



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 November 2013

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HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

33rd Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)

*Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)

Douglas Hamilton (Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty)

Nico Juetten (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People)

Maggie Kelly (One Parent Families Scotland)

Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

Fiona Moss (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Claire Telfer (Save the Children)

Jane Wood (Scottish Business in the Community)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Health and Sport Committee

Tuesday 19 November 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting in private at 09:30*]

10:05

Meeting continued in public.

Subordinate Legislation

Fruit Juices and Fruit Nectars (Scotland) Regulations 2013 (SSI 2013/305)

The Convener (Duncan McNeil): Good morning and welcome to the 33rd meeting in 2013 of the Health and Sport Committee. As usual, I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones, BlackBerrys and other wireless devices, which can interfere with our sound system. Members of the public might notice that members and officials are using iPads and other tablet devices instead of hard copies for our papers.

We have again received apologies from Richard Simpson. Malcolm Chisholm is with us as the Labour Party substitute.

Before we move on to our main item of business, we must consider a Scottish statutory instrument, which is subject to the negative procedure. No motion to annul the regulations has been lodged, but the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee drew the Parliament's attention to the instrument on the ground that it broke the 28-day rule. The details are in members' papers, as members will be aware.

If members have no comments, do we agree to make no recommendation on the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

Child Poverty

10:06

The Convener: Item 3 on our agenda is a round-table discussion of child poverty. I warmly welcome our witnesses. Given that time is tight and we want to get on with the business, I will forgo the normal procedure of asking you all to introduce yourselves—instead, please give your name and organisation when you participate. We will go directly to questions, with Malcolm Chisholm getting us started. We will give witnesses priority over MSPs, as we usually do in round-table discussions.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I know that many of the witnesses are concerned about the negative effects on child poverty of many of the United Kingdom Government's policies, but I imagine that this morning we will want to concentrate on what we can do in the Scottish Parliament.

I was struck by comments in the submissions from One Parent Families Scotland and the Child Poverty Action Group. In different ways, I think that both organisations called for a legislative duty on local authorities in relation to child poverty. That reminded me of what I have read from Dr Jim McCormick, who has suggested—he will tell me if I am wrong on this—that single outcome agreements do not focus strongly on child poverty and that there is little or no guidance on the issue for community planning partnerships.

I suppose that I am asking not just what more local authorities can do but what more the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government should demand of local government, through either legislation or guidance.

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): As you said, we flagged up the issue in our paper. Overall, we welcome the approach that has been taken in the national child poverty strategy for Scotland. We welcome the aims, objectives and outcomes that have been set out and the understanding of the kind of things that local and national government in Scotland can do to tackle child poverty.

However, we think that a weakness in the strategy, which is reflected in the second annual report on it, is that there is not really a robust mechanism for enabling local authorities, partners and other bits of government to demonstrate what they are doing to tackle child poverty, and also to hold them to account to ensure that every arm and level of government and its partners are doing what is expected of them and what is laid out in the national strategy. We have a national strategy that very much relies on local delivery, and what is

missing from there is the feedback loop that ensures that local authorities and other bits of government and its partners are able to demonstrate what is happening on child poverty.

I am sure that Claire Telfer will be able to talk about the work that Save the Children has done on the extent to which child poverty is a priority for local authorities and their partners. There is quite a lot of evidence that it is not the priority that it ought to be, despite it being a national priority that is set out in the national child poverty strategy.

Maggie Kelly (One Parent Families Scotland): We, too, raised the issue of a statutory duty and we support many of John Dickie's comments. We suggested a statutory duty as one of the things that could be done to strengthen the overall strategic approach that is set out in the current child poverty strategy.

Malcolm Chisholm specifically asked about a duty. We are well aware of the pressures on local authorities in the current financial climate and the difficulties that they face in having to deal with lots of competing calls on limited finances. Everyone is under that kind of pressure, so having a duty would be extremely helpful to many of them because it would give a clear message about leadership from the Scottish Government, and it would prioritise child poverty for everyone concerned. It would make it so much easier for local authorities to approach their decision making in a child-poverty-proofing manner and put it right at the top of the agenda. That is one of the reasons why we want a statutory duty to be put in place.

As I said in my written evidence to the committee, we can do a whole range of things.

The Convener: We might come back to talk about some of them.

Douglas Hamilton (Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty): Thank you for kicking off with this point; it is one of the key points about the child poverty strategy, the way in which the Child Poverty Act 2010 was passed, and the way in which the Scottish Parliament responded to it.

It is worth pointing out that the Scottish Parliament made a decision about a statutory duty when the act was being considered: it decided not to place a duty on local authorities to develop local strategies. That means that Scotland is the only part of Great Britain where such a duty has not been placed on local authorities. At the time of the first strategy, it was thought that the gap would be met by working with local authorities in concerted effort, and we trusted that that would happen and that some action would fill the statutory duty gap and show that no statutory duty was required.

However, I do not think that that has been the case, necessarily.

As John Dickie has pointed out, there is a gap in the delivery framework, and the gap in accountability is still there. It is now incumbent on the Scottish Government and local authorities across Scotland to agree a joint plan of action, because—to go back to the question—the biggest impact that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government can have, with the powers that are devolved, is within the local authority framework. I hope that that will be implemented in the next strategy. I am not sure whether a duty is required to get that action to take place, but it certainly requires commitment and some concerted action and leadership from local authorities and the Scottish Government.

10:15

Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation): I will build on those points. It is interesting to note that, in Wales, the duty applies to all public bodies that come within the remit of Welsh devolution. It is not therefore just local authorities; health authorities and other public bodies have a duty to show how they are contributing to the delivery of the child poverty strategy.

I honestly do not know whether applying a duty is the best or only way to go about this. We just do not know enough about how effective the Scottish strategy has been so far, and at a time of austerity that is not good enough. With the next strategy, we must be able to say that we are maximising our existing powers and budgets across public services in Scotland and that we are investing in proven anti-poverty approaches. Lots of things look good on paper but do not contribute much to tackling poverty, and we cannot afford not to know what those are. In the future, we must have more confidence in the steps that we are taking on childcare, fuel poverty, housing and so on, and we must put our investment into the most effective approaches that have the biggest anti-poverty impacts.

What happens at the UK level will still have a bigger impact, but it is not only taxes and benefits that will make a difference. What we do in schools, on fuel poverty, on childcare and so on could make a significant difference but only if we invest in proven approaches. To do that, we must focus as much on high-quality evaluation evidence as we do on placing duties on public authorities.

Claire Telfer (Save the Children): I welcome the points that have been made and highlight some research that Save the Children undertook on local authorities' approaches to tackling child poverty about a year after the strategy was

introduced at the national level. A couple of the findings emphasise the points that have been made and are a cause for concern.

There was a lack of appreciation of what was in the strategy in terms of what we need to do in Scotland to tackle child poverty and of the range of different services and policy areas that local authorities have control over in which we can make a difference in relation to child poverty. Local authorities also reported that it is difficult for them to know whether they are making progress towards a lot of the national outcomes. As well as some good signs being shown at the local level and positive reflections of the importance that is attached to tackling child poverty, there were some gaps in how the approach is being taken forward.

The refresh of the strategy provides an opportunity to look at what needs to be in place to drive progress and action. That is partly about understanding what works at the local level, as has been pointed out, but it is also partly about ensuring that tackling child poverty is a key aim within, for example, children's services planning and other documents at the local level, including single outcome agreements.

Douglas Hamilton mentioned that the Scottish Parliament decided not to place a statutory duty on local authorities but proposed that the way to drive progress was through single outcome agreements and other mechanisms. However, at the time, the cabinet secretary referred to a review of that process to see how it was working. There is, therefore, an opportunity to look at what is needed as we go forward.

Jane Wood (Scottish Business in the Community): I do not disagree with any of the points that have been made—they are all valid. Our approach is very much about getting businesses to contribute to wealth distribution and employability. Although we welcome the infrastructure that exists throughout Scotland in programmes and initiatives such as the CPP employability initiative, the reality is that local authorities are not engaging enough with businesses or using businesses to mitigate in-work poverty and child poverty. How can we better understand the issues and barriers to businesses engaging more with those critical social issues? How can we engage businesses more and what is the capacity for that?

I get frustrated because a lot of the existing initiatives are preaching to the converted. They talk to good employers that already have a social conscience and understand the issues related to poverty. However, 99 per cent of our businesses in Scotland are small and medium-sized enterprises, and over 70 per cent of them will not be engaged or understand the impact that they

can have by, for example, employing somebody with low educational attainment, supporting a young person in work or developing skills within their workplace. The capacity is huge, but there is not sufficient infrastructure to do it.

Although we can work with businesses that already support community investment to distribute wealth and mitigate poverty in Scotland, local authorities need to come up with a way of auditing so that they understand the capacity in their area—especially in areas that are high in the poverty indices—the issues and the barriers to businesses engaging.

Big businesses are happy to play their part through supply chains, but an awful lot more can be done. We are doing a lot of that through welfare reform, on which we are working closely with the Scottish Government. By working on the welfare reform changes, we are dealing with the poverty issues and preventing people from being pushed into poverty by helping them to understand how to manage the changes. There are good examples, but there is a lot of capacity for businesses to do more.

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Perhaps unsurprisingly, as the lone local government person here, I will take a slightly different tack. However, I agree with some of what I have heard. I agree with John Dickie that there are weaknesses in the strategy. If we are to develop the strategy, we would look for it to be more reflective of all the work that is going on locally. I also agree with Jim McCormick that we need to know how well we are doing on the strategy. That is a good point, too.

I want to reflect on the idea of a duty. There are a number of duties on local government. Indeed, there will be a strengthening of community planning, which in essence tries to tie all community planning partners together with a focus on outcomes. Child poverty and poverty in general are complex and multifaceted issues that cannot be tackled by a single service or, indeed, only by local government. To reel off some of the issues that are involved, they include housing, economic development, employability, mitigation of welfare reform, education—which we might come on to talk about in a while—and childcare and the early years. All those aspects are priorities for local government.

At the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders meeting a few months back, we had a debate on the Ian Wood report, which sees vocational education as one route out of poverty. Our politicians are completely committed to that. There is no doubt that, among our membership, tackling poverty and ensuring that children have—to use the Government's words—the best start in life is the absolute top priority. However, the issue

is extremely complex and I am not convinced—and I do not think that our membership is convinced—that simply imposing a duty is the right way to go about the issue.

Malcolm Chisholm: I realise that the idea of a duty might not be taken up, which is why I also asked whether more could be done within the current framework, by building child poverty more into the single outcome agreements and the guidance to community planning partnerships, to ensure that the issue is prominent.

The Convener: On the points that Robert Nicol of COSLA made, let me say that the committee deals with a range of issues, and one of our focuses is health inequalities. People tell us that that is all very complex and that health inequalities are not the responsibility of just the health department, despite the fact that they are a top priority. I suppose that we are getting a bit of that idea with child poverty. Is child poverty an element of something else? Do we need to tackle the bigger issues and not just focus on child poverty?

Dr McCormick: That is a good question. I will reflect for a moment on the status of a national strategy in Scotland. The way in which we go about framing and delivering a child poverty strategy is different from what we are doing with the national dementia strategy and different again from the housing strategy for older people.

I am keen that we reflect on what we mean by a national strategy in a climate of localism, austerity and demographic change, because it is quite unclear why we take different approaches to different national challenges. I favour getting alongside local authorities and health boards, building know-how and sharing expertise, but when there is high-quality evidence of things that work, such as working for families and the healthier and wealthier children approach in Glasgow, it is important that we recognise that the strength of evaluation evidence for those initiatives is greater than for lots of the things that we do.

We must then consider how we can protect those initiatives and scale them up. As far as child poverty is concerned, the story of devolution so far has been about lots of brave, bold initiatives but on too small a scale to make a dent in poverty, too inconsistently over time or too patchily across the map of Scotland.

Although we are all in favour of local autonomy and discretion on how to implement programmes, we might be a bit more demanding about saying that it is not okay if some parts of Scotland choose to ignore the evidence entirely and to do other things that have less of an evidence base. We must have a clearer view on what the negotiation between national and local levels looks like when we have strong evidence on what we should

invest in, and we are not yet there with our governance frameworks.

The Convener: So we just need to get on with it, then.

Dr McCormick: I will let John Dickie answer that. *[Laughter.]*

John Dickie: We cannot let the child poverty strategy sit in isolation as if that is the only place where action to tackle child poverty happens. The child poverty strategy needs to give a clear indication of how tackling child poverty will be built into other strategies, such as the economic, housing and childcare strategies, so that the broad range of powers and actions that the Government is taking will all take into consideration their impact on reducing child poverty and delivering the aims and outcomes set out in the child poverty strategy.

Child poverty should not just sit in isolation; it must be built in to the range of action and broader strategies across the board.

Nico Juetten (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People): I would like to pick up on what John Dickie has just said, and to some extent on what Jim McCormick said, about the many initiatives that are going on.

From our perspective, what is striking about the strategy and the annual report is that they cross-reference an awful lot of other things. Although the various initiatives and case studies are interesting and tie in with other policies and strategies—such as getting it right for every child, the curriculum for excellence and other mainstream initiatives, which are all worthy in their own right—the report does not really explain what they do to tackle child poverty. What is the curriculum for excellence's contribution to the overall objective of tackling child poverty?

It is clear that no strategy or initiative can stand on its own and tackle an issue such as child poverty—there are lots of contributors—but the different impacts of the policy landscape have to be explained and properly analysed. We must understand what the different currents in policy and practice can do to contribute. That analysis is lacking at the moment.

Jane Wood: I agree. As I have said before, if you want to engage the main employers in Scotland, you need to understand the issues and barriers. There is a plethora of public sector initiatives that businesses can engage with, but most businesses do not engage with them, even if they want to effect social change in the communities in which they serve.

We need to understand what the barriers are—a lot of them are about collaborative partnerships and how business can work in collaboration with the public sector—and we need to understand the

capacity that exists in Scotland's rural communities and in places where communities are not engaged because they do not have big employers to be engaged. We do not understand the barriers that prevent employers from doing more.

Fiona Moss (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde): I am from the national health service. In the conversation, a lot of the focus has been on what local authorities should do, but I agree with colleagues who say that we need an approach that covers everything from business to all aspects of the public sector.

10:30

Glasgow has recently established a poverty panel, which brings together all the partners along with people with experience of poverty. There is a child poverty sub-group as part of that. That has been very helpful in the discussion on child poverty, because we have a context for placing child poverty in wider poverty discussions.

It is important also to have a focus on poverty. We often cross-reference one initiative to another but, until we give that a poverty focus, we do not make all the connections that need to be made.

On the question of whether we need a duty to make local authorities or partners come together on the issue, I think that the work should happen in each local authority and that it should be supported by partners.

Douglas Hamilton: Convener, your question started along the lines of, "Is child poverty part of something else?" The question that we then ask, and which has been picked up, is why we would have a focus on child poverty rather than on something else that could make a difference.

Child poverty is part of something else. It is part of our broader aim to make society fairer and to support those who are not able to support themselves or who are having difficult times. The child poverty efforts are based on that, and we need a particular child poverty focus to ensure that the child and the family are at the centre of those discussions. We can have debates on some aspects of economic growth and distribution that can benefit some parts of society more than they might benefit children and families. The advantage of having such a focus is to be able to determine what is needed.

It is interesting to reflect on what has happened at the UK Government and Scottish Government levels over the past 15 years, since we brought a focus on to tackling child poverty across the UK and in Scotland. There has been massive progress, with a reduction in the number of children living in poverty. The level of children

living in poverty now is about half what it was in 1997. That is a huge achievement, and we need to think about that and build on it. As Jim McCormick said, we need to think about the things that have worked and about how we can take them forward.

Over the past 15 years there has been a change in the economic context within which we exist. It is not the case that child poverty reduces faster in the good times than in the bad times. Child poverty is still there, and there are still problems.

We need to focus on the aspects of the child poverty strategy that need to be looked at, as we have been saying for the past 15 years. Some initiatives have picked up those aspects, which include the issue of parental employment. The working for families initiative has been mentioned already, and it was a good example of getting parents not just into any job but into a good, decent job.

The other big news story over the past few years is that getting parents into work does not end child poverty. There are a lot of children whose parents are in work but who are living in poverty. We therefore need to consider the issue of parental employment.

When we focus on parental employment, it brings up issues around childcare. Childcare has been talked about in the Parliament for a good number of years now. It has been viewed as a priority, and many people around this table have been very supportive. However, there is still not a focus on providing childcare for the poorest families to help the parents get back into work.

We have considered issues of educational attainment, and we have discussed life chances. We have said that one of the key things that could break through, if we had a focus on child poverty, would be a reduction in the education inequality gap—yet there is still nothing concrete to indicate how that is going to happen.

There are things that have been around for the past 15 years or so. The economic context has changed, but there are areas where we can still decide what we need to do, what we need to focus on and where we need to pool our energies.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): This is a really interesting conversation. I have visited a couple of initiatives in the past couple of weeks that I think are making an impact on child poverty. I went to Home-Start Glasgow North-West, which works with young families, often those with single parents, and supports volunteers. It is very similar to the family nurse partnership—it offers a slightly different service, but at a fraction of the cost. One Parent Families Scotland offers a monthly hub in Maryhill for single parents, and there is also the work that kinship carers do. I have met

representatives of all three groups over the past few weeks.

We keep talking about investing in the things that work, but that means that we have to disinvest from things that are potentially not working, which is really difficult—particularly for politicians when people come looking for funding applications. Some of the people around this table will come looking for funding applications as well. Without naming specific, individual projects, what type of anti-poverty initiatives—or projects that are labelled as anti-poverty measures—that you are involved in could perhaps go?

The Convener: There you are—dig your own graves. [*Laughter.*]

John Dickie: It is a difficult question because we do not have the evidence. It is not being collected consistently and coherently; if it was, it would allow us to make judgments about what the most effective interventions are.

To come back to my earlier point, perhaps the weakness in the annual report is how we currently report on the child poverty strategy. We describe a lot of interventions, but there is no analysis of the impact of those particular interventions and investments on children and on child poverty.

There is a need to consider how we measure the impact on children and on child poverty and to start thinking about what indicators we need to build into the next child poverty strategy that would allow us to be clear and enable us to demonstrate which interventions work.

Broadly, we know the kind of things that work: removing barriers to childcare, enabling children to participate more fully at school in order to get the most out of the education system, and ensuring families are able to maximise their incomes through work and through ensuring that they are getting the benefits and tax credits that they are entitled to, whether they are in or out of work.

Between us, we could identify the things that work, focus positively on them and ensure that resources are going into them. At the same time, we need to have a clear set of indicators to measure the overall impact of those actions on children and families.

Dr McCormick: Bob Doris has put his finger on a really important question, and we should get ourselves into a position where we can answer it better within the lifetime of the next strategy than we can at the moment. Broadly speaking, however, with the help of Scottish Government analysts we can probably map out the approaches that are proven—that have a strong evidence base.

Some stuff will look promising. In your constituencies, you will be able to spot

champions—people with a lot of energy who are doing great things. Even if we do not have formal evaluations yet, we can say that what they are doing looks promising. Some stuff will be unproven. Either it does not make much of a difference or we have been doing it for a long time and it does not appear to show a big positive impact. We should be able to map out those different approaches more transparently than they are mapped out at the moment.

One really good example, which should give us pause for thought, is the recent annual report on the Scottish fuel poverty strategy. It is interesting because it is specific—there are some numbers, which is quite helpful. It shows that, although we have been making various interventions on fuel poverty in Scotland in the past 10 years, fuel poverty has risen. Does that mean that our approaches have failed? I do not think that it does, because we can say that the problem would have been much worse without those interventions. The problem is worse largely because of market drivers to do with price—and it is currently beyond the remit of this Parliament to deal with that issue.

We therefore need to be careful about the conclusions we draw about approaches that, on the surface, have not made the problem better. When we look at the effectiveness of those interventions, we can probably tell a more positive story. We have to understand the external influences as well.

Looking ahead to the end of this decade, I think that the big difference with the next child poverty strategy in Scotland is that, sadly, we will be delivering the strategy in the context of a sharp rise in child poverty. That is different from where we were five or 10 years ago, so the strategy will have to run much harder against a much bleaker external context than what we faced in 2010-11.

Jane Wood: It is interesting that we are talking about measurement. The current child poverty strategy clearly lays out the measures that employers need to look at with regard to in-work poverty, whether that be closing the gender gap in pay, the living wage or whatever.

Quantifiable and measurable things can be done in the business arena that are actually easy to evaluate. However—and I keep harping on about the need to identify the various gaps and barriers—we have found with businesses that, although there is a plethora of very good third sector initiatives that work with young people who come from second-generation unemployed families and who have no positive destination when they leave school and get them ready to go into a workplace, there is also a big gap in respect of sustainability of work and employment. A lot of young people and those from other vulnerable groups, such as ex-offenders, do not have the

opportunity to get into sustainable work and employment, and we can identify a lot of gaps where, in turn, employers need extra support to support those particularly vulnerable groups.

As for in-work poverty, we have initiatives that, although quite small, have been evaluated, and we know that they have been able to get people back into work or get businesses working to mitigate some of the impacts of increasing poverty. We can share with the committee details of those initiatives and some interesting case studies that have emerged as a result of that work. The same is true with the work that local authorities are carrying out.

There is good work going on, but when you mention the phrase “child poverty” to businesses they say, “Whoa!” because they do not understand that they have a role to play, until you talk about their sustainability behaviour and show that the issue cuts across different areas in which they are involved. That means that we need to use a different language, but we also have to be realistic about what is going to have an impact on a family with young children.

It is all a matter of sustainable employment, and I do not think that we really understand how we can get employers to help with that issue. It is not just about volunteering or supporting people into work but about keeping them in work.

Robert Nicol: This is essentially a question of prioritisation, which will be familiar to this committee, the Education and Culture Committee and certainly locally elected members.

There is no easy answer to disinvestment. We have wrestled with it with regard not just to health inequalities, which will be familiar to the committee, but to the early years. I draw the committee’s attention to the early years collaborative as an interesting way of bringing together practitioners and thinking about the day-to-day stuff that will have an impact on children and families.

Of course, we are talking not just about resources for initiatives but about the £11 billion or thereabouts—I hope that I have got that figure right—in the local government settlement, the health budget and other moneys in other parts of Government, all of which needs to be prioritised. That is where the gains will come and where the real challenge lies.

Education is the area that I know best. In September, we held a round-table event that involved all elected members, the ministerial team and officers, and what emerged from that was the level of expectation that needs to be set in schools and what could be called a zero-tolerance approach to using poverty as an excuse for poor outcomes.

Services that families touch on every day need to make tackling poverty and inequality in all its forms a key priority. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are talking about not just small initiatives but the totality of public sector funding.

10:45

Maggie Kelly: Jim McCormick commented on the context that we are working in. When Naomi Eisenstadt spoke at a recent OPFS seminar, she talked about the fact that, as we all know, a huge rise in child poverty is predicted over the coming years and doing nothing or carrying on in the same vein is not an option. We have to up our game and think critically about how we can deal with the situation. Our success might just look like trying to slow down that increase—that is a measure of success in the current climate. We need to think in those terms, and more broadly.

It is difficult to prioritise when we do not have enough evidence about what works in the current strategy. However, as has been pointed out, we have lots of well-evaluated evidence about things that work. For example, the working for families project has had a huge impact on lone parent poverty levels. It is an extremely good piece of work, but unfortunately it has been allowed to run into the sand and is no longer ring fenced. I know that some local authorities are still taking that approach, but we lost sight of it in the national strategy, which is a real pity as it could be helpful, particularly for lone parents.

A number of things that Naomi Eisenstadt said chimed with our experience. She recently did some work on child poverty in London, and she said that the key issue is maternal employment. A number of things support that, one of which is, of course, childcare. As we state in our written submission, childcare is a really big priority for lone parents. They have to be providers and carers for their children, so it is critical to them. That goes hand in hand with flexible employment. Jane Wood talked eloquently about some of the issues around that, including the need for flexible employment, family-friendly employment practices and the living wage. As we know, lots of families find themselves in poverty despite the fact that they have moved into work, so the living wage is also a critical support for maternal employment.

Another important factor that we see increasingly at OPFS is that young parents, particularly 16 to 19-year-olds, need to engage in employability and skills. I have talked about some immediate things that can be done to reduce child poverty among parents, but improving the employability and skills of young parents will help to break the cycle of poverty in the future, so I would like the committee to consider that, too.

Claire Telfer: I want to comment on Robert Nicol's point about universal services. When we talk about what works in tackling child poverty, it is important to think about the services that children and young people are in touch with every day such as education and, in the early years, health visitors. We need to consider how we can make sure that tackling inequalities is a core part of those services.

For Save the Children, it is important to look at the gap on achievement at school between children who are living in poverty and their peers, and we need to learn what that means for later life. We could do more to focus on those key issues, as the committee will know given its work on health inequalities. It is important that we do not lose sight of them.

I reiterate Maggie Kelly's point about maternal employment, which is an important issue in the context of tackling child poverty. A lot of work is going on across the Scottish Government on women in work, and some of it links to what we are talking about here, including work on the big structural issues of childcare, flexible working and occupational segregation. We need to grapple with those things in the short and long term if we are to tackle child poverty.

The Convener: The committee is also aware that the inverse care law applies in all these services and the gap does not narrow. That is another challenge. Perhaps Fiona Moss will pick up on that.

Fiona Moss: I would like to go back to the question of what measures we should disinvest in. That is always difficult, but I think that the question is much broader than that. Picking up on what Robert Nicol said, I note that it is not just about what anti-poverty measures we disinvest in; it is also about other activity that might have a value but that is not as valuable as tackling child poverty.

I will give an example. I work in the health service and I am responsible for delivering a number of the health targets in our organisation. I deploy resources to deliver those targets, but if those targets were changed and child poverty targets were introduced, that would change my behaviour in deploying my resources. I deploy a fair amount of resource to apply fluoride varnish to children's teeth in schools. That is important, but members must think about what the most important issues are that they want us to deal with. At the moment, I invest more in the oral health of children in Glasgow than in any other aspect of their health and wellbeing in the early years.

The Convener: I am tempted to go into that, but Jim McCormick wants to speak.

Dr McCormick: My comment is broadly about children and mainstream services. I will pick up the points that Robert Nicol made about education. A striking difference between our strategy in Scotland and those in Wales and Northern Ireland is the almost complete lack of reference to the attainment gap in schools in our strategy. I do not for a second argue that the approaches in other parts of Britain are better, more effective or better evaluated but, in other parts of Britain, there is more of a profile of the tools that are needed to close the attainment gap.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is just about to complete a programme that has looked at education and poverty. That is absolutely about what happens before children get to school, but the evidence is also strong on the point that, once children are at school, schools' outreach ability with parents and communities is important—not in a vague sense, but to build parents' confidence and ability to support their children's reading and writing. When parents really know what that is about in everyday terms and understand how to support the learning that goes on in schools, a significant closing of the attainment gap starts early enough to prevent the escalating gap that typically opens beyond the age of seven.

If we think of the early years as zero to seven and invest in links between the school and the home and between the school and the community—our system in Scotland has not been great at doing that consistently well over the years—we will be in business to start to close the attainment gap. Schools do not need to just change the curriculum to be more about the competences that are in curriculum for excellence; they need to consider how they go about delivery and to see families and communities as key partners. If closing the attainment gap and raising attainment faster at the bottom were the priority for curriculum for excellence, that would take us into a different place in the next five years from where we would go without that.

Bob Doris: I give the disclaimer that I did not expect any of our witnesses to suggest a specific area to disinvest from. In round-table discussions, we prioritise getting the debate going among the witnesses.

I will not ask a follow-up question, but I would like to ask a specific question later, if I get the opportunity to do so, convener. I am sure that my colleagues want to come in.

Jane Wood: My comment will relate a bit to the point that Jim McCormick made—he knows how I feel. I have mentioned preaching to the converted. A lot of the families who live in poverty and who therefore have children in poverty will come forward to take the help and engage with schools, but there is a huge gap between them and the

families who have an issue with trusting the state and the public sector and who do not come forward. Huge pockets of families who do not understand how to engage in greater attainment for their children are not even being touched.

That goes back to Jim McCormick's issue. We work with many schools around Scotland. An awful lot of schools are really good at outreach—they engage with businesses and use the skills of business to support their teachers in their teaching of aspirational career and vocational work. However, many schools are not engaging, although they are important and straddle the divide between them and families and communities. I would like to understand the schools in high-poverty areas that do not engage. There is a huge amount that we can do if we bring in business. Because business is not perceived as state or public sector, it is sometimes a bit easier to use that collaboration and relationship. We need to consider how we reach the people who are not engaging or getting support and help—those who will not engage in any programmes at all.

John Dickie: I absolutely agree that there has been a real gap in educational attainment. The lack of national or local targets or outcomes that are focused on how to close that attainment gap is a gap in the strategy.

The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland is concerned about the additional financial barriers to the full engagement of children and their families in school, which prevent children from low-income families from getting the most out of school. I refer to, for example, the cost of school clothing, school meals, school trips and school activities. Our education service, which should in theory be universal and free, creates a range of financial barriers that prevent children from getting the most out of the school day, or imposes real hardship and burdens on parents.

On what works, looking back to the evaluation of the pilot introduction of universal free school meals to primary 1 to primary 3 children in five local authorities, it was interesting that there was an impact not only on children in school but in the home environment. That got children and their parents talking more about healthy eating and what they were eating not only at school but at home. We could make an immediate impact by investing in widening the free school meals entitlement and ensuring that, at least in those early years of primary school, all children get a healthy school meal. That would remove a financial barrier to getting the most out of the school day.

Robert Nicol: I will not respond specifically to John Dickie's comments, although I will say a bit more about educational attainment, which has

been at the top of our agenda for a long time but has certainly come to the fore in the past few months. At our executive group, which is a committee of members, we had a presentation from West Dunbartonshire Council. I will give everyone a quick flavour of it, because it answers the question of whether attainment is a priority in the curriculum for excellence. It is a priority, and it is a priority at the local level, albeit that councils will translate that in different ways.

The presentation focused on West Dunbartonshire Council's work on attainment. It set out not only how the council's attainment strategy links to strategies in education and other services but, more practically, the measures that the council supports, such as supported study, revision schools, transition work with families and pupils and Saturday classes. It then talked robustly about how the data is analysed locally and the council's knowledge of how well areas in West Dunbartonshire are doing on a variety of measures, such as school leaver destinations.

The presentation then went on to talk about the focus that I hinted at earlier, which is the idea of zero tolerance; about leadership in schools and an authority; and about how exactly the council goes about ensuring that schools have a focus on raising attainment.

I will not go through all the bullet points from the presentation, but I wanted to give a flavour of the practical things that councils are doing on attainment. There is not a vacuum locally. It is not the case that councils are not focusing on attainment; councils are doing that in different ways. It is very much about how the curriculum for excellence is translated into local practice.

However, there is no doubt that there are tensions. Closing the attainment gap is a priority, but we must recognise that there is a broad swathe of parents who want the best for their child, which creates pressure in areas such as subject choice. It is not necessarily easy for local authorities to prioritise.

11:00

The Convener: If local authorities are delivering, as we have heard, why do we need to place a duty on them?

Douglas Hamilton: I want to comment not on the duty point but on what Robert Nicol said. I know West Dunbartonshire Council well. When I worked with Save the Children, we worked with the council quite a lot on tackling the educational attainment gap. Robert Nicol talked about initiatives to raise attainment, but the issue that we need to grapple with is that attainment among children from the poorest households needs to rise

faster than attainment among everyone else. We are talking about a relative measure.

That is the crux of the matter. We want society as a whole to progress, but currently there is a gap, which applies to educational attainment, income levels and all sorts of opportunities. The challenge is how we prioritise to ensure that children and young people from the most deprived households benefit more than their peers, and at a faster rate. If we are serious about tackling child poverty, we need to be committed to making that happen. I am not saying that some people should lose out overall; I am saying that we must ensure that other people get the chance to benefit at a faster rate, so that everyone gets similar opportunities.

Maggie Kelly: I want to back up what John Dickie said about free school meals. We are keen for the current free school meals arrangements to be extended, as is happening south of the border. As John said, there is strong evidence that such an approach can improve educational attainment and narrow the gap.

In our submission we mentioned the extremely worrying growth in food poverty among families in Scotland, which is evidenced by the growth in food banks. OPFS has seen increasing evidence of the impact of sanctions. There is already some evidence—albeit not a huge amount—of a large rise in referrals to food banks as a result of sanctions.

I will tell the committee about a recent case study from our helpline, because real-life examples can give a better idea of what is happening on the ground. The case is that of a single mother who lives in the east end of Glasgow and has a child of five years old. In March she was moved from income support to jobseekers allowance, although her child was not due to start school until September. She signed on in June and was advised to apply for a vacancy. She was not given information about the closing date for applications, and unfortunately she could not get access to the internet to look up and apply for the job until three days later. She managed to get online on 8 June and discovered that she had missed the deadline.

Because of that, when she went to sign on she found that her benefit was completely suspended for two weeks. She got absolutely no benefit for herself, but she was able to claim a hardship payment of £43 per week. The suspension was followed by a 13-week sanction, which applied to her personal allowance of £71.60 a week. She got 40 per cent of that for 13 weeks. You can imagine the impact that that had on her and her child. She explained that, because of her circumstances, she could not access the internet, so she could not apply for the job immediately. She asked for a

review, but her review was turned down. Currently, OPFS is supporting her with an appeal.

That gives you some idea of the impact that sanctions are having. I highlight the fact that having access to free school meals and other education-related support would be an enormous help to that family.

More broadly, I would like the committee to consider whether we could have more of a conversation in Scotland about the way in which Jobcentre Plus delivers sanctions in the current climate. Although there is a great deal of flexibility in the current guidance and in law on how they can be applied, they are being applied in the most draconian fashion possible. Given the flexibility in the guidance, the sanctions could be applied in a much more generous way. We should probably look at the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the general approach that is taken to the rights of the child and have a conversation with Jobcentre Plus about how we can ensure that the different legislative framework and the different approach in Scotland are incorporated in the way in which the sanctions are operated here.

Obviously, I am not arguing that the sanctions are a good thing. I would like to see the whole system being completely changed, but in advance of that being achieved—in the immediate future—we need to think about practical ways of dealing with the issue.

The Convener: That was raised with the committee when we were out and about.

Jane Wood: To go back to Douglas Hamilton's original point, God forbid that we put in place more bureaucracy, but I think that local authorities should have a duty not only to create a child poverty strategy, but to integrate it with other strategies and community planning. As well as being linked to what is already there, it should be an evaluation driver. It should be used to assess whether councils are doing anything on income maximisation and understanding the impact that that has on the intergenerational exchange of wealth within families. I am suggesting that, rather than develop a standalone child poverty strategy, local authorities should create something that feeds into and learns from other initiatives that they are doing.

We work with the authorities in Glasgow, East Ayrshire, Aberdeen, Edinburgh and the Highlands and Islands. They cannot get enough new initiatives from us on how to engage their communities in different ways. There are some great case studies on how that is being done. All the authorities are taking on board welfare reform and the impact that it will have on poverty. They want us to create an infrastructure of businesses that can help to mitigate its effects—they are open

to the issue, but they do not need more work because they do not have the necessary resources.

We must be realistic, but councils should have something in place to address the issue. Although the situation is getting better, it is still unacceptable that such a high percentage of children in Scotland live in poverty. As the local public delivery mechanisms, local authorities should have a child poverty strategy, but I ask them to please ensure that it is integrated and joined up.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am getting more and more depressed, because every time I think that we might be getting close to an answer, something else happens.

From what the witnesses have said, I think that we need to target to a greater extent and that we are just not doing that. How can we do that? People are used to universal benefits and, when they do not get them, they do not like it, and the people who are the best off shout the loudest—that has always been the case. For people who are living in poverty, just trying to get food on the table is enough of a struggle without having to run the gauntlet of approaching their local authority about childcare and to demand their rights.

How do we empower people and give them the resource and the backing to fight not only for their own rights, but for their children's rights? I think that it comes down to the balance of power. How do we change the balance of power?

John Dickie: It is important to get the right balance of targeted and universal support for families. Our ambition should be to put in place the social and economic infrastructure that we know is needed to prevent families from falling into poverty and to prevent children from being in poverty in the first place. We must ensure that we have universal services for all families, so that families do not get into poverty. It is about taking a more universal approach to access to childcare, ensuring that our existing universal health and education services are genuinely universal in their reach. Within that, we must ensure that families that are particularly vulnerable are reached, whether by education services, health services or whatever. We must think about getting the right balance between universal and targeted services. There are risks in targeting, as it means waiting until children are in poverty and then trying to find complicated mechanisms to target support at them. We need to work towards an infrastructure of support that prevents child poverty in the first place.

The Convener: As Douglas Hamilton said, we need to accelerate those who are left behind now, and the argument that you have just put forward

locks in the inequality instead of addressing the gap. It maintains it because they are not in an equal position now.

John Dickie: No. At the moment, within the universal services that ensure that all children get the full benefit of education services, there are barriers in the cost of school clothing, the cost of school trips and activities, and the other things that I have referred to. We need to find ways of removing those financial barriers, which means focusing on who is missing out on those bits of our education services, and to remove the barriers to school participation. It is partly the lack of full participation that is leaving those children behind as the rest benefit from rising attainment and quality levels in our schools.

Dr McCormick: John Dickie is right. We must always step back and ask ourselves whether we have the right balance between targeted and universal approaches.

One form of targeting that I am completely in favour of our doing more of happens in the workplace. Let us look at the evolution so far of access to on-the-job training. It is really important for social mobility progression through work, but who gets access to on-the-job training? The answer is that if someone enters the workplace with no or few qualifications, they are three times less likely to get access to on-the-job training than those who already have qualifications. That is not unique to Scotland; the pattern is similar across the UK. Since 1999, with our public and private training budgets we have widened the gap in skills acquisition and progression. I hope that, in the next decade, prompted by the new strategy, we will get much better at targeting our investment in skills training at those who enter the workplace poorly qualified or unqualified.

Beyond that, we should target households in which everyone is living in poverty, is low paid or is low skilled—households in which everyone is at risk of living in long-term poverty. We often support individuals without any regard to their family circumstances. The living wage is important, but it is a blunt way of targeting poverty because a lot of people who are low paid live with people who are not low paid and in families that are not in poverty.

We need to get much better at targeting our public, private and individual investment at families and households who are already in poverty or are at risk because of their previously poor skills formation. Do we know how to do that yet? I do not think that we do. However, does the evidence suggest that we should go in that direction? Absolutely.

11:15

Douglas Hamilton: First, we must start asking how we target investment and how we change the balance of power in all this; how we can do more of that has to be one of the questions that underpins the next Scottish Government strategy. As with Jim McCormick's point about targeting households, there is certainly an issue around place across Scotland, because we know that there are higher levels of inequality in particular geographical areas. It is about considering targeting within universal service provision, which is possible. The *Sunday Times* talked about the high attainment levels of the children at St Ninian's school in Giffnock, which it referred to as the top state school in Scotland. I do not believe that the delivery of education at St Ninian's school in Giffnock is fundamentally different from that at any other school in Scotland; what is different is that the children who go to St Ninian's school have opportunities that come from their household, their place and their environment, which might not be available to children in every other part of Scotland. We can start to redress the balance by saying, "Let's find those places and look at some of the opportunities that could be there."

We could look at targeting within employment—Jim McCormick is totally right about that. We could also look at targeting within the early years. We talked about childcare. We could consider how to get additional help for families on the lowest incomes so that they get the extra hours that families on higher incomes are able to access. It is about redressing some of the balances. There are ways of doing that in the early years, at school and in the health service. We should continue to ask those questions.

Rhoda Grant: Childcare is a huge issue. In Scotland, it is hard to get affordable childcare at the right times. In areas of higher deprivation in my region, it is clear that there is less availability of affordable childcare. It just is not there to start with.

I think that it was Maggie Kelly who said that a child's poverty relates back to their mother's poverty to a huge extent. We have to consider how we tackle and focus on that—and, I should add, how we can get away with focusing on it. There are people crying out for services who are articulate, able and have the power to demand them. The people who really need the services do not have that power.

Maggie Kelly: I will give an example of a focus on particular families. OPFS sees a lot of young mothers and young fathers who do not have many educational qualifications and who want to go to college. Very often, bursaries or help with childcare are just not available. Provision is much better in some areas than in others; it is very

patchy. We do not have a national strategy to assist young lone parents to enable them to go back to college or to seek other skills and training, which is key to helping those families move out of poverty. That is a quick example of how targeting some help much more strategically would really help particular families.

Fiona Moss: We grapple with the issue of targeting quite a lot. I will give an example of where, if we had targeted help more, it would have backfired on us. In the healthier, wealthier children initiative, we did not target just the poorest families. We did not sell the service as being just for the poorest families; it was much broader than that. We said to people, "Having children completely changes your financial situation and you may be able to benefit from accessing the service."

The vast majority of the people who accessed the service were on very low incomes, so it reached those whom we wanted it to reach. However, they were not people who would have ordinarily used financial advice services; they were completely new to the financial advice sector, which we commissioned to provide the service. The question is whether they would have come forward and used a targeted service, and there is a challenge in that regard.

There is a subtlety in targeting that we should think about in what we do. We can target without necessarily having an explicitly targeted service. The issue has been picked up already, but we need to change attitudes to poverty and wellbeing for everybody. At present, there are a number of people who would not necessarily place themselves in the bracket to be targeted despite the fact that we might put them in that bracket.

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): I find most of the comments very interesting, including the points that Jim McCormick, John Dickie and Jane Wood raised earlier. It all comes down to income and expenditure: the amount of income that is coming into the house and the expenditure that is going out. We could go through all the various reasons for that.

Children in workless families are more likely to be in poverty, but a considerable number of children in working families are also in poverty. I do not think that Jane Wood will like my question. The principal problem is that working parents do not earn enough to escape poverty. The UK has one of the highest rates of low pay in the developed world. I find that amazing—why is it the case?

People could have their wages raised so that they are on the Scottish median wage. Businesses could pay more, although I know that they will turn round and say, "Well, if we have to pay more, we

will employ fewer people.” When I was self-employed, if I earned £10 an hour I thought I was doing well. Most people are not earning £10 an hour. If we got to the stage at which we could increase people’s wages, we could lift a hell of a lot of children out of poverty.

Dr McCormick made the point earlier that kids cannot get things because their parents do not have money. With the greatest respect I must say, having previously been in a local authority for 36 years, that it is not all the fault of local councils. It is our fault that we do not aspire to give people a better wage and a better job in order to improve their income, which would ensure that families could look after their kids in the way that they should do.

Jane Wood: I have to come back on that. You are right to say that low income is one of the issues, but there are problems. We have established that SMEs are predominant in Scotland; we can talk about the big corporates later, because they are a different issue.

The key issue is that businesses in communities tend to be small and medium sized. Those who run them are struggling to keep their business alive, and they do not wake up in the morning and think about social change, poverty, social mobility, climate change or any part of the triple bottom line on which we are working with them.

Awareness of civic duty and the need to understand the impact that we have on lives around us is an evolving thing, and a lot of those businesses have to be educated to do that. We chap on the doors of a lot of businesses and explain to them, “If you pay more, it is good for your business. It is good for your reputation in the community and you will get more customers because people will see you as an ethical employer.”

That conversation is an important part of our work, which goes on and on. A lot of the businesses that we talk to write big cheques for local charities and things like that, but a lot of their employees do not have enough income or whatever. We go in and say, “Don’t give that cheque to a charity”—I apologise to Claire Telfer if that charity is Save the Children—“create something instead that is really sustainable for your business and your employees.”

It is also about educating civic society and those that have small businesses to understand the impact of their behaviours on employees. Some of them will not employ people with English as a second language. We are doing a huge amount of work mentoring them. They are fearful of getting in people from chaotic backgrounds because they think that they will steal from them, not turn up or be rude to their customers. It is education,

education all the time with business. We have to keep on doing that. Your point is valid.

The big corporates have less of an excuse for how they act as employers. A lot of FTSE companies are now having to do the right thing. Before we came in we were discussing how many living wage employers there are in Scotland. I work with most of the big corporates in Scotland and I know of only one such accredited employer, which is Scottish and Southern Energy. That has happened only in the past few months.

I suspect that there are many businesses that pay the living wage because they know that it is the right thing to do. However, the committee will be aware that getting accredited living wage status is extremely complex and regulatory, and it has to go through a business’s supply chain, too. It is quite a big journey for an employer. We have talked about it a lot in this committee. It is about understanding the barriers and whether local authorities know how many businesses in their area are living wage employers.

The unfortunate thing is that the employers that can really have an impact on individuals with low educational attainment are retailers in the night-time economy, which sometimes pay the lowest wages. We are doing a lot of work in the specific sectors that can take on board people who have low educational attainment and can also train them—that goes back to Jim McCormick’s point about committing employers to do in-work training because employees have not come through school and succeeded in terms of educational attainment.

There is so much going on. I am happy to share some of the best practice but also the worst practice, of which we are also very aware. I do not defend business. I broker it, support it and try to make it better, which is quite a job.

Dr McCormick: I welcome what Jane Wood just said. We need that kind of pragmatic engagement with business. As Richard Lyle said, it is about encouraging good practice, although we also need to understand what drives bad practice. I can think of lots of examples from one small part of Scotland where it is large companies that are behaving the most irresponsibly. They are coming very close to breaching employment law and are creating employment contracts that are badged as 40 hours a week but are actually zero-hour contracts when they are tested. That is another debate, in a way.

On the question of our ambition, a high rate of women’s employment, especially among mothers, is something to aim for. One of the best examples might be Denmark, where there is virtually no difference between the employment rate of lone parents—overwhelmingly mothers—and couple

families. How has Denmark done that? Part-time working is pretty rare in countries such as Denmark. It is about pay, but it is also about working hours, which is one of the tough challenges for us if we are going to spring the trap of in-work poverty. Couple families need to have one and a half or two earners in terms of working hours. Single parents need to be working more than 25 hours a week to spring that trap. The only way to do that is to have employers who are flexible. The other issue is childcare. In the Danish example, childcare is capped at 10 per cent of someone's net earnings—they do not pay more than 10 per cent.

The bit of the debate that is missing in Scotland compared to Denmark relates to not just flexibility and affordability but quality. Leaving aside parental employment, childcare only works in terms of child development if it is consistently high quality. In Scotland and the UK, we have the worst of both worlds—patchy quality and eye-watering costs. We need to find a way through that route that not only gives us much better quality and flexibility but drives down the cost.

That opens up a whole area around the cost of living. Richard Lyle mentioned that it is about expenditure, not just income. That is absolutely right. Across a whole range of services where the market has a big role—energy, childcare, housing and transport—we need to have a better balance between costs, quality and flexibility than currently exists throughout the UK.

Ultimately, that is about having more powers under whichever constitutional option happens to come our way. In the meantime, things can be done, such as the ex-Glasgow Housing Association group's short-term deal with ScottishPower to freeze energy tariffs for tenants and those who use factoring services. That is a modest but interesting example of how organisations with a social purpose, be they housing associations or employers, can engage market providers to offer a better deal for some of their lowest income customers.

11:30

The Convener: Before the session comes to a close, I bring in Aileen McLeod.

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): My questions are about the impact of the UK Government's welfare reforms, which is an issue that we have skirted around a little bit. As a member of the Scottish National Party, I want this Parliament to have the power to design our own fairer welfare system. Such a power would give us all the levers that we need to tackle child poverty.

Universal credit will see the move to single household payments. How will that impact on

women, particularly those in low-income households and, in turn, children? How will it impact on the initiatives to reduce child poverty? Given the shortness of time, I will roll in my follow-up question: what is the panel's view on how the earnings disregard between our first and second earners is applied to universal credit?

John Dickie: Both those issues are huge concerns about the new universal credit. I hope that the fact that we are seeing a delay in the implementation of universal credit—clearly there are complications because the roll out is not happening as expected—gives us some time, hopefully collectively, to lobby the UK Government to correct some of those problems and ensure that universal credit works in line with its policy purpose, which is to reduce levels of child poverty.

There is no question but that there will be winners and losers. Among the losers are second earners and lone parents. As you say, there are concerns about the single monthly payment and how that leaves families—particularly women in families—on budgeting over the month.

A fundamental problem is that the value of benefits and tax credits that have been rolled up into the universal credit has been massively cut, which is the driver behind the huge increases in child poverty that we are expecting. It is important for us here in Scotland to think about what we can put in place at local and national level to support families and ensure that they are able to access universal credit and find ways of managing their resources over the month, at the same time as pushing for fundamental change in the design of the new credit.

We need to look at how to mitigate and respond to the UK welfare reforms, but there is a lot that we can do here to look at the other things that we have been discussing and to put in place the policy and service infrastructure that we know is needed for a society free of child poverty so that, at the point at which—and through whichever route—we get a more benign and supportive social security system, we have the other building blocks in place for a society free of child poverty in the long term.

Douglas Hamilton: The impact of the universal credit and the UK welfare reforms is well rehearsed. It is being picked up by and discussed in other committees. We know that the combination of a lot of those factors, as has been mentioned, points to a rise in child poverty over the coming years. We must take that seriously when considering how to deal with the situation. Quite rightly, the Scottish Government and local authorities are making efforts to mitigate some of the worst impacts, for which some credit is due.

I will add one other thing—something for the future maybe—that is missing from the debate in Scotland. We should say, “Okay. We’ve got the mitigation; we’ve got the worst impacts. Are there any opportunities with welfare reform that we can capitalise on?” That part of the question has not been picked up yet. Because of the changes to the system and changes in emphasis, there will be opportunities to look at what we can do in Scotland to maximise the best intentions of the universal credit system.

Dr McCormick: We need a version of universal credit that will fit our labour market circumstances. For lots of people—especially those who move off long-term benefits into work—their experience will be of moving into the murky end of the jobs market, where people work insufficient hours and move quickly in and out of work. It is much more of a revolving door than it has been in the past.

Such people need a platform of income security in universal credit, with a more generous earnings disregard before we start reducing their benefits. For example, in Ireland a single mother can earn the equivalent of £120 a week before her benefits are reduced. In this country the figure has been £20 or £25 a week, typically. To have a more generous earnings disregard sounds like a technical fix, but actually is one of the simplest and most cost effective design features that we could add into universal credit, to give it a fighting chance of being a more effective anti-poverty measure.

Jane Wood: We are very cognisant of the potential impact of welfare reform. In partnership with the Scottish Government we are looking at the in-work issues. I will outline a practical solution to one of those issues. Many of our major employers will employ people who claim benefits. One of the big problems is that those people will now have to apply online for their benefit, but they might not have access to IT and might not be IT knowledgeable. We have approached employers and asked them to put IT resource into their businesses to train people to fill the forms in and we have been absolutely delighted at the number of employers that have responded.

A practical approach is needed with people who need that help. They will not look online because they will not have access to do that, and although many organisations are helping, those people will not know where to go. In Inverness, Glasgow and various places around the country, we are running projects at which major employers provide support and training for people who are on benefit and in the workplace, which are going very well.

Nico Juetten: I was not going to comment specifically on the issues raised about universal credit, but generally a theme runs through that and other aspects of welfare reform—something about

penalties to benefit claimants, which Maggie Kelly mentioned earlier. Children are not being treated as people in their own right. They are being treated in the system as appendices to their parents and left to sink or swim with them. That is not what a children’s rights approach is all about. There is an opportunity in the 2014 child poverty strategy to take an approach that puts the simple proposition that every child should have the right and the entitlement to live with dignity, equality and freedom to develop their autonomy. That should be at the forefront of the strategy and there should be proper accountability for the measures that are being taken to deliver that strategy.

Maggie Kelly: I have been told that I have to be brief. Single payment will be very problematic, particularly for women, and consequently for children. Earnings disregard for second earners will also be very problematic. The question was raised of whether there will be positives in universal credit—there could be some. The ability of families in which someone works fewer than 16 hours to get help with childcare for the first time is a plus, but we must think about that in terms of labour market conditions.

The question in my mind is whether the measure will increase the number of low-paid, part-time, insecure jobs instead of helping parents get a first foot on the ladder to move into employment. As a result, not only are there employment issues for employers to consider but childcare provision issues to be taken into account. Maternal employment needs to be more than part-time; however, taking the first steps in that direction will be important and under this new arrangement—when and if we get universal credit—the flexibility of childcare will be critical.

The Convener: The issue is certainly massive. We have worked on various topics that have linked into the overall issue of inequalities and certainly could go on discussing it for much longer this morning.

We have your written evidence and appreciate the oral evidence that you have given this morning, but I want to give each of you the briefest of moments for some final comments. On 12 December, we will meet ministers and, I hope, the Secretary of State for Scotland to discuss the general issue. What, in one sentence, would be your big ask of ministers with regard to the child poverty strategy?

Fiona Moss: For me, it is about achieving better connectivity between programmes. The family nurse partnership, for example, might invest in nurses but it has not given us any ability to invest in employment opportunities or other things for those young women, and I would ask that we have programmes that deal with the totality of addressing child poverty.

Douglas Hamilton: In her foreword to the annual report on the child poverty strategy, the Deputy First Minister uses words such as “shocking”, “wrong” and “unacceptable”. I know that she and the other ministers are passionate about this issue, because I have regularly heard as much from them, but the question, then, is how they show in future strategies the actions that they are taking to back up the objective of addressing that injustice.

Dr McCormick: My comment is that ministers should build the next child poverty strategy on the evidence, pay attention to delivery and measurement and prioritise getting low-income parents into good jobs.

John Dickie: There should be a commitment to putting in place a more robust framework to ensure that every bit and level of Government can demonstrate how it is contributing to tackling and preventing the tragedy of child poverty and can be held to account if it is unable to do so.

Claire Telfer: We need a clear framework for driving progress on measurement and holding to account those involved in making progress at a national and local level. As for policy areas and priorities, I very much want more of a focus on tackling the gap in educational achievement between children living in poverty and their peers and on looking at how we support parental, particularly maternal, employment. Childcare would certainly be a key area for prioritisation in the next strategy.

Nico Juetten: Children’s rights should be put at the forefront of thinking on the child poverty strategy, which would include giving children and their families a voice in the process. We also need clear structures of accountability for actions taken by the state in all its manifestations.

Jane Wood: I suggest that we try to understand business’s real capacity to mitigate the impact of child poverty and give some open support to sustainable business practice and transformational change and leadership in businesses.

Robert Nicol: We need to respect local government’s commitment and passion with regard to tackling poverty and any focus on outcomes and prioritisation must be agreed between local and national Government to ensure that we have the accountability that people talk about.

The Convener: The last word goes to Maggie Kelly.

Maggie Kelly: It is absolutely critical that the new child poverty strategy has specific concrete targets with timelines, brings together co-ordinated action across all departments and policy frameworks and takes a much more consistent

and transparent approach to monitoring and evaluation. As for specific asks, I have talked a lot about the need to support maternal employment and we also feel that action on childcare and improved childcare provision will be critical in supporting lone parents.

The Convener: I thank everyone for their attendance, their time and their contribution to our work.

As previously agreed, we will move into private session to discuss our report on the draft budget.

11:45

Meeting continued in private until 12:33.

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