action—it cannot be a reason to pause action.

The way I see it, there is a world in which we have income at the top and indicators under that. Childcare, social housing and other important parts of the patchwork could be measured underneath income to consider what families are in receipt of and whether they are getting in-kind benefit from other investments. However, if, after you are in a social house, and your children are getting free school meals, and their primary 1 bags and bus passes, you still do not have enough money and you are standing in the queue for a food bank, you are still experiencing child poverty, which is why income is so important. There is no point in counting a whole bunch of stuff, when families are still living the reality of poverty. Our concern is that we might come up with a framework that captures some stuff, but families are still living in poverty. If we are capturing stuff, it takes the foot off the gas, if you see what I mean. There is important work to do to ensure that we capture some of those things.

On Suzanne Fitzpatrick's point, we need to be more data-driven, and we need to invest in the policies that we know are having an impact at scale. There are lots of things that are valuable to families, but they are not going to have an impact at scale. We all need to be a bit more impact driven.

Kate Campbell: It feels important that policies on things that have a really big impact, such as social housing, have teeth. Rather than just focusing on things such as the Scottish child payment, we should be asking the whole of the Parliament, including all the committees, and all the cabinet secretaries to focus on the really important things. We should focus not just on the confetti of policies that we have talked about, but on the really important aspects that make a big difference, such as social housing and childcare.

Chris Birt: A good decision was made in the design of the 2017 act to have the "after housing costs" measures as part of the target. In relation to social housing costs, that plays into what is already there in the targets. I am pretty sure—I will correct this if I am wrong; my colleague Carla Cebula, who is our statistician, will know—that free school meals are already included in household incomes.

There are the big things, such as the cost of electricity. We all pay for them, but some people struggle more than others. If the Scottish Government really wants to go for an all-singing, all-dancing new survey that will allow us to get more local data so that councils can make more informed decisions and we can cut things by different households, which Peter Kelly talked about, we are all up for that. It would cost a bit of money, but it would be a really good policy tool. That is definitely worth thinking about. However, thinking about what we have already, let us be a wee bit careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Fundamentally, going back to something that was said earlier, I note that we cannot eradicate child poverty without improving the lives of disabled people and without taking on depth of poverty, too. It is worth bringing in those other areas.

Julie MacDougall: We have talked about disabled children, and we know that 55 per cent of disabled children are from one-parent families. I am regularly out and about visiting people in the community, and on Monday I had a meeting with TouchBase Fife. An issue that it highlighted, which is a common theme throughout Scotland, is that third sector organisations struggle to be able to plan ahead, to understand how they can work collectively with other organisations, and to be more connected with councils. Many concerns have been raised with me. I hear that people at the grass roots should be making and shaping our policies and be far more involved, because they are the people who know what is happening in our communities. That message has come across strongly.

I agree that we need strong and robust policy, as has been mentioned. We have heard about confetti. I call it fluff, but it is the same thing. We need strong policy, and it has to be put together with the people who know our communities best. I hope that you agree with my analysis of what I hear and the feedback that we get as politicians, which we are listening to. We should be stronger in our policy and make sure that we are hearing those messages. Public sector reform is an opportunity, and I hope that everyone will be fully involved and have their voices heard.

Do you agree that it is important that we work in a joined-up way with the third sector and streamline the way that we work? Do you agree that we could improve on that?

Justina Murray: I wanted to come in on Suzanne Fitzpatrick's point about whole family support about three hours ago, but I come back to that now, because it is all connected. You have picked my favourite topic of public service reform versus public sector reform. I have been a real pedant about that but, rather depressingly, it has become about public sector reform. I feel that that is taking the lens completely away from outcomes for children and families, which I know the committee has at its heart.

In Scotland, we rarely see the third sector being the lead and being trusted to lead. At the moment, a load of work is going on in Government about pulling different whole family funding pots together.

We have put it to the Scottish Government that maybe—just maybe—the third sector could lead that work. We are well able to work collectively, but, once again, it looks as though the funding will be distributed through local authorities, in which case it will be a very slow-moving train that will not deliver the outcomes that we are looking for.

10:45

The reason I am so pedantic in distinguishing between public service reform and public sector reform is that the third sector delivers outcomes-focused public services to the public every day, and the more we talk about public sector reform, the more it becomes a debate about boundaries and jobs and who will get an early retirement package, which is not entirely helpful.

The Convener: I call Morven-May MacCallum.

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): I want to ask about childcare provision, which many of you touched on in the submissions that you kindly provided to us. Many of you work with parents who are locked out of work because of childcare issues. In my region, parents in rural and island communities often struggle to access childcare provision at all. What are those parents telling you about the struggles that they are having in accessing childcare?

Satwat Rehman: Earlier, I touched on the fact that we still get calls from people who tell us that they have just secured a college place or been offered a role and have called the after-school club, only to be told that there is a two-year waiting list. The availability of provision when and where it is needed is an issue. Provision across the country is patchy. Parents tell us that it is a postcode lottery.

Increasingly, families are coming to OPFS and presenting with concerns about childcare debt. Calls about that are becoming more common. Childcare debt makes it harder for families to access placements. We have heard about parents scurrying to pick up their child so that they will not be spoken to by a member of staff about the fact that they have childcare debts.

As was mentioned earlier, childcare is an essential enabler, but, at the moment, the lack of availability is acting as a barrier for families we work with. Often, the hours that are on offer do not marry with what the labour market expects from parents. Many employers expect flexibility from their employees. Most of the parents we work with work in low-income, insecure jobs, where shifts might be changed at a day's notice. In the main, childcare is not flexible enough to cope with that.

Provision is available through Flexible Childcare Services Scotland, which we tested as a concept, because we knew that parents needed childcare at different times, but that provision is not prevalent. There is no standard offer of childcare across Scotland to enable parents to take part in mentoring work, training or employment, or to do all the other things that are essential, especially for single parents.

We often hear that the provision of childcare is a lifeline that enables parents to access the labour market, but the lack of affordable, flexible options often forces people to work fewer hours in lower-income jobs. That definitely needs to be addressed.

The programme for government committed to the provision of childcare for 52 weeks of the year from the age of nine months until a child reaches the end of primary school. That is a really welcome commitment, but it will not be met overnight. We are still waiting for the blueprint, let alone the dates for delivery. The Poverty and Inequality Commission found that there had been no meaningful progress on the provision of funded places for one and two-year-olds. When people hear a policy announcement, we start to get calls from parents, or they start to speak to their support workers, about how they can get that provision. The time lag is not helping.

Within our local teams, we have staff who we call our childcare connectors. Their work involves not only helping parents to find the right childcare, but supporting them to claim to get their childcare costs covered, which there are many ways of doing. People want to know what they can get through universal credit, how much free provision they are entitled to, how long they will have to wait for it and so on.

There are things that you can do now to try to make access better for families in an imperfect system, but the goal must be childcare that is free at the point of delivery for low-income families and available where and when they need it. It must also be to support families with a disabled child so that the child can enter childcare and gain valuable experience, which is critical, and that ethnic minority families feel more comfortable using childcare.

It is great that we have a commitment to childcare, but the reality on the ground is very different for families.

Chris Birt: This is another two-sided coin. The roll-out of the universal offer for three and four-year-olds has been reasonably successful. There are families who are excluded, as Satwat Rehman described—whether disabled families are families who work different shifts patterns—but what the roll-out did well is that it forced childcare to be provided in areas in which the market would not have provided it on its own. That is crucial for any expansion because, at the moment, particularly for one and two-year-olds, low-income households are completely locked out of the market because they cannot afford it.

The Parliament needs to come together on this matter. Practically every party stood on a manifesto that said there would be some kind of expansion of childcare. However, the Scottish Government has made big commitments on it and then pilot, incremental improvements whereas we need the big action.

We need to think differently about how we fund childcare. The Scottish Government already spends £1 billion on it. It is not as if it has not invested significantly in it. We need universally available childcare. It does not necessarily need to be universally free. Yes, it could be heavily subsidised and, ideally, free for low-income households but other households might be able to

contribute. However, universal availability is really important because, if we are talking about voucher schemes, it is all very well having a voucher for childcare but that is like having a saddle for a unicorn if there is no provider in your area.

Fiona King: I agree with everything that Satwat Rehman and Chris Birt said. I underscore the point that we work with lots of lived-experience groups and, by a clear margin, childcare comes up as the top issue every time whatever the discussion is. Whether we want to talk about increasing best start grants or the costs that you face when you have a baby, childcare comes up front and centre. That is always the case because, as has been captured well, the offer is good—the investment in childcare is good and right—but it is just not reaching some of the families who face the most barriers and are in multiple priority groups.

Such families cannot sign up when they are two months pregnant as more affluent families can. A more affluent family can plan ahead with the job that they already have and reduce their hours. Their costs pay for their childcare for the first few years of life but they are banking it for their future role. If your job is your income to pay your rent, you cannot do that.

Low-income families face many barriers. We hear it from parents all the time. I refer to flexibility and availability for those who are in lower-paid jobs working at the weekend, in the evenings, in shifts that go up and down or seasonally—all the things that are familiar to the committee.

We just did a piece of work with Close the Gap on young mums' barriers to employment. The project was about employment but childcare was central to that because it is a barrier. Young mums are unable to find childcare that suits the offers and hours that they have been given.

There are improvements in the current system but we need to target the expansion and build it around the families who need it most. It needs to be targeted at low-income families and single mums, in essence, because those are the groups who face multiple barriers to taking up places. We need to have a much more grown-up conversation about contributions to childcare. Childcare is far too expensive for everyone in Scotland but that means different things to different families and, for low-income families, that can be catastrophic as opposed to being a large percentage of their income.

The Convener: I will bring in Peter Kelly. We have quite a lot of ground still to cover, so it would be really helpful to now go at some pace, because we are keen to capture as many views around the table as possible.

Peter Kelly: I will try to be brief. Colleagues have made the point that childcare is absolutely fundamental. If we look internationally, and this is something for the committee to consider more generally, what did countries that have been successful in addressing child poverty do? Denmark is one place that has child poverty levels that we currently aspire to achieve. Childcare has been absolutely fundamental to Denmark's approach, which is very similar to the models that the Scottish Government is currently promoting.

To respond to the point on the rural experience, we are currently completing a project on taking action on rural poverty. Childcare has come up time and again in that work. We supported action in Aberdeenshire to ensure that childcare places were still available. There is undoubtedly an availability problem, which is exacerbated in rural communities.

In terms of our focus on child poverty, and with respect to the delivery plan, the act and so on, this brings into play the important role of local authorities. In various situations in relation to childcare, we saw the vital role that local authorities were playing through their local child poverty action reports in identifying quite innovative approaches to address some of those gaps in childcare in rural communities. In the committee's future work, some additional scrutiny of the role that local authorities play in the local child poverty action report process is required, because a lot of evidence about what works is gathered through that process. That also leads to the question of public service and public sector reform, and how that will impact on our ambitions around child poverty.

The Convener: In that respect, uncertainty creates stasis, as we saw with the national care service in the previous parliamentary session. Councils dropped the ball because they were not sure whether they would still be holding responsibility for it five years hence.

Have any of you fed into the Government's public sector reform process, particularly in relation to local government? Is there not a risk that local government sits out the process until it has determined where it is actually going?

Chris Birt: We have all talked about the transparency of the process around the review of the targets. I am not sure that we would be as kind about the transparency of the review around councils. That review and where the conversation is happening seems to be very unclear at the moment.

Childcare is a really good example. We also have a situation in which more and more disabled people are being charged for their social care. We are shifting the cost on to the most vulnerable in

society because we have not reformed a system that needs reform. Those are things that we need to take on. However, you are right. I fear that we risk distracting from the actual outcomes, which are the changes in people's lives that we want to see.

Justina Murray: We should push back on it even being called a consultation, because it is not one. A thing has been floated. Social care reform was written into the programme for government, then the First Minister stood up in the Parliament and said, "I think social care should go to the national health service." That was not even written in the programme for government. There is no consultation. No such questions have been written down that we have been asked to respond to.

We are in direct engagement with Scottish Government ministers, and we are also engaged through the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland and other collective bodies. However, it is very frustrating to hear it called a consultation.

Morven-May MacCallum: Thank you very much. Your feedback has been really invaluable, because I am hearing from you that the impact of the lack of childcare is monumental. It sounds like people have to give up hours that they would otherwise work or give up jobs or college places entirely. It is certainly the case in the Highlands that people are moving away from their communities because they cannot get the childcare that they need, so it was fantastic to get that feedback.

This is a slight deviation but, because you touched on the issue, I am curious to know your views on reform. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commented:

"We think the Committee should hold the SG to account on how these proposed reforms will improve local services".

In your view, what tests should we apply and what do you want to see from the Government before those proposals go ahead?

11:00

Chris Birt: This sounds kind of stupid, but my question is, "Why?" By that, I mean, how will those proposals improve the experience of people in communities across Scotland? For our report on poverty in Scotland, we conducted a big poll on people's views of local government and how it tackles poverty. It will be no surprise to anyone when I say that there is a lot of disaffection with councils at the moment, and people do not feel that they are reacting to the needs of communities. However, we wanted to get positives out of the poll, because we knew that there would be dissatisfaction. We asked people who they go to when they are struggling and who they trust in their communities to get support from. The answers were people such as general practitioners, practice nurses, teachers, nursery workers and local charities. If we want to transform people's experiences in our communities, we should consider the issue through the prism of those professionals and the people that they serve. That is how we will improve democratic accountability and break down political disaffection.

There is also a question of how we keep decisions on things such as social care and childcare close to the people who are served by those services—I say that as someone who lives in a rural community. When I worked in Government, people talked about decisions being made in Edinburgh, or they would say, "Inverness feels a long way away from me." How do we ensure that people feel involved in how vital local services, which are the crux of their lives, are delivered?

Given that the defining mission of the Scottish Government is to reduce child poverty, we must also ask how the reforms will do that. As part of that, we need to consider how the money will flow.

Satwat Rehman: I will briefly reinforce and support what Chris Birt just said. We all know that there are things that we need to be doing differently, and that there are services that are not accessible to the people who most need them. The critical aspect of any sort of reform process is the question of why—why are we doing it? What is the outcome that we want to achieve? If that outcome is financial savings alone, then the reform process will not improve anything for people. It is critically important that the assessment of the reform process should be based not on financial savings but on whether it will materially, emotionally and practically make people's lives better and make services better able to reach and support people. The reform process could therefore be a distraction from improving people's lives. If you are going to reform anything, the reason should be to improve people's lives—that is essential.

A large piece of work was done on developing a minimum income guarantee for families in Scotland, which many of the witnesses in this meeting or their organisations were involved with. One of the issues that was raised in that work related to providing higher-quality services, along with a combination of fair and accessible paid work, reformed costs and stronger social security. Services are a key part of the issue, and that minimum income guarantee group did a piece of work on universal basic services.

I am not saying that we should not consider doing things better or differently, but the question of why the reform is being carried out is critically

important. We should do it to improve things for people, not just to save money.

The Convener: Morven-May MacCallum has another question.

Morven-May MacCallum: Actually, the witnesses answered all my questions and pre-empted my other question, so I am happy to hand over.

The Convener: I apologise—I get carried away. I will bring in Kate Campbell, who I think has some further questions on public sector reform as well as whole family support, so perhaps we can address Justina Murray's point.

Kate Campbell: Public sector—or service—reform has been covered quite well, but I have been wanting to ask Justina Murray a question about whole family support since the beginning of the evidence session, because I know that her organisation delivers it. The Scottish Government has put whole family support at the centre of its aim of tackling child poverty. Sometimes, when there are three words that people say over and over, they can become meaningless. Will you tell us what whole family support looks like for a family that experiences it?

Justina Murray: I am delighted to get involved with that question. Family support—as I call it—is obviously a good thing, but it has somehow become conflated with the commitment to eradicate child poverty in a way that is not entirely helpful. The idea that we cannot have social security and family support feels like being told to pick a favourite child; it is an unhelpful debate.

The term "whole family support" has become problematic in the midst of all this—it has suddenly become very jargony. Everything is badged as whole family support, when not only is it not whole family support—by which I mean everyone getting the support that they need in a different way—but it is not even family support in many cases. I run Aberlour Children's Charity so, obviously, I am a huge supporter of family support but, for us, it is about getting right alongside families for as long as they need us and taking a strengths-based approach, which is important. That is about what really matters to the family and not necessarily what is on the referral form from social work or schools.

In every area of Scotland, the full continuum of family support should be available to everyone, from the early reach-in help right up to the more intensive community-based and residential options. There should be support for babies, children and young people and for adults and families. However, you cannot see that in communities. You get pockets of great practice round the country, but not anything that is comprehensive provision.

We have the pitching of social security against whole family support, with the cabinet secretary saying that the Government will not put any more into the Scottish child payment because whole family support is the new nirvana. However, family support is about practical, emotional and financial support, and embedded in that financial support is social security, so it is not an either/or. My team get really fed up of me saying, "Show me your workings," but, on that issue—and, as Suzanne Fitzpatrick said, the Poverty and Inequality Commission has also raised this point—we really want to see how the Government thinks whole family support eradicates child poverty. That is not a line.

Some of the families who we support are living in poverty, but that is maybe one issue that they have in what really matters to them. There might also be issues of mental health, physical health, disability, domestic abuse, housing, temporary accommodation, homelessness, trauma, alcohol and drug harm, loneliness, isolation and actually of people just believing that they are really bad children or young people or parents, because that is what they have been told by other services. All of that is in the mix. I, of course, want proper investment in whole family support, but that should not be to the exclusion of investment in social security.

Kate Campbell: I feel that people do not really understand whole family support. If a family comes to your organisation and you are giving them family support, what does that look like for them? I know that it will be different for different families, but what can it be?

Justina Murray: Yes, it is different depending on the situation but, as I said, the family will have a family support worker who will really get to know them. For some of our intensive services, the worker might visit a family every day. For a week, they might sit on the couch drinking a cup of tea, just getting trust and beginning to understand what is going on for that family. Many of the families who we support are referred by social work. They will have a referral form, which will set out all these things that are wrong and broken with the family, but that is not necessarily the family's view of what they would like support with.

A lot of the conversation and engagement is about what really matters to the family. Then it is about working with them, using that strengths-based approach, and helping them to believe in themselves again. There can be an approach of saying, "We're going to teach you parenting skills," but our approach does not work like that. It is about helping parents have confidence in their abilities.

When you sit in a meeting with our family support workers, working alongside social workers, where everyone is using strengths-based language, it is different from other meetings. The outcomes are different. You have hope and belief that things will change.

We support many families whose children are at high risk of going into care. When we put in the right support, they then have no social work involvement whatsoever. That approach is the right way to do things, but it is not the same as just badging everything as whole family support and saying that that is how we will eradicate child poverty. It is a very specific kind of family support, and it should be what we are looking at.

Kate Campbell: Obviously, it is really powerful. How should the Parliament report to the Scottish Government? What should we say that the support should look like in every community? What would you like the Scottish Government to do to make sure that that is delivered?

Justina Murray: I talked about the standards that should be there for all babies, children, young people and adults. There should be a minimum standard of support, which is a floor and not a ceiling. I am repeating myself a little but, in every community, we should have that, from the early help to the most intensive support, and that requires money, but that money is not currently being spent.

Recently, £20 million of whole family support funding was allocated to different areas, and, in the first instance, the funding was provided until March. That is not really what we are looking for; we are looking for a comprehensive national long-term programme, which should be led by the third sector—I repeat that point again.

A few jobs ago, I worked in community justice, which is probably why I feel quite scarred when it comes to talk of redesign. I worked for the south-west Scotland community justice authority, which was part of setting up the Shine women's mentoring service public social partnership. It had the third sector in the lead on agreeing a model of throughcare mentoring for women leaving prison or at risk of imprisonment. It was a fantastic piece of work. There was never enough money in the pot—that was the flaw—but Shine continued for years, and a sort of next version now exists, so it can be done and we have done it before. It takes funding and commitment and a long-term look, which we sometimes struggle with.

Fiona King: I will build on the points made by Justina Murray, who is much more of an expert on whole family support than I am. We have a funded project with Home-Start UK and Citizens Advice Scotland to deliver some whole family support—although that funding tranche runs until March, so I am not sure that that will have a big impact. We would like to see more emphasis on the early years. We do a lot of work on babies, which I would like to come back to later, if there is time.

On the point about having whole family support or income, it feels as though whole family support is being seen as a panacea, and, on Suzanne Fitzpatrick's point, there is not a direct causal line linking whole family support investment to eradicating child poverty—and the investment is not at the scale at which you would see that effect anyway. However, that does not mean that it is not important to the families we work with. For them, it is absolutely critically important, and it can be the start of the building blocks that take someone away from poverty to some of the things that you can measure, such as income maximisation, but also confidence, support and breaking the cycle of isolation, especially for new parents. It is definitely invaluable, but, again, it is part of the patchwork of things that need to happen.

A couple of years ago, everyone got ever so excited about the sure start programme and said, "Let's do that here. That sounds good", but you do not get the same outcomes if you do not make the same investment, and the evidence from the sure start programme was 100 per cent clear that you need whole family support and investment in social security to get the outcomes for children. You cannot take bits of policy from elsewhere that sound good and not do them in the same way but expect the same outcomes. That seems obvious, but I am worried that we are almost switching lanes mid-race, and we cannot do that. We need to do both of those things.

Satwat Rehman: We are also recipients of the fund that Fiona King spoke about, and we would ask for a commitment to multiyear funding for that kind of work, not just to provide stability for organisations but to ensure continuity of support for families, which is critically important. There cannot be artificial cut-off points for the support we provide.

On what whole family support is, we look at it as practical financial and emotional support, and we start with the income-first approach by ensuring that a family is getting everything that it is entitled to before we move on to any other work. Other than that, you cannot be too prescriptive and come up with a definition that will work. Geographies, communities and needs vary, and structural barriers vary in terms of the impact that they have on different families. Racially minoritised families also have to deal with structural racism, so addressing that has to be part of making services accessible to them.

At OPFS, we also think that whole family support is a really effective vehicle for providing support to

families but that it is not an alternative to income and increasing income, and it should never be seen as an either/or situation. We might be able to support a family to improve their situation through whole family support but still not address the fundamental issue of a lack of income. In one of our meetings of the whole family support partnership, we talked about the example of a family living in overcrowded temporary accommodation. We might be able to support them with things that will ease their situation, but it is the lack of availability of affordable social housing and mid-market rental properties that is causing the problem of overcrowding and the family being in temporary accommodation. We can ease their journey to better housing, but whole family support will not provide them with that housing.

11:15

Professor Fitzpatrick: The views of the commission on the issue would very much chime with what we have just heard from our colleagues who work directly in delivering whole family support. The commission would certainly support that model, particularly in relation to working with people who have the sort of very complex needs that Justina Murray was talking about: people who have multiple severe disadvantage associated with mental health issues, substance misuse issues, physical health issues, disability and so on. However, the really important issue for the commission, which we have just heard from our colleagues, is that we must not conflate that with what we need to do to address child poverty.

There is an area of overlap, but not every family that is living in poverty has those complex needs and requires that whole family support. Equally, as Justina Murray said, whole family support can benefit families that are not poor but have other complex needs in their lives. To an extent, there is a conceptual issue here. We should not confuse the two agendas, albeit that there is an area of overlap.

All the witnesses have made the point that this agenda should not be seen as being in competition with cash-first approaches, income-first approaches and investment in social security. Fundamentally, poverty is about not having enough money. Although whole family support will play an important role for those families that have complex support needs, it is not a substitute for ensuring that families that are living in poverty have enough money.

That is where the commission's anxiety lies. The more that we hear from the cabinet secretary and the Government that they are placing an emphasis and reliance on whole family support as the route to addressing child poverty in Scotland, the more concerned we are that they are conflating two different sets of objectives. They are connected, but they are not the same. That very much chimes with what colleagues who are involved in whole family support have said.

Clearly, it is a good idea to have person-centred and family-centred models that are holistic and flexible and respond to the specific needs of those families and communities. Nobody in the commission would disagree with that. Our concern is the emphasis that the Government is placing on that, over and above material levers and those big structural levers that are required to ensure that families living in poverty have access to the material resources that they need. Whole family support is not a substitute for that.

The Convener: We will turn to the period beyond 2030 in a moment with Gary Bouse. Do any committee members have any further questions about the present or near future, before we go beyond 2030?

Kate Campbell: I had a question on PSR, but it was answered, and so I thought that I might be cheeky and use my second question to ask Fiona King what work she is doing with babies.

Fiona King: Thanks. That was a great segue.

This has been mentioned by others, but it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that we welcome the supplement that the Scottish Government has announced for the priority group of families with a baby under the age of one.

I also wanted to come in on the question about the link to disability payments. I do not want the fiscal environment to end up in a situation where we are pitting one group with very high and distinct needs against another group with very high and distinct needs. There is massive intersectionality between the priority groups, as we are all aware.

Our work on babies happens because, organisationally, Save the Children has an expertise in early years, but it is also about where we can be most impactful. Of course, we would like to see all children lifted out of poverty. However, for families with a baby under the age of one, the rate is far higher than the 21 per cent average. It is closer to 35 per cent, which I think is because income goes down at a time when costs go up very specifically in that first year.

Our "better for babies" work is about trying, in a time of scarce resource, to be targeted and focus on where we can have the most impact, because it is a child development issue. The time from pregnancy to the age of three is such a pivotal time in childhood and it affects outcomes throughout the whole life, as I am sure everyone on the committee is aware. If someone experiences child poverty, their earning potential later in life, their

physical health, their mental health and their educational attainment can all be impacted by that experience.

The campaign is about making the most impactful interventions that we can make for one of the priority groups, which can have an impact on the whole family. There is intersectionality, because lots of those families will be single-parent families or include family members with a disability, so the impact also has a wider benefit.

We welcome the supplement: our proposal was a bit bigger, but it is a good start. However, we also need an early years strategy. We used to be very strong on early years and have a connected early years strategy, but that has gone by the wayside. I understand that committees, portfolios and cabinet secretaries are all very busy and not everyone can do everything, but we want to improve educational attainment, close the attainment gap and improve mental health outcomes for children, and so much of that happens in the early years.

Those are actually poverty problems. We cannot divorce poverty from conversations about closing the attainment gap or addressing the mental health crisis for young people. We need to target some of that work in the early years, because it is a pivotal time.

We need targeted interventions for all the priority groups and, in our policy work, we need to be more focused on where there are distinct barriers for those groups. We have heard from Satwat Rehman about single-parent families, and we need to be more sophisticated in how we target employability services and other services to ensure that they help the families who need it the most.

Morven-May MacCallum: You have covered so much ground and answered all my questions within the scope of this discussion, which has been fantastic.

The Government's argument is that some councils are too small to be strategic. I am curious to know your views on that. Given your experience of working with local authorities and the feedback that you get from the households that you work with, is that the case?

Justina Murray: I would say, "Show me your workings". Where is the evidence that some councils are too small to be strategic while the large ones are smashing it? Some councils are doing very well and some are not doing so well. To me, that is not to do with their size; it is to do with their values, their community engagement and how close they are to their communities. I go back to Chris Birt's point: whether a local authority is large or small is neither here nor there.

Chris Birt: Local government finance is such a fundamental part of the issue. We see examples of councils striving against the shackles that they are under to work with communities and be flexible in the way that they provide public services, but that certainly does not happen across the piece. Councils have been significantly underfunded for a number of years, and we now have significant ring fencing of funding. We have social care in a kind of no-man's land at the moment.

Don't get me wrong: we hear real frustrations with how local government deals with third sector services and other things, and I am sure other people round the table experience that. However, it is hard not to sympathise with the finance officers in local government who are trying to make these decisions. We need to look at the situation fundamentally and consider how rurality and deprivation play into it.

If we look at the areas of Scotland that were really struggling with high levels of deprivation and poverty in 1999, when this place opened, and we look at what those areas are now, they would be extremely similar. That is a massive failing and it forces us to look at how our local services are provided, but it needs to be more than a slogan. It needs to be about how we can improve councils' connections to the people that they serve and the services that people get through that.

In addition, council tax needs reform. At the moment, people see their council tax going up, but that is not reflected in better services. People do not understand that council tax is a relatively small part of how local government is funded. We have to fix that; it is breaking local democracy.

The Convener: Thank you. We will now go to 2030 and beyond with Gary Bouse, who will do a bit of horizon scanning.

Gary Bouse: I have a dual mandate—I am also a councillor. Given my nine and a half years of experience, I understand a lot of the challenges that have been mentioned.

Councillors and Governments quite rightly deal with, and make decisions about, what is happening today and perhaps what will happen over the next year or so. I want you all to take on the role of Mystic Meg and look beyond 2030, given that we have already covered what we are doing to meet the targets up to that point.

I was going to ask two separate questions, but I will combine them into one to help the convener. Where should investment be focused to ensure that reductions in child poverty are tackled over the long term? Are there trade-offs between making large investments in social security to meet the targets of 2030 and investing in policies that will

deliver change over the longer term, beyond 2030?

That is a bit of a challenging question.

The Convener: We will go counter-clockwise, so we will start with Justina Murray.

Justina Murray: Thank you so much—that is very kind. [*Laughter*.]

The Convener: Fiona King, that gives you plenty of thinking time.

Justina Murray: In my job, we look well ahead all the time. We do not just think about what will happen tomorrow or next week; we are well used to taking the long view.

We will not roll back on anything that we have said today. The Scottish child payment is a fantastic long-term investment. As Fiona King said, the effects of growing up in poverty stay with people for ever and affect them in adulthood. A cash-first investment is definitely the way to go.

I would push back a little on the idea of trade-offs and the suggestion that this is an either/or choice. Children's rights should be kept at the heart of all this. As a Parliament, it is your duty to uphold the rights of children to grow up and live their lives free from poverty. I will leave it to you to decide how best to distribute resources.

Gary Bouse: I am not suggesting there should be trade-offs. I am asking the professionals whether there are any trade-offs.

Justina Murray: I know. This morning, I have not had a chance to talk about public debt, and I am happy to have a further conversation with the committee about that.

On the impact of public debt in trapping families in poverty over the long term, a significant issue concerns families who are losing money from their benefits because of debts that they owe on council tax and social housing rents. Over this session of Parliament, £1 billion will be taken from families' pockets as a result of that public debt.

When we consider what money is in the pot and how it is distributed, we know that, all the time, money is being wasted and diverted from people who need it in their pockets as a result of all those other measures. Therefore, it is not only a question of how much money is being distributed to achieve outcomes.

Satwat Rehman: I would definitely say that it is not about trade-offs and that it is not an either/or choice. I will come back to something that I said earlier about the need to consider how we sequence things. We also know that some measures will have a greater impact at certain stages of a family's life than others. The provision of social security is absolutely fundamental throughout people's lives—there are times when we all rely on certain supports more than others.

Let us do some in blue-sky thinking about the period beyond 2030. Let us say we are in a period in which we are shifting the system and meeting the targets—we will be shifting from paying for the demand that is created by failing systems to a system that is working for families. Inevitably, those transitions are when the costs are greatest, because we are winding down one thing while starting up another.

I urge the committee to look at the route map that was produced as part of the minimum income guarantee work, because it covered all those areas: the importance of social security, the importance of work, the importance of reducing household costs, what we can do incrementally and how we can test it out for people as a long-term plan for Scotland.

Peter Kelly is here, and he might say more as he has done a lot more work on that than me. However, we are very happy to share the links to the reports and so on with the committee.

The Convener: That would be useful—thank you.

11:30

Chris Birt: Quite fundamentally, a lot of this comes back to things that the Rowntree family looked at 100-odd years ago. Far too often, we see poverty through the prism of the individual rather than the systems and the economy that create it. We have an economy that creates the levels of poverty that we see today. That is the challenge. Child poverty is deeply tied to women's poverty, disabled people's poverty and racial discrimination. If we want to eradicate child poverty, those are the things to go after.

It comes back to what I said in answer to Morven-May MacCallum's questions. You all represent areas of Scotland that feel left behind. I do not think that they have been forgotten about, but they have been left behind.

There are trade-offs within this. It drives me bananas, as it used to when I was a civil servant, that people often say, "You want to spend some money on child poverty, so cut attainment funding or cut support for this other thing related to improving the lives of children." The Scottish Government spends a lot of money. For me, there are trade-offs in how we spend money on economic development, for example, because that is not targeted at reducing child poverty. If you wanted to target that spend on reducing child poverty, you would look at the care sector, childcare, social care, hospitality and retail. In-work poverty is a relatively new phenomenon that

has come since the financial crash because we have socialised the risks and privatised many of the profits.

We need to think about how to create, in every community in Scotland, a thriving community that provides the services that people need and the conditions that allow people to live healthy, enjoyable lives, because that is not the experience just now for far too many people and children in Scotland. It requires strong local representatives to make that case; it needs greater flexibility from the Scottish and UK Governments; and it requires us to stop doing the same things over and over again and expecting to get a different result.

Peter Kelly: I will build on what others have said. We already see trade-offs being made all the time. We see where decisions are made, or not made, about what we will prioritise, and the ultimate cost of that lands most heavily on people who are living on low incomes.

On where we go from 2030, there is the question of where we have got to by then as that will, in part, determine where we ought to go next. Let us assume that the public service reform programme has been successful in some way by 2030. One of its driving forces is the desire to prevent problems and to make public services across the piece—not just public sector services—deliver better outcomes and, therefore, make substantial savings. The estimate of what the whole-system cost of poverty will be by 2035 is more than £11 billion, or perhaps £12 billion. If we were more successful in addressing poverty, and if we hit the child poverty targets, we would save about £3 billion.

Chris Birt put it well: we must think about the role of the economy in this. How do we reshape our economy? As we have said at various points this morning, it is not about one service over another; it is about the whole piece. It is about how we change our economy to ensure that it works for the service of people, instead of us working to service the economy, which is how it sometimes feels. With that in mind, a change in the way that our economy operates is fundamental, as is having a different set of priorities.

Satwat Rehman mentioned the minimum income guarantee, and we think that this and other committees should look seriously at the work that was done in the previous parliamentary session to develop that proposal. The Scottish Government does not show much enthusiasm for the idea at the moment, but it contains solutions to many of the problems that the committee will encounter over the next five years.

More specifically, the Scottish Government has committed to a Scottish artists minimum income pilot. The committee could look critically at the pilot and consider its implications for how we address poverty in Scotland more generally. We need to take that pilot seriously. It feels quite small-scale at the moment, but the potential lessons that it offers could be significant.

Fiona King: I agree with what colleagues around the table have said. If we are looking beyond 2030, the aspiration should be for fewer children to have their childhoods stolen by poverty. I hope to see the Parliament and the political representatives on this committee and across the chamber parking their politics at the door and upholding the ambition of the original 2017 act, which was supported unanimously across the chamber. No one wants to see high levels of poverty, so whether the target changes or not, we should be pushing the trajectory downwards.

We need to tackle some of the big drivers of poverty. We need to see a social house-building programme that is cooking with gas. We need to see further investment in social security—that point has been well made. We need to see connected services. We need to remove barriers for people with complex lives, because we are currently asking people with very little resource to navigate complex systems when we should be making the systems easier for them. That should be one of the goals for public service reform. We should be on that trajectory and continue that momentum.

Perhaps one of the trade-offs will be that politicians have to tell a better story about the political choices that they make. I will come back to what Gary Bouse said about language hours ago. Perhaps it was days ago. How long have we been in this room? The way that we talk about poverty is absolutely pivotal. We have a role to play as campaigners, but, as elected representatives, you also have a really critical role and a megaphone with which to choose how you articulate both the problems and the solutions.

We have a partnership with Joseph Rowntree Foundation through which we have been doing a bit of work called changing the story, and polling across Scotland has shown that we need to articulate the narrative better and that the ambition is around a better Scotland for everyone. Wherever you sit politically, there are people you represent who experience or witness poverty in their communities.

Chris Birt mentioned JRF's recent polling. It showed that 83 per cent of people support strong child poverty targets, which is possibly higher than we might all have imagined. Earlier in the year, we did a piece of polling with Young Scot that surveyed 2,600 young people. They identified child poverty as their top priority, above the climate, education and the NHS. Sixty-two per cent

of young people in Scotland experience poverty or know people in their communities who experience poverty. It is a real, live issue in every community, and the public wants to see more action.

In terms of horizon scanning, there is a desire from the public to do more, there is a legal framework that requires more and there is lots of evidence on what works. We need to explain the narrative not in terms of trade-offs but in terms of investing in children, families, communities and Scotland.

Professor Fitzpatrick: With regard to the long-term structures that we need in place to reduce poverty levels and keep them down, the commission is on record as saying that the minimum income guarantee is a key vehicle for that and one that we fully support. The Government and the Parliament should take very seriously the road map that has been laid out by the expert group on the minimum income guarantee. That is an indicator of the Scotland that we want to live in. We want to live in a Scotland where nobody lives on less than a minimum floor, which should be set at a level that enables people to live a decent quality of life and that reflects something about society as a whole and the society that we want to be part of. For us in the commission, that is a really important part of horizon scanning and of where we want to see ourselves beyond 2030.

I want to pick up the points about trade-offs. Trade-offs are unavoidable—in public policy, we have to make them all the time. A key role for the commission, the committee, campaigners and others is to ensure that those trade-offs that must and will be made are not to the detriment of low-income households, including families. In the current financial climate, we need to think about redirecting spending towards anti-poverty priorities; some of that will involve difficult political conversations—I go back to Fiona King's point about telling that story. There must be trade-offs, but they must not happen at the expense of those on the lowest incomes.

The minimum income guarantee is a really important concept that requires the best of all storytelling so that we get the message across that this is about the kind of country that we all want to be part of. Moreover, it fits with a progressive universalist model in which we ensure that public services and support from the public sector are rooted in a universal narrative, which Chris Birt alluded to in, I think, the childcare discussion. Within that, we must ensure that additional support is targeted at people on the lowest incomes and those who have other needs.

Post-2030, we would like not only to see the minimum income guarantee in place—or at least to be as far down the road towards establishing it as possible—but to see it rooted in a broader progressive universalist model that accepts that, when trade-offs happen, they must benefit those in the lowest-income groups. That might mean targeting resources and redirecting spending from where it is at the moment, including away from some of the bigger-ticket universal items in which the Scottish Government currently invests. That might have to be on the table. It is politically difficult, but if we want not only to meet the child poverty targets but to sustain lower levels of child poverty into the future, those difficult political conversations must be had.

The Convener: Do you have any further questions, Mr Bouse?

Gary Bouse: I would just like to thank everybody for their very full answers. To be honest with you, I had written down minimum income guarantee before I asked the question and I was quite surprised how many times it came up. There was obviously support for that.

I take it that you want to take the last question, convener?

The Convener: I do not have a final question.

Gary Bouse: Okay. I will ask one, then. I do not know how we are doing for time, but—

The Convener: We are quite tight for time, so it will need to be one-sentence answers, otherwise we might run on a bit.

Gary Bouse: Remember that, everybody. What would be your one key message for the Scottish Government and, indeed, for the Scottish Parliament in order for them to effectively tackle child poverty in this session?

The Convener: We will go the other way this time, starting with Fiona King. Actually, we will start with Professor Fitzpatrick—just in case I forget you online, Professor—and then we will go to Fiona.

Professor Fitzpatrick: Sorry, I did not quite catch the question. Did you want one word or one sentence?

The Convener: One quick sentence—

Professor Fitzpatrick: On what the Scottish Parliament should do in this session to address child poverty?

Gary Bouse: Yes.

Professor Fitzpatrick: Invest further in the Scottish child payment.

Fiona King: Maintain the ambition of the 2017 act as part of the targets review and keep income and investment in social security at its heart.

Peter Kelly: Invest in social security. It is quite a simple message.

Chris Birt: I will go a slightly different way, because part of the message that Fiona King mentioned relates to people being cheesed off. We are wimps. We have not chapped people's doors to get elected like you MSPs have, so you will appreciate that better than us—sorry, this is more than one sentence. People feel as though things are not changing. The Scottish Government and Parliament need to deliver a significant improvement in the lives of children in this country, not only because it is the right thing to do but because it will protect our political institutions.

Satwat Rehman: I will go with investing in social security and seeing investment in things such as social security and support for families as exactly that—an investment as opposed to a cost or a burden.

Justina Murray: I echo what all the others have said and add that Parliament should recognise its responsibility to uphold the UNCRC so that children can live their lives free of poverty.

The Convener: The message is quite clear; it is about what we do with it now. I would like to thank the witnesses for what was a bit of a marathon session. Thank you for sticking with us. We will suspend briefly to allow our guests to gather up their possessions and leave.

11:45

Meeting suspended.

11:52

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Council Tax Reduction (Miscellaneous Amendment) (No 2) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 (SSI 2026/259)

The Convener: We turn to agenda item 4, which is consideration of the Council Tax Reduction (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2026. No motion to annul has been lodged. I refer members to the paper from the clerks.

I see that members have no comments to make. Is the committee content to note the instrument and agree that it has no recommendations to make in respect of it?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That concludes our public business. Next week, the committee will continue its themed stakeholder round-table sessions with a session on local government, which is an equally hot topic.

11:52

Meeting continued in private until 12:53.

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