

Work and Pensions and Education Committees

Oral evidence: School holiday poverty, HC 2459

Wednesday 3 July 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 3 July 2019.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Frank Field (Chair); Heidi Allen; Marion Fellows; Ruth George; Emma Hardy; Steve McCabe; Ian Mearns; Nigel Mills; Lucy Powell; Chris Stephens; Thelma Walker.

Questions 1 - 117

Witnesses

I: Karen Rotheram, Parent; Dawn Taplin, Parent; Nichola Salvato, Parent; and Anne Newbould, Parent.

II: Martha Mackenzie, Director of UK Poverty Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns, Save the Children; Abby Jitendra, Policy and Research Manager, The Trussell Trust; Sophie Howes, Senior Policy and Research Officer, Child Poverty Action Group; Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare; and Ema Wilkes, Director, Neo Community.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Trussell Trust ([SHP0001](#))

Coram ([SHP0004](#))

Save the Children ([SHP0005](#))

Child Poverty Action Group ([SHP0006](#))



Examination of witnesses

Karen Rotheram, Parent; Dawn Taplin, Parent; Nichola Salvato, Parent; and Anne Newbould, Parent.

Q1 **Ian Mearns:** Good morning, and welcome. This is a joint meeting of the Department for Work and Pensions and Education Select Committees, and we are here to look at the issue of, among other things, holiday hunger and the effect that school holidays have on families where their children are in receipt of free school meals.

Can I ask that the panel introduce yourselves, please, beginning with Dawn? If you can just say who you are and where you are from, please.

Dawn Taplin: Hi. I am Dawn Taplin and I am from the Wirral. I am with Birkenhead North Development Trust, St James Centre.

Anne Newbould: Hi. My name is Anne Newbould. I am also from the Wirral, and I also work at Neo Community Centre.

Karen Rotheram: Hello, I am Karen Rotheram. I am also from the Wirral, with the St James Centre.

Nichola Salvato: I am Nichola Salvato. I am from Sussex, and I am with Save the Children.

Q2 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much indeed. We will kick off with a question for the whole panel. What have you found to be the biggest challenges for you and your family during the school holidays?

Dawn Taplin: Money, activities, feeding your child while you are off in holidays, and childcare.

Q3 **Ian Mearns:** Can anyone add anything to that?

Karen Rotheram: Childcare, money worries.

Nichola Salvato: Childcare. Childcare costs. They are fluctuating. It is quite difficult to manage during term time but it can really increase enormously during the holidays. My child is school-aged so it is not full-time, but it can increase to more than £1,000 per month for childcare costs. I claim Universal Credit and work. I was working full-time and I have reduced my hours to try to manage those costs, but it is coming up with the full upfront costs as the rate goes up and down.

Q4 **Ian Mearns:** How easy is it for you to manage without free school meals for your children during the school holidays?

Dawn Taplin: It is not. I have to go to the St James Centre and they help. They have Looby's Lunches, so that provides a meal for my son. They also have Feeding Birkenhead, so we also have to go there as well. I would not manage without them.



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Q5 **Ian Mearns:** Is that the same with everyone?

Anne Newbould: Yes.

Nichola Salvato: We are not entitled to free school meals.

Q6 **Ian Mearns:** Has anyone needed any support to cope without free school meals for children during school holidays? It goes without saying, doesn't it?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Q7 **Ian Mearns:** Have there been times when you really were wondering just where the next lunch is going to come from?

Dawn Taplin: Yes, there have. Yes.

Karen Rotheram: Obviously, you have to manage your money. Some weeks are worse than others, when you have bills coming out, other things, and you are literally looking to see—you have to add more money on to a food bill. It becomes quite stressful, very stressful.

Dawn Taplin: In the holidays you are spending more because the child is not in school and you are entitled to the free meals, so you are doing a bigger shop, and children need activities. You are spending more that way.

Anne Newbould: They eat more at home, don't they?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Anne Newbould: They eat more because they think it is there, so they are eating all day, whereas at school they would have their set times of eating. Trying to get the odd treat as well is hard.

Q8 **Chair:** Can I just ask, how many times are you hungry, particularly during the summer holidays? Do you go hungry to make sure your children are fed?

Karen Rotheram: As a parent, you do eat less because obviously children are the priority. I know times when I have sort of had less to eat because I want them to have what they should have during the day.

Anne Newbould: Yes, I will agree with that. Last summer—

Dawn Taplin: Yes, I would agree.

Anne Newbould: You feed them first, and then whatever is left you have.

Q9 **Chair:** Is there always enough left over for you?

Anne Newbould: There is always cereal, isn't there?

Q10 **Chair:** You fill up with cereals?



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Nichola Salvato: Although we do not get free school meals, because I am challenged by the childcare costs, definitely something that I do is I do not buy such good-quality food. Like the ladies said, cereal or cheese, eggs, bread. You are managing on the basics.

Q11 **Lucy Powell:** Thank you so much for coming. We all have kids and it is a real nightmare, isn't it, in the school holidays? Can I just ask, are your children—you three because you have already said—school-age or pre-school?

Dawn Taplin: Yes, my child is school-age. Yes, yours is.

Anne Newbould: Yes.

Karen Rotheram: Yes. One is school-age, and one has left school, who is waiting to go to college in September. He has been off school since June, so that is a big gap to fill until he goes to college in September.

Q12 **Lucy Powell:** That is a nightmare, isn't it? Yes. An absolutely horrendous teenager probably as well. I have one of those. For you, is it possible for you to pay for holiday clubs and things like that in the school holidays, the long summer holiday?

Karen Rotheram: We are lucky that we have a centre that does activities for a very, very low cost. For example, I have a son who likes football, but you are looking at £40 or £50 a week for him to go to a football school for a week, and it is just not possible.

Dawn Taplin: We cannot afford that.

Q13 **Lucy Powell:** You cannot afford that. With the school holidays and having to manage the kids in the school holidays, is that something that is a massive barrier for you to work?

Dawn Taplin: Yes, it is. I think if we had not had the centre, we would not be able to do it. I rely on the centre quite a lot.

Anne Newbould: For me, obviously I help run a centre now, but last summer, thankfully, because my child is a looked after child so I am a foster parent—

Lucy Powell: Well done.

Anne Newbould: There are not many benefits to that, I will be honest, but one was that we got part-funded placement in the Hive, Youth Zone in Wirral, which was really useful because I had to carry on working over summer part-time. It fitted in around her and my hours of working because we were both there at the same time, so it did not eat into her and my time. I could not have afforded to work and have her looked after.

Q14 **Lucy Powell:** Sure. I know it is a false choice in a way, but what would help you the most, do you think? Some free activities that have meals



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included, or some extra money over the summer?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. Extra money to put in towards childcare and activities would help a great deal.

Q15 **Lucy Powell:** Yes, or a mixture of those free—

Dawn Taplin: Yes, or having them available. Yes.

Q16 **Lucy Powell:** Maybe the school could run them.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, because I work in a school, term time. My child is in the school, so I have applied for one in the centre, but now I could not do that job because I work term time. It is like overcounting the days. I cannot be here and I cannot be there. I am trying to get a bit more work in the holidays, so it crosses over one another.

Q17 **Lucy Powell:** Yes. Do you get the Universal Credit childcare component as well?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Q18 **Lucy Powell:** How does that work for you? Is that working okay?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. It is not great because I might get paid five hours a week but I am doing 25 hours voluntary a week while my son is in the school. I do more voluntary work than paid work. I am a single mum at home so I have nobody for childcare, so it is a bit of a nightmare. It is not good.

Q19 **Lucy Powell:** Do you get the Universal Credit childcare component? Would you need that?

Karen Rotheram: I just think the whole thing is a nightmare. A lot of things you have to pay for upfront. You have the six weeks' holiday, but then you have the added pressure of thinking, "Well, how can I save up X amount to put them into something?"

Anne Newbould: You are in debt before you start.

Karen Rotheram: Yes, it is like another debt. Obviously you get it back, but you have to—

Q20 **Lucy Powell:** Yes, and then you have to buy the uniform as well. At the same time of year, you have to buy the uniform. Do you get any help with uniform costs?

Karen Rotheram: No.

Dawn Taplin: No. My circumstances changed in October, so I went to a one-stop shop, and they stopped my money and put me on Universal Credit and told me to wait six weeks for my money. While I was waiting, they told me to go to the food bank because I have a nine-year-old son to feed, and I had just started work so I had to wait a month for my wage. I went to the food bank and the lady asked me, "Have you got



your bank statements?" I said, "Pardon?" "Have you got your bank statements so we can help you?" We were sat there asking for help, and they wanted me to prove it, and I thought that is terrible. I had gone to a one-stop shop for a voucher for a food bank, and they asked for all my bank details to prove I had no money in my account, when I am sat there asking for help. I thought, "How is that help?"

Then they told me at the Jobcentre, "You have to wait six weeks so you can have a loan. You can have a bit of money now, £900 upfront, if you pay £100 back a month". I could not afford to pay £100 back, so then you are straight away—

Anne Newbould: You are in debt.

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Q21 **Lucy Powell:** Yes. I suppose I had not thought about that. Being transferred on to Universal Credit just for the summer holiday would be an absolute triple-whammy, wouldn't it?

Dawn Taplin: They stop every payment, yes. Then you go to the food bank and they do not help you.

Q22 **Chair:** It was not the food bank that did not help you, it was going to the one-stop shop, before you got the voucher.

Dawn Taplin: The one-stop shop. The lady behind the counter said, "Can I have your bank statements to prove you have no money?" In the end, only because I know a community centre, I went through the line of using them to get a voucher, but I thought people out there do not know they will help, and they should not treat you like that when you are there to ask for help, and I needed it.

Q23 **Thelma Walker:** Thanks very much for coming in and talking to us. You have touched on this already in terms of keeping your kids occupied during the holidays and extracurricular, as you call it, activities. If you were to compare what your children can do and what they are offered during the summer holidays, or any holidays indeed, compared to when they are at school, what would you say the big difference is?

Karen Rotheram: A huge difference. The primary school that my son goes to operates a breakfast club for a very minimal amount. They have after-school activities nearly every day, so he is able to participate in after-school activities. That helps tremendously in term time because you do not have that worry. You can put him into school and pick him up later.

Q24 **Thelma Walker:** What do you notice is the difference in your child? Do you notice anything in their behaviour?

Dawn Taplin: Yes, their behaviour changes. I think my son's behaviour changes in the holidays because he is not—



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Karen Rotheram: They do not have the structure.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, they do not have that routine like in school. There are no activities if you do not have the money to take them, so it makes a big difference.

Karen Rotheram: I think children like structure. They like to know when they get up, breakfast, and what are we doing at dinnertime, teatime? They like structure.

Q25 **Thelma Walker:** Would you say that they miss some of their peers, some of their friends?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Karen Rotheram: Definitely.

Anne Newbould: That is where it was really useful for me last year having the Hive, because my little one knew that you went there at 8.00 am. She had her breakfast, she saw her pals and stuff, and then we finished at 1.00 pm. That was every day, so she knew at least in the morning and it kept that getting-up-in-the-morning, like you do for school, routine going. It was easier when we went back into school in September for her to just carry on and go back into school.

Q26 **Thelma Walker:** I know we have all the money issues and all of that, but would you say there is additional stress on you as mums because you feel perhaps guilty that you cannot offer—

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Anne Newbould: I often feel guilty. My little one will say to me, "Can we do that and do that?" I say, "Not this week, babe, because we haven't quite got the pennies yet, but when we have, then we will".

Q27 **Thelma Walker:** Would you say the schools are supportive, maybe through that period of time, signposting you to the right support?

Anne Newbould: Some are.

Karen Rotheram: Yes. The primary school my son goes to does work closely with the local centre, so they do advertise what the local centre does. It is very community-based.

Q28 **Thelma Walker:** Do any of your schools actually give out the vouchers? Do you use any vouchers?

Dawn Taplin: No, you do not get any. They do not help you. They do not help you in that way, do they, the schools? No.

Q29 **Thelma Walker:** Would that help? In my area, we have gone up from 21 schools registering to 34 this year, so schools register and have vouchers that they give out so there is some support. Would that help?



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Anne Newbould: I imagine it would, if there was more access. Like Dawn was saying, it is how it is dealt with. Myself, I have had to get a food bank voucher when—

Dawn Taplin: It is the way people judge you when you are asked, when you have to stand up and you are going to ask for help, and then it is, "Bring your bank statements in". We would not be here if I did not need the help.

Q30 **Thelma Walker:** Exactly, yes. Are there any activity programmes that have been helpful? Have you participated in anything?

Anne Newbould: Sometimes when we have big event days in the parks and stuff. I know, myself, when I used to run groups in our childcare centre, a lot of families used to come to ours. We used to do two event days. Parents would come to that and we would provide a picnic and stuff, a teddy bears' picnic. It was a way to get healthy food in. That kind of thing does help, but it is only a little snapshot in a day or two days a week. If they do not have access to anything else, it is a long time in between.

Q31 **Thelma Walker:** Do your children talk to you about how they are feeling during the summer holidays? Children sometimes close down a bit, don't they? Do they talk to you?

Karen Rotheram: When I had a nearly full-time job, I had to send my youngest son to relations, which was two hours away, because that was my childcare, and he absolutely hated it because he was away from everyone. He was away from home. He did not see his friends. He does talk to me.

Anne Newbould: There is a worry about this social isolation.

Dawn Taplin: Karen, didn't you say they wanted your 12-year-old to look after the other child? The other child is losing his childhood to look after the other one.

Karen Rotheram: Yes. That is why I went to relations because the Jobcentre said to me, "Why can't your 12-year-old look after the eight-year-old?" which I think is absolutely ridiculous.

Dawn Taplin: He is still a child.

Karen Rotheram: He is still a child himself, so that is why he was sent to relations for a few weeks just to ease the pressure.

Anne Newbould: In order for you to get the support and help that you need financially or whatever, you have to be shown to be working a certain number of hours, but in order to do that you have to have childcare or somebody whom you can trust to look after your child. There is an impact also for your self-esteem and everything. I have always worked, and I have always worked full-time. Now I am a full-time foster carer. I am not going to stop that. This is what I do, I work, but I have to



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work where it is flexible around meetings and everything else. I do not want the child that I am looking after to think, "Oh, it is all right, you do not have to work".

Q32 Thelma Walker: I think it is the earlier point I made about the fact that it impacts on you.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, stress, feeling guilty.

Anne Newbould: Then when they say, "Oh, my mates have been to so-and-so", and you are like, "We cannot go that day because I have to work". That was all I seemed to say last summer, "I am sorry, sweetheart, I have to work".

Q33 Chair: Nichola, would you like to come in on this?

Nichola Salvato: Yes, I guess so. I am very similar to these ladies. I work as a benefits adviser. What the lady was saying at the end about the food banks: I often refer people to food banks, and that is really not uncommon to find that there is an issue about having to prove. They are not as easy as you might think to access. I definitely see that.

Being a lone-parent family is a challenge in itself but working as well is stressful. You have to be resilient, determined, organised. You really have to be on all of it. You want the compensation for the sacrifices that you are making, the guilty and worry that you are not around for your children. You want there to be some compensation that you are not still financially excluded. You are doing it because you want to support your family, you want to provide for them and you want them to be able to access and have the experiences that other children have.

Q34 Thelma Walker: Would you appreciate the schools having a bit more of a say or support?

Nichola Salvato: I think so, yes. For example, there is often an offer from school, "If you struggle to pay for this activity or that activity, talk to us". Nobody wants to stand up and say, "I am poor". Nobody wants to be seen like that. It is not a comfortable thing to have to do. If there was something that you did not have to stand up and single yourself out as that person or that family, that might be useful.

Anne Newbould: There are expenses over the year. We have just had to pay for a leaving school sweatshirt, which is great and I would not deny her, and that is fine, but then also school photos, again, with the whole year. It is year 6. If there was a way of them saying, "This is going to happen then, this is going to happen then", from September, if you just put £1 in a week, then at least you have some of the money towards it or whatever. If everybody did it or everybody was given that offer, so it was not just to people who are poor or not well off, if everybody was given that option to have a little tontine where they saved up for things—



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Dawn Taplin: Yes, like a trip, £95 for one night, and your child comes out with, "I want to go on that trip, all my friends are going". I cannot afford that trip for £95.

Q35 **Emma Hardy:** Thanks everyone for coming in this morning. I just wanted to ask about that myself because I used to be a teacher. In the school I was at, they used to cover the costs for people who could not. I just wondered if, in your experience, as you have just mentioned, Dawn, have your children had to miss out on residential trips, on music lessons or on extracurricular activities because of the expense of them?

Anne Newbould: Some of the expenses that occur for my looked after child fortunately are covered, but not all of them. I still have to find quite a lot of money to cover certain things. School will get a certain amount of money in relation to her, but they are not very forthcoming in saying, "Right, it is okay, and we will use that money for it". I have to—

Dawn Taplin: Unless you ask for help and you say, "I am struggling as a parent. Would you be able to do this?" They would possibly put a little tiny bit in a pot but they would not pay for the trip, so your child would not be going on that trip. I would have to say to Thomas, "Sorry, we cannot afford it".

Q36 **Emma Hardy:** Is that the same for not just the overnight ones but the daytrips as well and when they have the music lessons and the football practice?

Dawn Taplin: Yes, you have to pay it all online. Yes.

Q37 **Emma Hardy:** Your children are missing out on these experiences?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. He has missed out on a trip last year, yes. He couldn't go.

Q38 **Emma Hardy:** Would you prefer a system where, if your children are qualified for pupil premium and the school is getting this money, they would just automatically cover this?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. Yes, we would. That would be fantastic, yes, because he was let down. He was crying. All his friends were going on it, you know.

Anne Newbould: That would help no end. I know obviously pupil premium has certain criteria and it is for certain things, but it would be handy as a parent or whatever to know what those things are and what is and is not covered.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, what we have. Yes.

Q39 **Emma Hardy:** The school will get pupil premium money for your children.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, they do. Yes.



Q40 **Emma Hardy:** I am just thinking of ways that we could take away you having to ask, whereas if you qualified for pupil premium you would, therefore, have free trips. Would that be better?

Karen Rotheram: Yes, that would be better.

Anne Newbould: Rather than the child missing out on a trip, I will miss out on something else that I do not need.

Q41 **Chris Stephens:** My question is going to be particularly around the six-week summer period and the cost of school uniforms as they are growing or they are moving school from the wee school to the big school. It is just to ask you about that, about the costs of that and if there is any assistance that is out there that you have had to rely on. School uniform banks are on the rise for my constituency as well. It was just to ask about that.

Karen Rotheram: That is another huge pressure in the six weeks' holidays, getting the uniforms. Like you say, especially if they are going from primary to senior school, you are talking in the hundreds of pounds, and you do not get any help for it.

Anne Newbould: Yes, I would say the same. I have been quite organised, unusually for me, this year. Once I knew what school we were going to, I started getting bits in. Each time I went shopping, so to Asda or whatever, I would get a couple of shirts or whatever. I have built it up. Fortunately, a friend of mine's daughter had started at the school that my little one is going to, and then they moved, so we have brand new blazers and everything else. That saved me a massive amount of money.

Q42 **Lucy Powell:** Quite a few places do grants and things for school uniforms, but clearly not where you are.

Anne Newbould: You have to fit certain criteria to be able to get that. Quite often you do not.

Nichola Salvato: It is a discretionary thing, whether your local authority runs it or not.

Q43 **Lucy Powell:** It is discretionary, yes. Sorry, just to quickly follow on from that, if a secondary school had a particularly expensive uniform, so it was a certain type of blazer that is £60 or whatever and you had some certain type of trouser and certain type of shoes, would that put you off choosing that school for your child? Would the cost of the uniform be a decision for you in terms of which secondary school to pick, do you think? Have you ever thought about that? Some people have said to us about that.

Karen Rotheram: Yes. There are some schools in our area where the uniforms are very overpriced. You are looking at £80 to £100 just for a blazer and a pair of trousers or something.



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Anne Newbould: They only use certain suppliers, so you have to go to that one.

Q44 **Lucy Powell:** Some people have said to us that some schools do that deliberately so that only posh kids go there. Have you ever thought about that?

Anne Newbould: There is certainly an element of that, I believe.

Q45 **Chair:** Do you think all schools should be compelled to draw their school uniforms from supermarkets?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. That would help, wouldn't it? It would lower the cost.

Karen Rotheram: Yes, definitely.

Q46 **Ruth George:** Thank you very much and thank you for being so honest and open with us about your situations. It really helps us to be able to make the best recommendations we can.

Dawn Taplin: Can I just ask what your next step is now, then? Us coming in here and talking. What will happen?

Q47 **Chair:** We will come to that at the end and we will tell you.

Dawn Taplin: Super.

Chair: Thanks for giving me notice.

Q48 **Ruth George:** One thing I was going to ask, having been a single mum myself, summer holidays do have a big pressure on you. My local council says that it sees the rent arrears going up in the school holidays, and August is its worst month for payment. How do the summer holidays impact on your finances then for the rest of the year? Does it mean that you get behind?

Anne Newbould: You are paying it off for the rest of the year, aren't you? Then there is Christmas, so you have another debt then. Then there is, say, a birthday or whatever, and it is just this constant cycle of trying to play catch-up, which you are never going to do. You are never going to catch up.

Dawn Taplin: You are constantly taking one bit of money out of one pot and putting it the other, but there is no money left. Do you know what I mean?

Karen Rotheram: Then you are in debt, which most people are in anyway.

Anne Newbould: I do not worry about it anymore, debt.

Q49 **Ruth George:** Do you find it gets worse over the summer, then?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.



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Karen Rotheram: Yes, it does, especially the six weeks' holiday. Your mind is constantly thinking about money for the children, money for this, money for that.

Dawn Taplin: You are stressed, yes.

Anne Newbould: You are not stressed because they are home. You are not stressed because they are off school. That is the nice bit. Do you know what I mean? That is nice, and you can say, "Come on, we will just go out to the park" or whatever. It is that added pressure, "My mates have been to this" or whatever. You are just like, "No chance".

Q50 **Chair:** Nichola, would you like to come in?

Nichola Salvato: I am working, so my child is going to be looked after during the summer holidays. I have had to reduce my working hours to manage the upfront costs for childcare but nevertheless I think for August it is going to be around £750 that I have to find on top of my rent, food, travel costs, all of that. I am very conscious that even though I have reduced my hours, which has reduced my childcare costs and will give me some time during the holidays with my daughter, I am not going to have the funds to be able to do the things that I would like to do with her in that small amount of time.

Anne Newbould: It is trying to balance it out, isn't it?

Nichola Salvato: Yes, and the impact of that on her. She is going to be in childcare that she does not want to be in anyway. She wants Mum around. She wants to be seeing her friends and for us to be doing things, so she is not going to be able to do that. Then, with the little bit of time that I do have, there are just not going to be funds available for us to do the activities that would be really nice and that I think, when you are working hard and doing all that juggling, you want to be able to do at the end of it.

Q51 **Ruth George:** What would you like to see Government doing to improve the situation of managing to get by over the school holidays? Is it around childcare and the cost of it and the upfront costs? Is it around provision, around support to work?

Nichola Salvato: I just think for you to be able to access childcare costs in advance would resolve the difficulty for me, I really do. To have to find between £500 and £1,500 in advance is just—and it is ongoing. It is not just at the beginning of when you start a job. It is ongoing. Every six weeks you have some kind of holiday, whether it be one week off the children have or two weeks off. Half a term lasts six or seven weeks, so every six or seven weeks you are doubling your childcare costs. That would change my situation entirely, not having to find that.

For it to be funded in some way, whether it is a direct payment—I know the aim of Universal Credit is to get people responsible for managing their own money and so on. If they want to make the payment directly in the



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way that they do with tax credits or directly to the provider, although I know that there are issues with providers and whether there are enough places and where the direct payments are, that would really resolve the situation I think for working families.

Q52 **Chair:** To manage your own money, you have to have the money in the first place.

Nichola Salvato: Yes, exactly. Absolutely.

Anne Newbould: Exactly. You cannot manage money that you do not have, can you?

Nichola Salvato: No.

Q53 **Ruth George:** It would not actually cost Government any more. It is the same amount of money. You just get it in advance rather than in arrears.

Nichola Salvato: Exactly, when we need it.

Dawn Taplin: We cannot pay for a school trip, so we are not going to be able to pay for childcare. Let's be honest.

Anne Newbould: It is simplifying the system. It is so complicated. I just do not bother because there is no point. It is so complicated. I manage on my own, thanks.

Karen Rotheram: The system is very complicated and you do not really get it explained to you. When they are helping you to look for work, I think they should look at your circumstances more: how old are your children? What hours can you work around your children, around holidays? We all want to work, but I do not think we get the help and they do not explain things to you. They just say, "Right, look for work. There is a job. Bye".

Nichola Salvato: Yes. I think as well there is an idea that the flexible support funds and the budgeting advances and things like that are a solution, but the flexible support fund, for example, is only available to single parents who have been working for less than six months. For childcare costs, that is. There are many families on low incomes where both parents work and need help through Universal Credit.

For example, in my situation I have been working for longer than six months so I was not able to access the flexible support fund. I have perhaps once or twice seen people at the beginning of a Universal Credit claim not take out the advance, so you cannot access any budgeting loans or anything like that if you are still paying off an advance. It is very rare that people do not take some amount of money at the beginning of a claim. You have a year before you can access any kind of budgeting loan or anything like that.

Dawn Taplin: Then you are £100 a month in debt, too, because you have signed that form. £100 coming straight out of your Universal Credit



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once it is sorted, then you are in rent arrears for your rent or whatever. It just goes in a vicious circle then.

Nichola Salvato: Being a working parent, as I said before, is really challenging. You really do have to be determined and resilient. We all want to be the best parent that we can be. On top of all that juggle of trying to meet your children's needs, trying to give what you have to at work and all of that, on top of that you have the added stress of poverty even though you are working. Your ability to parent well and be emotionally available, even if you do not have any money to do anything, just being at home and messing about and having fun and having a good relationship with your kids, all of it is just massively—

Karen Rotheram: It can affect your mental health tremendously.

Nichola Salvato: Absolutely, yes.

Karen Rotheram: It really can affect your mental health and how you are thinking, which is not good when you are with your children.

Q54 **Ruth George:** I was just wondering if it had got worse under Universal Credit to tax credits, which might just follow on. I think your children are not very young, so you have been in this situation for a while. Is it different under Universal Credit to how it was under tax credits?

Nichola Salvato: Absolutely.

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Karen Rotheram: Awful. Awful. Absolutely awful.

Nichola Salvato: Even though under tax credits your entitlement was lower in terms of percentage, because you could claim it in advance, because you could declare it, even though you are only getting the 70% as opposed to potentially 85%, it is a world of difference. I would 100 times rather have 70% in advance than 85% but have to find it first. I am not even on a terrible wage. I cannot imagine what it would be like on minimum wage trying to find £1,000 on top of everything else.

Q55 **Chair:** Karen, of the two, if you had a choice, you could have a wish, tax credits or Universal Credit, which system would you choose?

Karen Rotheram: Tax credits, definitely. Universal Credit is awful. Also, you are waiting every month to see how much they are going to pay you.

Anne Newbould: It is a gamble each month.

Karen Rotheram: I do not even know how they work out how they pay you. I really do not.

Dawn Taplin: I think they just click a button and go, "Pay you that today".



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Karen Rotheram: I think they just pick a number. Some months you might be £50 less than the month before. There is no explanation as to what they are doing. Because it is all online now, you send them a message to query something and it might be five weeks before they reply to you. It is awful.

Anne Newbould: You cannot budget.

Q56 **Chair:** Anne, what is the difference between the two for you?

Anne Newbould: For me, with tax credits, you knew what you were getting. You knew what you were getting each month, so you could plan. You could budget. As you say, if you do not have money, you cannot manage it, can you?

Dawn Taplin: You had a set amount.

Anne Newbould: With Universal Credit, for me, like you say, I was advised to apply for it by my social worker. I applied for it. I got an advance, because I literally had no money.

Q57 **Chair:** Anne, so your circumstances did not change? Your social worker advised you to claim Universal Credit?

Anne Newbould: Initially, to get tax credits. They said, "They do not do that anymore. It will be Universal Credit". "Yes, yes, go get that. That will give you some additional income, blah, blah, blah". Off I toddled to the Jobcentre and signed up and stuff. I had not done that in 30 years, so even that itself was hard work. I signed up and everything, got an advance eventually and they went through everything.

Then, I think about six months down the line, because I was working part-time as a dinner lady, I think I did an extra couple of shifts as a nursery nurse, because that is what I do. Because I was a few quid over, I did not get anything. For about three or four months, I got no support at all, no additional support. I literally got what I get as a foster carer, which is not really a huge amount, to pay a mortgage, a car and feed a child.

In the end, they said, "We don't really know why you're coming here, Ms Newbould". I said, "No, I don't, because I can't claim any childcare because she's not my child. I can't claim any child tax credits because she's not my child, because I am supposedly getting a fee that covers that, but it doesn't. I don't know why I am coming. It is actually costing me more money to come here".

Q58 **Chair:** How many months has your income been the same as the previous month, when they are paying you something on Universal Credit?

Anne Newbould: I was, in theory, on it and logging on every day and stuff for about 10 months.



Dawn Taplin: You don't, do you?

Q59 **Chair:** Dawn, what is your experience between tax credits and Universal Credit?

Dawn Taplin: I feel tax credits worked a lot better. Universal Credit, I feel the same. You do not know what you are getting paid. It is not a very good system.

Q60 **Chair:** From your experience, how many months have you had the same money and how many months has it been—

Dawn Taplin: Probably the first month I got paid, I knew what I was getting, and then you do not. That was your advance, so they tell you what you are getting. Other than that, you do not know what you are getting.

Q61 **Chair:** Every month it is—

Dawn Taplin: It is like juggling two balls. You do not know what you are getting. If work asks you, "Would you do a couple of hours?" "Yes, I will do it." You do it, and then it affects you that way, where you have lost money on your Universal Credit, so then when you are getting paid, you are like—

Anne Newbould: You don't actually get that money that you have earned. Do you know what I mean?

Dawn Taplin: It goes out of your Universal Credit.

Anne Newbould: You lose that money, those two hours that you have worked. You effectively lose it. It is just bizarre.

Dawn Taplin: It just does not work. It does not work. It is not a very good system.

Q62 **Ruth George:** I was just going to ask if it stops you wanting to take on extra work.

Karen Rotheram: It does. It does.

Q63 **Ruth George:** We were always told by the Government, "Universal Credit is there to help you take on extra work".

Anne Newbould: That is the slogan, isn't it? "This is to support you into work." As I say, I have worked all my life. I know how monthly pay works. I am not daft. It is a big, long month when you have nothing.

Nichola Salvato: When you are not earning lots of money, it is a stretch. The thing with Universal Credit is that the actual, fundamental principle of it is not necessarily a bad thing but there are lots of administrative difficulties.

Something that I see is that there is a massive, enormous training need for Jobcentre staff. Once you get your head around how to work out a



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Universal Credit claim, it is not that difficult but none of that information is passed on to claimants. People are not able to know in advance, work out in advance. One of the things is Universal Credit does not tell you how much you are going to get until seven days before you get it. It is not too tricky to figure it out but this information is not passed on for people.

One of the things in terms of stress and poverty and all of that is being able to plan. Although it might work in terms of working for the Government and directly fluctuating according to people's earnings, it does not work on a stress level for people because there is no way of us knowing or that information is just not widely shared. It is a tricky calculation. It is not that difficult but it is very different from the previous system. There is a bit to it.

Anne Newbould: Also about the system, it is just so impersonal. The idea of doing it online and everything else, I get that. It works quite well, apart from the messaging system. "This has not worked for me. Why isn't this right?" That can take a while. I get the modern era and everything else, doing it online, but that just makes it so impersonal. When you are writing a message to say, "I haven't been paid anything. I've got no money. What do I do?" and somebody says, "Well, there is not a lot we can do", that really does not help at all.

I cannot fault the people that I went to in the Jobcentre in Birkenhead. They are amazing. The staff there have been brilliant, but, as you say, they can only tell you so much. They only have so much information themselves. If they have not been informed properly what the whole system is, they still do not know. They still do not know how it is going to work.

Dawn Taplin: The thing is when I changed from tax credits to Universal Credit there was an overpayment because my circumstances changed. They never told me. They just popped into my journal and took the money out of the pot so that when I got paid—they took £70 out of my account because I had had an overpayment because it had changed over, and they did not even know that month.

Q64 **Marion Fellows:** I have listened to a lot of evidence in the last four years serving on the Education Committee and I have never heard anything as compelling and honest as I have heard from you ladies. I really want to thank you, because real living experience absolutely informs the best kind of report from a Select Committee. Thank you.

I am finding it quite difficult and challenging because I can only relate to my own local authority and what happens there. North Lanarkshire recently—I think it was a year or so ago—started up a thing called Club 365, and it is now open every weekend and all through the holidays for children who get free school meals to go along from 11.00 am, I think it is, until about 1.30 pm. They get a meal, they get activities. It is amazing. It is wonderful. It is backed by funding from the Scottish



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Government. When I was listening to you earlier on talking about the centre, is it all voluntary organisations that help?

Dawn Taplin: Yes. It is a charity, the centre, yes, at St James Centre. They help. There is a lady who is a teacher, who goes in her own time and provides lunch for children. Then the centre helps with activities. You pay 50p and the children get their lunch included.

Q65 **Marion Fellows:** I should say that the local authority, my local North Lanarkshire Council, works in conjunction with the local voluntary organisations as well to provide an all-round service. I am struggling to see where local government and central government play any major role in this in England.

Dawn Taplin: Yes. I think we need a little bit of help with activities, without the strain.

Anne Newbould: Without local charities, particularly the likes of St James, the Hive and Neo, without those kinds of centres, I personally would be in deep trouble.

Q66 **Marion Fellows:** It is great that that work is being done, but it probably needs more input from central and local government.

Dawn Taplin: Yes. We would not survive without them, would we? They are like our backbone.

Karen Rotheram: They are like your support system. There is somewhere to go.

Anne Newbould: There are set days that you know you can go there, and the kids are fed, and fed well, and so are you for a change.

Q67 **Heidi Allen:** That is perfect because that is exactly what I was going to ask. One thing that we have already recommended to Government is this issue of childcare costs being paid retrospectively, which is totally bonkers. It has to be paid upfront and I cannot believe that the penny will not finally drop and they will not change that.

I was struck by what you said, Nichola. In the summer holidays it is like double, isn't it? If you are trying to keep in work, it is double.

Nichola Salvato: Yes.

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Q68 **Heidi Allen:** Not putting money in the Government's pocket and spending it for them, though it is always a fun thing to do, it strikes me that in the holiday periods—it is not just the summer, is Easter, three weeks, presumably you have a couple of half-terms, Christmas. Should there be a recommendation that not only do childcare costs get paid upfront all year around, but an additional amount that you could claim upfront, even if it is a modest amount because some of it might be in conjunction with a charity or a local authority? It is an additional chunk



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so that it is a fun activity. It is not just about parking them at childcare. It is a day out or—

Dawn Taplin: It would be nice just to say to the children, “Let’s go here for the day, and we are there with you”. Experiences. The children love that, going out somewhere.

Anne Newbould: We are not saying we want to take them to somewhere that day, somewhere that day, but at least—I don’t know—once a week maybe go somewhere nice, or whatever, two weeks.

Q69 **Heidi Allen:** What you are asking is very modest. It is just not parking them somewhere, isn’t it? Just doing something like children should in the holidays.

Dawn Taplin: Yes, as a family together.

Anne Newbould: Yes. As I say, we are not expecting it every day because no realistic family does that anyway, do they? To be able to say, “I know we are in work at the beginning of the week, but on Friday we are going to go here”.

Karen Rotheram: So they know there is something to look forward to to do with the family.

Q70 **Heidi Allen:** It is a blend of traditional childcare but it is a slightly different thing for holiday periods?

Dawn Taplin: Yes.

Karen Rotheram: Yes.

Q71 **Chair:** Can I ask a last question? Would it help you if we changed the school year, say to have a four-term year and much shorter holidays, the same holidays but spread differently over the school year?

Dawn Taplin: No, because we are still going to have that issue in the holidays. There is no way of changing it. It is still—

Anne Newbould: You would still have same amount, wouldn’t you?

Chair: With all the problems you have, you would still prefer to have the long summer holiday?

Q72 **Lucy Powell:** Is that when you go on holidays, if you can ever go on holiday? You do not go on holiday?

Dawn Taplin: No, we do not go on holidays.

Nichola Salvato: Unless somebody else pays for it

Karen Rotheram: It is too expensive in the six-week holiday even to think about planning something like that.

Lucy Powell: The reason I slightly shirk is that when people say about



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changing school holidays, for me, what that usually means is one of my kids' schools will have different holidays to my other kids' schools. Do you know what I mean? At least you have a known quantity with this six-week holiday. I do not know.

Chair: We could standardize school holidays, couldn't we? Anyway, it is not for us to have a conversation—

Ian Mearns: On your idea, Chair, I am afraid to say that a number of years ago, probably 20 years ago now, I chaired a commission on behalf of the Local Government Association looking at alternatives to current school term arrangements. We came up with a number of alternatives, all of which were roundly rejected.

Q73 **Chair:** Very good. I am immensely grateful to you, as the Committee is. You asked me a question, Dawn. We have a role of writing reports, of trying to make sure they are unanimous. We have two Committees here, DWP and Education, and then we, as MPs, have a job to try to persuade the Government to actually implement those recommendations. I would be very surprised if the recommendations you have been making to us this morning do not feature at the top of that report. I am immensely grateful to you, as we all are. Thank you very much for coming.

Dawn Taplin: Thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Martha Mackenzie, Director of UK Poverty Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns, Save the Children; Abby Jitendra, Policy and Research Manager, The Trussell Trust; Sophie Howes, Senior Policy and Research Officer, Child Poverty Action Group; Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare; and Ema Wilkes, Director, Neo Community.

Q74 **Chair:** Very good. Thank you also for coming this morning. Can I start with you, Ema? Might you introduce yourself and go down the panel so that we can register you for the transcript?

Ema Wilkes: I am Ema Wilkes, a mum of three young children on the Wirral, and I run Neo Community.

Martha Mackenzie: I am Martha Mackenzie. I am the Director of UK Poverty Policy at Save the Children.

Megan Jarvie: I am Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare.

Sophie Howes: I am Sophie Howes. I work in the Policy and Research Team at Child Poverty Action Group.

Abby Jitendra: I am Abby Jitendra, and I am the Policy and Research Manager at the charity the Trussell Trust.

Q75 **Emma Hardy:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming. First



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question. What do you think are the biggest drivers of poverty and hardship during the school holidays? Do you think the Government are aware of all the additional pressures that parents face during the school holidays? Shall we start with Ema?

Ema Wilkes: I think a lot of pressure is put on especially low-income working families, and it is a hidden pressure a lot of the time that I don't think everyone is fully aware of. We talk very much about full universal payment—free school meals were mentioned quite a lot in that previous discussion—and about clubs that are open every day for all the children on free school meals, which is amazing and I am not saying they should not be, but we are forgetting the low-incomes that are not eligible for free school meals but cannot afford to pay their school dinner money. The children do not have full packed lunches and are being checked on by the teachers and are being called in to say, "You did not have enough in their packed lunch this morning". That was what was in the cupboard, and that happens a hell of a lot.

So many provisions in the holidays are available in the bigger deprived areas with the statistics that back it up, but especially in the Wirral and Birkenhead—we have Feeding Birkenhead, which we are all very proud to be part of, but there are many pockets where we cannot stretch the community sector and third sector any further. We have estates that are walking for half an hour to get to these provisions or they are paying bus fare, so even though we are making those activities free, we have areas like Noctorum that cannot get to other areas, and we are all trying to pull together to make it happen. There is a lost section, I feel.

Martha Mackenzie: We heard it from our brilliant panel earlier. Mums are telling us time and time again that it is this issue of upfront childcare costs under Universal Credit, which is particularly acute for parents of three and four-year-olds. We have done a little bit of work to look into this further. Because childcare costs are so volatile, that upfront payment is not just a problem in the first month. It is a huge problem in summer holidays as well. Parents are having to find in some cases up to an extra £100 to cover those costs. You look at the fact that most low-income families, well over three-quarters, do not have any savings. That is a huge financial burden. We are hearing from parents that it is just a cycle of debt.

We have released a new report today, and it is just constant debt. That is what we are hearing from mums: having to borrow from friends and family, take out loans and potentially reduce hours or leave work altogether. For us and the mums we talk to, we really need to crack this issue of upfront cost to stop a downward spiral in the school holidays.

Q76 **Chair:** Martha, would you tell us a bit more? How does the £100 extra arise?

Martha Mackenzie: Because childcare costs are so volatile, we are seeing that when you have to find those upfront costs and then be



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reimbursed, you are not being reimbursed enough for the next month. The school holidays come along, and most providers only offer the free hours entitlement 38 weeks of the year and it is during term time. A school holiday comes along, you do not have the free hours entitlement anymore, so your costs spike massively. This is a really interesting thing.

A lot of other costs under Universal Credit are much more permanent. You know how much you are paying in rent. You know broadly what utilities and food costs, whereas childcare is nothing like that. Parents are seeing it fluctuate month to month, so you cannot budget. When something like a holiday comes along, the provider is not offering that free childcare entitlement, and you suddenly have to find up to £800 a month extra to cover those costs, which is money that people just do not have lying around.

Megan Jarvie: I would agree with Martha. At Coram Family and Childcare we know a lot about those pressures of holiday childcare costs, that they will more than double during the holiday, and that causes huge pressure on families. What we see is that has a double-whammy effect on families living in poverty. If they stay in work and continue to pay those childcare costs, their outgoings spike up massively, as you were saying, and they have no money, basically. They are skint.

What we actually see is more common is that families cut back their working or stop working entirely during the holiday, so incomes plummet. Either way, they are stuck in that really difficult position. If they choose to stop working or reduce working, then they have those additional costs of activities during the holidays as well, which then penalise them further.

The second part of your question was whether there was enough recognition of the school holidays. The way to look at that is: is policy adequately adjusting to those extra costs during the school holidays? As you were saying about Universal Credit, it is simply not. It is not made for those costs that go up and down.

Tax-free childcare, on the other hand, is very, very well designed for fluctuating costs because you can pay the same amount in each month and a different amount out when your costs go up. You can use it kind of like a savings account. We know that that is targeted towards the higher end of incomes, so it is the people who are least at risk of poverty who have the system that copes best with the holidays, whereas 30 hours and Universal Credit are not quite there yet.

Q77 **Chair:** It is like Universal Credit. If you are middle class, the system can work quite well for you. You have these fluctuating incomes. Sophie, please.

Sophie Howes: I will not repeat what has already been said about childcare because I think that has been covered really comprehensively. At CPAD we feel that those financial pressures over the holidays are really three things: childcare, which has already been talked about;



activities, so providing enriching activities to your children; and then food. Any response from the Government really needs to address all three. We feel quite concerned that the current response from the Government is very focused on child hunger and food, so food being the driving force. We are not saying that is not important but we think it really needs to be provided within the context of provision that does address childcare needs and does provide those activities as well.

One of the main reasons why we think that is important is that provision that is just about food can lead to stigmatising provision. We think it is really important that we are addressing all of those needs within the context of universal, inclusive provision, rather than this kind of, "Let's go into these deprived areas and let's offer food to children who are eligible for free school meals". That is just not going to cut it.

Abby Jitendra: Not to repeat what the other panellists have said, food banks in the Trussell Trust network have seen some of the busiest summers over the last few years. We just put out some statistics for Northern Ireland and Scotland, and we will be putting out statistics for England and Wales shortly showing that this summer is due to be the busiest on record for our food banks.

Eighty food banks in our network last year carried out some kind of food and activity sessions to help people. We know that independent food banks and other third sector organisations are doing the same. We can really see that there is a need for activities, for food, for support during the holidays.

In terms of drivers, definitely childcare, additional activities. It is definitely the case. It is something that our food banks and people whom they serve tell us day in, day out. Fundamentally, the issue is about parents all year round not having enough money to cover what we would all consider are the very, very basics. We saw the mums in the previous panel talking about the five-week wait for Universal Credit. That is one of many delays and insufficient levels of benefits that Universal Credit has built into the system. There is so much that we can do during the holidays to provide support and so much that the Government could do to provide support during the holidays. Fundamentally, if people cannot afford the very basics like food and activities all year round, the problem is only going to continue.

Q78 **Emma Hardy:** Thank you. I am just going to go back to what Sophie said because I was struck by the mums that we were talking to just before about how their children are missing out on activities and missing out on those extracurricular experiences, missing out on music, missing out on all the things like that. I was quite interested with you saying this is not just about feeding children but also providing them with some worthwhile and enriching activities as well. I just wondered whether anyone else on the panel would like to expand on that point or add to what Sophie said.



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Emma Wilkes: We run holiday provision and we are very pleased to be able to do as much as we can. Last summer, for instance, we worked across the network with hundreds of families and we did not restrict it to free school meals. It was any child that needed that provision. As a third sector, with the funding that was available and the numbers that were needed, it was £1.71 per day, per child, that we fed children. Breakfast, lunch, snacks, dinner to take home, and we did activities, and we went to make holiday memories.

That is what is so important for us, even today, bringing some parents down. The children are out at the museum. The children are going on a tour around Parliament. It is not about coming to talk about experience without those children having some memories. That is really important for us. Even if it is literally going to Birkenhead Park, putting loads of blankets out and having a massive community picnic, which we are doing in August. That does not matter if the doctor's kid is sitting there or the child that possibly does not have dinner in the fridge. It is about everyone being inclusive, everyone being able to put something in if they have it, not put it in if they don't, but no child feeling excluded. You do not want the child that is still sitting in the street, in the bedroom, looking out the window, and none of the other kids are playing out because they are all with us or they are all at school doing an activity.

My children, I have a four, a seven and a nine-year-old, and everything you are saying about childcare—because I have chosen to work within the third sector and I will never change what I do, it is a passion, but my children struggle and I have to have childcare support. I know from personal experience. My children have just come home with lots and lots of information from their school of £40 a day football club. My little girl wants to go and play violin now, and she wants to do this and she wants to do that. There is nothing in that pack, even as a parent that has given them all the information of what we are doing, to say, "There is also this that costs you 50p. There are free activities at the church hall". It is all those ones that are going to come into schools and do the lovely big free activities because they have advertised all summer for them. I do not want any child left out.

We always talk about the children in poverty. Actually, the doctor's and the consultant's kids and all of them, their parents are out working very long shifts, the same as someone working in Tesco. That child still needs the interaction with their peers, and that does not mean going to a summer camp and not seeing their families. That means being within a community, and a strong community, rich or poor. Everyone is together to make a difference.

Martha Mackenzie: That is something that both your Committees have talked about previously. Those early years of a child's life are the most important developmentally. We know that children growing up in poverty are already starting primary school significantly behind their peers, and then that gap risks widening. High-quality childcare can play a really



important role in closing that gap and making sure that children do have access to enriching educational opportunities, but that six weeks over the summer is a really big gap and if children do not have access to that kind of childcare or those kinds of activities it really can have a knock-on impact on the attainment gap.

Q79 Emma Hardy: What Ema has described sounds absolutely incredible but I am very aware that this is not across the country. Would anyone like to comment on the patchwork geography of provision that there is across the country?

Megan Jarvie: It is something that we do research on, whether there is enough childcare, and we find that only one in four local areas have enough holiday childcare for the families that need it. There are some areas where it is considerably below that, some are above it and there are some groups of children that are most likely to miss out. Disabled children have the lowest availability. Only one in eight local areas have enough holiday childcare for disabled children.

To touch on what you said before, we also know that quality is very variable. School-aged childcare can play an important role in opening up extracurricular activities and new experiences but it is based on what you can pay for and it is very different what different families get. Whereas during term-time there is a bit more uniformity in children's experience, that can be vastly different during the holidays. The parents we talked to, particularly ones who will see marginal financial gains from working—they might only be £2 better off per week—say, "I am only going to do that if my children are going to get something from their experience in childcare". It is important to focus on the quality as well.

Sophie Howes: At CPAG we have done quite a lot of research on extended schools as a policy model and lots of that research has tracked essentially the decline of extended schools after ringfenced funding was ended. There are still schools that are trying to limp along with providing some of that provision, before and after-school childcare and then holiday childcare, and providing enriching activities and food in the context of that.

Q80 Chair: Sophie, can I just say on that, Ema, our experience in Birkenhead has been an extension of schools, hasn't it, providing food before school?

Ema Wilkes: Yes. Almost every school does it in some way. It is not something to be proud of that we do it, £1.71 and that the schoolteachers are coming in in their own time, volunteering, but a normal working day is 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, there is always going to be a gap for kids and it has to be done.

Q81 Chair: It is not desirable in one sense because it is dependent on raising the money to do it but where there is a will—

Ema Wilkes: Well, there is always a way but—



Q82 **Chair:** Birkenhead has shown that the extended school model continues.

Sophie Howes: Yes, definitely, and in some local areas it is good but that is not the picture across the board.

Q83 **Chair:** Sure. I agree, yes.

Sophie Howes: Breakfast clubs and after-school clubs are probably a bit more comprehensive. Our research shows that the holiday provision is where it really drops off, schools staying open and providing some kind of holiday childcare. That is where schools are not providing as much. That very localized picture is concerning. We think that schools, as institutions within the community that nearly all children are accessing that are non-stigmatising, that are universal, are a really good place to invest some of that money, thinking about what a more comprehensive provision would look like.

Abby Jitendra: Just jumping in on that, our holiday clubs model that we have developed at the Trussell Trust, along with food banks, is specifically trying to counter some of the issues to do with stigma and people finding it difficult to put their hands up and say, "I need help". We focus the model around food being alongside activities. The focus is very much on activities. Families can come. There is no, "Are you deserving of this?" Anybody can come along. You come along with your parent and you are given some kind of enriching activity.

We had a food bank come and speak to you, Frank, and others last year, talking about some incredible things that they do with fresh food and surplus food, making incredible meals with children. It is an enriching experience, something that they can remember, alongside obviously being able to get a good meal and being able to be fed for the day.

Fundamentally, again, the voluntary sector is piecemeal. It is completely based on the expertise of the volunteers at the time, who is available and what resources they can rustle up from the local area. It is an amazing example of ingenuity in local areas but fundamentally it does result in a postcode lottery.

One of the things that the Trussell Trust did last year was advise the Department for Education on their holiday food and activities programme. Some of the recommendations that we made were based on the model of holiday clubs that we had developed, saying that this cannot simply be about food. This needs to be about activities. You need to have best practice guidelines and part of it needs to be bringing up to standard the areas that do not have provision that is the best quality or has the most coverage. We welcomed it when we saw the Department for Education announce it but fundamentally £2 million is not going to cover the kind of need that we on this panel and the previous panel are seeing in the communities that we work in.

Q84 **Chris Stephens:** Martha, just to pick up on your earlier answer to Emma there about childcare costs, some of the written evidence that Save the



Children have submitted is eye-opening to say the least. Particularly the one that sticks out is the average childcare bill example you have given us, where there is an increase from £57 a week to £135 a week per child. Someone with two children faces an additional bill of £150 a week. How are parents possibly managing during the school holiday when you get that sort of increase in childcare costs?

Martha Mackenzie: I think we heard from our panel this morning that they are not. That is a huge part of the problem. In theory, childcare under Universal Credit is more generous and yet unanimously parents wanted to go back to the old system because of that impact of upfront costs and just how damaging it is. We have touched on this a bit already but it does feel like it becomes a cycle of debt and constant borrowing.

We know that the Government has suggested some solutions but for us these just do not go far enough. It is great that the flexible support fund is now available to cover childcare costs but it is only for jobseekers and it is only really available in that first month. You knock on the debt but then it is not there to cover those school holiday costs. It is the same with those budgeting advances. Most people will not have that option in school holidays. You are left reducing hours or potentially dropping out of work altogether, which is what most parents do not want to do because of the importance of being in work, the self-esteem and the long-term income opportunities that come with that. It feels like a catch-22 that this is a system that is meant to be supporting people into work but these childcare costs come along and it is making it much harder.

What we are hoping to see is recognition that it is a system problem before this is rolled out to potentially 500,000 families. How can we correct that problem by paying the money in advance, either to parents or to providers, to stop this huge burden that arises over the summer holidays?

Q85 **Chris Stephens:** Thank you for that. There is also a snowball effect, is there not? You will have heard me ask the parents about school uniform costs that take place in that six weeks, whether they are going from the wee school to the big school or whatever it is in the child's development. Is there any evidence that you have picked up, Martha, about the difficulty of school uniform costs as well as the additional burden of childcare?

Martha Mackenzie: We have not heard from parents directly about school uniform costs but we are hearing a sense that it is having a knock-on impact on quality of life throughout the summer. These are just such large sums of money that people do not have lying around.

Sophie Howes: We run a project called Cost of the School Day, which is primarily in Scotland but we are hoping to bring to England. That is looking at all of those financial costs, recognising that school is free to attend but there are lots of financial costs that parents are picking up with sending their children to school, uniform being one of them. We



have done research that has shown that parents are really struggling to meet those costs and I can get you copies of that research if that would be helpful.

Q86 Chris Stephens: That would be helpful, Sophie. Abby, I know that the Trussell Trust in my area help with organisations, school uniform banks and things like that. Have you seen an increase?

Abby Jitendra: Yes. I said that a fifth of food banks in our network last year helped with holiday food or holiday clubs but all food banks will give additional food during the holidays. If they need to, they will give additional support. They will help out with things like school uniform during that time and obviously, in winter, things like warm clothes. We do have some data on which food banks are doing that. We do not, unfortunately, know whether that has increased but against the backdrop of an increase in demand for food banks anyway, a record increase, I would imagine that would increase. I can get you some more specific figures.

Q87 Chris Stephens: Thanks, Abby. Back to you then, Martha. Are there any significant variations in the nations and regions of the UK when it comes to childcare costs or is that pretty consistent across the board?

Martha Mackenzie: It is high everywhere. We do see some variation. In the figures that we released today looking at what the impact of the summer holidays is, in the north-west that increases about £530 per month whereas in London is up to about £800, but right across the board these are really high costs. We are in Parliament today with 11 mums, all of whom are campaigning on the issue of upfront costs, and obviously you heard from Nichola as well. They are from right across the country, different regions, different nations, and they all speak to this knock-on impact of high childcare costs.

Megan Jarvie: One of the things that we look at in our research is the different regional costs of childcare and we do see big variation. There is, on average, about a 30% change between the different regions but also within a local area there will be huge variation. We ask about the lowest and the most expensive cost provision and there will be up to a four times difference. One will be four times the expense of the other, which speaks to the point I was making before that there can be real differences in what is available. It is a hyper-local market. You go to childcare that is down your road, you do not travel right to the other side of the borough, and therefore even in a low-cost area you might only have high-cost options.

Martha Mackenzie: Just to add to that, we talked a little bit earlier about the fact that for a lot of parents that free entitlement is not available during the holidays and that is why it spikes. Some providers do have the option of stretching the entitlement so that you have more consistency, but very few maintained nurseries, which the vast majority of low-income families use, offer that stretched opportunity because they



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are tied to schools. Again, it is that knock-on impact. The nurseries that are available to low-income families are also the ones not offering these opportunities to even those costs out across the year.

Q88 **Chair:** Ema, can you tell us something about school uniform costs?

Emma Wilkes: Yes. I was going to say that we have very varied school uniforms in our area. At the secondary school especially, it is the perfect knit skirt that has to come from a certain shop. We are all for hand-me-downs and all of that as the kids grow, we do not like waste, but when you are starting a new school in year seven those kids want to walk with their heads held high and be really proud. We all walked in with blazers that would last two years, but you want that. They do not want to come from a Facebook sale or a car boot sale. We have handed out uniforms and we will always do that. As you said, Trussell Trust down there, you will give extra food in the summer holidays and you will give uniforms. So will we, until we have no more.

The food banks are amazing in the holidays. We have a social supermarket, community cafes and things, but we have to send people to the food bank for extra. They will, but we know at one point our local food bank was spending £5,000, I think, on extra food because they did not have enough. We are all buying ridiculous amounts. We have all put cereal into the schools to make sure all the kids at least go home with cereal and juice. Then everyone is worrying about the school uniforms. Even for three primary school uniforms—my little one starts in September—I spent £350 last month just so it did not hit me in the summer holidays. That was on three little kids' uniforms. They are in primary school. It is a ridiculous expense.

It would help if schools, if they are going to go with one provider, bulk buy and take the big cost. I remember when I started secondary school you went into the big hall and were told, "Here, buy your tie, buy your blazer, buy this badge, buy this PE bag". They are not doing that anymore and even in the business climate, if anything, bulk buying saves money. Put the pressure on the schools rather than the parents and the children.

I hate the word "poverty" but it is poverty and the children are constantly holding that stigma of poverty. You have children who are saying, "Are we all right for the leccy this week?" I have eight-year-olds who know when Mum is getting paid and when they can do this. "My skirt's broken but I'll get a new one next month. Can you put another safety pin in it?" It is not fair.

Q89 **Chair:** Do you think we should suggest to schools that they do not have a single provider and that you can build up a school uniform from the supermarkets?

Emma Wilkes: I think you should cap the cost of school uniform. It does not matter if it comes from supermarkets or a main provider. A school



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uniform is something to be proud of. I am not saying we should not have school uniforms because I think it is very important for children personally, but it should be a capped amount. As I think someone over there said before, it is becoming elitist again. There were boaters when we were in school in certain schools. It does not matter if that is the free school or the private school, they should all be equal. Kids should have an equal start in life. Education is the one thing we say is equal. Therefore, there should not be hidden costs in it. My child misses out on a lot for that reason.

Q90 **Heidi Allen:** Just on that, I remember that at my school “nearly new” was the thing we had. Any left-over uniform from any pupil who had moved on just got piled up and then we came into the gym and you found a piece. It was not always the best fit or you would have to unpick people’s names or whatever, but that was normal and I am slightly surprised that does not happen universally now.

My question really is about the way the Government offers these childcare support schemes. The two broad policies for childcare costs are Universal Credit and also the 30 hours for three and four-year-olds. Talk to me just generally about whether you think those schemes work. I know today is specifically about the differences in school holiday time but I am curious. In particular, the 30 hours for everybody is utterly bonkers to me. Why would the taxpayer be funding that for everyone? Give me your views generally on those two aspects of the Government contribution to childcare costs and what you think could be changed.

Sophie Howes: We would have more to say about Universal Credit than the offer to three and four-year-olds, and it is echoing what has already been said about costs needing to be in advance being one of the main issues. I do not think I need to say anything more about that.

In terms of responses to that, we would exercise some caution in terms of direct payments to childcare providers. We are not against that but we need to be careful about making sure that the autonomy for those decisions stays with the claimant. We see a worrying trend of this idea of just handing over money directly to providers, providing families with food vouchers or this sense of not trusting people to spend their own money. That is a worrying road to go down.

Q91 **Heidi Allen:** That should fit nicely with the ethos of Universal Credit, shouldn’t it, because the whole point of that is—

Sophie Howes: Exactly. It undermines the Government’s own argument in a way because the idea is that people should be financially budgeting. If that was a recommendation that the Committee was considering, I think it would be helpful to just make sure that the choice to do that stays with the person.

Q92 **Chair:** Sophie, I do not think any of us are talking about vouchers.

Sophie Howes: No.



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Q93 **Chair:** What we are saying is that a mother or a father who wants childcare can go to the childcare provider and that would activate for the provider the payment from the Government.

Sophie Howes: Yes, and if that is what that family want then that would be great, definitely. No, I am not against that at all.

In terms of other issues, more immediately there is the problem around not receiving the money when you pay it. It is for the childcare that has been used during that assessment period. We think that is an immediate fix that could be addressed so that when that parent is handing over a term's fees of childcare they are reimbursed for that at that time and are not having to wait until it is used.

Q94 **Heidi Allen:** Forward planning rather than retrospective?

Sophie Howes: Yes. That is something that could be addressed.

Covering the full cost of childcare would be another change to Universal Credit. It is 85% at the moment. Increasing that figure would help.

There is a longer-term consideration around whether Universal Credit is the right place for childcare for sit. Do we want to move to a system that is looking at more provision of universal childcare? You might have a different view around what you were just saying about three and four-year-olds, "Is that the right place to spend money for taxpayers?" We feel that access to free universal childcare for children and families is fundamental when we think about child poverty and that it is something that is worth investing in.

Q95 **Heidi Allen:** I just struggle with parents who have high incomes when the money could be better spent giving better support to those who are really struggling from a poverty point of view.

Sophie Howes: Yes. No, we recognise that.

Megan Jarvie: The parents raised probably better than I will just how complex the childcare system is. What we see every day is parents getting lost in this maze of different systems, all with different criteria, all for different people. That is the bit that fundamentally needs to be fixed. We need something that is much simpler for families to use, making sure that quality is prioritised and making sure that every parent is better off working.

On the schemes that have been introduced, we know that largely "flawed but popular" is probably how they would be described. They do make it worthwhile families going out to work. They are putting more money in people's pockets and that is a good thing.

On the 30 hours, there is more that could be done to help achieve its social mobility aims and help families move out of poverty. At the moment you can only get it if you are already working, and you need to start work and then it starts the term after that. It is based on terms.



Terms are not how we work in the working world. It is not a helpful way of being. You still have to fill that gap from when you first start working until your 30 hours kicks in, which is all the upfront costs that we have already been talking about and really difficult for families.

We would also like to see it supporting families that are looking for work or in training and education because that is normally a really important step towards employment for families. At the moment, because it is only families that are working already, it is largely being used by parents who were in work already and it is just reducing what they are paying on their childcare bill. It is not yet really achieving that goal of helping families to move into work. Including families who are in training and education could be an important step, or parents who are seeking work as well. It could help that movement into work.

Universal Credit, similarly, does help make work pay but there are flaws to it. I would completely support what Sophie said about looking at paying the full cost of childcare. At the moment, by having that 15% we are just accepting that parents will not see the same gains going to work as other people do, and that is something that perhaps needs a bit more thought. We could support families better to think about work.

The upfront costs are just not working right. We all know that. I will not go into it again. Then the final point is the maximum amount of childcare costs that are supported under Universal Credit. They have been carried over from tax credits and were introduced over a decade ago. Childcare costs have gone up above inflation every year since then and yet the maximum amounts that are supported under Universal Credit have not. It is not supporting parents to work full-time. What we see is that if you go from working three or four days to five days, you lose money.

Q96 **Heidi Allen:** Should that be reviewed annually?

Megan Jarvie: Yes, absolutely.

Martha Mackenzie: I would agree with almost everything that has been said. It is popular but flawed. There is no doubt that 30 hours has been a huge relief but it does need looking at in terms of making it work for the most disadvantaged parents.

I would just add two additional points. We again support the idea of paying 100% of childcare costs, just as a no-brainer to remove that extra barrier, and we think that there is a case for looking at the amount that is awarded under tax-free childcare to the higher earners and whether you could reimburse some of the costs from there and make that more equal. That is one option to explore.

The second point I would make is just making sure that quality of provision is there. We heard reports earlier this week that in areas where parents are largely on low incomes, the 30 hours can be a real burden for



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providers. Often providers fund themselves through those extra payments, those trips, those costs that people cannot cover—

Q97 **Heidi Allen:** Yes, and that is the whole of the ballpark, isn't it, of what the providers are actually being paid themselves?

Martha Mackenzie: That is the thing. If we are going to make this work, make sure that those nurseries are available to parents and that they are high quality, we need to invest in it.

Emma Wilkes: I can speak as a community worker and myself as well. I have a four-year-old who does get the free four-year-old place. My other two were not able to have that, it was not there, and it has made a massive difference. I haven't got her in three hours in a school for a day and Nan, me, Dad or whoever runs and gets her. I know every child is different but she is much more advanced than my other two already because she has had that continuous support. She has known the structure in her life. She has known where she is going every day. For my other two, both Mum and Dad were working. At one point Dad was working nights and I was working days, just to try to juggle childcare. That was two years of literally seeing each other as we walked through the door. I think we had three weeks off in that two years to be in the same room.

It has made a massive difference and I am very pleased that it has done that, but if only we had not have gotten rid of the Sure Start budgets and the children's centres as well. There was so much provision that our families really did rely on in terms of family support workers and the childcare options that were there.

Childcare has been a massive thing today and I do in one way agree that it is, as you said, flawed but I also think that when people are looking for work, when people are in education and when people are on low incomes, there is that parent and child time as well. It is not just being at home. It is quite daunting on your own to go, "Right, let's teach you how to read". Going to a centre, having things after work hours and having things for parents to go to with their children is very important as well. We are always looking at, "Right, you all need to go to work and you all need to go to education or childcare", whereas we are actually building families and communities together as well.

Megan Jarvie: I was just going to pick up what you said, Ema. It is absolutely fantastic about your younger child benefiting so much from the 30 hours, but what we see is that that is targeted toward working families. A lot of families in poverty are not getting the benefit of those extra hours and therefore you are widening the gap.

Emma Wilkes: That is what I am saying about Sure Start and things. When they are not working, it is not there.



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Abby Jitendra: I would very much echo what other panellists have said. Just a couple of things I would bring out. One definitely seems like a no-brainer, that you are only reimbursed 85%. Again, there seems to be an issue with Universal Credit where there are a lot of shortfalls. For example, with the five-week wait for Universal Credit you get an advance and you need to pay it back, along with having to only receive 85% of your childcare costs back. That has an impact further down the line, a cycle of debt, and then you have deductions. Seeing the Universal Credit system as a whole rather than siphoning it off into childcare is very important.

I very much echo Ema's point as well around the local area. This is also against a backdrop of local communities having much less support in general. The little money that you get on Universal Credit becomes more and more important because you cannot get support from the local authority and you have a dearth of crisis provision as well, crisis grants, so that food banks and other third sector organisations are having to step into the breach.

Q98 **Heidi Allen:** Just very quickly to round up, given that today we are predominantly looking at that holiday period that is extra difficult, is there anything specific you would add to smooth that issue?

Martha Mackenzie: We will keep saying it until we are blue in the face, but upfront costs.

Q99 **Heidi Allen:** Would that alone be enough?

Martha Mackenzie: That would be significant. Again, we heard from the first panel and we are hearing from a lot of the parents we speak about that the summer holiday rolling around and having to pay that upfront cost can be incredibly damaging. It would take out a stress and take out a payment.

Q100 **Chair:** Ema, did you want to come in?

Ema Wilkes: Yes. It is very much what Sophie said at the beginning: it is not childcare, it is not food, it is not provision, it is all three that enrich our children, not leaving them with gaps or without any of those three. They all need to be together.

They say the years go quicker as you get older. Well, months get longer when you are on a very low income. Someone said, "Is that not when you go on holiday?" When you are trying to work out that you have two weeks left until payday and there is whatever is left in the cupboard, you are thinking, "We will go to the park. We will go to the beach". Right, it is raining. What do we do? There is great fun to be made out of cardboard boxes and pans in the kitchen but it is a long month when you are doing that all the time with the children. If the springs have gone on the trampoline that you have in the garden—which was well worth £200 because that is six weeks of bouncing—you are thinking, "There is



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nothing else”, and you are the one climbing the walls rather than the children.

It has to be all those three things brought together and brought together strongly. Our local authorities need to do much more. We are very lucky to have Frank in our constituency. We have a hotline in our building that goes through to his office. It should be in a way that every MP does that, but actually it should not be, it should be that our one-stop shops are trained and have the advice that they need. Our schools should not be something terrifying for parents to go into. I never want to tell my teacher that we are struggling. When I said about a packed lunch the other week, it was my child and my deputy head that rang me and asked if everything was all right, and sorted of laughed down the phone saying, “It is what you do as a job and your child does not have the right packed lunch”. It was only because she had left her butty at the side of the fridge but the stigma has to go.

Our community is happy that the local councillors, the one-stop shop, will come in, talk and will pick up a phone to say, “Help”, but it has to be that you do not have to leave your pride at the door. Staff and all those three things need to be pulled together to make our children’s lives and our future. They are the ones who are going to be sitting around this table in 30 years.

Megan Jarvie: We have focused on the summer holidays because that is by far the most difficult, but we have six-weekly holidays and there is often the most provision during the summer because it is the most difficult as well.

Q101 **Ruth George:** Just on the three and four-year-olds, some of the private nurseries will allow you to spread the 30 hours over 52 weeks so you get some in holidays but obviously the maintained ones and ones linked to schools do not do that. Is it an issue for parents then suddenly having to find really expensive care for three and four-year-olds in any school holiday time? Does that make a difference, the way that you cannot spread it for a lot of providers?

Megan Jarvie: It does, and it also means that often you will pick the provider that will offer that year-round care rather than the term-time care. It is a decision between convenience and quality sometimes for some families.

Martha Mackenzie: I think Nichola touched on it again in the first panel. You have a half-term coming around every six or seven weeks so it is a constant cycle of dread if you are in a nursery that does not offer the stretched. Exactly as you said, most nurseries attached to schools do not, which is what most low-income parents use. Every six weeks you are having to find that extra cash.

Q102 **Steve McCabe:** I just want to go back to the question of food and free school meals. I know that one of you said there may be too emphasis on



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the food side of things but we have seen reports that say that about 3 million youngsters may go hungry during school holidays and at least 1 million of those are eligible for free school meals. I just wondered what you thought the impact was on children and their families when these summer holidays come around if they have been eligible for free school meals during term-time.

Sophie Howes: The impact is quite severe for some families. CPAG has just produced a book with some academics from UCL that was called *Living Hand to Mouth*, which interviewed children and families. Lots of those families were eligible for free school meals and talked about how difficult it was during the holidays.

The reason I made the comment earlier about it not just being about food is that really it is money. That is what families do not have, money to buy food, which is also why it is difficult to cover childcare costs and all the other things that they are paying for as well. It is definitely an additional financial pressure.

In terms of the solutions from Government, that is why we want to see that any food provision is wrapped up in that wider package of support that also addresses childcare and those enriching activities that are so important for children, particularly when we think about attainment. It is all of those things.

Q103 **Chair:** As well as to stop attainment falling back during the summer holidays, which is a key thing. Abby?

Abby Jitendra: Just to come in on that, Steve, I am very much in agreement with Sophie. As I have said before, it is very much about money. People on very, very low incomes think about basic essentials like food, heating, gas and electric in the round and have to make some very difficult decisions about what they are cutting back on. What we see when people do not have the support of free school meals during the school holidays is that rather than obviously letting their children go hungry, it is the parents themselves having to skip multiple meals.

A lot of the research that we have done in food banks shows that families with children are disproportionately likely to need a food bank and they are also disproportionately likely to have gone hungry multiple times over multiple months over a year. Again, we know parents will do absolutely everything they can to protect their children from experiencing hunger and poverty but it is heart-breaking.

Emma Wilkes: Also, when you are talking about the effect on people, it is mental health as well. The panel of parents were amazing. We did not have a dad on the panel. Sadly, we hardly ever hear from the men and there is a really big percentage of men struggling with mental health as well. I am not saying that women do not find it as hard in pride but we know ourselves that if men are coming to the centre and they are



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struggling with children, that is when it is so much harder for them to come across the doorstep.

The children are taking the mental health aspect as well. Their attainment does go down when they are hungry, they are not paying attention and they are not listening. They can see that parents are upset, they are hungry or they are waiting for them to finish their meals, waiting for scraps to come back from the kids' plates. I have done it. It comes back and you go, "You have left two nuggets". It is about how the kids feel and how the parents feel. If you are really low yourself, you are not putting 100% into the job that you possibly have and you are not putting 100% into the family.

We all laugh—and it should not be something we laugh at—at the idea that debt is something that is not important to any of us anymore. Red letters. Each morning there is a story swapped, who has a bailiff, who has a court order, who has an attachment of earnings, because there is nothing else you can do. You cannot get blood out of a stone so you have to.

At one point I worked with another community worker in Birkenhead and just before last Christmas we were ringing each other after the emergency crisis nights to check on each other. One week I rang her and she was holding someone's wrists in the toilet until the ambulance arrived because they had had enough. One child that Frank spoke about in Parliament a couple of years ago got upset when he saw a banana at our place and got excited. I think Heidi was there when he was telling the story, and these are not stories, these are not things for the newspapers, these are people's lives.

We have people who are talking about going to Gautby Road and going to St James when they were kids who are 70 now. They are going, "We used to go there in the school holidays. We used to go to the mission to get our dinners and we used to make some crafts". They are celebrating that we are doing it. We are not celebrating that we are doing it. It is 50 years on. Peggy, who is 93, is still at the mission and she has done the same thing for 50 years. It is not something to be proud of, that our children are still in the same position. Mental health is a massive problem.

Q104 **Chair:** Ema, can you give us examples of just how hungry some of the children are when they are coming to you?

Ema Wilkes: I would like to say a lot of the time the children are hungry and want something to eat. It is the parents that we have to look after. I think it was Sophie who talked earlier about the quality of food that is getting bought. The kids are being fed and cereal is a brilliant thing. I have sent the kids to bed many a time with cereal. We all had it. It did not kill us but it is not brilliant.



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It is parents. I know we have amazing volunteers that make sure what we do is everyday but most people are mums and with most people, if you say, "Did you have tea last night?" it is, "No, I was in too late and I could not be bothered". It is, "There was nothing in or I was eating some Weetabix". People are living on cereal to make sure their kids have everything.

That story did happen. It was not, "Let us tell Frank to say this because a kid got excited about chocolate". He did not. He got excited about a banana, and that same family had donated toys the year before to our Christmas hamper appeal. His van had broken, he was self-employed and it just spiralled and he could not then get back on top, and the next year I am giving them a Christmas hamper and their kid is going, "Can I have that banana, please? Can I have that banana?" They went to someone's funeral to make sure that they had dinner that day. It is just not right.

Q105 Steve McCabe: No, certainly. I guess if the Children's Minister were sitting here at the moment, Sophie, he would say to you, "I agree with you and that is why we have the holiday activities and food programme", and he would tell you that he is spending four times more on it this year and that he is catering for a whole 50,000 children, which must be about, what, 5% of the million. What is it you have to do? He is going to want you to say, "Thank you very much. You are doing a really good job". What is it you have to say to him to make him realise it is not good enough?

Sophie Howes: There are two things. The current offer from Government is just not comprehensive enough. It is the tip of the iceberg when we think about child poverty in this country. It is over 4 million and it is projected to rise to over 5 million in a few years. The number of children that that programme is going to reach is just not comprehensive enough. There is something about the money that is being invested and what that is looking like on the ground. The Government is leaning very heavily on the voluntary sector for this at the moment and that is just not fair.

There is a broader issue that is not just for the Children's Minister but for everyone here more broadly, which is about the drivers of child poverty. If we address some of those systemic causes of child poverty there will be fewer families calling on these types of services. We do need to think about it in that context. We have already heard about how Universal Credit has been a massive driver to food banks and other crisis support. We need to look at the other parts of the system that are feeding these things.

Emma Wilkes: I think the Minister should remember the End Hunger Bill as well, look at how much work and research everyone did for things like that and how much it went through. Yet again, even though money has been given out it is more research and it is, "Let us see how this way works". If we just keep seeing how well this way works for the next 10



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years, it is still only going to equate to a tin of beans per child and it does not make any difference to a child's life.

Chair: The hope is that the Government is going to use this experience and give us a universal scheme. That is the hope.

Q106 **Emma Hardy:** One of the things I found very worrying is the long-term implications of this. I am very worried about the food that the children are eating and the food that the parents are eating and the long-term impact on their health. I just wondered if you wanted to comment on that.

Sophie Howes: I do not have huge amounts to say on this but it is obviously important to make sure that children are eating healthy food, particularly when they are being provided in the context of school holiday activities. There is a responsibility on those providers to make sure that the food that is provided is nourishing. I caution slightly that when we think about the support that children and families might need over the school holidays, it is important to not layer that over with this idea that poor families do not know how to feed their kids.

Emma Hardy: I do not think it is that at all. It is that if you go into a supermarket and look at the cost of fresh fruit and fresh vegetables, and you also look at the cost of fast food, the differences are quite stark. Parents have talked about the fact that they are feeding themselves cereal when we know that that is not as nutritious as if they do themselves a stir-fry. It is not that I think parents do not know, it is that they cannot afford it and I think this is having an impact on life expectancy, on quality of life and the number of years people spend as healthy adults.

While we are talking about this, one of the things that we need to bear in mind is that this will have a lifelong impact on these children if they are not being exposed to the nutrition that they should be at that age. I do not want that to come across as if I am criticising the parents because I am not.

Q107 **Chair:** If I bring you in, Abby, what is your concern about the food that is provided? Would you prefer to provide a much healthier diet than you are able to do?

Abby Jitendra: It is a really interesting point about the nutritional content, not just from holiday food providers but also just the ability of people on low incomes to afford healthy food. Part of the problem we have is that these crisis provision schemes like food banks were not set up to provide food for people multiple times. Within the Trussell Trust we are doing some hard thinking about, if people are having to come to food banks three, four, five or six times because they are having to wait for Universal Credit for five weeks or more, if they have to come six times because over the school holidays they just do not have enough money to cover basics like food, what should that food parcel look like?



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It is a combination of people just having enough money to be able to buy the food that they want. If we are talking about dignity and a real response that has the dignity of families at heart, we need to make sure that people have enough money to be able to buy the food they want. Yes, there is a role for third sector providers to make sure that what they are offering is the best it can be, but I take your point around the affordability of healthy food. There is research out that shows that the amount that you earn does not affect your food practices. We know people on very low incomes do everything they can to rustle up incredible meals from very few resources, but fundamentally if the money just is not there—

Emma Wilkes: I am pleased that both of you said it as well. It is always, “People on low incomes do not know how to cook properly or they do not know what to buy”. It is the cost of things. Also, if you put a poorer parent—mum, dad, whatever—in the room with a more affluent one that can get whatever they need, and you do the ready, steady, cook, they will make sure everyone is fed and every last bit of food is in the meals. That is why there is that organic growth in community enterprise and community business of things like social supermarkets and community cafes.

Everyone gets sick of me saying the word “dignity” continuously in our place but it is about dignity. It is not about stripping someone of their pride on the doorstep. That pay-as-you-feel model, the reduced cost in citizens’ supermarkets and things like that, is to make sure that that pride is still there. Something is still being handed over but we are making sure that there are fridges and racks full of fresh vegetables, meat, cheese, milk, all of that sort of thing. It is not about having rows of tins. Everyone goes, “It is just quick and easy and they can eat it”. As you said, it has a lasting effect on our children.

Even doing slow cooker courses and looking at how we freeze it—and that can go right across. It is something that is inclusive. How many people are working long hours who would actually quite like to know how to use their slow cooker and make sure there is something in the freezer every night?

I do not think that surplus food is the plaster that should be stuck but at the moment it is something that is massively supporting us. In this country, 33% of food is wasted before it even goes to a shop or to a household. Things like FareShare and other organisations are massively supporting us as the third sector. We go out and collect it ourselves. Businesses should be given more from the Government side of things, more of an incentive to say, “Do not put something in the bin”. We want the waste to stop, and poverty, and we want people to have the money to go straight to the supermarket. As you said, we cannot just put money in the Government’s pocket and make them pay it but we can say to people, “We will fine you if you put stuff in the bin that someone else can



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eat”, and we can then put that fine in their pocket and tell them to spend it, give them the money and then they can go to Asda.

Abby Jitendra: If I can just speak to that, I very much agree with you. Surplus food is not the solution to this but it can go some way to help people. I think though that when we say the Government cannot just put money back into people’s pockets, we know that over the last four years the Government has taken money away from some of the poorest people in society.

Q108 **Chair:** They have taken huge amounts out, yes.

Abby Jitendra: Some of the easiest or more straightforward things that the Government could do are things like making sure that benefits are operated in line with inflation. It is crazy that the cost of food has gone up but the amount in the pockets of some of the poorest people in our society has stayed the same. We have seen cuts to disability benefits. Someone on the panel talked about disabled children having the least access to holiday provision and yet we are seeing that money go down. Again, I could say this until my throat hurts, which is already sore as it is—

Q109 **Chair:** It is not just this. It is important to link to inflation but families across the country have lost £1,800 if they have been on benefit. Someone needs to, don’t we, write a report to address the Government about putting that £1,800 back and then inflation-proof? It is a mega, mega cut, what we have experienced.

Abby Jitendra: Yes, it is a combination of both the value and the cuts. There are some really straightforward things that the Government could do to put money back into people’s pockets so that they can go to the supermarket and buy their own food and do not have to rely on a food bank or a community initiative to be able to do something that all of us think is completely normal. Being able to go to the supermarket, buying the food that you want for your family, cooking it and eating it seems like such a straightforward thing. Why is it that some of the most vulnerable poor people in our society are not able to do that?

Chair: I am anxious because we have other questions and time is pushing on.

Q110 **Thelma Walker:** I would like to move on to the dip in attainment, the attainment gap and the impact on life chances. I was a teacher and a head teacher for 34 years and my second headship was in a very deprived area. We had a Sure Start centre. September was always the toughest month for the children and for the staff, getting them back into routines, readiness for learning, all of that. Could I ask you what one thing each of you would want the Government to do better at in addressing this attainment gap?

Sophie Howes: On my wish list would be a summer holiday club in every school, every primary school. It would make a huge difference, I



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think. We have been working with a number of different primary schools in London on a Greater London Authority-funded project. Some of those schools have put a summer holiday club in, have been tracking the attainment of those children and have found that where it used to drop back, just by having activities, food, all the things we have been talking about, over that period their attainment has either stayed level or actually improved against their peers who were not attending. That is just one school. The research, which you will be aware of, reinforces that. If that existed in every primary school in the country, that would make a huge difference.

Megan Jarvie: I would back up what Sophie said. The activities are incredibly important in terms of the attainment gap, but helping parents to be able to go out to work as well will also help address the poverty and the attainment gap. Quite often we hear about the shorter day that does not really support working parents. Activities might be focused more towards getting a nutritious meal at lunchtime and a couple of hours either side, and parents are like, "What do I do for the other four hours of the day that I am supposed to be at work?" It does not really work for them to try to do both of those.

Martha Mackenzie: I might be a bit cheeky and just say two things. One, which we have spoken about before, is the quality of provision. We have seen that really good early education and really good childcare can help close that gap. The first thing would be investing in teachers and providers in those low-income areas to make sure that people have access to good quality childcare.

The second thing is hearing the Government recognise the link between poverty and attainment and the fact that ultimately it is poverty that is driving the attainment gap. It is to Emma's point about lasting effects. We know that once that attainment gap opens it is so difficult to close it up. What are we doing in those earliest years to make sure parents have the money in their pocket, they are not stressed and they can support their children, and that poverty is not driving the attainment gap? That would be my second.

Emma Wilkes: I think that as a group we would say that it is about all sectors working together. I and most of us would say that we do not want our children in school 365 days of the year. It is about investing in not just the teaching staff and the community sector, which might as well have the fifth blue light on our heads, but every sector working together, even businesses. They all have a duty of care to their workers who have children who they are going to employ eventually. We all need to work together to increase the skills that are on offer and make holiday memories.

It is brilliant that schools are doing more, and I do want to see schools doing more, but I do not want my child's memories of school holidays to say, "Yes, the playground is just the same as it was when I left". It is



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about going on things, and teachers need a break. They give us a bit of a break and we want to share that. It is about all working together to upskill the whole offer to children. When there are training courses and when the local authority are paying for schools, social workers, Sure Start centres need to be there, children's centres need to be there—

Q111 **Thelma Walker:** Could I just come in on that? Obviously I have said I was a head of a Sure Start centre. Would you say a Government commitment to further investment in our Sure Start centres—

Emma Wilkes: Annie used to be a family support worker for a Sure Start centre. That is why she works with us.

Q112 **Thelma Walker:** Family outreach workers, multi-agency working?

Emma Wilkes: It is multi-agency. Family workers like Annie in the Sure Start centres—

Anne Newbould: Am I allowed to speak on this?

Q113 **Chair:** Right. The people at the table answer the—

Anne Newbould: Literally two minutes.

Q114 **Chair:** No, no, sorry, we are going to keep it—Ema, can you—

Emma Wilkes: Yes. Sorry. The early intervention and the report that was there on that proved what Sure Start centres did for our area. I have just said I am lucky enough to have that four-year funding. We have an amazing childminder who has worked so hard with my daughter, but I should not have had to do that and I should not have had to kill myself trying to pay all the bills in the gaps. We should have had those centres there.

Q115 **Thelma Walker:** Could I ask all the panel, are we in agreement about the investment in Sure Start?

Megan Jarvie: Yes. I think what we have seen is an investment in the formal childcare bit. That does not start until two or three years-old and children's centres and Sure Start centres do a huge amount before that supporting parents. You can get a bit more bang for your buck from it, to be honest.

Emma Wilkes: Parents used to automatically know they were going to get a pram and they were going to get the support if they were on that really low gap. They used to know they would automatically get fruit and milk. The Sure Start centres and things put all that in place for them. In Birkenhead we have a brilliant project, the Baby Basics project, that we are really proud to be rolling out and being able to say, "There is your Moses basket, there are your nappies", but it was already there and it was working. Why stop something that worked so well?

Abby Jitendra: Again, I agree with everything the panel has said. What the Government needs to do is take responsibility for this. I think there is



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a sense that leaving it to the third sector is somehow okay, but fundamentally I think what the panel is saying is that it is not okay to just leave it to this piecemeal postcode lottery. The Government needs to be front and centre in the co-ordination of as high-quality blanket coverage as possible, so that people are not left behind finding themselves in areas where they cannot quite make ends meet or the provision is not good enough. A big part of it is the Government saying, "This is our role rather than somebody else's".

Q116 Ruth George: Can I just put on record the support for support being not just to children on free school meals? We know there are going to be 1 million children in poverty who do not qualify for free school meals. That is important.

Ema, you said that in some areas, even in Birkenhead, people just cannot reach provision. I live in a really rural area and in our biggest centres of deprivation there is a little bit going on but they are still not very big. The holiday meals programme from the county council goes to the areas where there are many more towns and centres of population, with much more poverty more widespread. Are any of you seeing a difference in provision between rural and urban areas?

Abby Jitendra: Just to speak to that, I do not have a specific example but I definitely know that when we speak to food banks in very rural areas, people have much higher transport costs. It is something we have not talked about yet but factoring in transport costs, the logistical nightmare of just getting around, is important. We know that people in poverty, even if they have a car, may not be able to fill up the tank so are having to use public transport and spending £10 or £15 to get into town. Things like that make a real difference.

Q117 Chair: Anyone else on the rural issue?

Sophie Howes: I know from our extended schools research that schools in urban areas are much more likely to have a better extended schools offer than schools in rural areas.

Emma Wilkes: We obviously do not have an excess of rural across Wirral but it is those small bits, as you said. They are not rural but they are locked in an area. In Hoylake and areas like that on the Wirral it might be, "Brilliant, there is a golf course there", while for everything else you have a few roads that are really struggling. West Kirby has its own council estate. It is those areas that just cannot get in. I live in the other constituency and my children come with me to Birkenhead because until now—luckily this year a lot more is being done—there was not as much provision. It is hard to be juggling getting them across your borough while you are trying to do everything else. Much more needs to be looked at in terms of the links between those and public transport, making an effort to help and support that as well. Your food bank voucher should come with a bus pass. It is not hard, is it? "There you go. Go and get the bus".



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Chair: On that happy note, thank you very much. I think you can see the direction of our reports. Thank you very much.